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Adventure

To my wife and daughters. They are forever my life inspiration.

Prologue

A pack of felines had just attacked the grazing herd. They approached unnoticed. Hair color of predators merged with high grass, so they were almost invisible. About six years old male defied at first, he bowed his head to the ground into the defensive position, aiming at attacking predators. But when one of the attackers approached and unleashed the feral roar, male turned away and started to flee the very same second. Well, the entire herd ran away.

Suddenly, another feline flanked escaping animals from the left. It managed to confuse and separate some of them from the fleeing group. Like they were just waiting for it, beasts focused on one animal.

They were reaching it. One of carnivores caught the right leg of running animal with his paw. It ran so fast, that it stumbled and did a couple of somersaults. It hit the ground heavily and stayed there, motionless. In fact, it wasn't hurt, just extremely exhausted from the insane race for life. But this race was already lost for him. In another second, felines were at him and first of them bit into his neck.

The hunt was successful. The pack leader was breathing heavily. He didn't feel the excitement of hunt and taste of dying victim's blood anymore. Rapid run in the hot landscape exhausted him much more than before. Some young males were already glaring at him viciously. Soon, some of them would challenge him again. But somehow he felt this time it would be different. As he was aging, he was losing his strength.

One of his future rivals approached the prey cautiously, looking at the leader. He was waiting for his reaction. He bowed his head and bit into the meat.

"And here it comes," thought the old male.

He roared threateningly and bared his teeth. He couldn't ignore such attack at his position. He was ready.

The first clash was hard. The younger male bounced the opened mouth with his right paw and with sharp teeth he caught the rival's shoulder underneath. Blood splashed out of the deep wound. Both males turned, getting ready for another attack. The older one was considerably slower. The last contact waited for him. Now, he didn't rush so much. He saw, his rival was much stronger. So he let him attack first.

He dodged swishing paw with nails to turn and bite into his neck in another moment. The huge teeth tore the skin and muscle, until they found the way to carotid artery and opened it. When he felt warm, pulsing blood in his mouth, he bit again and squeezed jaw even more.

Paralyzed rival was shaking convulsively for a while, his moves were getting slower and at the end, he stopped.

The older male released motionless body and stepped aside. He raised his head and roared winningly. But he was too exhausted and, moreover, seriously injured. Furthermore, he knew what would follow next.

A dark growling came from behind his back.

Another challenge!

He turned slowly to face another attack. He was sure it would be the last one in his life. He showed his bared teeth.

Then, something unexpected happened. Already during the hunt it began to darken, but now the sky was pitch-black. Lightning cut the air. It hit the tree, only hundred yards from the ongoing duel. Almost simultaneously, the deafening thunder came. Then the lightning hit again. And next one. Dry grass was ignited from the hit tree and the wind spread fire through the land. It was swallowing the grass like a hungry beast and the fire became stronger every second. Finally it started to rain and heavy raindrops slowly put out flames.

The former pack leader roared again, in fear this time. The other members answered him in the same way. Suddenly, they all began to run away. The pack was escaping in one direction, their leader in another.

Lightning were gaining in intensity. Many of them were striking again and didn't go out. On contrary, others showed and started to create a light circle. It shone shortly and clearly and then went out. In another moment, also diabolical thunder stopped.

Silence fell over the land. Animals, frightened by unusual phenomenon, were escaping in panic as far from that place as possible. The storm ended as quickly as it started. Just a burnt circle remained after the light phenomenon. There was a man laying in the middle.

Chapter one

After this passage through time, I remained laying on the ground, dazed. Despite having the experience of several time travels, I always needed a while to recover. I rubbed my eyes, trying to gently get the ashes of burnt area out. Then I opened them carefully. As usual, I was laying in the middle of burnt circle. I stood up slowly. Somehow, subconsciously, I expected to appear at the usual place. But one look at surrounding amazed me.

–Where the hell I am? – flashed through my mind.

I didn't know this place at all. Where are my hills, my forest? If I at least partially understood principle of Time Gate and time travelling, I could be anywhere and anytime on Earth. Even on the other planet. I better rejected this option immediately, because, to be honest, I couldn't accept such idea.

I searched the vicinity with trained eye. The countryside was mostly flat. All of that looked like wide valley of former harsh river. But where had this river disappeared, it remained a mystery. Today there was just a creek, meandering through the landscape and its flow was followed by green ribbon of lush vegetation. Apart from that, the country was mostly dry and looked like prairie. The valley was covered with tall grass, almost reaching my belt. Here and there were clumps of large shrubs and trees and some freestanding individuals of respectable size. Thick forest emerged as valley started to turn into hills. Light green, formed by deciduous trees was gradually turning into dark green coniferous forest. Above it, rocky snowy mountain peaks towered.

It was desolate and lifeless land. Later I found out that the opposite is true. Animals, frightened by unusual storm, ran off in fear. But I didn't know that at the moment.

Silence here was almost scary. Despite it was quite warm, I shivered. That was the result of increasing adrenaline in my blood. Looking up, I realized that I was not quite alone here. There were vulture-like birds flying in circles. Circles were gradually getting smaller, as they focused on the one spot, flying to the ground. After a while, they landed on the meadow on the two small dark piles. These lied on the black stripes of burnt grass. They immediately started to scramble for the carcass; their angry shrieks were heard up to me.

After the rain, air was relatively clean and fresh and a light gust of wind brought to me smell of roasted meat. According to the direction and intensity I learnt it spread from the spot, where carrion birds were bickering.

Slowly, searching the vicinity, I stepped towards them. As I was approaching to the carrions, smell of roasted meat was getting stronger. I already recognized rough shapes, but still didn't see them very clearly. They got lost under the flapping wings of large birds. In addition, their charred skin blended with the background, burnt grass.

I chased birds from the pile, closer to me. Shrieking angrily, they flew away, but only a few yards and surveyed me with hate.

"You won't feed on me," I shouted to them.

I didn't want to admit it, but I started to lose my nerves. Just because my former life of hunter hardened me, I managed to keep my temper.

I stepped to the lying torso and kneeled to survey it. At the first sight it looked like a deer, but instead of antlers it had sharp horns. The body was overall in bad condition. At first, intensive heat, created by ignition of dry grass, had burned its hair and skin to the ashes.

Tendons and leg muscles also shrunk in mortal spasm and it looked ghastly. Besides traces of the bird beaks, I discovered something much more serious. Couple of large wounds on the body, especially on the neck. I wouldn't like to meet a predator, which had caused them.

After I searched the first body, I headed to the second carcass. I tried to organize my thoughts. Vultures, scared by my arrival, shrieked in pleasure, sprang back to the body and continued on the feast. As before, it didn't go without bickering.

I started to search the second corpse, lying about twenty yards away from the first one. This creature had been more robust; it had quite different body structure. Short strong legs were ended with sharp curved claws. Leg muscles were huge. It was simply a predator in all respects. I had never seen such beast, now I was absolutely sure, I found myself if not in another time, at least far from my region.

The animal was surprisingly large. Undoubtedly it was feline, but it was much larger than all the bears, I had ever met in my life. Although fire covered all traces, I was sure it had killed the other beast. Predator was lying on the side and from this perspective I couldn't see any injuries it had to burn here for. But I didn't want to believe, that fire had just surprised it. He could just run a few yards and it would be out of the danger.

I came around and froze. Huge burnt head was full of sharp teeth. It looked like a monster from nightmares. If I kept my head cold until now, gazing at this, I almost lost it. Almost feral fear seized me. It paralyzed me for a while. In panic, I started to breathe heavily and look around disjointedly, but I wasn't able to think.

A long time ago, when I had been thrown through the Time Gate from the end of the 20th century into the dark and bitter times of the Bronze Age I'd managed to survive. Thanks to my friend and later father-in-law Tork. But now I was alone and after everything I had seen, I found out, the Time Gate had transferred me deeply into the prehistoric ages. I had no idea, what could meet me here.

In my mind, a picture of Tork with his careful face appeared.

"What shall I do?" I thought hopelessly.

"Don't give up, my son," rang in my head like distant whisper, "let your brain work. And rely on your instincts of the hunter."

I pulled myself together and started to think soberly. If I met something like an animal I saw in front of me, I probably wouldn't stand a chance. The landscape was too open and unknown to me and if something had managed to catch up the deer – as I called the creature in my mind – it wouldn't had much trouble dealing with me. My only chance was to get to the

woods at higher altitudes. That was the environment I was familiar with. There, I had better chance for survival.

“Fine, what can I use?” I told to myself quietly.

Hunting bow, a quiver with almost thirty arrows, long curved dagger and hunting axe. Furthermore, on the belt I found a bag with necessary things – a thin bronze needle, a bobbin with thin yarn for sewing wounds, some alcohol for disinfecting, a roll of canvas, several slices of dried meat, a tinder and little waterskin.

“Well, not much, but at least something,” I told out loud, because the sound of human voice helped me in my loneliness.

“So, water first, night shelter next. Then I will see,” I said at last and looked into the distance.

In this heat, I could easily succumb to dehydration. Fluid loss could cause my weakening, which would mean death in this strange environment.

Sun was high above the horizon and I estimated I have had about four or five hours of daylight left. From my previous experience, I knew it’s not wise to look for the night shelter after sunset. Otherwise, this night could be my last one, as well. I calculated immediately that if I went to the creek to provide water, I would have had no time to get to the forest. Therefore, I had to spend the night here, in this open countryside, the best place would be one of high trees I had at hand. When I finally decided how to proceed, I was relieved a little. I had a plan and a goal.

I went to the first carrion and cut off beast’s horns with my axe. They were almost meter long and it could be used as stab weapon. Then I freed a few longer tendons that would be used as retaining rope. That certainly provoked storm of resentment of vultures which had to spring far meters away, waving their wings.

It made me angry. I pulled the bow down from my shoulder and draw the arrow out of the quiver. After all, I didn’t know when I would find some food again. I aimed shortly and shot at the chosen target.

Birds were less than seven meters far from me, so I couldn’t miss. I hit one’s heart. The arrow hit with such force, the bird was thrown back. The rest of flock silenced, at first, they probably didn’t understand, what had just happened. After they realized that I was a threat, they started to flee in panic. They spread wings and flew up clumsily.

“You see, vultures,” I shouted at them cheerily, “man comes on the scene!”

I got rid of bird's guts quickly. Then I tied a piece of tendon to his leg and slung it over my shoulder. It had size of hen. So I hoped it would taste like it, too. It was the right time, I had to go on.

As I expected, vegetation by the brook was very dense and I had trouble to get up to water. Of course, I could follow the stream and find the place, where animals used to drink. It would certainly be beaten, but places like this used to be visited by predators a lot. And I couldn't risk it. According to everything I had seen here, I was the being, less adapted to the environment in this world. It made me a prey automatically. What irony! In fact, I, the man originally from the end of 20th century, was crown of creation. But all my knowledge of the Earth, mathematics and universe were useless here. The only thing that counted was my primordial instincts, strengthened by life in Bronze Age. I just could hope that my equipment wouldn't leave me in the lurch.

When I struggled through thick vegetation, sometimes I had to hack the path with hatchet. I found an interesting bush. It had relatively thin flat trunk covered in thorns. When I cut into one of them to pave the way, the hatchet left just a superficial notch in it. Wood was very hard. After next ten minutes of exhausting work I managed to fell the trunk. I pulled it at the open area and the thorns off. Then it was time for the final phase.

I shortened the trunk on less than two meters. Its front side was a little thicker than the back and it suited me. With the dagger I created a shallow groove. There I had set a prong of horn I had collected from the burnt carrion. It was very sharp and spiral. I attached it to the new spear. I used tendons and also dared to sacrifice part of my yarn.

When I finally finished my work, I was satisfied. I created a truly menacing weapon. For the test, I hefted spear in my hand. Rough wood was heavier than I expected. On the other hand, the energy of thrown javelin concentrated at one point on the tip, would be devastating after impact. Considering I had no experiences with material like this, the weapon was balanced quite nicely. During the testing flight it flew straight forward and stubbed into the ground in right arc. Deadly weapon indeed. I didn't mean to throw it in longer distances, it should be rather used as stab weapon.

Work on spear delayed me, but I didn't regret it. I filled waterskin and stepped forward.

As a night shelter I chose one of lonely tree giants, standing in one-third of the road between me and deciduous forest.

I knew that I would get there at least at the end of the day and then I would have no time to get ready for night. The tree was really huge, about twenty meters tall. Its trunk was almost two meters thick. There were a lot of cavities, probably made by birds, which represented grips

and footholds for a climber. It would be great advantage to me, because the lower branches were about six meters above the ground. I couldn't imagine how I would climb up without these helps. The tree crown was richly branched, there were smaller and smaller twigs, growing from the thicker branches, ended by tiny sharp-like leaves. I thought, it was because of the dry condition and this way the tree protected itself from intense sunshine in the dry area.

Shadows became longer. The day was quickly coming to an end. Sun approached to the horizon and then, suddenly, swung over hills and there was gloom. As the night came, country suddenly came alive. Sounds of night wild reached me from all sides. Even from the tree above me a loud scraping was heard, as small animals were crawling out of cavities. I wasn't usually afraid of night sounds, but these were different. More intensive and scarier, because I didn't know local fauna very well.

After a while, I stopped looking over my shoulder after every sound, because it tired me. I found a place, where one thick twig branched into several smaller ones and somehow they made a natural bed. I laid there as comfortable as I could.

I looked up to the sky. Above the hills on the left side, Moon started to rise slowly. There was almost full moon and its silvery light illuminated the landscape. Then I realized that it was noticeably colder. Compared to the daily heat, one could say that it was very cold. I pulled my buckskin tunic closer to the body and for the first time I regretted that I hadn't find the shelter on the ground and with fire. Now I couldn't do anything with that, perhaps tomorrow it would be better.

Gradually, my body adapted to the lower temperature and I began to doze off. I dared to think about my actual situation for a moment. Where the hell I was? When the Teacher asked me to travel through Time Gate into the half of twentieth century, I had no idea that I would ever get to the place like this. I was alone and helpless! But most of all, I missed a company of my loved ones. I didn't dare to think about my son and wife, because I wouldn't make it psychically.

I was thinking about Tork, my father-in-law from the Bronze Age, who was not only my savior, but also the second father to me. He had been teaching me how to make and use weapons, how to hunt, track animals and simply survive in the wild. I wished he was here right now.

Suddenly, something roared terribly. I got terrified so much, I almost fell from the tree. In the last second I caught the branch and with difficulty got my balance. Then the terrible roar sounded again. Next there was heard a clatter of hooves on the grass and some animal tried to run off. It failed. Only scream of pain drowned again by the horrible roaring told me that another

hunt had just ended. All the others noises suddenly silenced for a moment, to resound in the same intensity in the next moment. One animal had just died, but others still lived. There were heard tearing of fresh meat and cracking of bones. A bloody feast was just happening down there. I couldn't stand the growling of beasts, scrambling for meat. It was horrible. Although I had seen and heard a lot of things in my life, this was too much for me. I covered ears with my hands and closed eyes. I was about ten meter above the ground, thus relatively safe. My body and mind needed a rest. Tomorrow, another tough day was waiting for me. I found so-comfortable position and tried to relax. I stopped dealing with terrifying sounds of wild and my thoughts. The tension fell away from me and I fell asleep.

Chapter two

Tork had just been finishing skinning of a young deer. The work went smoothly; it looked like under the knife skin was separating from the body by itself.

