

The End of the World...
Again
or
Hitbodedut

Book One: A New Beginning

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Credits to:

My wife, Linda, for putting up with me

And

Enya for putting me in the mood

Signs in the Wind	1
The Face of God	10
A New Beginning	18
The Robes	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Sticks and Stones	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Knowledge of a Woman	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Cleansing	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Grandpa	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Stick	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Challenges of Life	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Boys Will Be Boys	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Take the Damn Stick	Error! Bookmark not defined.
New Arrangements	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Pleasant Walk	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Flaming Cliffs	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Guide Stone	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Little Man	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Wait	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Will You Stay?	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Simple Blade	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Real Reason	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Chance to Say Goodbye	Error! Bookmark not defined.
River of Stone	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Savanna	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Temple in the Sky	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Family	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Pretty Girl	Error! Bookmark not defined.
On Her Own	Error! Bookmark not defined.
She's Gone	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Game Begins	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Right Path	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Gathering	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Change	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Word	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Great Symbol	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Prince	Error! Bookmark not defined.
It's Your Job	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Face up to It	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Tell Me What You See	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The First Rain	Error! Bookmark not defined.
It Is a Temple	Error! Bookmark not defined.
One Big Happy Family	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Fair Trade	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Signs in the Wind

Chilcoat lay trying to come to grips with the concept of being the newly ordained ‘seer’ of the lakeshore clan. His stomach rumbled from the poison Tarra had given him. “It all seems so contrived and unnecessary to have to eat her damn spirit-herb after finding this strange temple, and besides, the herb isn’t doing anything except keeping me awake and upsetting my stomach.” He fought with his bedding trying to settle his robust frame on the meager pile of leaves and grasses she had gathered for him.

She was also keeping him awake. Tarra, the daughter of Tangar, the shaman of the lakeshore tribe, lay only a few inches away acting as his guardian while he performed the sacred ‘spirit-walk’. Her delicate figure played erotic mischief in his thoughts as he struggled to find a better position.

The churning in his stomach brought him back to reality as the duty he felt for his family overpowered his lustful dalliance. He opened his eyes and was startled that the stars overhead connected in a web of figures across the heavens. He knew the poison was playing tricks on his mind and wondered what Tangar would’ve said about it. “Is that why you’ve brought us here, to show me the web of heaven?” Chilcoat grumbled to the spirit of the old man.

Tarra stirred sleepily and spoke from behind a screen of auburn hair fallen across her face. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah sure, just wondering why we’re here.”

“Mmm,” was all she said before reclining on her mat.

He watched as her form settled into a comfortable contour that started him again thinking of things best left alone. He considered taking a walk, but decided it would just upset his guardians. He was curious about the abandoned temple they had found, and the people that must have lived here, but he didn’t trust his perception at the moment, so he just closed his eyes and tried to remember how he had gotten into this dilemma... It seemed so long ago.

He had sat quietly on the small rock outcropping just beyond the edge of the village. The night sky was beginning to give way to the gray of dawn as the morning cold crept through his cloak. His knee was

starting to complain about his inactivity, so he stirred slowly, swinging his feet around to the east.

Inching precariously down the face of the boulder called “the dawn watch” by the men who stood guard over the camp, he reaching the niche etched into the stone. Sweeping the surface with his open hand, he removed a few leaves and a family of bugs as he spread his cloak into the smooth pocket.

Settling in for the short wait, he focused on the sun as it rose above the far hills outlined black on the distant horizon. Since he was taller than most, he had to slouch to fit his head into the saddle carved painstakingly into the rock face by his ancestors.

As a senior guard, and master hunter, it was his duty on the morning-watch to check for the season change. He knew it wouldn't yet be time, but it was his responsibility, and one of the young men of the tribe might see him; so, he sat quietly in the cold facing east.

A rat complained about the ownership of some morsel down by the trash dump near the base of the rocks. Tangar sat in the darkness waiting for just such an opportunity. He moved quickly to better locate the varmint and threw a barrage of stones. There was a short skirmish and he emerged triumphant. He had earned his keep and was justly proud of his accomplishment. He would hold his head high at this morning's meal.

Chilcoat reflected on his own age and the stiffness he felt in his knee. He was just reaching middle age but had lingering pains from a rockslide that nearly killed him as a young boy. The incident left his knee scarred in such a way that he feared he, too, would soon be hunting rats and grubs.

He pulled his long dark hair back from his face and held his hand up to block the first full rays of the sun as it peeked over the horizon. It was just to the left of the distant hill.

In a few weeks, it would be aligned and, it would be time to move the village to the lowlands. He didn't look forward to that either. In years past, he could hardly wait to leave the mountains and feel the excitement of the journey; now it just seemed to be longer, harder, and more likely to end poorly for someone.

His watch was over and a cool breeze snapped at his cloak clearing the path back to the village. A band of clouds gathered in the south and he felt the need to be inside with his wife and children. As he

passed the first hearth, he smiled at Tangar sitting proudly while his daughter worked diligently to prepare the rats he had provided. There were two large ones and a single small one, and the broth was rich with grains from the summer harvest. Chilcoat nodded approval to the old man who sat erect in acknowledgment and beamed with pride at still being the man of his lodge.

Chilcoat moved slowly to his own hut. His sister-in-law, Charona, tended the fire near the entrance while he washed up and huddled under the blankets next to Caran, his wife. He always enjoyed this moment of warmth and union. He was nearly ready to doze off when she stirred gently to caress him before getting up to tend to her morning duties. She brushed her ample flow of brunet hair back from her face, wrapped her comfortable figure in her morning coat, and left through the drape that served as the door to their hut.

Chara, their daughter, wrapped herself against the morning chill and quickly retrieved a few small sticks to rekindle the heating fire in the center of the room. She adjusted the chimney flap in the roof to allow the night's fumes to escape. Chilcoat pulled his blankets tight and rolled over against the gust of cold air that swept in under the door and across the packed earth floor. His son, Chilton, motivated by his sister's prodding, eventually left his father to his morning rest.

The village soon stirred and began to make too much noise for him to get any more sleep, so he sat up close to the fire and lit a pipe of smoking herbs. The familiar warmth swept through him and the prospect of the morning meal sounded good.

As he finished his smoke, Charona entered with a bowl of morning stew and a large piece of flat bread. The size of the bread spoke of a stew that was without much body. He needed to hunt today even though he had been on watch most of the night. That usually didn't work out very well, but he had no choice; his family needed meat. His son was still too young and not yet able to bring home enough to fill the pot.