It was a beautiful day. Sun was shining and bird chirping was heard in the air. I was on the little glade in the middle of the old forest.

"Peter! Don't stand there uselessly and hold this!" he yelled at me suddenly.

I stepped closer to him and caught the released part of skin. I stretched it slightly to make my friend's work easier.

"Tork," I spoke, "what is happening?"

He stopped working for a while and looked at me.

"Where did I get?" I wanted to know.

"Everything has a meaning," he answered uncertainly.

"What meaning? And why me?" I raised my voice a little. I wasn't in the mood for riddles. "The country is wild and I'm alone."

"Yes, that world is much tougher that it seems to be. But people are able to survive there, too. And there is also more in you than you think."

"What am I supposed to do? Where shall I go?" Despair started to capture me again.

"Find people and keep looking for the Time Gate. That is your way. You are connected to it."

"But how? How to do it?" I asked again, "I don't know, where the Time Gate is, even where shall I go. And I think it would be a miracle, if I survive."

Tork smiled.

“Peter... the first time, when you were thrown through the Time Gate from the twentieth century to my age, it was the same situation. At the time you had also no chance to survive, but you adapted and succeeded.”

He raised his hand and patted my shoulder friendly. Suddenly, his face frowned.

“Tork,” I started again.

“Peter,” he interrupted me in hurry, “time is out. Now you have to wake up, because they are coming...”

I opened my eyes. For a while, I was remembering, where actually I am. Smell of predator hit my nose. In a second, I was on the alert. I heard scratching under me. I looked down and almost froze. From the darkness, two green eyes were looking at me. Predator was climbing the trunk, using its claws. That was the scratching sound that woke me up.

Tentatively I looked up into the tree crown. I immediately knew there was no way out. I had to face the beast. I grabbed my new spear firmly. I leaned against the thick branch to get support. I was ready.

As he was approaching, I heard his raspy breathing. His body was too heavy and even if he could climb the tree, it was clear that he was more adapted for moving on the ground. I waited, until he was about meter and half far from me.

Then the beast opened his mouth and roared. That sound made me stiff for a while. At the next moment, with all my strength, I stabbed the tip of spear into his mouth. The sharp end came through tissue of the throat and jabbed into flesh.

He didn't expect this. He paused for a while, to roar even more than before in the next second. In pain this time. He couldn't hold on the trunk and fell to the ground from about eight meters height. After he hit the ground, he remained to lie, motionless.

My heart was beating rapidly. Adrenaline flowed in my blood and euphoria seized me. I won.

I wasn't expecting another visit tonight, so I tried to calm down and get some sleep. I would look at the predator tomorrow, in the daylight.

The rest of the night I slept dreamlessly.

The first sun rays tickled my face. I opened my eyes. Meanwhile, a feast started under the tree. A pack of hyena-like animals was feeding. They were tearing large chunks of meat and took them away from the carcass where they were gnawing at it. All the time they were making annoying barky sounds. My old friends, the vultures, were here as well, circling in the sky.

I couldn't decide, should I leave my safe place on the tree, when so many predators gathered down there? Although they were interested in the food and I probably could walk around them in small distance without any problems, I wanted my spear back. Last night it had served me well.

So I decided to wait for a while. I pulled out a slice of dried meat and started to bite it slowly. It was tough and barely slid down my throat. I finally flushed it down with big gulps of water. Tearing and cracking sounds that had scared me last night, left me cold now. I was adapting.

Eating my breakfast, I was watching predators, feeding on dead body under the tree. They were canines, similar to hyenas as I remembered them, but a bit larger. They were brown and grey and blended in high grass very well. They were about one meter tall. They had short but strong muzzles, and mouth full of strong teeth. They were able to chew through the femur of larger animal they were eating now. I guessed their weight was about hundred kilograms.

It took about an hour until hyenas stuffed themselves and left the stage under my tree. Even during their early lunch, vultures began to join them. At first hyenas were chasing them away, but when their stomachs filled the meat, they ignored the vultures. Thus, the feast was going on after they left, just with different guests.

Now was my time. For the last time I checked vicinity from the height, then I started to creep down. Finally, I could survey the dead beast. As I expected, hyenas did their job and parts of predator's body were everywhere around me. I knew this wasn't the end. The smell of dead animal would attract others scavengers soon. But that time I wouldn't be here anymore.

I chased angry vultures away and leaned to the body. My spear was sticking from the mouth like a big exclamation mark. After closer examination of traces I managed to pull together, how the situation had ended. The spear tip had penetrated deep into the soft palate. The attacking animal had fallen from great pain down from the tree. Using his cat instincts, he had automatically rolled and landed on feet. Falling, the end of the spear hit the ground first and the beast had impaled on it with all its weight. The impact had to be terrible. At least according to the place, where hitting the ground, the spear had yanked out the proper tussock with a piece of soil. The handle resisted and blade driven by inertia smoothly broke through the cranial bone and crashed deep into the brain. The animal had to be dead before it felt the impact.

I grabbed the spear with my right hand and pulled. It didn't move, it was firmly stuck in the beast's skull. I leaned with my foot against the neck of the carcass and tried to pull it out with both hands. The result was the same. I was a little disappointed, but never mind. The spear had served its purpose. So I picked out the dagger from behind my belt and cut carefully tendons

and string, which I had used to fasten pike before. At least I released the handle. I took another peak I brought with me and made a new spear. It was high time. I had spent too much time in this place.

I stepped towards the hills. I estimated I would get there until evening and find a suitable place to stay. On the way I kept searching countryside around me. If I thought it was a desert yesterday, today I knew I was wrong. Walking through it, I often came across herds of wild aurochs. They were made by something like smaller groups. I didn't have many experiences with these animals, so I avoided them. If somehow they considered me as a threat, they would have attacked me. And I probably wouldn't withstand in the face of these horny giants. Aurochs were large animals resembling to modern cattle. But their stature was at least one-third more massive and they had long dangerous horns.

But they would be worth it as a prey. – I thought, smiling. For the first time, since I got here, I was in a good mood.

Apart from the fact that I found myself at the time and place where I definitely didn't want to be, I had to admit that it was beautiful. It was sunny day and wasn't very warm yet. It was a breathtaking view of the number of animals, freely grazing along the prairie. As I had already said, there were herds of aurochs with huge horns, herds of six or seven wild horses, wild pigs and number of cervids. Survey of herds took me more time than I could afford to waste. I decided to not spend another night on the tree and find a safe place on the ground and make a fire. It would save me from night cold weather and also from uninvited visitors. And after all, I wanted to catch something and bake big tasty chunk of meat. Too bad, I had lost a vulture meat, which was dropped after my first contact with the beast. Now I would never know how it tasted.

In the nick of time, not far from me, a smaller group of wild pigs emerged. It was a sounder of about fifteen ones. Their grunting was heard all around, as they were digging food out of the ground. There were some adults, but around them a lot of pups were running joyfully. I stood downwind, but they ignored me. The scent of human didn't scare them. I decided to take down one of the young pigs and have a rich meal. I would need strength for another walk. This night I would stay in prairie and tomorrow I should reach borders of forest.

I put the bow from my shoulder and stepped to the pigs. They had just scattered among bushes. To save themselves from sun and also to dig worms and insects around roots.

I was not more than twenty steps far from them. Several animals already noticed me and looked at me curiously. Obviously they still didn't consider me a threat. On contrary, I began to realize that this adventure might not end well. Now, when I could see animals closer, I learnt they had robust bodies. Females had almost hundred and fifty kilograms and teeth in their mouth

weren't unnoticeable, too. I looked around the terrain again, looking for possible escape routes. About ten steps far from me, there were couple of bushes and one thicker tree. I guessed it wouldn't be problem to catch its bottom branches and climb up fast.

Fine, let's go. I nocked the arrow to bowstring. A young, several months old pig wandered off a few meters far from the herd. Now it was turned by side to me and tried to dig some root out. I raised the bow and tightened string. I aimed carefully. Pigs still didn't notice me very much.

I loosened the arrow. Swishing, it overcame the distance and stabbed the pup's left shoulder. The arrow quietly came through skin and tendons, until it hit the heart.

The animal froze. Then, making no sound, it fell down.

Gaze towards the rest of herd told me that I already had aroused their interest. All of them were watching me anxiously. Like they couldn't decide if I was dangerous or not.

I took a deep breath and shouted. They still hesitated, but when I screamed and stamped my feet, they turned at once and took flight.

"Meet the man!" I yelled at them as goodbye.

I quickly ripped out guts of the little pig. Scavengers would take care of it. Then I realized one important thing. I couldn't eat so much of meat all at once and it wouldn't be good decision to bring it with me. As the sun was rising in the sky, its rays sucked the strength out of me. I separated some best chunks of meat and somehow tied them together. Then I hanged them on the peak of my spear to carry them on my shoulder.

After that I could finally hit the road. My closest goal was to find suitable place to make fire so the dinner could be made. I chose remote bushes in the direction of my journey. There should be enough wood to feed fire.

Until I finally reached my destination, the second half of the day started. I had to admit, I was a little scared. Walking through the prairie with chunks of bloody smelling meat, I felt myself like butchery advertisement for predators.

Fortunately, I managed to get there without any problems. I quickly found place to sleep. There were enough thicker and thinner wood. Now I could only hope that natural animals' fear of fire would protect me and nothing would disturb my night rest.

Fire was cracking cheerily and meat cut into thinner slices was baking slowly. I paid attention so it wasn't too close to direct flame and wasn't burned. After a short while, a mouthwatering smell started to spread. I didn't have anything to use as a side dish, any pepper or anything to season it, but hunger was the best sauce. I was really looking forward to this meal.

After another while of baking I gradually started to trim pieces of meat. It was quite hot and unbelievably tasty. The pig had young soft meat, but it wasn't dry either. On contrary, it was delicious and almost slid through my throat. I flushed it with sips of water. Oh God, that was something! After great meal, euphoria seized me. However, man is just an animal, too and some principles are universal. Full stomach was the best medicine not just for hunger, but for the mood as well.

Now I could afford to calculate my position. I was thinking about my actual life. When I was thrown through the Time Gate about two thousand years backwards, I was sure I was going to die. Fortunately, at the last moment, Tork, my later friend, had saved me. He was honest and open man. Typical man of his times. Strict and kind. He wasn't afraid of death, didn't matter if it was struggle with people or wild animals, which could threaten his family. He was also very caring and loved his family.

Then there was his daughter Ivone. Love that flared between us was intense and passionate. It had grown into truly beautiful relationship which we sealed in marriage and child.

When I remembered this moment, terrible sadness captured me. In my head I saw picture of my wife, playing with our son. My throat tightened like it was gripped by iron hoop. My eyes moistened and one lonely tear rolled down my cheek. I made every effort to control myself, for now I had to drive all these beautiful but painful memories out of my mind.

I needed to clear my head. Considering I had no place to go, I had to find some activity. As I was used to do before, I began to treat and clean my weapons. Then I prepared a pile of wood to keep fire all the night. I paid special attention to the pile of thin twigs and dry grass, so I was able, if necessary, to quickly expel bigger flames. During this activity I relaxed and felt although not well, but a little better. At last, I made a temporary bed from dry grass.

Lying on the back, I was watching rising stars. Meanwhile, it became quite dark and night filled with noise of wilderness. I wasn't as terrified as night before, but I was constantly on the alert.

In my mind, I came back to the past again. I nipped thoughts of my wife in the bud, because I didn't dare to think about her without sadness seized me again. But there was a man who was able to induce at least as strong emotions in me, just in opposite nature. The man I found myself here because of. His disgusting face filled entire my mind.

"Eduard Beck," I strained through my teeth, "If we ever meet again, I promise I will kill you!"

Beck was a heinous villain, who had discovered traces left by me in the past. He had immediately learnt there was a time travel and as fanatic Nazi, he saw his fate in it. According

to his own version, he was chosen to come back into the past and reverse history by Hitler's side. To create eternal Third Reich and lead it. He was insane.

He had managed to realize his plans. He spread the terror and suffering among the nations. Numerous people had died by his hand. When I and my friend had come to Beck's alternative time line, we managed to start uprising of subordinate nations, Beck's Third Reich had ceased to exist. The last task, as it seemed, was to prevent Beck in using the Time Gate and disrupt natural flow of time. When I embarked on this task, I had no idea that it would bring me here. I didn't know when and where I was and even where should I look for the Time Gate. It was impossible to search entire planet though. And then, the Time Gate might not be here at all. Had my presence here any sense, or it was just a mistake, when I thought I understood working of Time Gate and by accident found myself at the different place? I was confused, as questions started to mix.

I put another piece of wood in the fire, raw one this time to keep it longer and smoke would deter animals and insects. Then I fell on my bed, exhausted physically, but more psychically and fell asleep immediately.

In my dream, I found myself in Shumava again. I was captured by Beck's people, as I tried to break into his command center. I was just woken up by bucket of water. I could barely raise my head. My whole body was covered in wounds, I almost didn't feel it. I had already stopped cursing myself for coming here. I focused at one goal – to survive.

Questioning was harsh, but I knew it would be worse. They couldn't be stopped by anything. I was resisting for now. Fear seized me, when I imagined these killers in Tork's time. Automatic guns and modern equipment would have allowed them to rule entire area in short time. What would follow, I couldn't and even didn't want to imagine.

Door opened and a man in stylish suit came in. It was astonishing that high society looking man like him was surrounded by such a bunch of murderers.

"Good evening, Mr. Brezovsky," said with broken Czech, "I am sorry, we don't treat you like a guest. But it mostly depends on you."

"What do you want?" I asked, trying to stretch time. I didn't mean to tell him anything, but brutal torturing wasn't enjoyable.

"What do I want?" rhetorical question. "You managed to time travel. Twice, according to our information. I just want you to show me how, that's all.

"Why would I do it?" I asked openly, "If I tell, you'll kill me."

Originally, that was intention, I won't deny. But your attitude convinced me. I am offering you something different."

He paused significantly.

"According to our information, you are one-third Aryan. Join me. Join my side. I am offering an opportunity to participate in something big. I am talking about nothing less than ruling the world."

He looked like he was getting into trance. His face was pale and numb, as if he was flying in his imagination. After a while I understood what he was talking about. It was so incredibly monstrous that I almost died of disgust. This man, if you could call him that way, was a monster. Monster within human race, offering me eternal life and youth if I joined him. If I forgot everything what I believed and what my parents had taught me. No, I couldn't do it. I would never do it.

"You are a maniac!" I said, "You want to murder masses. That's insane! Even your body is a fake. You are supposed to be an old man, after what you are saying..."

"Don't judge me by my appearance, my friend. What you can see, is a combination of money and the latest genetic researches. It's beautiful, isn't it? Eternal youth. But something is missing. The power! Absolute power over millions of people. Yes, that's what I want. You say I was a maniac. And what happened to you, Mr. Brezovsky? Respectable businessman with successful company and promising future. Now you are a savage and a murderer. What's the difference – to kill five, ten or thousands of people? We are the same. Come on, join me, you won't regret."

To forget Ivone? To waive friends? To betray Tork, Eric and the rest? No, I couldn't do that. And I certainly couldn't entrust the power over millions of innocent lives to this monster. I'd rather be dead. I spat in disgust.