While this season had started well enough, in the last few weeks, it had suddenly turned very harsh. The animals they depended upon were skittish and hard to find. It made teaching his son very difficult. They spent much time searching and little time actually hunting. "Perhaps it's a blessing," he thought. He had had to teach his son many tricks he himself hadn't learned until he was much older.

“Hunting in the lean years is a much greater challenge and will, perhaps, serve the boy well.”

The thin morning stew was only roots and grain—a woman’s stew. “Dirt stew” the men called it when they were drinking late in the evening. It was warm, but it wasn’t the meal he needed. “Maybe I should hunt rats with Tangar,” he thought. “Maybe I’ve grown too old and don’t realize it.”

Charona sat near him and tended the fire. She was a good woman, but she hadn’t yet taken a mate. She had come of age when the village was in the high country and, because of bad weather, their village didn’t return to the coast in time for the annual gathering. She had to wait until the following year, and then there were no fit men of age for her. She could have taken a younger man but would have to bear the shame of the other women calling her a mother and not a wife. Instead, she stays with her sister and waits for a man of the right age to approach her. She knew she would find someone eventually, but in the meantime, she was a burden on her sister’s family.

She watched Chilcoat awkwardly as he stirred the thin broth and offered to comfort him as a small conciliation for the burden she felt. At first, he dismissed her advances but as he considered the chill of the day and the prospects of trudging around the hills searching for food, he decided to take advantage of her offer. She knotted her long dark hair back from her face and burrowed under the blanket he had wrapped around himself.

As they lay quietly, Caran called for her to gather more firewood. Charona knew they didn’t need more wood, but it gave her an excuse to leave. She and her sister had long ago worked out a system that provided each with an opportunity to escape involvement when they wanted to. She took the cue and left Chilcoat to recover on his own.

The ground swayed under him as he bent to the fire and lit his pipe. He hadn’t felt such uneasiness since he had been sick last season. He steadied himself for a moment and realized that it wasn’t his condition but that the earth itself was gently rolling. His family had gathered around the kitchen fire and looked to him as if he could explain the earth’s unsettled behavior. The dogs skittered nervously around the small group, cowering at the slightest movement or sound.

Rancon, their nearest neighbor, stuck his head out of his hut and called to him. “Did you feel that?”

“Yeah; it felt like I was still drunk.” They laughed together knowingly.

Rancon wrapped his coat closely over his shoulders and picked his way across the clearing to stand barefoot in front of him. Sipping a cup of morning broth, he gestured toward the south. “Looks like a storm; seems like there’s always a storm when there’s an earthquake. Kind-a late in the season for a storm from the south though; must nearly be time to move to the lowlands and we’re still having summer storms.”

Chilcoat followed his gesture and was surprised at how quickly the clouds had gathered. The gray blanket was just coming over the horizon when he finished his watch and now it was nearly upon them. It wasn’t going to be a good day for hunting, and he wasn’t really in the mood for more dirt stew.

“Maybe someone in the village will trade for some herbs or hides. Perhaps Charona will serve one of the elders for a few days in exchange for extra meat; I’ll have to ask around.” As he recalled, Lannon had had a good hunt a couple of days earlier. He had three sons and they were always in need of a woman’s touch.

Just as he had convinced himself that things were going to be OK, the dogs started to dance around nervously and, again, the ground trembled. It started gently at first, and then a great wave caused a pile of wood nearby to tumble with cooking pots falling from their platform.

“Whoa! That was a good one.” Chilcoat remarked as the commotion subsided. “Maybe it’s a sign that we should leave the highlands early this year.”

Rancon collected some of the wood that had fallen. “Maybe so—we should ask Tangar to divine the meaning.”

“You’re right, it’ll give him a chance to lead again, and by the time the storm is over, and he’s done his reading of signs, it’ll be time to leave anyway. Ran; that’s a good idea, sometimes you surprise me.” They had a good laugh while they finished their stew and returned to their families.

As the morning routine finished, Chilcoat approached Charona about serving the Lannon boys for a couple of days and set the rest of his family to work getting ready for the annual journey north. He pulled on his hunting clothes and grabbed his gear as he left the tent. The storm had gathered strength and rumbled as it poured in over the hills. Stopping at the edge of Rancon's clearing; he called out. "Hey Ran, are you going to come with me to talk to the old man?"

"Yeah, sure. Give me a minute to get some shoes on." He finally emerged from his house and after taking a quick look at the sky, returned for a moment, and pulled his raincoat over his head. "This looks like it's going to be a real mess."

"That's the spirit; I always like to hear that positive attitude when things look bleak." Chilcoat joked with him as he left his hut.

The old friends took the main path through the village and tried to attract as much attention as they could without being too obvious. They wanted everyone to know that they sought the wisdom of the seer. "It never hurts to pump-up the old man's ego before you try to convince him to find in your favor."

As they stood at the edge of Tangar's clearing, the thunder rumbled in the south. Chilcoat pulled the arrows from his quiver and, quickly sorting through them, pulled a rather drab looking dart from the group. It was straight and well made, but not very attractive, and would be hard to find if it missed its target. He placed it across the flat stone next to the fire pit and called out to the old man. "Tangar, I've come to report a quiet night with only the dogs being restless near dawn; and we would humbly ask your guidance."

Thinking quickly, Rancon pulled a rabbit hide from his belt and placed it with the arrow. "Tangar, we've come to ask your wisdom." Both men stood quietly next to their offerings. Lannon and a couple of others from the village approached from behind, tucking in their coats and pulling on their shoes, as they stumbled up the dusty path in front of Tangar's lodge.

Tarra peeked out the door of her father's hut and quickly counted the number of people gathering in the half-light of morning.

Within moments, the old man emerged wrapped in his ceremonial robe and pulled the hood to cover his bald head against the chill. He looked deep into the eyes of the two men standing at the base

of the path and glanced quickly at the offerings on his hearthstone. “What have you come to ask? Can’t you see I am resting?”

Chilcoat hung his head slightly and pulled his small hunting pouch of smoking herb from his belt. He tossed the pouch on top of the rabbit pelt. “We’re sorry to keep you from your rest, father, but we knew you would be disturbed, as we are, by the ground quaking. What does it mean, and why are we plagued with a storm so late in the season? Tell us if we should prepare to leave for the lowlands. Are the gods telling you what we should do?”

Tangar gave a quick nod and returned to his lodge. The two men followed and entered the hut as Tarra held the flap open. She quickly tiptoed across the clearing in her sleeping gown and went to the hearthstone to retrieve the offerings. Her hair was a tumult of ginger that she pulled back from her lightly freckled face as she closed the door behind them.

The men sat on the meager cushions scattered on the floor while Tangar assessed the offerings. The rabbit pelt was of good quality and met his immediate approval but it was of lesser value than the arrow. He pulled his hood back and rubbed his naked head twice; this was his habit when he had something to resolve. Turning his attention to the arrow, he smoothed the feathers skeptically and gave the remaining arrows in Chilcoat’s quiver a quick glance. He would need to replace the feathers before he used it for bird hunting. His eyes had grown dim with the years and colored feathers made a missed shot easier to find than the dull brown plumes that currently adorned the shaft.

Putting the arrow aside, he turned to the pouch of smoking herb. He opened the small purse and poured the contents carefully onto the flat stone near the fire. He was pleased with the apparent quality of the herb as he took a small pinch and held it to his nose. He tossed the empty bag back to Chilcoat and dug into his own pouch for his pipe. After burrowing through the leather purse for several moments, he withdrew the small clay cone with a great deal of satisfaction.

He tapped the end of the pipe on his palm several times and blew through the stained yellow barrel to be sure it was clear. He then took a pinch of the dried leaves and packed them firmly into the pipe. Making a loose fist, he wedged the cone between his fingers, lit a kindling twig, and held it to the pipe. He pulled his closed fist to his mouth and drew a breath slowly through his fingers. With the practiced hand of an expert, he metered the acrid smoke with fresh air, mixing it

in his palm. His lungs were also showing their age, and he found that he needed very little smoke and plenty of cool clean air to keep from choking.

He opened his fist and rolled the pipe between his fingers as the pleasant warmth of the herb spread through his body. He felt the comforting pleasure he had felt so many times before as he looked upon the young men awaiting his wisdom. He considered the pipe for a moment and then held it out toward each of them in turn. They both nodded acknowledgement, but didn't take the pipe from him. They knew that custom required him to offer it, but that it was also the custom to decline herbs given in compensation.

He placed the pipe carefully on the hearthstone and looked up at the two men sitting across the fire from him. "You're anxious to return to the lowlands? You know that the season hasn't yet turned. Why do you think we should put the people through this hardship now, before they've had a chance to prepare for the journey?"

"Father, please hear us out. You know that I've watched the signs of the season, and I know that it isn't yet time, but the time's near, and the hunting's poor this year, and now the earth trembles beneath our feet. I think it would be good to start our preparations as soon as possible, and make the journey in an easy walk instead of running from the winds of winter as we have done so many times in the past. This storm is another sign..."

"Sign; now you're reading signs in the winds? You know what the scrolls tell us... *'Look to the sky for your signs and know that God will give you no other sign than the knowledge that you live in heaven'*. You don't need me if you can read the winds. Perhaps you should take my cloak now." The old man tugged at the decorative band around his collar.

"No father, I don't want your cloak. I'm not trying to read the signs as you do. It just seems to me, and others, that the season has turned early this year. You know this happens and it makes the journey hard on the very young."

"Now you're telling me that I am too old to know the concerns of the young?"

"No father, I ask only that you explain the signs and tell us what we must do. Are the gods telling us to leave this place before the ground falls away from under our feet?"

Tangar considered his words and knew that what they asked was on the minds of everyone. The tribe expected, and deserved, an answer to the meaning of the quake, for while quakes are common in the highlands, they're always a sign from the gods. Someone had apparently done something that offended YodHeaVau and he needed to determine what to do about it. Usually he could find someone who had done something that offended the gods, but that would take time to divine, and this request for a quick answer wouldn't give him time to find an infidelity or transgression to blame this on. The old man finally spoke. "Let it go. It's not of your concern now. Let me rest."

The three men rose and passed through the door. Each stopped and looked at the sky as they emerged. The clouds streamed ominously across the sky. Tangar spoke in calm measured tones loud enough for those gathered to hear. "You're correct to come to me with this. I'll need time to divine what Hea is saying, but it is best that you begin to prepare for the journey." The old man took a small scepter from his daughter and waved it, first at the clouds covering the sun, then at the men standing before him.

Chilcoat spoke quietly to Rancon as they left. "He'll need time enough to smoke the herb I gave him before he'll be able to divine what the gods are saying. But, he's given his approval to begin the journey, that's all I wanted."

The Face of God

Everyone eventually settled into the work at hand, but the children's reluctance grew as the weather worsened. The thunder became an almost constant distraction and the windswept rain made everything cold and heavy. By evening, their belongings were packed and ready for the long journey, but the weather was too dreadful to consider an evening departure.

Lanoner, the eldest Lannon boys, had heard of Charona's offer of service and came around just after dawn. He was curious as to when they were going to leave and seemed to linger, showing undue attention to her. Despite the fact that he was a notorious flirt, or perhaps because of it, she appreciated his interest but he was a couple of years her junior and was one of her own tribe so she couldn't really consider him as a mate.

It detracted from Chilcoat's objectives to have the doe-eyed lad hanging around getting in the way, but he was big for his age, stronger than most, and had been on several successful hunts. As the preparations continued, it became evident that he wanted to become an extended member of their party so Chilcoat pressed him for a contribution to the provisions. He stammered a little and left in a nervous scuffle of unsure bravado. He was glad that Chilcoat accepted him, and was proud to provide a man's share, but unsure if his father would allow him to take it.

Many of the less important details remained undone, but Chilcoat looked to the sky and felt an urgent need to get started. He stirred the fire pit looking for embers as he broke it up. The last official act was to put embers from the morning fire into a traveling pot and to piss on the fire to be sure it was out.

Lanoner waited his turn and followed suit. He was proud to display his manhood and assume the position of 'second man' of their little band.

Chilcoat struggled not to laugh and did his best to ignore the display as he hung the ember pot in its sling. He wedged the handle between two of the tent bundles and looked back on the camp. His daughter complained, but when everyone else had left the campsite, she reconsidered her position and came whining up behind Lanoner who gave her a knowing smile. He was still on his best behavior trying to convince Charona that he was a good fatherly type.

Chilcoat smiled to himself. The poor fool was trying so hard to impress her and all he really needed to do was be here. Meanwhile, he was glad to have the young man in his family; he had brought the hindquarter of a deer that was his share of the kill he and his brothers had made two days before. He was carrying more than his share of the load and he was keeping his daughter happy. “What more can I ask?”

As morning peeked gray over the distant hills, the small band made its way past the trash heap and onto the main trail. Tangar interrupted his hunting and stood to greet them as they passed. The storm buffeted the old man’s overcoat as the morning breeze picked up. He called after them, “Be well my son. I’m glad you’ve taken this burden from me. Others will follow—perhaps tomorrow.”