The scene suddenly changed. By side of my Germanic comrades, I was watching approaching Roman army. We were hiding on the hill above the valley and waited, until they would get within striking distance of the bow. Meanwhile, Roman commander had approached about hundred and thirty steps far from us. It wasn't a long distance, despite the object was moving. As I noticed, he was running forward in fairly constant rate, so it was easy to estimate his position. It wasn't needful to kill Severus, or even to hit him. It was enough to get arrow somewhere close to him and panic would arouse. Of course, hit would've been better. With my finger I checked direction and strength of wind. I nocked arrow on the string and pulled slightly. I took shooting position and kept watching the target. I wasn't thinking about Severus as a man anymore. Now he was just an object.

- Steady hand, sharp eye - I repeated in my mind.

Tork had taught me these spells to stable and balance heart rhythm during the shooting at distant aim.

- Steady hand... - I repeated for the last time.

The commander almost came within range. I was watching him fixedly. About hundred and ten meters were between us.

- One, two, three, four, five... -

I counted and checked, how far he meantime shifted. Again.

One, two, three...

Fine, it's time. I bent the bow and headed carefully. I slightly angled the bow to the left and shot out.

Chapter three

I jerked and woke up. It was just a dream. It was made by my memories and fears from the past. As many people after waking up, I quickly forgot, what I was dreaming about. Just scraps remained and they didn't fit into each other in any way. So I left it behind.

The sun had risen just a while before and sky was clear and cloudless. Another hot day was waiting for me. I made a fire again and warmed up yesterday's meat.

After a brief but hearty breakfast, I reassessed the planned route. I had to change direction to come closer to the creek again and added water supplies. I assumed there wouldn't be such problem with water in the hills, not so big like here, in open flatland, where this stream probably represented the only source of water.

As I was approaching to hills, I was gradually recognizing that there wasn't continuous deciduous forest as I had thought before. It was rather hillside overgrown by sparse shrubs. Soil probably wasn't very fertile here and drought also wasn't good for vegetation. There were also several tall trees, standing alone and sticking out above the shrubs. In addition, I saw also groves and little clusters of trees. As I was able to tell from here, it was mostly birches, but there were oaks and hornbeams as well.

Suddenly I felt worried. Something was happening. Wind brought to me screams and female crying. There must be a human somewhere! Or couple of them. And they are definitely in danger. Then high rasping voice was heard which was in a moment drowned by a cry. I nocked arrow on the string and stepped that way.

There was a woman on a hazel. She was trying to climb as high as she could. She was obviously scared. There were three beasts similar to bears down there. They were shaking the hazel, trying to drop the woman down. They were making disparate strident sounds.

When I came closer, I found out it was people. They were muscular and short and were wearing animal furs. That's why I considered them some animals at first. Suddenly, I didn't know how to behave. Because I didn't understand, what was going on here.

I took the arrow off my the string and hanged my bow over the shoulder. I was in strange territory and if I were unfriendly, I could expect just an attack. I had to make contact with them and show my friendly intentions. I came even closer.

"Hey!" I shouted at loud to grab their attention.

They immediately stopped molesting the woman and turned to me. They had short spears in their hands. Finally, I could see their faces. Their appearance was wild and feature quite barbaric. Like stature which wasn't finished by sculptor and just crude outlines of face remained.

The first things that caught my attention were broad noses, fleshy lips and striking supraorbital ridges. They were a little shorter than me and their robust sturdily built chests indicated their strength.

They exchanged some words in language I didn't understand. Then, right on cue, they ran towards me with aimed spears. From their throats, the unpleasant high screeching sound was coming.

The situation was quite clear it wouldn't be a meeting of friends. They wanted to kill me right now. I had no time to plan some effective strategy. They were just twenty meters far from me and kept approaching. I picked my spear up and threw it against the attackers. It overcame a short distance and hit the first runner in the chest. Inertia drove the spear through whole body and the very tip popped out on the other side. The man fell to his knees and the air filled with horrible screech of pain. Two others didn't pay him any attention they even didn't try to help him. They were approaching very fast.

I pulled the hatchet from behind the belt and without thinking threw it at another target. It was flying in the air, rotating like a messenger of death and stabbed in another attacker's neck. Force of impact threw him on his back. The blade of the axe torn windpipe and carotid artery and got stuck in a tissue. Mortally wounded man tried to pull out the hatchet from the wound one more time. But he only triggered massive bleeding. In the next second, he was dead.

The third attacker was already close to me. He aimed his short spear on my stomach. At the very last moment I managed to jump aside, but he slightly scratched me anyway. The tip

came through my buckskin vest and hit the muscle on the hip, not so deep though. Severe pain rushed through my body and I screamed. Blood began to leak from my wound.

Next time the adversary attacked, I managed to jump aside and grab spear's shaft with my left hand, trying to snatch it. But I immediately found out it was a mistake. That man was extremely strong. With single movement he tossed me aside and I fell on the ground. The attacker was getting ready for another strike.

I dug fingers into dusty earth and threw it right into his face. It surprised him for a second. He snorted and shouted again with his grating voice. I rolled over on the ground and thus narrowly avoided the peak of his spear. It stabbed the soil just few centimeters from my face.

I managed to pull out my long dagger. With all my strength I kicked with my heel to a man's thigh. It was like hitting a concrete wall. But yet I disrupted his balance and he dropped the spear. He jumped at me and with his strong hands grabbed me by the neck. The strength of his squeeze was overwhelming. I was defending with one hand, while with the second one I grabbed my dagger firmly. I stabbed it under the rib cage into his body. The sharp blade smoothly came through his clothes, under the ribs and hit his heart. I twisted the knife to widen the wound and give the way for leaking blood. The pressure on my neck stopped. The man stiffened in incredulous surprise and slipped off of me. Dead.

I stayed lying next to him for a while, totally exhausted. I was breathing quickly and shallowly, as adrenaline was still running in my blood. Gradually, an unusual weakness began to seize me. Then I realized that I was still bleeding from the wound on my hip. My adversary probably managed to hit one of bigger vessels and despite the injury didn't look very serious at the first sight, it was bleeding a lot.

With an effort I pulled out my medical supplies. When I opened a little vial with strong alcohol, its typical scent hit my nose. I carefully poured a little of it on canvas cloth and cleaned the wound. Sharp pain moved me to tears. I screamed involuntarily. Then I wiped the wound carefully to disinfect it. The pain seized me again, but this time I stood it without a word. I took little bronze needle and yarn and began suturing wound on the front side. This, I handled pretty well. But it appeared to be a problem to suture wound from the other side. I couldn't turn enough to look at it properly.

Blood loose had already begun to take its toll. My vision was getting blurred and I even stopped perceive surroundings.

Then I saw her. The woman, about seventeen, stepped to me. She behaved cautiously. Even if I saved her life, I was still a stranger and possible danger. She was looking at me suspiciously like she couldn't decide if run or stay.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said slowly, trying to put pleasant tone in my voice, “I won’t hurt you.”

My words seemingly scared her. Obviously, she didn’t understand me.

“Come closer, please,” I beckoned with my hand, “I need your help.”

I tried to smile. I showed at the wound on the front side. Then I showed at the one on the backside and signed her that I couldn’t sew it up. I really needed help.

Finally, she understood. Nodded and came to me. She was still tense and a little in alert, but it was seen that had decided to trust me. She took a needle and quite handily began stitching the wound. She tried to work gently to not cause me another unnecessary pain. All the time she was gibbering something in her own language. According the tone, it seemed she was trying to calm me. I didn’t understand a word, but it didn’t matter to me. At least she tried.

When she finished suturing, I showed at vial with alcohol and the cloth.

“Wipe it with this,” I asked and signed her how to proceed.

She opened the vial and shrugged her nose.

“It doesn’t smell very nice, does it?” I noted with smile.

I shrugged nose in the same way to show her that it doesn’t smell nice to me either.

She smiled and nodded. I was gaining her trust slowly.

“I am Peter,” I said and put the hand on my chest.

“Peter,” she repeated and showed at herself.

I started to laugh as loudly as the wound on my chest allowed me. Then I shook my head and tried it again.

“Peter,” I pointed at myself. Then I aimed at her and with strong questioning tone I said, “You?”

She smiled and repeated after me. She pointed at me and said, “Peter.”

I rewarded her with smile and nod. It seemed she was quite smart.

Then she pointed at herself and said, “You?”

I didn’t want to confuse her more, so I left it behind. For now, I would call her You.

Then the girl got serious and pointed at dead body of a savage, lying close to us. I was so concerned about myself that I totally forgot at him.

“Saroma!” she hissed and shrunk her face.

I understood quite well. These people were their enemies and now mine, too.

Then the girl pointed at sky. The sun was already far beyond zenith and was approaching to west side. As I already knew, it would be dark in a few hours. I nodded. It was time to go. There was nothing to do in company of three corpses anymore. Besides, the smell of death would attract carnivores soon.

She helped me to stand up and pick my things up. The injury hurt a little, but it wasn't so terrible. I had lived with worse. Before she handed me a dagger, she was surveying it with an interest. The hatchet as well. Despite some difficulties she managed to pull the spear out of the body of one attacker. If nothing else, it was going to serve me as a pillar while walking. We wiped bloody weapons in the grass and we went.

The girl's name was Anné. When hunters from tribe of bear men had killed her brother and attacked her and her friend while searching for edible roots, she ran off. But she had no chance against the bear men. Their stamina and strength were incomparable.

In panic, she was running forcefully at first, but then she became tired. She tried to run slower and in more regular tempo. She was running for a long time, becoming more and more exhausted. Burning in her lungs finally made her stop. She was already sure she couldn't escape them. When she realized that, she started to think immediately.

At last, she tried to trick them and hid on the tree. For a moment it seemed it could work, but then one of chasers noticed a broken twig. As the hunters were arguing, their grisly voices were heard all around. They looked up and saw her, on the tree. In their eyes she saw excitement of hunting. But there was something else, too. Bear men used to kidnap girls and women of her tribe. From older women she often heard about their rapist behavior.

When they began shaking with thin trunk, what she was holding anxiously on, her fear turned into horror. She was screaming in terror, although she knew nobody would help her. She was too far from their territory.

And then, he showed up. Tall and fearless. It had to be a good spirit of the forest, or something like that. He was so different from her people, but somehow similar to them as well. His white hair confused her. She had never seen that on a young man.

He shouted something at bear men. The sound of his voice terrified them. But for her, it was sweeter than birds' chirping. The voice of savior. When bear men attacked him, he killed them all. The second attacker fell down dead, when a shiny thing was released by a white-hair man. Like he had a magical power. Afterwards she found out the thing was made of some shiny hard material, what she had never seen before.

The bear men hurt white-hair man though. At first, she was afraid, but then decided to reward his kindness and help him to cure his wounds.

The needle, which he used for fixing his skin, was made of similar material like his weapons. It was much thinner and sharper like bony needles, used by people in her tribe for sewing clothes.

The sound of his language was silky and melodic and confused her a little. But it sounded nice. When he smiled, she knew she could trust him, he didn't represent any danger. At one moment she had a feeling he asked for her name, but she wasn't quite sure. A word "you" probably meant "woman" in his language, so she let him use that to address her.

It was the right time to go away from here. People of her tribe used to avoid paths through open landscape. There were a lot of predators and wouldn't stand a chance against them.

The sun began to approach to the horizon, night was coming soon. The elders of their tribe always emphasized the need to be in the village before sunset. In addition, Peter – that was his name – was hurt and he would walk slowly.

All the way, she didn't let him out of her sight. Where did he come from? From a tribe at the end of the world? Now she was sure he was human. She was thinking, how their people would accept him. They used to behave suspiciously and dismissively to strangers. Their reaction was often similar to reaction of bear men. They tried to chase newcomers out, or kill them right away. They had good relations with some of clans, especially if they were related with them in way. Then, great hunts were organized and they used to choose women from the clans. She would be chosen by some man this year, too and if he made a deal with his father, she would go with him to a new home. She only hoped it would be somebody like young Aram from mountain tribe. Looking at him, her heart always started beating wildly. Last time they had exchanged several stolen glances and she immediately felt that his heart was beating in the same rhythm like her did. She wished the Great Spirit would bless them and they could become one! It would be real happiness! She would certainly have given him healthy children. She was dreaming about possible future for a while yet, and then had to focus on the present again. Now it was her turn to protect this man and convince people of her tribe to accept this man.

There was perceptibly less sunlight. In the distance, some beast, getting ready to attack a prey, roared. She was shaking. They had to go on without a rest although that was the thing the injured man would need most of all. She glanced at him, worried. He had pale face, sweat beading on his forehead. Blood loose had obviously weakened him and she only hoped that it wasn't too much. A short break would be good for him.

The terrible roar again. This time noticeably closer to them. A panic began to seize her. It was still a long way to the village yet and it would be night soon.

I was following my guide through sparse forest, but I was getting weaker with every second. The experience told me that it was dangerous to get too tired. I couldn't tell how further the place, where she was leading me is. I couldn't take any more risk. We had to stop and

encamp somewhere here. So I began to search for a suitable place. At last I decided to stay close to an old oak. Its thick trunk would protect us from the one side and fire would do it from the other one.

I stopped and yelled at woman, “You, stop! We are going sleep here tonight,” I said and pointed at the chosen spot.

I saw she disagreed, she tried to explain me something frantically. She probably wanted to express that this is very dangerous place and we had to go away from here. She was talking too fast and I didn’t catch the point, where one sentence began and the second ended. Obviously she was stressed.

“Wait a minute,” I stopped the waterfall of words.

I picked up a little twig and started to draw in the ground. I sketched two figures.

“Peter,” I pointed at one of them. Then I stuck the end of twig in the other one.

“You,” I explained her.

She nodded to sign me she understood. She even smiled when she saw how I drew her.

Then I drew six another figures a little further. I showed at each one of them and said, “You, you, you, you, you, you.”

This way I wanted to visualize her tribe. I saw she got it. So I drew a movement of the sun in the sky and tried to ask the distance between us and her home. According to her explanation, we were about one quarter of the day away. So I drew fire next to our figures and showed her we were going to sleep here.

Her eyes widened in fear. She took my twig and began to draw. She made a line between us and the rest of members of her tribe and drew others figures.

“Saroma!” said the word like before, when she had pointed at the dead attacker.

“Saroma! Saroma!” she repeated and drew several next figures.

I understood quite precisely. We were in the hunting territory of their enemies. I myself had already seen that they weren’t quite nice. But walking through the dark forest during was extremely dangerous, especially when I saw local animals. I shook my head.

“I am sorry, You, we have to stay here.”

Without any other explanation I began to prepare wood for fire. She tried to convince me for a while, but then gave it up and started to help me. In a short while, a little fire was already burning brightly and we lied on temporary bed made of twigs and grass. I regretted that I hadn’t have my bear fur here, so I could wrap in it, because nights used to be cold in here. So we pushed to each other and warmed ourselves a little. I had to be careful that the fire was large enough to scare off animals, but at the same time I didn’t want to attract unwanted attention.

As I had discovered, animals in this territory had strongly rooted a fear of fire, but there were others predators, who could be attracted by flames – Saroma, wild people, as I had named them after our first meeting. I could only hope that the tribe of this girl would be friendlier.

I was falling asleep slowly. One more time I turned to my companion and said quietly, “Good night, You.”

“Anné,” she said sleepily.

“Peter, Anné,” she added as explanation, so I finally knew what was her name.

“Good night, Anné,” I said again.

“Good night, Peter,” she answered me and was slowly dropping off.