At the mid-day break, a small portion of the meat was prepared and eaten. The group had pretty well settled into a slow steady pace but they were ready for a rest. Everyone lay quietly huddling together amongst the bundles. Lanoner pretended to fall quickly asleep and fitfully squirmed ever closer to press warmly against the curve of Charona’s back. She lay quietly and watched Chilcoat for signs of disapproval. With none coming, she enjoyed the firm cushion of his youth pressed against her.

A sudden bout of thunder roused everyone and the rain started to make everything cold again. The troop stirred without complaint and headed steadily down the path leading to the creek. Water flowed swiftly in the stream and the rain fell in a light mist making the stones along the bank slippery. In good years, the streambed would still be dry and the walk would be less treacherous but this storm’s unrest made every step more hazardous than the last.

Lanoner stumbled under the weight of his load and fell into the stream. He recovered well enough, but lost a great deal of his bluster. The children sensed his loss of stature and gave him room to nurture his bruised ego. By the afternoon rest, his leg had stiffened and the skin had reddened. He would recover, but it would be several days before he would regain his swagger.

By the third week, the slow march brought them to the lowland plain. The walking was easier, but the weather had improved only slightly in that time. The streams were impassable in many of the usual places but they eventually made it to the ceremonial ‘great-house’.

The structure bulged from the hillside like some broad flat snout overlooking the sea. Its smooth domed curve formed a ceremonial terrace that hung over a small clearing cut into the hillside. Chilcoat reflected, “The skill of cutting a single block of stone, such as this, into such a form had long since been lost to our people.” According to the legends exchanged each year at “the gathering,” the great temple had survived hundreds of generations without change.

Those of the tribe that could no longer make the annual journey to the cool highland pastures used the structure as a sanctuary through the summer months. They would stay inside in bad weather and would otherwise tend the gardens that spilled down the hillside.

The only entrance was a tunnel under the terrace. The squat hallway passed darkly beneath the main floor of the temple with stone carvings and small altars set up in ceremonial alcoves along its walls. The tunnel emerged as a ramp leading up a gentle curving path into the central plaza and through the herb gardens to end in front of the main altar mound. Rain drifted into the temple grounds through the opening above the plaza where the elders grow sacred herbs.

Tradition demanded that Chilcoat and his family stand before the council of elders upon reaching the gathering. They were to offer gifts that would pass, in turn, to the children who gathered every morning to hear stories and fables. The roof arching overhead held the storm at bay, but gusts of wind stirred through the open terraces overlooking the valley and drove rain across their cold stone floors.

Chilcoat formed up his little band of refugees and tried to look as presentable as could be expected. They found their way around the garden mounds and up the stairway nearest the inner shrine. One last dusting and they stood proudly at the base of the altar.

One of the elders put aside the basket he had been mending and slowly made his way to the throne. With a couple of labored grunts, he pulled himself up the steps and sat on the chair.

Chilcoat stepped forward and laid a small packet atop the large smooth surface of the altar. The platform had always amazed and troubled him just a little. As a child, he had stared for hours at its smooth dark surface. “It was like a highland lake when the moon shone on it on a still summer night. The deep black reflected light but was as dark as the darkest night.” The elders polished it with great pride and

reverence, but none of them had the slightest idea of where to find such a stone.

As was the tradition at the annual gathering, the elders opened the festivities by reading the sacred scroll and telling the story of how Vau, the mother of all life, had taken her children and imprisoned them for having spread lies on the face of the earth. *“She put them in a house that was perfectly smooth on all sides. It had no doors, so they couldn’t escape and spread more lies, but it had many windows, so they could look out upon the world and see the damage their lies had caused. When they refused to repent of their deeds, She flung the house from heaven into the sea and there it drifted for many years. When She finally asked them if they had learned their lesson, they smugly replied that they had been the teachers not the students and that She herself must answer the question. She was so disappointed that She called Hea, Her husband, and the father of all things, to send a great and terrible storm to carry the house to the farthest ends of the earth where it came to rest, stuck in the side of the hill upon which they now stand.”*

The people of the tribes were said to be the descendents of those children of Vau and because She was punishing them for their lies, She made them forget the skills of how the temple had been built and scattered them among the hills. Now each year at the end of summer, the tribes from all over the island gather at the temple to trade goods and stories, exchange knowledge, and make and renew family bonds.

The elder on the throne inquired about their health and asked each person what they had learned over the summer. The children told warm tales that brought a smile to his eyes, and Chilcoat reflected on his unrest with the late summer storm. The elder nodded acknowledgement but offered no consolation for his concern.

The family left the high altar and wandered around the inner garden grounds for several minutes as the storm continued. The rain fell gently on the well-tended paths that curved through the garden. At the very center of the courtyard, a large boulder sat glistening in the rain. It had always seemed odd to Chilcoat that such an ungainly object should sit in such a place of honor. It wasn’t a nice boulder; it was jagged and broken, and even with the shimmering coat of rain, its colors were drab and without life.

Maybe he could talk some of his buddies into breaking it up and hauling it away this season. “I’ll have to see if I can make it a drinking game of some kind.” He rubbed his hand across its rough surface and

struck it firmly with his fist. “For all of its unattractiveness, it’s distinctly solid.” He rubbed his hand. “Maybe it isn’t such a good idea to break it up. Maybe I can learn to appreciate its jagged beauty.”

He remembered a time in his childhood that he had climbed nearly to the top of the boulder by shinnying up its northern face. It wasn’t anything he would try again, but at the time, it had seemed like a good idea. It earned him a scolding from one of the elders and he had to sit through a long story about the importance of the stone. He, of course, had paid very little attention, but he was sure there was something about it being a gift from Hea to remind his children of His might and glory. It had always seemed to Chilcoat to be more of a sign of His arbitrary whimsy.

As punishment for his disrespect of God’s gift, the elder had insisted that the young boy sit and visualize the face of God in the chiseled facets of the stone. Maybe that was why he disliked the stone and wanted to see it crushed. He missed many of the important games while he sat all day moving from side-to-side trying to see a face in the jagged crags and clefts of the boulder. He remembered thinking, “If the face of God is to be found in the imperfections of this stone, He is certainly an ugly god.”

The exercise concluded when he made up a story about a face he had imagined in the cracks of the stone. While the elder seemed satisfied with his fabrication, Chilcoat had always felt cheated, having not really seen anything. Now, as he stood gazing at the same spot he had pointed out so many years ago, he was still disappointed. He wasn’t sure if the regret was with God for being so mysterious or with himself for being so dim. All he knew was that, the beauty of the stone still escaped him, and he still couldn’t see the face of God etched in its rugged form.