I had to smile. Although she probably didn’t understand meaning of the words, she pronounced them very well. This was a hard day. A wound on my hip still hurt, so I had a problem to find a good position for sleep. For now, I couldn’t do anything with that. Just time would cure that.

The overall exhaustion of this day finally won over me and I fell asleep.

“You have to train more,” Tork rebuked me. “If you meet predator or enemy, you can’t hesitate. The weapon has to become a part of your body.”

He handed me a hatchet.

“Now!” he called me suddenly.

I threw hatchet against training target. It hit correctly. If there was a man, he would have been dead.

He handed me another one, wordlessly.

I took it and, without aiming, threw it at another, more distant target. The hit was accurate again. Next were dagger, spear, bow and arrows. They all hit chosen aims.

“Why do you think you aren’t ready to survive?” asked me Tork suddenly.

I turned to him and already now realized that I wasn’t supposed to be here.

“I have no idea. I don’t know the land, animals or people. I don’t know what to do.”

Tork nodded thoughtfully.

“Everything has its right time,” he said finally, “a lot of things have to happen yet.”

“What is going to happen?” I asked directly.

But he shook his head again and repeated, “Everything has its right time. Everything has a meaning.”

I started to be sick of that. I really loved Tork, but now I was getting angry. But I controlled myself and asked a question which had bugged me for a longer time.

“Are you real, Tork?”

“What do you mean, Peter?” he asked.

“Are you really here with me? Or I am just dreaming of you?”

He smiled slightly. “Does anyone care?”

“I do,” I answered wildly.

“Just you can decide about it. But now there is no time for chit-chat. Do you remember the night on Angrosansian territory?”

“How could I forget? You left me by the fire and protected the vicinity by yourself. You were expecting enemies. Actually, you used me as bait,” I added reproachfully.

“Yes, but it worked,” he said with his typical laughter.

“Do you think I should do the same tonight? But what about Anné? What if they hurt her?”

“I don’t think so. Nothing threatens her. At least, nothing in this case. Wild people appreciate women as mothers of their children.”

“Well, now you calmed me,” I snapped ironically, “and what about me? They won’t appreciate me as a father of their children? I would certainly enrich their genes.”

Tork shrugged his shoulders.

“Do as you mean,” said without anger, “it’s up to you.”

Suddenly, his face got serious. “They follow your track. Be ready!”

I woke up. A few meters from our camp, a twig cracked in the darkness, as an animal was beating its way through underbrush. I grabbed my dagger. I opened my eyes, listening to sounds of night. The animal was slowly receding.

Fine, what now? Anné was sleeping peacefully. She was a child of her age, but she lived in a relative safety of community and her instincts and senses weren’t as sharp as mine.

If Tork was right, they were coming from the left side. But could I trust him? Was it really him, or just my subconscious created this dream to warn me against danger? It didn’t matter now. I realized that this threat is more than real. If this day and injury didn’t exhaust me, I could figure it out by myself much sooner.

They certainly knew that we were only two and one of us was a girl. They had to be surprised when had found those three dead, but by my traces they knew I was hurt. How could they resist such tempting prospect? Injured man and a young woman. Despite the only short clash with them I was completely sure they wouldn’t give it up. The question was how many of them would come. Walking through the night forest required a lot of courage, even for

people, who knew this country intimately. And they had found the bodies! So...five or more men. I had killed three of their men, they wouldn't take it lightly.

I assumed that the group would go after our trail until it reached the camp. Then they would surround us and stick to their usual plan. I considered all possible scenarios, but all of them ended by our death. Of course, I could run away and let Anné at their mercy, hoping she would keep them occupied for a while.

When this thought reached my mind, I immediately rejected it. I had saved her once and felt responsibility for her now. She relied on me and I couldn't just leave her. I will face them, and I will be dictating the rules.

Quietly, to not wake Anné up, I began to prepare weapons. I poured water on cold ashes and thoroughly blackened shiny metal parts of my weapons. All the nights until now was cloudless and reflection of moonlight on metal could easily draw my enemies' attention to me. The rest of black color I used to make some lines on my face. My hands were so dirty from previous activity that I didn't have to blacken them at all. I was ready for night encounter.

I widely avoided the place, where we had come from. The forest was sparse enough and moonlight sufficiently illuminated places, I was walking through. But the shadowy spots were pitch black. In my head, I was praying so no animal would show up right now, in this part of forest. And absolutely not the animal of the size I had seen in prairie before. Distance, I passed, seemed to be proper. Even in moonlight I recognized places where I and Anné had come through before. So most likely they would go this way.

I was waiting about an hour. My body began to freeze already. Especially the injured hip – it started to burn a while ago and now it was literally on fire. Like somebody put a hot iron on my skin.

Time was passing by. I already began to think I was wrong. Then I smelled the odor. It remained me an odor of previous attackers. So they were coming after all. I caught snatches of their conversation. They were speaking with grunting voices and they were often using rattle to emphasize their words. One of the voices was stronger than the other and when it spoke, the rest of them remained silent. It was probably their leader. The worst thing was I wasn't able to guess their numbers correctly. According to the voices, they could be four, but, of course, some of lower-level members could be quiet all the time.

They probably discovered our camp because they started to diverge slowly. I heard them vanish in several directions and wade their way through the night forest. Obviously they weren't night hunters, at least according to rates of Tork's world. To my trained ear they were too loud.

I squatted in the shadow of a big bush, when one of them began to approach towards me. Slowly I drew a bowstring at maximum. My hurt hip protested against such pressure, but I ignored it. With my eyes narrowed, so the enemy couldn't see their sparkle, I was surveying the vicinity.

All right. Nobody else was here. I aimed shortly and released the arrow. It even wasn't seen, as it was flying and suddenly appeared stabbed in my enemy's eye. The arrow driven by big force, killed him immediately. He fell to the ground, motionless. The sound of fallen body was too loud for me and so I waited tensely if somebody else appeared. Nothing. Fine then, let's go on.

On the right side from me, a bush rustled gently. Crouched, I headed towards it. After a while, I stumbled upon another hunter. This man was a little more careful and was watching vicinity from behind the short bush. I barely missed him. As I was approaching, suddenly I was standing by him. He was just turning towards me and reflection of his eyes attracted my periphery vision. I quickly sent him one arrow. Reflexively, he raised the hand with the spear. My arrow bounced back from the body of spear and ended up in the dark forest.

The man stiffened for a while, he was probably startled by my appearance. In his entire life, he had never seen anything like this. Then he began to open mouth to shout out. I couldn't allow that. Another arrow hit his heart. The scream died in his throat, when he fell down. That was two. How many else? I didn't know that. All I could do was to remain patient and continue with my night hunting.

From the left side, an undertone was heard. Somebody of them, worried by suspicious sound, was coming back. When he was passing next to my hiding place, I waited for a while. Then I came out of a shadow and plunged the dagger to its handle into his back. I pulled it out immediately and stabbed again. I caught the falling body and put it down quietly.

Now I had to hurry. Enough time passed to any of them could get to the camp. On the way I stumbled upon another one, as he was creeping to our bivouac. Precisely aimed cut with the hatchet from the side almost decapitated him. Blade, sharp as razor, cut through the spinal cord and carotid artery. Blood spurted and splattered my face. I wiped blood out of my eyes.

I was about ten steps from the camp, so if other people were there, they had to be very close to Anné. The answer to my worries was her scream into the night. Then, another voice sounded. Noise of short struggle was heard. Then there was silence. There was nothing to wait for now. Anné was in danger. How long until the attacker realized that his companions were dead? When he realized that he could commit something unforeseen? He could hurt her.

I quickly pulled off clothes from my last victim. It was simply prepared fur, something like a vest. It was covered in blood, but I had no choice. I covered my hair with some furry cap with ornaments.

“God,” I begged in the head, “please, let it work!”

I grabbed the short spear of the first warrior and slightly crouched I headed towards the camp. As I supposed, our enemy was just about to collect his reward. Anné was lying on the ground, obviously unconscious. The bear man was standing above her, quickly throwing off his clothes.

When I approached, the attacker looked at me. But my disguise could fool him in this gloom. He told me something in his unpleasant language and again drew his attention at the woman lying on the ground.

With my head down, I was slowly approaching. I hefted their spear in my hand. It was too short and too heavy, I was unlikely to throw it well. And even if, I could only do it in short distance, while risking I could hit Anné. It wasn't properly balanced for throwing. It was simple but deadly weapon.

When I saw the savage and Anné, lying on the ground, anger captured me. Until now, I was eliminating enemies with a cool head of hunter. But the glance at person, who was already close to me, put fire into my veins.

This is the time, I thought and raised heavy spear with both hands, prepare to attack. At the moment, a terrible roar came out of the forest. Blood froze in my veins. A massive dark body came to the clearing of our camp. The creature was moving slowly, as it was sure his prey couldn't escape. And it was right about it.

I looked towards extinguished fire. The enemy warrior was in the alert, too, clutching his spear. He was ready to face the night visitor. When the dark body got to the place, where the moonlight was shining through the trees, I finally saw it was a bear. This specimen was truly impressive. When he was standing on all fours, he was as tall as I was.

The bear was standing for a while, like he was deciding which one of us to eat first. Then he made two steps towards me. So he chose me. I actually wasn't very surprised, in that bloody fur I had to look like open butchery store window. The beast roared again and rose on its hind legs. It had to be almost three meters tall and I knew I wouldn't get out of this situation.

Suddenly, I recalled a story about man attacked by bear, who pretended to be dead. That dulled predator's instincts and it didn't attack at last. I lied carefully on the ground and stayed there, motionless. My heart was beating like a drum. I thought it would jump out of my chest.

Bear stood on all four legs again and sluggishly stepped towards me. All the time it was grumbling, like it was speaking with himself.

I felt his wet snout on my shoulder. As he was breathing in and out, I was hit by smell from its mouth. It was a smell of predator. The smell of old blood, smell of fear – simply smell of death. It made me dizzy. Now I truly regretted I even didn't try to face the bear. Now I was let on its mercy.

Several times, it tentatively struck my back. After the last strike it hit my injured hip. I almost screamed in pain, but I handled it in the last second. Like the beast felt my thoughts, it roared again, this time very close to my head. My nerves were stretched to the breaking point. The pressure was so big that at one moment I almost wished it finally attacked.

Then, another sound was heard. High, screeching scream. An unknown warrior attacked the bear with his spear. He quickly ran through the little clearing and stabbed it into the predator. The wooden part of his weapon stuck out of bear's body.

The animal turned to him, in reaction at unexpected threat. It swung with its paw with long claws and the hunter's head dropped from the body like it had been cut by executioner's axe. Headless torso of the hunter fell down. That was enough for the bear to make its predatory instincts awaken. It roared again and began ripping meat of his kill.

This scene was occurring not more than four meters far from the place where I lied. Ripping, gobbling and crackling of bones were too loud to ignore that.

You are alive, you are alive! – That was the only thought that helped me to chase this horror away.

If I didn't do anything stupid, the bear shouldn't attack me. I felt really sorry about the hunter. Yes, he and his companions had been following our traces with intention to kill us, but this wasn't important now. That man was really brave, I had to admit. When the bear turned to me, he could easily run away. But he didn't. He had sacrificed himself and literally his body to save me instead. Perhaps he was fooled by my disguise of one of his people. But it wasn't important. I wanted to believe that he had sacrificed just because I was human. And in critical situations, people help each other.

"Thank you," I whispered and turned away from bloody feast.

I was searching Anné with my eyes. She was just waking up from coma. She was still dazed for a while. When she saw what was happening here, she quite froze and was going to scream in horror.

Waving a hand, I drew her attention. I put my finger to lips and signed her to be quiet. Then I spotted with my palm on the ground.

Stick to the ground, I sent intensive thought to her, not daring to say it at loud.

She understood. A kind of empathy was the result of coexistence of family groups, where people had been communicating not only with language, but also thanks to gestures and they also could empathize with others' thoughts. She slowly went down to the ground. In moonlight I saw her scared gaze. She carefully turned back to the eating carnivore and stayed there lying, motionless. The bear finally finished his horrible work and with belly full of human meat was sluggishly leaving the clearing. It was heard, how it was retreating, grumbling. Shuffling of his fur in bushes was more and more remote.

Silence, finally. I was still tense, I didn't dare to move in the event that the bear returned. A few minutes later I finally decided it was the right time. The fresh meat and smell of blood could attract another predator. And this time we didn't have to be so lucky. I carefully stood up, with spear in my hand.

Nothing happened. I quickly watched the vicinity and stepped towards the woman.

"Anné," I whispered.

She didn't react, even didn't move.

"Anné," I repeated, "it's gone."

She turned to me. In moonlight, her face was pale as a ghost. She jumped up and hugged me firmly. Emotions burst out of her like from pressurized boiler. She started sobbing and her sobs gradually turned into heartbreaking cry.

I was squeezing her and whispering comforting words, "Sh, sh, it's all right now. We are safe."

Words were smoothly running from my mouth and had beneficial effect not only for Anné, but on myself as well. It was simply too dangerous situation and even the most cold-blooded man would've been ruined by that. I had to pull myself together to handle this. She finally stopped crying, a lonely sob just sometimes shook her body. I stroked her cheek.

"Don't worry, everything's going to be all right now," I said with comforting tone.

She was quite calm already. She was just a child of her age and her resistance to stress was influenced by environment she had lived in.

She pointed at the forest and signed me to leave this place. I fully agreed with her. But I couldn't leave immediately. There was a debt I had. I owed my life to this man. I just couldn't leave his half-eaten body here, where others predators could go to finish the rest of him.

I refused the idea to dig a grave. I had no right tool and if the grave was too shallow, scavengers would have found it. Thus my effort was completely useless. The only option was to burn the corpse.

I started picking up wood. Thinner twigs at first, then thick branches which had fallen down and were dry enough. I was putting them right on the rest of my savior's body, trying to avoid looking at his mutilated corpse. Anné was helping me wordlessly.

When we made a quite high funeral pile, I took a tussock and burnt it with tinderbox. The fire quickly engulfed the grass and bit into the wood. In a while, air was filled with smell of burnt hair of hunting fur and later also with smell of burning flesh.

"Thank you," I said quietly, "thank you for your courage. Thank you for our lives."

I crossed myself according to my Christian habit and looked down, quietly praying.

"Let your soul finds a peace," I said for the last time and turned away.

I began picking my things up. Arrows, which had killed my enemies, I would find next morning. I had already noticed that there was no iron in this land. According to this fact and to a presence of giant animals I figured that the Time Gate had sent me deep into the past. At the very beginning of mankind, I guess.

In the light of fire, I carefully surveyed the spear, used by hunters. It really wasn't made for throwing, but for stabbing at the close range. It was very dangerous way of hunting and fatal injuries had to happen quite often using it.

The spear had a diameter of about five centimeters and it was made of some hard but flexible wood. I couldn't say what kind it was. The tip was made of some cut stone. I felt tiny indentations, as it had been gradually sheeted into needful shape. It was very sharp, though. I could say it was comparable to my bronze spikes, if not even sharper. The blade was partially put in the hollowed groove. Then it was tied by thin leather straps and finally poured in resin mass. This had been probably made a long time ago and resin glue had already hardened into stone.

Anné gently tugged my sleeve. She pointed towards the forest. This time more determined.

I shook my head. Although I had wanted to go far from here, I have changed my mind. Despite everything what had occurred here, we were most safe at this place. Smoke and fire would chase animals away, so they wouldn't represent any danger for us anymore. I also didn't assume that we could meet other enemy hunters. They had lost eight grown men in one day, it had to weaken them a lot. I didn't know how large their communities were, but they had never lost eight men at once. I was sure about that.

At last, I and Anné went to sleep by smaller fire, further from burning funeral pile. My companion quite calmed down and stopped convincing me to leave. She probably came to similar conclusion like me. This time, nothing interrupted our sleep until morning. During the

night, Anné cuddled to me, breathing deeply. That night I wasn't dreaming at all. Like my previous life started to leave me.

Chapter four

Anné woke up first. She shook me gently. I opened eyes and stood up with struggle. The wound on my hip hurt badly. Like somebody was hitting it all the time. Never mind, it needed time to heal.

My first glaze was headed at the burnt place, where a thin strip of smoke was rising from. We were done here. Now we could go.

We headed west. We walked in silence, we had nothing to talk about either way. Moreover, I had felt strangely since morning. At first, I thought it was the cause of yesterday's stress. Several times I drank water from my waterskin, but I couldn't quench thirst. It seemed this day was very cold. Gradually, I began shake from cold and my hands were shivering uncontrollably. My vision was blurred and I had problem to walk straight. I didn't want to delay both of us and tried to keep pace with her. But I was more and more tired and I barely could move my legs. A dull pain seized whole my body. It started to turn into twinge in knee and hip joints. Like thousands of needles were stabbing me at the same time. I had to handle it, now I couldn't stop. I bit the bullet and kept walking.

I was too exhausted. I had to rest for a while. Just a minute. My eyes were closing by themselves and opening them was accompanied by strong pain. Sunlight rasped my eyes, like somebody put sand into them. I would sit down, just for a second. Or, even better, lie down. I would sleep for a while and then I would go on. Together with that woman – what was her name? Then darkness swallowed me.

When Anné turned back, terrified, she realized that she was alone. Since they left the clearing where they had spent the night, they didn't talk to each other, didn't even try. They were both too exhausted after previous day and didn't want to talk very much. In addition, they didn't understand each other, so they couldn't discuss yesterday events.

At first, panic seized her. Did he leave her alone? No, he wouldn't do that. She trusted him too much to believe that. So something happened to him and she didn't notice. Some animal had attacked him or other hunters showed up? In her mind, a thought of escape emerged, but

refused it in the bud. She couldn't do that, even if she was sure he was captured by bear men. She has had to try to rescue him, even if she risked to be captured, too. She owed him. Like when Peter had been burning dead hunter's body. She didn't understand his words, but felt their meaning. He owed him. Therefore, she receded from another persuasion and helped him to prepare wood for burning the rest pieces of the body. And now he was gone.

"Where did you go, Peter?" she asked herself quietly.

When she was going tracing her own footsteps, she got lost in her thoughts. In last days, she had experienced more than in entire her previous life. If she finally managed to get to safety, she would unite with some man and start a family. She had been waiting for a long time. Her peers had been mothers already. Sometimes she envied them. But she was promised to the son of chief from friendly tribe, who once had saved her father during Great Hunt. But boy was a few winters younger than her, so they had to wait until he grew up. Earlier this summer, they learned that he unfortunately died after had fallen of the rock. She felt sorry about him, but didn't love him. Actually, she relieved a lot. She didn't want to wait next two years. Life was too short and could end at any moment.

Suddenly she realized she was thinking about Peter like about her future husband. It scared her a little. It was usual for them that young women were in pair with older men and young men took older women to be theirs, but she always imagined a younger man by her side. At least, until now. A thought of his chest while she was sewing up his wound, fleshed through her mind. Then warm of his body, when she was sleeping curled up in his arms. Or when she was comforting her on that horrible clearing. It was a feeling of safety and love. But she didn't realize on that moment. Women always kept saying that a man knew importance of things when he would lose them.

When she came to these thoughts, her throat narrowed. Her eyes filled with tears, so her sight blurred. Life brought her this strange man and now she had to lose him? There was no time for that. She quickly wiped her eyes and went on.

Finally, she saw him. Like somebody took off a huge burden of her shoulders. He was lying on his side, sleeping. She tried to wake him up, but he didn't react. She touched his neck. His pulse was strong, but too fast. His whole body was burning in fever. He was breathing quickly and shallowly. She opened waterskin and put it to his mouth. Running water made him drink it reflexively. She spread his buckskin blouse and then she saw it. The wound on his side was purple red and turning into purple in the middle. The whole hip was swollen and white-yellow pus was soaking out of it.

The bad spirit of weapon!

Many warriors had similar illness, when they had been injured by bear men with their weapons or wild animals with their teeth and claws. Some of them had survived, others had died. Especially when they had been injured deeply in the stomach. She didn't understand causes of the illness. But she did know, what would follow. If the wound wouldn't be cleaned by their tribal shaman with his herbs and magic spells as soon as possible, the inflammation would spread and turn into decay. Then the man, exhausted by fever, would die. She had to get him to their shaman at all costs. She tried to lift him up, but he was too heavy. Almost like dead.

"Stop it!" she rebuked herself at loud, "don't dare to think about that!"

She couldn't decide what to do. There were just few meters remained to the village. If she left him here, she could return with help soon. It was quite clear she couldn't carry him by herself. She was a young woman, but this was too much for her. But she didn't want to leave him. He was lying on the deer path, which they had chosen. But not only herbivores and people used to use these paths, treaded by animals to move easier and faster through the forest. Predators often used to watch along the sidewalk for possible prey. They were attracted by smell of potential food. She had to risk it. There was no other option. She could only hope that no predator would show up in the short time. For the last time, she looked around and stepped out towards the village.

About twenty steps far from her, a grey wolf came on the deer path. When he saw Anné, he bared its teeth and growled. He was surveying her for a while. Then he tilted the head back and howled stridently. That was a calling signal for others members of the pack. Several howls from afar answered him. The wolf drew his attention back at his prey and growled again. Then he began approaching towards her.

Anné almost froze in fear. But not in fear of herself. She just could climb up on the nearest tree and wait, until wolves got tired and left by themselves. But what would happen to Peter? He would be killed and eaten right in front of her eyes. And she couldn't allow that! She would protect him with all her strength.

Slowly retreating, she went back to lying Peter. She pulled his long dagger and put it behind her belt, like he used to. Then she lifted a short spear, what had belonged to bear men before. She squeezed it in her hands and waited for necessary. She knew how to hunt, like every woman in her tribe, but it was always happening with her tribesmen. Even when there was threat of mortal danger, somehow, she felt safe with them. Now she was alone.

The wolf was approaching slowly. He was waiting for the rest of his pack. Several times he raised his head and called them by howling. Howls were heard all around. Suddenly, another wolf jumped out in front of her. His bared teeth were sending clear message. Anné knew they

were going to attack and there was nothing she could do. According to howling, there were five wolves and they were approaching very fast. All she could do was waiting.

Then, the third wolf showed up on the path. That was enough to kill a man. Although there were two of them, one couldn't move. Predators felt, he didn't pose any threat to them. The first wolf bypassed the prey from the left and was about to jump. The two others were going to attack from the front.

It was happening. Anné was looking in front of her and to the left, trying to guess, where would the first attack come from.

The big male in front of her jumped at the girl. Foam was leaking out of his mouth, full of teeth. He tried to hit her neck with teeth, like his predator instincts told him to. Anné stabbed the spear in wolf's chest, with intention to throw him away. But the moving mass was heavier than she expected. After the wolf was hit by spike of spear, his weight threw her down to the ground.

In another moment, the second predator was by her. He tried to bit her thigh. But his teeth found the waterskin instead. He squeezed jaws and water splashed out. It splattered into his eyes and confused him for a while. That was enough for Anné to pull out the dagger and stab it into his body. Then she snatched the knife and stabbed it again, a few centimeters further. Blood, running from wolf's wounds, quite drenched her. Predator's body twitched and stiffened.

The last wolf hesitated. Two members of pack, the leader male included, were dead. Instinct told him to run away. But when another member of the pack appeared on the path, he got ready for another attack.

Anné stood up quickly. Looking around, she assessed the situation. Two of wolves were dead, but every moment she waited, when the last one would attack. Actually, she was lucky. If he jumped on her, while she was on the ground, she had no chance. Another wolf had just walked on the path.

“No!” groaned silently, “not anymore!”

She gritted her teeth firmly and yanked the spear out of the first wolf's body. It was a huge advantage that she had killed him with only one stab. But she might not be so lucky the second time.

Wolves were approaching, darkly growling. They were showing their teeth, like they were getting enough nerve up to attack with that. It was heard swishing, as the spear was flying to the target. It hit attacking wolf during his jump and knocked him down, next to the path. The

last wolf, whining, turned back and vanished in the forest. Men showed up from behind the trees.

Anné shouted in joy. When she saw her father and others men of her tribe, a wave of relief flooded her. But it wasn't over yet. There was one more thing to solve. Peter was lying on the ground, in fever which could kill him as quickly as wolves.

"Father!" she said, "I am so happy you are here. You came right in time."

He came to her and hugged her tightly. For a while, he was swaying her in his arms. Then he started to survey her thoughtfully.

"Are you all right, my dear?" he asked carefully.

In his heart, feeling of pride and worries were mixing. His daughter, chased by bear men, had survived the night in wilderness by herself. In addition, she had faced pack of wolves and even killed two of them.

"I am fine, father," she answered, "We have to hurry."

She freed from father's embrace and pointed at the lying man.

"We have to help him," she said anxiously.

He looked at him and shook his head dismissively, "That man is not one of us. We don't need any strangers."

Meanwhile, two others men came closer to the lying man. With interest they were looking at his white hair. One of them checked his condition. He found the wound on his hip and was surveying it for a while. Then he sniffed it.

"The great spirit of weapons has captured him," said to Anné's father.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He won't survive much longer. Fever has seized his body. He will be dead until next morning, I think," he concluded placidly.

The older man nodded. They had to come back. The injured man meant nothing to them.

"Kill him, we're leaving," he ordered.

"No!" yelled Anné, "you can't do that!"

"If we leave him here, he will die anyway. The predators will get to him faster. You must understand."

"No, father," she refused, although she knew she went too far already. In this society, women had no right to withstand men. Even she, like chief's daughter, could just beg. But now everything was at stake, there was no time for traditions.

"No, father," she repeated louder, "if you leave him here, I'll stay with him."

He looked at her blankly. In different situation, he probably hit her, but today everything was odd. He loved his daughter. She was the only child he and his first wife had. She was his greatest love, but she had died after Anné's birth. And now, his little girl was standing in front of him with head up and was so similar to her mother. Sorrow squeezed his heart. How she had grown up! When had that little toddler turned into this woman?

"Why?" he asked.

"He is my husband," she said firmly.

I was in Kalos's forge. There was terribly hot, sweat wetted my forehead. The air was too heavy, I could barely breathe. Kalos was blowing into bags hardly and drove air into the fire. Coal in the furnace turned red and the iron in it was already completely hot. The forger grabbed pliers and skillfully took a piece of red-hot metal. He pulled it out and put on the anvil. He was rhythmically banging with hammer faster and faster and I was still more captured by heat. My whole body was like in fire. I was breathing quickly and shallowly.

"Kalos! Enough!" I shouted at him with choked voice, "Stop, please. I can't stand it anymore."

Kalos didn't stop banging, but his rhythm slowed down a little. He raised his head from the work and said, "Only after metal is white-cold, you will get rid of the waste. Only then it can be reborn."

He lifted scorching piece of metal in pliers and, without warning, put it on my hip. A new wave of pain flooded me. I saw, how blaze of hot iron burnt my skin on the spot, where I had been injured. I cried.

Banging of the hammer sounded again, but much slower this time. The air cleared and I could breathe easily again.

Kalos handed me a glass of water.

"Now you have to drink, Peter," he said to me.

"Thank you, my friend," I said and took a glass, "It's better now." I drank water in one gulp.

The tribal shaman was watching the struggling of stranger with powerful spirit of weapons, who tried to defeat him with huge concern. He knew this night was breaking. If he lived until morning, he would survive. His body was in fever and heart was beating wildly. He was approaching to the critical point of his fight for survival. Either he would rise as weak as a child, or die.

Suddenly, injured man shivered and painful sob escaped his lips. At the next moment, sweat flooded whole his body. Fever subsided and his shallow breathing was gradually getting deeper and deeper. His heart began beating more calmly and regularly. He handled the worst part. But at least one more seizure was expected. If he survived that one, he would live. Now they just have to wait.

The old man thanked to spirits of the forest and plopped on the low block, used for sitting. He was too old, older than everybody in the tribe and was too exhausted. He had done what he could. He cleaned man's wound with herbs and was taking care of him all the time. He calmed hotness with compress soaked in herbal decoctions. Several times, he made injured man to drink of his decoction. His ancestor had taught him the preparation of that. It was effective tool against bad spirits of weapons. Now it was up to the stranger, how he would catch up with it. He waved at his companion to stop drumming on the little drum and ordered him to look after the man until next wave of fever. He himself barely moved on the bed.

I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw, were bizarre figures of animals swinging above my head on strings. Behind them, there was a young man, looking at me worriedly. My whole body was bathing in sweat. But fever was gone. I took a jar with water from his hands and drank.

I tried to get up from the bed. The boy pushed me back. He was whispering insistent words in language I didn't know. I was weak as a fly during fall, so I couldn't resist and fell back on the bed.

For a while, I was looking around. I was probably in some kind of tent. There was a slightly burning fire in the middle of it and smoke was rising to the top of the tent, where he disappeared in the little hole. All over the tent I could see spread string with bunches of herbs and sorts of amulets hung on them. There was a sleeping old man on the bed on my left side. He looked like a corpse. Suddenly, exhaustion reached me and I closed my eyes.

Lush green was cutting my eyes. It was right after the storm and sun had just risen. Everything was clean after the rain. I felt a light breeze on my face and it filled me with joy.

A young deer jumped on the little clearing. He looked straight at me and wasn't afraid of me at all. He came closer and let me stroke its neck. His soft, almost velvety coat felt gentle under my fingers. I was still stroking its neck with my left hand, while my right one found way to his nose.

"Run," I said to him, "I have to visit someone."

I turned and walked up a steep hill. I ran up the familiar path to the cave. The cave of the Time Gate.

When I came in, peace surrounded me. The cave impressed me – like every time, after all. It was beautiful, like it didn't belong here. I had already known that it wasn't made by human and was as old as the very mankind. Regular shapes of vaulted ceiling and upright rear wall couldn't be result of natural processes either. The back wall was covered in panels with thousands of little blue crystals. Some of them were blinking, others remained dark. Others were shining like little bulbs. There were two lines of red crystals under them. They were all dark and lifeless. As I was approaching, one of red ones began to brighten up. It was incredibly beautiful and I felt almost fundamental need to touch it.

"It is lovely, isn't it?" spoke deep male voice.

I turned and spotted the familiar figure.

"Greetings to you, Teacher," I said automatically and then talked on, "Yes, it is stunning. But every time, I touched the red crystal, the Time Gate took me to the time and place, where I didn't want to be," I added with soft reproach.

The Teacher nodded gently and then signed me with hand to sit by the table.

"Do you believe in fate, Peter?" asked suddenly.

I looked at him and anger began to rise in me.