The storm continued off-and-on for another week. At times, it seemed as if the sky would fall; at others, it was a pleasant autumn mist with no signs of thunder or wind. None of the elders could remember a storm that had lasted so long or a sky that had seemed so angry.

The storm had taken a grave toll. As other families arrived, he learned of births, deaths, injuries, and illnesses. The hardest hitting news was the loss of three children. Their demise had each come from accidents and poor judgment along the trail. One had fallen into the stream not far from where Lanoner had fallen. She was not as lucky as he had been. The stream had risen considerably, and she was not as

strong as he was. The others had died from infected cuts and lack of food. The trip was always hardest on the very young and the very old.

He then learned that Tangar had also died. A tooth had gone bad and made him weak with fever and his stubborn refusal to become a burden had all but assured his demise. “He had had a good life, and falling on the annual trek was an honorable end for a good man, even if it was to an old man’s disease,” Chilcoat reflected. “Perhaps it is even more fitting that he should fall to the nobility of an old man’s illness; it is nobler than dying as a young fool at the hands of a challenger or under the hooves of a beast that had proven its supremacy. The old man had proven himself often, and lived his life wisely enough to succumb only to the greatest challenge of all: age. Tangar had spoken of this being his last trip to the temple and had arranged to stay on. His family was to bring extra gifts each year to help pay his way, but now that wouldn’t be necessary.”

As the festival progressed, Chilcoat grew weary of the activities. He knew the stories in the scrolls by heart and decided that the competitions were of less interest than they had once been. The adolescents found it great fun to wrestle and tumble about trying to get some ball, or bag, or stick away from everyone else. Now it all seemed to be just a good excuse to grab and fondle each other.

The ceremonies that followed the weeks of games revolved around matchmaking and always led to the wedding ritual and displays of commitment by the newly joined couples. While he enjoyed the confirmation rite, he still felt the burden of Tangar’s loss and just wanted to be alone.

Grabbing what little smoking herb he had, Chilcoat headed up the hill above the temple. He hadn’t been on that particular trail for several years, and it seemed that no one else had either. He couldn’t help but think of Tangar as he struggled up the narrow overgrown path. His knee complained and his chest didn’t seem able to supply him with enough air. “The old man is walking within me,” he grumbled.

After an hour’s climb, he sought refuge from the wind in a niche in the rock outcropping that broke through the underbrush high on the face of the cliff. Far below, he could see the roof of the temple bulging from the side of the hill like a growth on an old woman’s face. “It didn’t fit the slope of the hillside, it just didn’t seem right.” He sat quietly watching the clouds gather on the horizon. The storm appeared to be gaining strength again and a thick layer of gray blanketed the sun.

The rock on which he sat poked him ruthlessly. “It must be part of the ugly monolith in the temple garden,” he thought. “It’s the same drab color and shows the same disregard for my comfort. God must have cast this stone from heaven as well.”

He stuffed as much of his clothing as he could under his butt and added some dried grass from nearby. The storm would soon be upon him, but he just couldn’t bring himself to return to the gathering. He had reached a place in his life that the loss of so many, so close, had touched him deeply.

He dug through his shoulder bag and found the ember pot he had carefully stashed amongst his other things. He plucked a couple of sprigs of grass from his butt pad and twisted them together so that they would fit through the feeder hole in the pot. Pulling the stopper from the chimney, he blew gently across it while stirring and feeding the embers with the shoots.

Before long, he had rekindled a steady glow and set to work filling his pipe with herbs. He lamented the remaining quantity. “I’ll have to see if I can trade someone for more, or maybe I can take a walkabout to find some. Better yet, maybe I can walkabout the temple garden. The elders always grow ample herbs; they wouldn’t mind giving me a little.” As he drew the first smoke deep into his lungs, he quickly forgot the issue and watched the clouds thickening across the sun.

Something stirred in the bushes to his left; he sat frozen and watched for signs of malice. “It wouldn’t do to have a snake creep up on me.” The glimpse of brown fur darting through the lower branches of a nearby bush rewarded his vigil. He let fly with a stone and smirked as the rat squeaked and fled back into the underbrush. The old man again crept into his thoughts. Tangar had been very fatherly to him in a tyrannical sort of way. They had shared many an evening talking and drinking over the years, and now he was gone. “Him and his damn rats.”

The rain mixed with his tears and somehow made his grief seem more fitting. As he struggled to stand, the stone under his foot broke loose and tumbled down the hill causing him to fall back on his hands. From his awkward perch, he watched the rubble crash through bushes on its relentless search for stability. The stone ricocheted off the rocks and crashed through the wall of a small catch basin. It slowed for an instant and then seemed to gather momentum as it bound from side to

side along the ravine leading down the hillside. The stone leapt and jumped the last few yards and lodged itself into a berm just above the temple roof.

Lying back, he looked to the gray sky in relief. “It wouldn’t do to bury the temple under a landslide.”

The sun peeked through a thin layer of clouds catching his eye. The perfect disk glowed brightly behind the blanket of gray, but there were blemishes ruining its perfection. Two small unblinking eyes stared down on him as he sat in his little sanctuary. “It must be the herbs,” he thought, as he squinted against the glare. The clouds swept by quickly and formed a stern grimacing mouth. He shaded his eyes and felt naked as he sat wet and cold in the sight of such a displeased god. For while he had, on rare occasions, been able to look upon the face of the sun and had on even more rare occasions seen spots on its face; he had never seen the spots form such a pronounced expression of displeasure.

As he gathered himself for another attempt at navigating the slippery trail, it occurred to him that the alcove he had claimed bore more than just a casual relationship with the ugly stone in the temple garden. At last, he had seen the face of God in the stone. It wasn’t in the rock itself; it wasn’t even on the hill from which it had come. He looked again at the sun as it peered through the clouds. The glaring face still stared down on him as he stood amongst the stones that had delivered His child to the shelter of the temple far below. “So this is the way of God. This is His face; the subtle change of form and substance that leads to mysteries without answers.”

Chilcoat longed for the wisdom of Tangar, to ask him what these signs meant, to comfort him with knowing confidence, to help him understand. His words from the scroll came back to him. “*Look to the sky for your signs and know that God will give you no other sign than the knowledge that you live in heaven.*”

“Father—you’re gone, as you must, but I miss you so...”

A New Beginning

Chilcoat searched the jagged rock face seeking a small shelf with an overhang to keep the rain off. Displacing a bit of loose gravel, he selected a likely spot and spread his robe on the damp hillside in front of it. He lowered himself slowly to his knees and dug into his pouch pulling a tightly knotted package from its depths. He held it thoughtfully, first in one hand then the other, weighing its contents; it was all he had left of his father. It was Tangar's pipe and a small measure of smoking herb wrapped tightly in a patch of rabbit hide. The elders had taken his ceremonial robes and would pass them to an aspiring shaman at next year's gathering. For now, they rested in a place of honor on the elder's platform, and Chilcoat sat holding the remains of the man's worldly possessions in one hand.