"I am no toy of destiny and I don't like how this Destiny uses me every time it fails. Why? To fix its mistakes?" I snapped.

"Peter," the Teacher stopped me, "every man has a mission and he has duty to finish it."

"What's my mission then? What am I supposed to do?" I asked ironically, "will I get some special task again? Shall I save the world?"

"Calm down, Peter, this won't help anybody. There are things more powerful than us. You have to accept it."

I pulled myself together, but anger didn't leave me yet.

"Why did I appear at this place? What's the purpose?"

Teacher sipped water from the glass thoughtfully. He looked into the distance for a while, then answered, "There are many possible futures. Every one of your decision in breaking situation creates new future. I stopped following all lines of destiny and wander around time in my mind. It's unbearable and no man can handle that."

"Then how..."

He silenced me with raised hand.

“Peter, I am certain you remember that when you’ve been thrown from the end of twentieth century to this place, history had already withstood many important events, changing the course of the world dramatically. Didn’t matter if there were ostensibly inflicted by significant rulers or warlords. But reality is somewhat different.”

He paused for a while and sipped water again.

“History is changed and created in breaking points by individuals like you. They carry sign of destiny and accomplish, let’s say, greater plan.”

He lifted up his hand, because he saw that I was going to react.

“No, I don’t know where the world is heading now either. It depends on your decisions in these breaking situation.”

After these words the Teacher stood up and stoked up fire. Flames blazed and immediately ate up new wood. Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe in the cave. The air was heavy and hot. It was unbelievable, but I could hear bangs of Kalos’ hammer here, too. It was banging louder and louder, until I thought I would turn deaf.

Then the Teacher stepped up to me. His white robe shaded me before the glow of fire. Warmth of fireplace wasn’t so intense now, on contrary, it was pleasant for me. I was filled with peace. Banging of forger’s hammer was still heard clearly, but the rhythm was slower and somehow more joyful.

The Teacher hugged me around my shoulders.

“Peter,” he said to me, “it’s time to go. Go back to your body and live.”

I woke up, while the old man was putting another compress on me. It stank like vinegar, but I didn’t care. I closed my eyes and slept dreamlessly until next morning.

Chapter five

I was recovering fast. Fever didn’t come back and wound on my hip didn’t hurt anymore. It healed up after a week. For a couple days, I was weak as a child, but then my strength slowly returned.

The old shaman and his companion were taking care of me excellently. Besides, there was Anné, too. She was visiting me anytime she could. These were pleasant moments. She tried to teach me as much of their language as she could.

As I noticed, in everyday language, they used to use just few words and meanings were created by expressive facial expressions and gestures. The tone of voice was important as well. Almost the same words could have opposite meanings, if they were spoken in different tones. There were also more specifics. There was language of women and language of hunters. In language of hunter, the same animal had several different names. For example a doe with fawns, in foal or just adult one had three names. It confused me a lot, so I decided to leave it for now. Overall, their language was guttural and not very carefully modulated by lips and tongues, so in the beginning I had some problems with some sounds. But thanks to repeating and effort to use their language as often as possible I was getting better.

The most part of day Anné spent with other women fulfilling their daily duties such as gathering of edible roots and fruit. These were hung on strings or spread on the ground to be dried in the sun. This way, they were preparing supplies for the winter. Some women were processing meat and other parts of animals like skin, bones and horns to make some products. And they, of course, were preparing food.

I myself spent time walking around the village. It was located under the little rock on the plane next to a creek. It was a clearing with grubbed up trees. It was surrounded by a high fence made of thorny branches to protect against predators.

The village was formed by several long cottages built on the base of shaft construction. Walls were made of huge animal skins. They were almost five meters wide and their length depended on size of family which lived there. When it was needed, another space was built and the house became longer. There were one or several fireplaces in the house. Smoke was rising towards the hole in the roof and went out through it. Besides, everybody had his own bed where they used to spend the night. Just a tribal shaman lived alone in his own tent at the edge of the village.

Overall, there were about eighty people here. Men used to have several wives and a lot of children were running around. It was because permanent struggles with enemy tribes and fatal injuries during dangerous hunts. So the number of women was bigger than number of men. As well, children often didn't reach adulthood because of diseases or mortal accidents. As I already knew, they were all blood relatives. If a man wanted a woman, he had to kidnap her from enemy tribe, or ask for one from other friendly tribe, but the choice had to be approved by woman's father.

As I found out, tribes didn't attack each other very often. Even victory over other tribe could mean weakening by too many losses, which would weaken then against attacks of others. Our pursuers were unlucky, too. When a rumor about loss of eight their men had spread, some

enemy tribes attacked their village. The rest of men and boys were killed and women were divided among them.

In this village I also saw some women who were different from others. Shaman said that bear women weren't too smart, but they were wanted. Instead of fact they were hardworking, men were attracted by their charms. And, supposedly, they could give birth to many children. But at first, man had to tame their wild nature, only then they adhered to him. They simply knew how to adapt to survive.

But I was the most surprised when I saw the first dog in the village. It was actually a wolf hybrid. Shaman had explained that they didn't catch wild wolves. These dogs were kept in captivity since childhood and they were also reproducing here. They crossed them with each other, but sometimes, it happened that female mated with wild wolf. They were invaluable during hunts and while protecting the village.

Two weeks had passed. I was almost back to my former strength. I found liking in old shaman, well maybe except for his constant secrecy and pretense of some higher knowledge.

One day, he invited me to his tent. He wanted to announce something. I wasn't fully versed in their language yet, but I understood quite a lot to know.

"Peter," he told me with his typical dramatic tone, "spirits had spoken."

He paused like he was listening to them right now. I was a little amused, but I controlled myself, although I had to suppress laughter. So I looked down.

This tribute was enough for shaman to spoke finally, "They got rid of the bad spirit of bear men weapons which captured you. They gave back you your strength. Now it's time." He paused again.

I myself started to be nervous. Information was going out of him very hard. I wanted to catch and shake him to make him spit it out.

"It's time," he repeated, "to appear in front of the tribe. There will be decided about your destiny."

Finally, he told it. I was already expecting it anyway. I had spent more than enough time with them to start dealing with this situation. I was a stranger, I also used resources of this society. For now, none of my things were available, if I didn't count my clothes.

So today was the day. Today, it would finally move on. I was sure that my only chance of survival was to stay in this community. Later, I could try to find the Time Gate. But without these people, I was sentenced to death.

The day dragged sluggishly. I was wandering around the camp, looking for a way to kill time. Women were preparing lunch meal. They used a sort of carved stones, around encircled

by small fire. Some meat was baking on other, flat stones. The smell was spreading around and it made my mouth water. I hadn't eaten since morning. Now I would be able to chew on those stones they were cooking on.

For preparation of meal, they didn't use pottery, just cooking stones, wooden bowls for dishes and simple, mostly wooden tools. If I found a potter's clay somewhere, it would be the first thing I'd bring. Besides, there were no traces after any kind of metal. All objects were made of wood, antlers, horn, bone or stone. The only animal they farmed was the wolf hybrid.

At first glance, the life was simple here, everybody fulfilled entrusted activities for purpose of the village. I quite didn't understand how they were divided between people. There was of course a natural division of labor into male and female. There was also some hierarchy, which depended on age and state.

A chief was the leader of the tribe. It used to be the strongest man and the best hunter in the tribe. But his position wasn't fixed. Serious resolutions were discussed at common sessions. There, men who had already reached adulthood could speak freely. The chief was mostly the man who was moderating the discussion and, in case of arguments, he had to decide in behalf of one of sides. He couldn't do anything he wanted. He was just one of them. And then, some solutions needed words of tribal shaman. He was old and richly experienced. Besides, everybody believed he was speaking to ghosts of ancestors. As well, the older hunters were more experienced and their words were more important.

I also saw how women used to indirectly manipulate men. And then regular fight between several wives. Interesting was that if she had an argument with other man's wife, they always stuck together. Overall, women were more talkative, while men used to be withdrawn. If someone grossly offended the traditions of the tribe, he was expelled from it. It, basically, meant a death sentence. Only the best hunter could survive in the wilds alone – if he, of course, hasn't been captured by other enemy tribe. Generally, if somebody wandered alone in the territory of another tribe, he risked death. It wasn't some sort of special occasion, just a mere fact. Friendly tribal connections were created by exchanging women between them. The bond women were connected with to their family tribe was often transferred to their children. Sometimes, when the certain tribe was populated too sparsely, it united with the other one. The life here was simple and difficult at the same time.

The sun was about to set and it began to darken. In the big house, ceremonial fire flared. Around it, all grown men gathered and sat down by their position in the community. The chief took place facing the exit.

When I came in, all eyes turned on me and all chatter died down. Most of the men were looking at me with curiosity, but some of them had disfavor in their eyes.

“Good evening to you,” I said while entering the house.

The chief waved with his hand to the place reserved for me. It was placed with my back to the entrance and facing the chief. I had to admit, I felt like at the court trial.

“Men,” spoke chief solely and silenced those who were talking about something yet.

“Men,” said again, “we’ve gathered here to decide.”

He pointed at me.

“To decide about this man. His name is Peter.”

He paused again. I didn’t like their cumbersome expression. But it was typical for them, so I had to handle that. When the discussion brisked up, perhaps it wouldn’t be so cramped. At least, I hoped so.

“He is not from our tribe,” the chief continued at length, “But he has saved one of our women. While rescuing her he was mortally wounded and we cured him. We owe him nothing now.”

He ran with his eye on faces of other men. Then he took a deep breath and spoke on, “So, what are we going to do with him?”

“We should expel him from the village. He is a stranger!” yelled one of men.

Well, he could express his thoughts very directly. No beating around the bush. Perhaps, it finally would move on.

“No, we should have killed him right there. He doesn’t belong to us and we don’t want him here,” next sitting man supported the first one.

I looked towards them. I knew them both. They were brothers, Tibé and Kalu. Both of them were experienced hunters and strong warriors. A long time ago, Tibé wanted to become a chief, but he had been defeated. In addition, new chief asked for woman Tibé wanted too. And he received her. It had been years ago, but he never forgot. He only wished the bear men would kidnap chief’s puppy and the old man was seized by sadness.

Tibé and Kalu were aggressive men at first sight. Their mother was a member of bear men and they weren’t very too smart. But in ordinary life it was balanced by their power.

“He saved one of our women,” chief reminded my modest credit, “and killed our enemies, even if he himself was injured.”

Some men muttered approvingly. Others, as a sign of approval, were punching their fists into the ground, until it boomed.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” spoke Tibé again, “women had always been kidnapped and always will be. Even though, some other men will take her to his village and she will leave.”

Although the chief was a great warrior and hunter, he wasn’t a speaker. So I decided to take the initiative by myself. I spoke directly to the chief.

“Allow me to talk,” I asked him with raised voice.

A murmur was heard, but he silenced it with waving of hand.

“Speak!” he challenged me.

It was obvious he was relieved. He was glad he didn’t have to speak by himself. Anné had already told me that her father really loved her and he would do anything to keep me in the village. But if the council decided to chase me away, he couldn’t do anything.

“Men,” I told to them, imitating chief’s speech, “I still don’t handle your language very well, but I want to speak for myself. I am hunter; I come from a great distance...”

“We can’t hear your words!” suddenly Tibé interrupted me, “because you talk like a woman. Are you a woman?” He burst in laughter. His great brother joined him, of course. And some others men.

“Shall I take you to be my wife?” he went on, trying to ridicule me.

That made me angry. This primitive asshole tried to expel me from the village just to harm his former rival and, in addition, he made fun of me!

“Shut your stupid whining mouth, you laughing pig!” I shouted at him.

Tibé silenced, with his mouth wide open. Then his face began to turn red, as he was getting angry.

Everybody silenced, waiting. Later, I figured out that due to my unfamiliarity with language of hunters I called Tibé just farrowing sow. Tibé hit his fists to the ground, so it boomed. He roared like an animal and jumped up. He was almost head shorter than me, but his body was robust and muscular. Origin of his Neanderthal mother couldn’t be denied. Also his typical squeaking voice was another reason why I chose this nickname.

He ran to me with his arms spread to grab my neck. I stepped left and, at the same time, with my left hand covered his attack. The Teacher’s training gave me clear superiority. In fight man to man, he couldn’t compare to me at all. I pushed him just a bit. Just enough to avoid his attack and kick him in the belly with my knee at the same time. He bent down and kneeled with his eyes wide open and surprised expression in his face. At the moment, I turned to him and hit him with a fist in head closely behind the ear. He immediately fell down, unconscious.

One of closer sitting man came to him. He surveyed him quickly and turned to the others.

“Breathing,” he announced.

Men were confusedly looking at each other. They didn't understand what had just happened. We both had no weapon, so it was expected that we were going to bite each other, strangle or something like that. Instead of that, suddenly a man was lying here after two seconds, unconscious. And he was one of the strongest warriors in the tribe.

Wailing, women ran to him and began to lift Tibé up. I understood they were his wives. They grabbed him under the shoulders and legs. Surrounded by group of children they were carrying him away.

"Anything else thinks I am a woman?" I asked.

Nobody answered.

"Are you saying something, Kalu?" I asked threateningly.

Tibé's brother blinked frightened. His tongue stuck in his mouth. He swallowed and said quickly, "No, Peter, I said nothing."

"I am glad you already remember my name." I turned to the others, "Now we can continue."

"Peter," spoke the chief, "you have killed many bear men. The number almost equals the numbers of my fingers. No hunter can do that."

He paused for a while, like he hesitated to continue. But then he took a deep breath and asked directly, "Are you a human or forest demon?"

"Sorry?" This question I really didn't expect.

I myself had already known that in case of fight one man against three men the only possible scenarios were escape or death.

"I ask you if you are a forest demon."

"No, I am not," I answered, looking right into his eyes.

"You are using funny objects. They are shiny, hard and very sharp. These aren't things we are using."

He reached back and pulled out my dagger. It was cleaned and shining in the light of fire. The others were nodding, some of them were whispering.

"So, did you come from the stars?" he asked at last.

I was stunned. I absolutely didn't get what he was talking about. Maybe, long time ago, they had found a piece of meteorite with the rest of iron in it. But it was just an idea.

"No, I don't come from the stars. I am a hunter and came here from a long distance," I answered directly.

"What are these objects? And where is your tribe?" next questions sounded, "and why is your hair white?"

I stepped to the fire. I took a brunch from the fireplace and wetted with water. Then I came to the end of the room and began drawing with a carbon on the big stump.

“This is the enemy,” I said and drew eyes, nose and mouth on the stump.

Then I returned to the opposite side of the room and turned to the chief.

“Could you hand me my things?” I asked.

“Yes, here you are,” he answered, giving me gradually the bow, quiver with arrows, dagger and hatchet.

I took my things and hefted them in my hands. It was as if I just met with an old friend after years. I pulled out the first arrow of my quiver. The distance between me and the target was short, so I couldn't miss, even in the shimmering light of fire. I aimed and release the arrow. Immediately, the next one followed it. The first hit left and the second right eye of the picture. Then I threw the dagger and hatchet. They both found their target.

There was a deadly silence around the fireplace.

“So this is the way how four men can die before you inhale twice,” said the chief sounding surprised and terrified at the same time.

His wonder was real. I imagined destructive weapons from late twentieth century. Automatic rifles, rockets and nuclear bombs. This world was full of killing and blood, but it was different. This was a natural struggle for life, not mass murders.

A noise of shaman's drum was heard from the outside. After a while, entrance fur opened and he and his helper came in. The old man had worn face and eyes wide open. Even in golden light of fire, his face was pale as ghost. He was in some kind of trance.

“He ingested a drink of visions,” whispered some man with fear.

He probably talked about some drug, inducing visions. At least that's what I thought. When he came closer to fire, I could take a closer look at him. He wore an odd coat of black feather and magical amulets. He was murmuring spells under his breath. His movements were broken, according to rhythm of the drumming. The rhythm was getting faster and old man's movements turned into crazy dancing. After few minutes he fell down, exhausted. His body was tearing and his eyes remained wide open. Suddenly, he began talking with husky voice.

“Spirits of ancestors have spoken.”

I looked at the others. It was a little funny for me, but when I saw faces of the men, how concentrated they were listening to the old man, I got serious immediately.

“The white hair hunter was sent by a great storm to us. He is going to stay with us in the village and we will protect him. He is going to become our Teacher.”

Suddenly, the old man screamed in fear. He was shaking, like his last hour just came.

“I can see a creature. It’s a man and animal at the same time. The white hair man will fight against monsters from stars. He is...”

The man suddenly stopped talking. He fell unconscious. The dose of hallucinogenic drugs, physical exhaustion and mental trauma completely ruined him.

The helper called some women and they carried the man out of the tent. When the entrance fur opened, I noticed many young women and men were pushing to walls of tent, intended to listen. Well, curiosity is rooted in human’s nature.

“Poor old man,” said somebody, “the drink of visions is very strong, it could kill him. He hasn’t drunk it for ages.”

Men in the room were discussing in low voice and it was felt they remained impressed.

“You heard voices of spirits,” said chief, “this man is going to live with us. Considering our habits don’t allow taking a stranger in our houses, he and his wife will live separately. His will get a tent next to the shaman’s one. Tonight, he will be sleep in shaman’s tent for the last time.”

Men muttered approvingly and began to leave gradually. The session was over.

“Wait, stop! I don’t have a wife!” I shouted.

The chief looked at me wonderingly.

“Anné is your wife. She told me when we found you. Now go. Go back to shaman’s tent. You can take your things.”

He sent me away. I was really confused. Anné was beautiful young woman. She was slim and sturdily built. Her soft breasts and round bottom probably enticed a lot of men. Her brown hair ranged to her scapulas and she usually decorated it with horn comb or entangled it. Her face was nice, too and symmetrical features were often beautified by her smile.

I was an ordinary human and ordinary man. Of course, I was thinking of her sometimes. And, in addition, I was a lot of years away from my wife. This time, I wasn’t able to find the Time Gate – if it was here – and so I didn’t know if I ever returned home sometimes. My head was buzzing because of that. What was I supposed to do? And why Anné told her father I was her husband?

The old shaman was still sleeping. His tired heart was beating slowly and his breath was barely noticeable. The man was dying. His young helper was going to assume his duties soon. We could just hope that the old man had taught the boy enough to be useful for the tribe.

“He saw something what burnt his soul,” said future shaman.

I looked at him, “What do you think?”

“The creatures. People connected with animals. It wasn’t just symbols. They are real.”

I had absolutely no idea where he was heading with that. But I was too exhausted. So I just shrugged and for the last time lied on my bed. Thousands of thoughts were spinning in my head. Time travelling, fight with Roman legions, uprising against alternative Third Nazi Reich. Then this world, so different from the others. And Ivone, my wife from another time. And Anné, my wife here.

Chapter six

In the morning, woman crying woke me up. The old shaman died last night and just a while ago his helper, now new shaman, found him. His body was wrapped in the deer skin, so his face could be seen. All community attended the funeral. Several men were carrying wrapped body.

We left the village and were coming up the little hill. The path was barely invisible, like no man had walked there for a long time. We came to a cave.

“This is a burying ground for shamans,” somebody explained me.

The cave entrance was quite low, so I had to bend while entering. But there was a huge space inside with high ceilings. Actually, it reminded me of a cathedral like I remembered it from the twentieth century. Huge stalactites rising for thousands of years were hanging from the ceiling or growing from the ground. Many others had already merged into stalagmites and their similarity to church columns also gave an impression of cathedrals.

There were several dark piles next to walls. There was a little light here, so at the first, I didn't realize what they were. Then I got it. They were bodies of shaman's ancestors. Above each of them there were several drawings depicting the life of the tribe during the shaman's life. There were sketched hunts, but also bloody tribe fights. I also found bizarre pictures of animals of amazing size. So if I could assume that drawing of human next to the animals was way how to express its size.

There were also drawings above the place this shaman would be buried. One of the last was drawing of man with white hair. Above him, there was a full moon and high-lying and strong shining sun. It probably was supposed to symbolize time when I came here. My character itself was shrouded in storm and lightning. Under my feet, there were killed bear men. I was holding a bow and arrow in it had a yellow peak. The cave, probably, also served as a history textbook for shamans or kind of memory of tribe.

The new shaman finally stopped saying spells for dead man's journey to the ancestors and moved away. People were gradually coming and putting small gifts next to the dead body. There were especially sculptures of rough shapes made of bones, antlers or stone. Some man put a bundle of dried herbs on dead man's chest.

I myself decided to donate something, in gratitude for his care. I pulled one arrow of the quiver and put it next to the wrapped corpse.

"Let the ancestors protect you," I said and stepped away to let other people to come closer.

The young shaman was just finishing the latest drawing which loosely followed up on earlier ones. There was a man with white hair surrounded by local people on it. They were hunting a herd of aurochs and many of them were holding bows. Some animals were laying hit by arrows, others were running away.

When I set my eyes on the last part of drawing, I stiffened. The white hair man was struggling with a monster. It was animal and human together. The animal beast was pushing him very hard. Above them, there was a building – if it was a good name for the object – of fantastic shape. Sun rays behind it were leading towards stars.

"What is it?" I barely said.

"That's the last shaman's vision. The most of shamans die after they take a drink of visions and we note their last visions as a prediction," the new shaman explained me.

"How? How did you come to these animals? These shapes?" I pointed at the building.

"I had a dream. The old shaman took me on the high mountain. From there, he showed me things and asked me to carve them into stone."

I shook my head in shock. It made no sense. Or I just refused to believe that. In the past, I had already met some mythical creatures, but, honestly, I didn't like that. I was used to rely only on myself. On my instincts, my strength and my weapons. These mythological matters quite confused me.

When the shaman saw expression in my face, he signed me to follow him. He led me to the distant wall of the cave and shinned the light of torch on rest of the drawings. They were obviously harmed by time, but I could see animal people and some strange balls, or, better said, ampoules and wires. Everything was very odd and it looked like some futuristic lab.

"This is the place where one of our first shamans came from," he said and left me alone.

The funeral was over and everybody went back to their previous activities. The chief chose a place for my future house. Trampled ground served as a floor. He also took several men, who were supposed to help me with tent. They brought long poles which should serve as framework

for my future home. They were almost four meters long and had about six centimeters in diameter. After they partially drove them to the ground, they crossed them at the upper end and tied them with leather straps. Then they overlaid it from the bottom with bonded animal furs. They minded that the upper fur overlapped the edge of the bottom one at least two palms. Up, in the peak of the tent, there was a hole for smoke. Inside, there was a fireplace and fur served as a bed.

In the afternoon, the building was ready and I could move there. As I had almost nothing, it wasn't very hard. I put the few things I owned next to the wall of tent. After a short hesitating, I put my dagger and hatchet behind the belt. It was a long time habit and Tork had always told me to not going anywhere without weapons. I came out.

Anné was just finishing a clever fireplace and putting a stone with deep cavity for cooking liquid meals and flat rock for cooking meat. She looked up to me and smiled nervously. Last time it seemed she was avoiding me. I still wasn't quite clear in all of this. How should I handle this situation?

"Anné," I spoke to her.

She stopped working for a while and looked at me tensely. The she focused back at work, but her movements were stiff.

"Why did you tell your father that I was your husband?" I asked quietly, squatting to her. She didn't look at me, just kept preparing the flat rock.

"I had to do that," said suddenly, "otherwise, they would leave you there."

Then she looked up and glanced at me. She took a deep breath and went on, with stronger voice, "But I said it because of something else."

"Go on," I encouraged her, when she paused again.

"You saved me. You took care of me and protected me. And then, when you lied there in fever, seized by bad spirit of bear men's weapons, I was terribly worried about you. I was worried that I couldn't protect you from wolves, that fever will kill you..."

Suddenly she began crying so heartrending, that my own heart squeezed. In her eyes, there were so much detained emotions that it couldn't underwhelm me. I wasn't a boy no more and I had enough experiences with women. And I didn't have to be a genius to understand what was going on. I hugged her around her shoulders and squeezed her tightly to calm her down a little.

"But if you don't want me," said, sobbing, "you can choose other woman from this or even some other village. It has been decided, you are going to stay. You don't need me anymore." She began crying again.

“Silly,” I calmed her, “it’s not true. Common experiences have connected us. And you aren’t indifferent to me, too.”

I lifted her up and took her to the tent. I slowly put her on the bed of furs. She was a little surprised after first kisses, but adapted quickly. I ran with my mouth along her neck. I was gradually putting her clothes off, taking my clothes off at the same time. I had small – none, honestly – experiences with virgins, so I didn’t want to hurry anything. When I stroked her breasts and gradually ran with hand over the body, excitement seized both of us. Anné was still tense, but her body already started to react to touches. Connection came by itself and naturally. Anné shivered as she felt a light pain, but it was gone immediately. Together we plunged into the maelstrom of passion.

During the night, we made love several times yet and didn’t come out of the tent until next morning. Our first lovemaking was greedy, but it gradually turned into mutual exploring.

Tickle of Anné’s hair woke me up. Sleeping, she cuddled to me. She was truly beautiful. I left all remorse behind and shook her gently.

“Wake up, woman,” I said, when she opened her eyes sleepily.

Morning lovemaking wasn’t so wild but it broke us with passion. Then we were laying, hugging, and enjoying our common moments. Sounds from outside told us it was the right time to get up and join in the regular life.

“Peter,” she told me, as she was putting on her clothes.

“Yes?”

“You know, I want to tell you something. Older women have already preparing me for this. I was afraid that you will be too rude and it will hurt.”

“Well, I tried it would be nice for you,” I said, smiling.

“It was beautiful. I even couldn’t imagine,” she said honestly and went on, “our men are different. They love their women, but during the mating, they behave rudely and violently. They don’t care of woman’s feelings. At least, most of them. I don’t know how to describe that to others women. They probably will think I made it up.”

“So don’t talk about it too much. There will be a sexual revolution,” I blinked at her. She looked at me blankly.

“Peter, you are really special. Even words of our language you use and connect together how nobody of us would do.”

“What do you think?” I wanted to know.

“You have a gift of speech,” she answered with sparkles in her eyes, “you give new meanings to words. You talk so colorfully, I even don’t know to explain. You can play with them and confuse the man.”

“And that’s just a beginning,” I said jokingly.

We went out of the tent.

Chapter seven

Days were passing by quickly. I totally blended in the life of the village. Days were filled by common activities such hunting by men and preparing of meal or looking for and processing the food by women. The chief chose men who were ordered to pay attention to me and gradually introduce me to habits of the village. In my opinion, men’s life was much more free, but more dangerous, too. Besides hunts and making of weapons they were just wandering around, trying to keep track of our territory. If a lonely hunter was discovered, many men gathered and began to chase him. They wanted to expel the newcomer, or – if there was a chance – kill him. They behaved quite like predators in their territories.

I tried to handle this, but my mind couldn’t absorb that. I wanted to understand the need of local people to protect their sources, but I couldn’t agree with pointless murder of an innocent man by outnumbered group. Several times, I talked with the chief about this, but I wasn’t able to explain him. He didn’t change his mind about this primitive behavior.

“It would mean to show a weakness,” he told me, “this way, has been learnt by habits of our fathers. If we were weak, others tribes would attack us. They would take our women and kill our sons.”

“Couldn’t be this vicious circle broken?” I asked.

He looked at me blankly. Even if their language was a little enriched since I came here, they still didn’t like using of complicated phrases.

“Couldn’t just stop that?” I asked again.

“No, it’s not that simple. Since times of our fathers, we have been listening stories about killing between tribes. You yourself experienced that when you met bear men. Or they didn’t try to kill you immediately?” he reminded me.

“They did,” I answered honestly and I shivered remembering that, “But one of them sacrificed his life for me. I don’t want to forget that.”

Surprisingly, he nodded. He scratched his head and said, “Sometimes I think the same. We used to connect with others tribes only during the Great Hunt, you know. Today, nobody remember how these friendships have been created, but if our ancestors killed each other, we wouldn’t be here now. I realize that people are much stronger when they are together. If we united, we wouldn’t have to be afraid of hunting in prairies. We would defeat all big beasts and the world would be ours.”

“I am glad you partially agree with my opinions.”

“This is just a dream. Even men from friendly tribe would be chased away from our territory. We used to unite just for a short time, during few days of Great Hunt in prairie.”

This is pointless – I thought – I have to work with them more.

“Peter,” he added, when he saw the expression in my face, “don’t think I like it. A lot of men were just boys looking for women. They weren’t experienced hunters or warriors.”

He read me like an open book. In times, when their language wasn’t so flowery, these people were able sense and read in faces much more than I was used to.

“But it’s not important. My duty – our duty – is to protect this tribe. Old Palé told me that about ten days of journey towards rising sun lives very strong tribe. They catch people around their territory and sacrifice them to their deities. When they catch them, they don’t die right away. They organize feasts where they eat flesh of killed people. Do you still believe we behave like animals?”

“Well, compared to cannibalism, you look quite nice. But it’s just a little difference, like black and grey,” I answered, “but I will remember and won’t walk ten days east. Well, if I don’t want to spoil someone’s appetite.”

For a while, he was staring at me surprisingly and blankly. Then he got the meaning of words and the joke. Suddenly, he burst in laughter. Today, our conversation was over and we split to mind our business.

Next day I was supposed to spend with Palé. He was an older hunter, although the word older was relative here. People didn’t live very long, especially because risky life and diseases. Palé was about forty and marked by life. For the village he made stony axes and peaks of arrows of strange stone. All day he was sitting at the same spot and you could hear hits of stones against stones, as they were splintered into necessary shape. The result had very sharp and hard peaks.

It was obvious he had survived many dangerous situations in his life. Many scars and missing ear – earlier I figured out the cave hyena had ripped it off – gave him a little scary expression. But after I got to know him, he showed to be quite a nice guy. He was undoubtedly intelligent and loved talking about everything. But when I opened topic about cannibals in the

east, he silenced and tears appeared in his eyes. Even after all those year, a single mention of them hit him deeply.

“We were hunting, me, my brother and three other men,” he began talking quietly, “that year was very dry. Most of creeks dried up. Animals walked away to others regions and hungry predators were attacking people. We were young and full of determination. We went to the east. We have been walking for many days and still nothing. A lot of us were injured after attack of carnivores. Lao, my friend from the childhood, got fever because of wound. So we decided to follow our trails back.”

He stopped talking and sadness seized him. He gazed into the ground, but after a while, he began talking again, “Suddenly, demons surrounded us. They were huge and had terrible teeth. They had masks, but we didn’t know yet. They threw a net on us, the same net which we use for catching birds. They didn’t kill us, even if we were expecting that.”