He took the dry grass he had used for his butt pad and made a small cushion on a cleft of the stone. Rolling the packet slowly in his opened palm, he tugged firmly on the knot holding it together and placed it carefully on the pillow of grass. Pulling the ember pot from its sling, he stirred the contents to life. When the warmth of the embers grew enough to make holding the pot uncomfortable, he looked to the sky, then to the packet sitting on its little cushion. His hand trembled slightly as he removed the chimney cap and dumped its contents onto the small pyre. Sitting motionless for several moments, he considered grabbing the treasure before the flames could consume it, then the voice of the old man drifted on the wind. "*Let it go. It's not of your concern now. Let me rest.*"

He bent slowly over the altar and blew the embers to life. "One last chance," he thought as the flame began to devour the packet with the distinctive aroma of burning herbs and rabbit hide. "I can still pull it free and return to camp with something to cherish. No one would know, no one would care, and some might even think it noble to honor his memory with a memorial. Maybe a necklace made from his pipe would be fitting."

The smoke stung his eyes and caused tears to flow freely as he drew the clutch of arrows from his quiver. He selected the longest, straightest, most colorful dart from the bunch and rolled it slowly in his fingers feeling the quality of its balance. It had taken him three days to fashion the shaft and he had to change the brightly colored feathers twice to get it to guide true. "The result was worth the effort," he thought, as he pressed his thumb gently on the fine stone tip. A drop of

blood embraced the translucent edge of obsidian. He drew it slowly down the shaft forming a snake figure before he snapped it quickly across his knee. He placed both halves on the flames and grabbed another handful of dried grass putting it on top of the offering. “Here, old man. Here’s your damn bird arrow. May the sting of this viper serve you well in your quest.”

The flames warmed his face and lifted his spirit as the smoke climbed over the top of the hill and joined the clouds. He watched the smoke play in the wind until the embers began to fade, leaving only a small pile of twinkling ash and the charred forms of the clay pipe and arrowhead. He thought again of salvaging these last remnants of a life well spent. “No. If I were to keep his pipe, he couldn’t rest, and I would never be able to enjoy his company around the evening fire again.”

He struggled to his feet and, with one last sigh of resignation, swept the ashes from the shelf crushing the delicate stones under his foot. “Now you can rest, old man. You have your pipe and a good strong arrow to serve you.”

He slowly worked his way down the path, made slippery by the rain and loose gravel. The sun inched slowly beyond the sea and the clay under his feet seemed almost to bleed as the sunlight reflected red off the water that trickle from the fractured surface left by his unsure footsteps.

With the last glint of light, the bonding ceremony would begin. Tonight was the last night of the ceremonies so it was important to be there to make the official offering and to honor the old man’s memory.

He was to act in behalf of Tangar at the ceremonies. Tarra had just come of age and would need to seek a mate. Tangar hadn’t intended to let her pass over this season, but now that he was gone, she would need to seek a new arrangement. Tarann, her mother, could no longer support her and would now stay on at the temple.

Tarra would be one of the youngest offered this season, so she would be in the first group. The girls in the first group normally didn’t wed, but they were included to introduce them to the ritual. They would usually take a mate in their second or more generally third season, but since her father was gone, she could seek attachment in her first offering.

Chilcoat felt sorry for her, since early pairings were not usually successful, especially if the boy was also young. Out of respect for the

old man, he resolved that he would intervene if it looked as if someone too young was going to select her. It would mean that she would have to move in with his family, but it would only be for a season or two, and she could help with the harvesting. “I’ll have to talk it over with Caran, of course, but she is usually accepting of my decisions. Maybe Charona will find a mate and move out, and everything will remain as it is: one woman too many in my tent.” Still, he didn’t hold out much hope that Charona would find someone suitable this season; the gathering was small since some of the distant tribes hadn’t come.

The ceremony began right on schedule. The head priest appeared in the temple window overlooking the gardens, and just as the last rays of light winked out over the edge of the sea, he declared the ceremony open with a wave of his scepter. The youngest group of girls hugged their tearful families and formed into a short queue gathered at the end of the main path. The lane meandered through the ramshackle cluster of huts that sprawled down the hillside below the temple.

The youngsters had swept the path clear and a cable of twisted vines strung along the edges emphasized its importance. Some families decorated sections with garlands of flowers matching those worn by their children in the ceremony. The mid and senior-year girls each went through a short supportive celebration with their families and ducked under the cable to enter the path in a symbolic separation from their past. Mothers wept, fathers hugged, and siblings scattered flowers. Some of the rituals were very elaborate, depending on the message their family wished to project.

Charona joined the last group but displayed little of the trepidation shown by some of the others. She had been through the ceremony before and held small hope of finding a suitable mate. She wanted to show her support for the tradition and didn’t want to look back and know that she hadn’t even tried. There were only four yearlings including Tarra and five seniors with nearly ten midyear girls.

The women of the tribe began a rhythmic chant and hand clapping that soon grew as the young men joined in. The women of the offering joined the chant as they began to move slowly toward the temple entrance. The tempo built as the men began pounding on drums and the chant turned into an upbeat marching tune. The women of the offering danced and flirted as they kept time with the music weaving their way toward the temple. Many of the girls found family and friends to wave to and dance with while others caught the eye of would be

suitors along the path with playful, and somewhat suggestive, gyrations. The last of the women disappeared behind a cloth drawn over the entrance of the darkened tunnel as the chant gave way to general applause.

The young men now gathered a little less formally into similar groupings with the youngest forming up the lead. There were about ten in each group with the eldest casually swaggering into a clump near the edge of the clearing with much hand clapping and elbowing for the prestigious last positions. The families seemed less emotional about the possibility of losing their sons to the ceremony, but two fathers brusquely dragged their sons from the youngest group. Their families judged them too immature and removed them from consideration.

The matrons of the tribe soon surrounded the youngest group. Much whispering and conferring took place among the women with occasional poking and prodding of individual boys deemed unfit for serious consideration. Two more of the boys were eventually convinced to leave the count.

The more serious consideration of the elder boys began with the men of the tribe gathering at the head of the path. Lanoner survived the initial culling process with only a minor assault on his masculinity when one of the matrons probed his robe aside with a stick and laughingly exchanged whispers with the other women gathered for the ceremony.