He covered his face and pain was coming from him so clearly that I almost physically felt it.

“You don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to,” I whispered to him.

“I wish they would kill us right there!” he sighed heavily, “They tied is up and took us to their camp. I have never seen something like that. There were caves built by men. Big and scary. They took us underground. There, we were thrown in a big cage. There were many people of many different clans. On that night, they took some of them and never returned back. Somebody told that they were sacrificed to their gods. Next day was my turn. They took me and two other men. They led us through long tunnel to the place where many people of that terrible tribe were gathered. We came up a stepped hill.”

- He probably meant staircase – I thought.

“Then we found ourselves by the stony altar. They put one of us on it. Then a demon went out of the cave. It was half man and half animal. He had a body of man and head of bull and he had long teeth of beast in his mouth. He had long claws on his hands. When he came to the altar, he roared horribly. A great fear seized us, but the local people cheered. Then the monster came to the man on the altar and began to rip his body with claws. I still hear the sound of pain, like I was still there. It wakes me from sleep.

Then the monster finally killed him. My second companion suddenly broke out of hands of guards and ran away. There was a chaos. The man was weaving and demon guards weren’t able to catch him. Human beast roared in anger. He waved with his hand and buried his claws into the belly of the closest guard. He lifted him up like a man lifting a child and threw him down the stepped hill. And looking public was shouting like animals in rut.

That was my chance. With my shoulder, I hit one of my guards and he fell down. Fall from height of five men immediately killed him. I turned and ran to the other side. Running, I managed to release my hands. I ran towards the stony edge of the building and looked down. Deep under me, I saw a water level. I had no choice. I jumped, with my legs first. If water was shallow, I would kill myself. But I didn't think about that in that moment. I managed to get above the water and take a breath. I was in the water grass."

Obviously, he was very excited by his story and I had to admit, it was also transferred at me. I didn't want to bother him, but the story interested me. So I was just listening quietly.

"I knew they will be looking for me. Behind the belt, I found my bony whistle. So I put it in my mouth and stayed under water. I could breathe only through narrow body of the whistle. It was very narrow line which kept me alive. I don't know how long I stayed there. I heard their horrible voices. One of them went to the river to survey the water grass. Suddenly, a large animal attacked him and pulled down under water. The man was screaming in fear and pain. He tried to get out of the mortal grip, but he wasn't strong enough. Even under water I heard his heartbreaking scream. The rest of men ran away, crying. I was waiting a long time until I dared to go out. Until the night I was praying to my ancestors so demon men or the water beast wouldn't find me. And when there was a dark everywhere, I dared to come out of my hide. Then I walked west, towards my home. I came back to my family and try to forget all these years. But the heinous place comes back to me in dreams."

I had nothing to tell to this. He had no reason to make it up. There was probably a place with stony buildings. Their inhabitants apparently professed human sacrifices. But what was the half man and half beast thing, I didn't know. Could it be just another mask served for ritual purposes? Or it was really a man and animal hybrid? As I knew, interspecific crosses weren't possible. So what was that?

In the afternoon I tried again to continue in previous discussion, but he didn't want to talk about it anymore. So I left it behind and changed the subject.

I asked Palé to make some smaller peaks. Meanwhile, I prepared a couple of straight thin trunks of about seventy centimeters long and as thick as my little finger. These were supposed to be my first arrows with stone peaks.

The best material for arrows here was thin hazel twigs. They were quite straight and I had used them before. I cleansed them from bark and straightened the bodies of future arrows by spinning over the fire. I could be satisfied with the result. While I was checking them with my eyes, they seemed to be straight enough. In the front side, I cut a small notch to fix the future tip.

Perhaps, I had already mentioned that the local people used to fasten the tip of the spear into the cut in the front side. Then they fastened it with the leather straps and poured in resin. They used old melted pine resin mixed with stone dust which had been produced while tooling the spear. After it hardened, it turned into almost as hard mass as stone.

Leather straps weren't too suitable for my purposes. They could considerably change aerodynamic characters of the arrow, especially while shooting at long distances it could cause a significant divergence from the flight path or extensively shorten the range. Bows used in Tork's world could shoot to the distance from sixty to eighty meters with relatively high precision. Of course, experiences were needed.

Making of arrows went slowly – mainly because I missed the special tools I was used to use. Now I had to improvise.

I used an old trick for final grinding. I took sand from the creek. I wrapped it in the thin skin and this way I made temporary but very effective sandpaper. Or, better said, sand-skin.

With circular motion, I was walking with it on the arrow body and this way I flattened it. The arrowhead put in the drain I fixed with vegetable fibers, like Tork had taught me. Then I poured it with melted resin and smoothed the final shape to put the less resistance to the air.

I hefted the arrow in my hand. It was well balanced, although a little heavier than I was used to use. We usually used only two or three years old dry wood for making of arrows and bows.

It was the right time for little test. I lifted my own bow, nocked the arrow and searched for a convenient target. There was a black and white magpie on the near tree. It was just few meters far from me. I drew the bowstring and the bird fell down with the arrow sticking up from its body.

An enthusiastic shout was heard. Then I noticed a group of young boys was watching me. One of them immediately ran to the catch and brought it to me. He handed it me proudly like he had killed it by himself.

I ripped feathers of the bird to add stabilizers of flight to the arrows. I had to admit, the penetrance of the arrow surprised me.

Palé tapped me on the shoulder. I saw a serious expression in his face.

“All you have to do now is to teach us how to make these bowed things and we can go to the prairie. It's funny that such little piece of wood can take life. And in such distance,” added a little sadly.

The rest of the day we spent with discussion what instruments are suitable for what activities during the making of arrows and how could be existing tools modified to be more

effective. Making of bows I was planning the next day. Palé, of course, immediately promised me to help. But I think that he was just curious and like a primitive craftsman and maker of weapons he didn't want to stay behind.

"Fine then. Your hands and tools will be useful," I told him for goodbye and went to my tent.

Anné was waiting for me with her typical smile. For a while, she was chirping about her day.

"So many hares, imagine that, Peter! They were running around by couldn't be caught," she was talking on, "Ika tried to hit one of them with stone, but they were moving too fast."

"Hm," I was listening to her partially, lost in my own thoughts. Men probably weren't built to listen to their women.

"All right," I said to silence her, "tomorrow I will show you how to catch hares. I will teach you make traps."

After short lovemaking Anné fell asleep. I was lying next to her with open eyes and looking into the dark for a long time. Who were the people living in the towns addicted to bloody feasts? And who was the animal hybrid? I had never heard about anything like that. At last, my thoughts started messing up and I fell asleep.

The next day, according to my habits, I woke up with the sun. Birds were already chirping outside, when I came to the creek to wash. Cold clear water always refreshed me. I asked Anné to make a leather quiver for me today. Not that I wasn't able to make it by myself, but it was a women's job and, to be honest, I just didn't want to do it. Besides, I had "higher goals" for this day. Today, I was going to make the first bow in this village.

Palé just came out of the tent and stretched in rays of morning sun. When he saw me, he waved to me slovenly.

"Good morning to you," I shouted towards him.

"Good morning to you, too, Peter," he answered sullenly.

As I figured out, he was known for loving a long sleep and hating of morning waking up. Together, we began to survey his supply of dried thin trunks which were used for making of arrows. Among them, I found several thin yew twigs which were perfectly suitable for making of the bow.

We immediately started working. At first, I removed a bark of the trunk and then began to hacking layer by layer to create some kind of prism. On it, I sketched a shape of future bow. Then, it had to be patiently removed a wood material gradually and come to the final shape.

Making of really good bow is an art by itself and I couldn't handle that without experiences, gained from my teacher Tork. The body of the bow had to be worked really precisely and many times, during the work, I had to draw it for test to make it perfectly tuned.

The bow had to work smoothly and tightening force had to be spread evenly along its length to make its efficacy the best. Otherwise, the bow would "kick" or, even worse, would break. Thus, the raw wood was absolutely improper for making of bows. It wasn't flexible enough and didn't keep the required shape. And it certainly would break while stronger draw.

Before afternoon, the bow was finished. As the string, I used a long tendon. It was sufficiently firm and flexible to last. While testing strumming, it had the right sound. After the final smoothing of the bow body with sand-skin, it was ready for using.

The time of the truth came. I pulled out the quiver my yesterday arrow and nocked it. I turned side toward the chosen aim. I had already prepared a few training targets. A pack of old fur was hung on the low branch, about twenty meters from the place we were standing. I wanted to try features of the new bow. I stretched the string at maximum, aimed shortly and sent the arrow. Swishing, it flew fast as lightning and stabbed into the target.

I and Palé came to check the result. As I expected, the peak went through several layers of the fur and stuck quite deeply.

"Well, that is something!" reviewed Palé.

"Isn't it?" I nodded happily. "And the biggest advantage is that you can carry more arrows with you, not just one spear."

"Yes, that is right," he agreed with me, "with this, the power of the hunter will multiply."

I searched the arrow carefully. The most, I was worried about the peak. But it kept firmly and the arrow could be used again.

"Palé, if you want to make good weapons, you have to know how to use them as well. You have to understand them. There's no other way," I added with smile.

He nodded. He took the bow and arrow from me. He stood with side towards the target and began to draw the bow, trying to imitate me. He aimed at the fur pack and released the arrow.

Suddenly, he screamed in pain and threw the bow away. He made a usual mistake of beginners. While bow shooting, it's necessary to make the right position, otherwise it could happen that after the shot the string hit the inner side of shooter's forearm. The gaze at purple bruise on Palé told me that it also happened this time. The man pushed injured arm to the body, cursing aloud.

Some people ran to us, curious, what had happened. Even Tibé went out of his tent, called by unexpected rush. When he learnt what was going on, he began mocking at Palé.

“Why are you doing such silly things?! Spear is enough for me,” he swaggered, “with this, you sooner kill yourself than an animal.”

Some people began to laugh. But Palé’s biggest pain had already passed and he didn’t want to show weakness in front of the entire village, especially in front of the women.

“That was nothing. It just bit me a little, I have already experienced worse.”

During the next try, he rather put the protective sleeve on the left arm. After few shots and my advices, his arrows began to find the target. It was clear he had to train a lot to turn this cramping shooting into subconscious automatic action.

Meanwhile, their sons were making arrows; they had about twenty of them. They were naturally handy as their father and they could use tools precisely.

Palé gave them the new bow and after short briefing, they began training shooting at the target. It was obvious, the new activity interested them. And why not? It wasn’t just a game, but also a hunt imitation and that was the thing all cubs of predators were attracted to. And the man was a predator after all.

Meanwhile, their father began to make the next bow with gusto.

In the afternoon, I challenged Anné to show me, where hare burrows are. These animals were breeding rapidly and if they could be hunted effectively, they also would be an interesting source of food. I had no doubt that with my bow I killed some of them, but this time, I had other plans. In advance, I prepared some strings made of tendons and vegetable fibers. Around the burrows, at the suitable places, I put on traps. They consisted of small eyes mounted on the flexible branches. After breaking the fragile balance, the branch loosened and the loop abruptly tightened. They prey would hang above the ground and would be choked with its own weight. The traps were ready, now we had to just wait.

When I and Anné came to check the place later, we found out that some of the traps were successful. Three hares were captured. The loop around their neck choked them. A fox found one of them and bit it partially, but it ended trapped in another eye. Now it was hanging here, choked by the loop just like its lunch.

Gasping, I released the fox carrion and put it on the ground. With fast motions of the knife, I cut its abdomen and ripped off its guts. Subsequently, I skinned it. Then I handed the fox Anné. Next it would be her job.

“Traps have to be checked more often,” noticed Anné.

“I guess,” I nodded, “otherwise, predators will eat our catches earlier than we will get to them.”

In pleasant atmosphere, we walked to the village, discussing the ordinary things. In the evening, I felt a little tired, but in a good mood.

Days here were running fast and somehow naturally. The man even didn't plan what to do the next day. It was a little carefree, if I could name it this way exaggeratedly. At least, from my point of view.

In fact, the village was systematically preparing for winter. It mainly consisted of dried meat and berries. I still wasn't involved in this cycle, so I was the only one who had some time to come up with ideas.

The next day I devoted to building of a smokehouse. To me, smoked meat always tasted better than dried one. The work went smoothly and I had already learnt how to use stone tools.

At first, I dug a hole for future fireplace. Then I laid it with stones. Then there was the time to start building the wooden part, where the smoking of meat in aromatic smoke would take place in. For building it, I used hazel wood about as thick as my forearm. I was a little bit of hard time until a small building had the required shape, but at last, I was a quite satisfied with the result. The smokehouse looked quite similar to that which Tork had built for me. Surprisingly, the most stir wasn't caused by the smokehouse but something totally different.

When I finally finished it, I picked up suitable, aromatically smoking wood. I prepared some dry grass and small wood to make a fire. Then I pulled out of my leather bag small tinder. I hit several times, until the right sparkle was made and landed on a prepared bunch of grass. I immediately began blowing strongly to wake the fire up.

A humming was growing around me. At first, I even didn't realize, I was so engrossed in making fire.

Exciting yells around me finally attracted my attention. I looked up and saw many members of the village, pointing at me and talking excitedly.

"What's going on?" I asked just coming chief who was called by the villagers.

"You can make a fire?" he asked tensely.

"Yes, why are you asking?" His question surprised me. "You yourself use fire."

"We do," he answered tensely, "but we don't know how to create it. We are just keeping it. If all fires in the village went out, it would be very bad."

I finally understood. The fire was important for them but they didn't know how to ignite it. This was breaking for them.

"How did you do that? Some kind of magic?" asked chief uncertainly.

"Not really," I smiled cheerfully.

“Come here, Palé,” I shouted at the craftsman. “Could you find stones like these?” I showed him my tinder.

Palé surveyed them carefully. Then he scratched his head.

“I know this one,” he pointed at one of them, “Sometimes I make peaks and other tools of it. But they are a little different shade. The second one, I saw in the creek about half of the day walking down the stream. But I have never used them for anything.”

Suddenly, he smiled, “And we had them right under our noses!”

I explained them simply the principle and method of setting fire. Of course, they wanted to try it immediately and after a short while, they managed to ignite a small bundle of grass. Their eyes were shining with pleasure more than the flame eating the grass. It was clear these interventions of mine would have strong impact on their community. What I considered usual things, were revolutionary changes for them.

As the time was passing by, I had already known everything in the village, what I needed to. I still didn't understand the basic organization of their activities, but I didn't dig into that. Something in me kept telling me that this wasn't my final stop and I wouldn't stay here forever. Or just my unconscious just rebelled against this alternative and deeply I just hoped in this? The time would tell.

Chapter eight

On that day, we went hunting. There were three of us. I, Tibé and Uri. I didn't know, why the hell chief sent me hunting right with these two men, when he knew Tibé and I didn't like each other from the beginning, but I guess, it was his business. Tibé was a head shorter than me, but his stocky body disposed with a great power.

Now, when I had an opportunity to look at him closer, I figured out his body had more marks of Neanderthals than humans. He wasn't very smart, but definitely wasn't stupid. He was experienced hunter and in the forest he felt like at home. He was treading quietly, listening to the sounds around. His acting wasn't such different from hunting habits of people in Tork's age.

After a time, we found traces of a roe deer. They weren't very old. Edges were sharp and despite they were at the wetter places, no water soaked to them. It wouldn't be very far certainly.