Much of the conversation revolved around the inclusion of Bartan in the pairing ritual. It seemed he had lost his wife in the winter three years ago and had turned out his mate from last season's ceremony because she was not happy with his inability to provide for her. The men of the tribe measured, discussed, and reconsidered his attitudes and contributions and decided that he shouldn't participate this season. He argued his case and offered to work for the elders to prove his worth, but to no avail. Had he brought a bounty of hides or herbs to offer he may have gained their support, but his lack of resources only served to confirm the notion that he wasn't able to provide for a family.

The assembly of men strode down the path with purpose, quickly gathering in a cluster at the temple entrance where they were ushered, pushing and shoving, through the tunnel. The passageway opened onto the garden grounds where the gaggle of youth timidly wondered amongst the elders that had already assembled.

The grounds were empty and the garden mounds cleared, revealing their matching stone platforms. The podiums served as worktables during the growing season but now flowers and carpets of many colors disguised their form. Tangar's ceremonial regalia adorned a stick figure at the rear of the center platform where they would stand in reverence over the proceedings.

The girls settled on their platform to the left of the main path; the boys gravitated to the mound on the right. There was considerable pushing and shoving as the larger, more dominant, boys found the most advantageous seating position around their platform. The elders meandered in small groups slowly up the third mound set between, and beyond, the others. The three hills formed a nearly perfect triangular arrangement of independently tended garden knolls.

As the elders climbed the last few steps to their hilltop, a small group of lesser status council members parted to allow them access to their privileged seating. The boys reshuffled their arrangement as they recognized that their positioning in relationship to the elders might be more important than posturing for the girls. The scuffling, pushing, and prodding threatened to deteriorate into earnest conflict but the larger boys quickly resolved the issue. While this display of macho brinksmanship seemed to serve some primal need within the hierarchy of young males, it had no impact on the pairing process itself. In the past, many a young warrior had gone home defeated and unhappy from the pairing ceremony after having done well in the athletic games leading up to the ritual.

The elders talked among themselves with only occasional gestures toward one or the other platforms. While the boys had been forming up outside, the girls had been seated in accordance to their age and had been given a lecture on process and procedures so they sat quietly only whispering occasionally to their nearest neighbors. The immediate families of the prospective pairs gathered around in an arc at the foot of the elder's mound. They also jostle each other for locations along the path.

Finally, Talbot, the high-elder, called the ceremony to order and the prime-elder, Santos, spoke in a tone that echoed slightly in the upper reaches of the temple. "Who is the first daughter offered for pairing?"

A timid little voice came from the slender child standing in front of the girl's platform. "I am Tarra from the clan, Tangar."

Her hair was a striking flash of red accented with a wreath of yellow flowers and the dusting of freckles on her face gave her a boyish sparkle that betrayed her feminine charms. Tarra was the youngest girl in this year's ceremony and so had the dubious privilege of being first to stand for the offering.

"Who gives this child for pairing?" Santos again spoke to the world.

Chilcoat put his arm around Tarann's shoulder pulling her close and stepped to the front of the families gathered at the base of the hill. "I am Chilcoat, a friend of Tangar, the father of this—woman." He hesitated for a moment looking at the child. "Her mother, Tarann, and I offer her for pairing; but let it be known that she is here before her time and will not be given in haste." Her mother broke into tears and hid her face in Chilcoat's shoulder.

The prime elder spoke in clear tones un-phased by the emotions of the moment, "Who desires to pair with this woman?"

Two of the youngest boys jumped to stand at the front of their platform. A third stood but reconsidered after looking to his mother. "How many elk have you felled this season?" The elder calmly asked. The larger of the two boys quickly offered that he had been on three hunts this season but that only one had been successful. "And how did you serve on these hunts?"

"I—I helped my father."

"What did you do to help?"

"I carried weapons and supplies, and I helped carry the kill. And, and I learned many important lessons." He struggled to bolster his case.

"Why do you wish to pair with this woman?"

"I am ready to—to be a man with a wife to care for me."

By this time, several of the older boys had begun to snigger and elbow each other in knowing gestures of having seen, or perhaps participated in, a similar discussion in previous ceremonies. It was inevitable that the youngest boys would make the biggest mistakes. Having them go first, built the errors into the process. Beside the entertainment value, it served to eliminate unqualified challengers early in the process. After a momentary conference amongst the elders, the

prime spoke for all to hear, “You are not considered right for pairing at this time. Does anyone else seek to pair with this woman?”

The second young man standing at the front of the platform looked at his feet then back at his friends still seated at the platform behind him. He considered his options for a moment and, hanging his head, returned to his place near the far end of the platform. His nearest neighbor elbowed him mercilessly as he settled dejectedly amongst the others.

“Does anyone else speak for this woman?” The prime pleaded for others to consider her situation.

After several moments of silence, Bartan spoke from the back of the crowd. “I’ve had many successful hunts this season, and I’ll keep her as she needs.”

A quick huddle between the elders culminated in the prime speaking clearly, “Does anyone object to this pairing?”

The muttering crowd erupted into full-blown arguments amongst the families. Emissaries from the various family groupings drifted in and out amid the uproar. Chilcoat stood with Tarann at the apex of the family arc and Bartan soon joined them. The two men greeted each other but remained silent for several moments.

Bartan spoke in measured tones. “I can care for her. I know she’s young, but I’ll not force her to do anything she’s unable to do.”

Chilcoat finally spoke. “Were those kills you had this season elk or rabbits? I’ve not seen you able to care for yourself and two other women. Why should I think that you could now care for one so young? She’s welcome in my house. She can join my children and will grow to full age before she again joins the pairing.”

The crowd erupted into heated discussions as various alliances formed then re-formed into factions. The elders gathered into a tight circle around Talbot, seated on the throne in the center of the platform. Tangar’s robes hung nearby seeming almost to eavesdrop on the judgment. A heated conversation ensued with Santos directing priority order. After repeated cycles around the ring of point-counterpoint comments, Talbot finally spoke with a great deal of agitation. He gestured at Tarra and pointed his finger at individual elders around the circle. He finished his tirade and they cast their lots into baskets at his feet.

The basket on the left soon grew heavy enough to tip the scale on which it sat. Talbot was apparently satisfied with the outcome and sat back on his throne. Santos didn't seem as happy about the outcome but strode quickly down the steps that jutted from the platform.

He marched with purpose down the face of the mound leading to the central clearing and spoke for all to hear. "Both paths have been considered and argued. The elders have agreed that Bartan seems not well suited to this pairing but recognizes that in these times of poor harvest, we must all draw together to help when we can. Therefore, at this time, we don't condone this pairing, but if Bartan wishes to pursue her, he will need to prove himself to Chilcoat. Chilcoat, you, yourself, are perhaps not in the best position to provide for another. Has your son yet contributed to your clan?"

"No, he's yet unproven. But I am sure he will soon join the providers."

"Yes, I am sure he's a fine lad, but you have already burdened yourself with your wife's sister. Are you sure another woman is a good idea in your tent? Perhaps your wife can speak to this."

"Caran, will you speak?" Chilcoat stretched his arm toward his mate.

"It's true my sister lives with us, but she provides many benefits to my young family. She is an experienced gardener and very good with my children. Besides, she'll soon wed, when a worthy man comes forward, and then she'll leave my tent. Perhaps this season will grant her desire. She's there on the platform; ask her to speak, if you wish." Caran gestured toward the mound on her left.

The prime considered the offer for a moment and spoke, "She'll be heard in her time. My concern isn't with your sister. Your sister is fully of age and I am sure offers many comforts a woman can provide. I am concerned that this young girl will not fit well into this family with two women already tending to their needs. How will she fit if, as you said, Charona finds a worthy mate this season, or what if she doesn't find a mate for many seasons? Will you still welcome this young woman?"

Caran pulled close to Chilcoat and pondered the questions. "I think that my husband wants to help the clan of Tangar and has taken his daughter to show his loyalty. If this girl comes as a daughter to my tent, I welcome her."

Santos considered all the arguments and spoke to Bartan. “Do you still wish to pair with this girl?”

Yes was the only acceptable answer.

“And do you still claim responsibility for her?” He asked Chilcoat.

Again, yes was the reply.

“The decision made by the elders is that she be given to you Chilcoat as a daughter and that Bartan; you shall join the clan of Tangar to prove yourself worthy of this child. If you prove yourself to Chilcoat by this time next season, we’ll again hear your offer. The people don’t consider you paired with this girl, but you may correspond with her as a member of her clan during the year. Chilcoat, you are to help Bartan as you would a brother. Help him fit into the clan’s needs. You’re not to judge him or his actions. You’re only to guide his efforts through counsel. If you wish to lay claim to this girl at next year’s gathering, you will need to defend your relationship with her. Each will be given a chance to account for the other’s ability to provide for her needs.” Santos turned and began to trudge up the embankment toward the platform steps.

Bartan called up the hill after him. “This will leave my clan with only four skilled hunters.”

The prime stopped and turned to him. “Your clan has always had only four skilled hunters. You haven’t proven you’re worth for the past three seasons.” He turned and planted his walking staff calling over his shoulder as he resumed the first of many trips back up the mound. “You would do well to watch Chilcoat closely. You’ll learn much from him, if you don’t meet with an ‘accident’.”

A small chuckle emanated from some of the veteran hunters standing nearby.

The group that had gathered at the end of the path dispersed as Tarra made her way down the slope leading from the platform. Tarra confronted Chilcoat pulling the wreath from her hair and threw it at his feet. “You’ve ruined my life! Why do you shame me like this?” She then fled out the tunnel in tears.

“I’m just trying to keep you from making a mistake...” His voice trailed off as she disappeared down the tunnel. He looked at Caran for understanding and found only wounded resolve.

Similar family interactions consumed much of the next few hours as the pairing ceremony continued. None of the conflicts were as confrontational as the first had been but, on more than one occasion, the elders provided an opinion on the worthiness or advisability of alternative pairings. Most of it was standard agreements between tentative families with an occasional outburst of bravado or tears as family members discussed dowries.

As the ceremony drew to a close, Charona's time finally came. She offered herself for consideration with a small acknowledgment that yes, she was indentured to her sister and would consider all for pairing, but that she was not desperate, or in need of a burdensome relationship.

The remaining male candidates nudged and prodded each other daring the older members to try it. Finally, two candidates approached the front of the platform. They were both younger than Charona and a bit small for their age. A few questions of hunting prowess quickly found them lacking the experience necessary to keep such a mature woman. The ceremony began to break up with the conclusion of this last offering but then Lanoner stepped to the head of the path. "Father, I wish to pair with this woman." He spoke in clear tones for all to hear. The general din fell mute as people nudged each other pointing at the youth.

The prime-elder turned to see who was speaking and readjusted the hood of his ceremonial robe as he approached Talbot. They spoke quietly for several moments with occasional gestures to various family groups and consultations with lesser elders. Finally, Santos walked slowly down the face of the platform mound toward the boy at the head of the path.

Standing face-to-face, Santos placed his hand on Lanoner's shoulder and leaned in close to speak quietly to him. "Are you sure that you wish to pair with this woman? She is your senior and will not bend easily to your ways. There'll be talk of you being afraid to leave your mother."

"Yes, Father. I have a bond of many weeks with her and I wish to have her join my house."

"You have this bond because she's from your clan. It's not advisable for such a pairing. It may lead to much hardship and children that are unfit."

“I am aware of the burden we’ll suffer. We’ve talked about it and we wish to go forward with this pairing.”

The prime spoke in clear terms, “The council has considered your request and cannot sanction such a pairing. If you wish to continue, you’ll be scorned by your clan and unable to take your place at their table.”

With the faintest of smiles, Lanoner clasped the arm of the prime and turned his face away with eyes cast down. It was exactly what he had hoped. It was the best possible outcome they could expect. While not strictly forbidden, they would lose face for a few seasons at public gatherings. It all depended on their success. If they prospered and their children were not a burden, they could return to their family’s table in a couple of years. If things didn’t go well, they would need to abandon their folly and return as outsiders to their tribe.

Santos gave Lanoner’s shoulder a gentle squeeze causing him to look up. He gave an imperceptible nod hidden under his hood and turned to take the final trip back up the platform mound. Charona came running down the women’s hill and fell quickly into Lanoner’s arms. They couldn’t partake in the pairing ceremony, but they could stand at the edge of the clearing while the others approached the elders’ platform.

The losing candidates returned to their families and soon left the temple grounds, leaving only those that had a stake in the remaining rituals. The elders descended from their platform and the sanctioned pairs replaced them.

Each elder, in order of rank, grabbed a small handful of flowers from the platform’s edge and scattered them on the steps. The matrons placed gifts of remembrance on the steps of the platform for those that had been lost. A large cluster of flowers and a cherished doll belonging to Teri, the youngest child to have been lost, were set in the center of the topmost step and the stick-man dressed in Tangar’s cloak stood guard blocking the passage.

The elders proceeded down the face of the hill as a small group of council women gathered at the foot of the steps and chanted a blessing of consent and concern. The joined pairs began talking and gesturing to each other. Finally, they established some order, and one by one, the couples took up the central position with the others gathered around in a loose circle to witness the consummation of their vows.

