

11,000 YEARS AGO

STORIES FROM THE MIDDLE STONE AGE

The characters in the story are:

The family

Neska	a girl, 9 years old
Mutil	a boy, 6 years old
Aita	their father, 31 years old
Ama	their mother, 28 years old
Osaba	Aita's brother, 26 years old

Chakur	their dog
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Their friends

Amona	the mother of Emakume and Kusi, 51 years old
Emakume	daughter of Amona, 32 years old
Gizon	husband of Emakume, 38 years old
Senar	son of Amona, 24 years old
Emazte	the new wife of Senar, 16 years old
Lagun	eldest son of Gizon and Emakume, 12 years old
Gazte	younger daughter of Gizon and Emakume, 9 years old
Ume	youngest daughter of Gizon and Emakume, 7 years old
Gorri	youngest son of Gizon and Emakume, 4 years old

Emakume was the sister of Aita and Osaba's mother, and so great-aunt of Neska and Mutil.

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Chapter 1. Moving home.

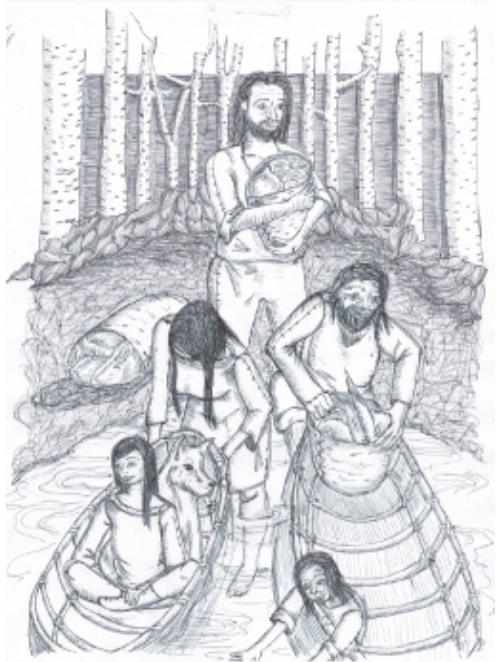
Neska woke first, the morning sunlight coming in through the door of the house. Mutil was still fast asleep next to her. On the other side of the hearth, Aita was snoring as usual, while Ama was beginning to wake too.

Neska was excited. The winter snows had melted and the sun was warmer now. Today they would be going inland to the happy place she remembered from last year. Mutil would remember too but he wasn't quite so keen on going back. Last year, he had wandered away into the woods and startled a family of wild boar. They had squealed and charged at him, making him run back crying to Ama. Neska was looking forward to the different foods she remembered from last time, and the sunlight reflecting on the lake. She thought their home there was the most beautiful place.

By the time the men were awake, she and Ama had begun packing away the food, tools and clothes into bundles they could carry. Aita and his brother Osaba began to damp down the fire in the hearth, to store the flint nodules in the pit they had dug and take the waste scraps of old bones and the bark from the floor to the dump by the edge of the sea. Mutil, as usual, was getting in the way playing with Chakur, the dog.

When all was ready, they set off along the path, away from the coast and into the wood. The spring sun was dappled by the birch leaves as they followed the light grey trunks into the distance. Osaba seemed to know the way, and they walked on going westwards. They walked quietly so as not to disturb the trees nor the animals they glimpsed in the distance. Mutil was worried. Everyone was carrying a lot of heavy things and he knew that no one had thought to bring the flint cobbles with them as they were just too heavy. He didn't know what they would use for tools when they got to their new home.

After a while, they come out of the trees to the edge of the lake. This was not the place she remembered. They would have to walk all round the edge of the lake to other end of the water. Her feet were tired already and her heart sank at the thought. Aita caught her look and smiled. He always seemed to understand what she was thinking. He walked down through the plants to edge of the lake. There, hidden on the bank, were the two coracles he and Osaba had made last year.



She had forgotten. Of course, they went across the lake in the coracles to the other side. So much quicker and less tiring for her feet. Mutil was also happy, splashing his hand in the water as they went along. Ama quietly stopped his arm and gently said "Now don't disturb the spirit of the lake or she won't send us any fish to eat later!". Mutil liked the fish. He stopped and happily looked at the birds paddling on the water and flying overhead, playing a game with Ama to see if he could identify what they were called.

Eventually, they came to the far end of the lake and the coracle turned to the right to come in on the near side of small headland that jutted out into the lake a little way. Now Neska was happy. This was her happy place. Mutil was quieter, looking at the trees as they spread back away from the shore. They landed, got out and upturned the coracles on the bank. The tall rushes by the edge of the lake were high this year. Neska and Mutil felt like they were a little forest, built just for them. They never liked it when the adults set about burning the rushes away to make a clear shoreline for their new home. Ama was the guardian of the fire, keeping hot embers of fungus in a leather pouch so they could easily restart the fire. Last year, the embers had gone out and Aita was cross. He never liked making fire from scratch as it took a lot of hard work, especially as that year, he did not have a good firestone to strike and had to use a bow drill instead.

It was mid afternoon by the time they got round to repairing their houses from last year. Aita had brought the flint axe with them to cut down new branches and trim the wood for mending the walls and roof of the house. Ama and Osaba together started unwrapping the rolls of animal skins they had carried to cover the outside of the house with. Neska and Mutil helped Ama with setting the hearth in the middle of the house and unpacking the items they had brought from the coast. Aita and Osaba went off to make and set new fish traps. Ama spotted the wooden post they had placed in the ground last year. This marked where they would place the skull of the first of the wild cattle they caught to watch over and protect them.

Mutil went round looking at everything, searching. Ama wondered what he was searching for. He looked so worried. He said he was trying to see if anyone had brought the flint with them. He thought they were all going to run out of tools and then they wouldn't be able hunt and he would not have any more food. She smiled at him. Then she took him to a tree they had marked last year. It had a set of parallel lines cut into the trunk. She quickly dug a hole at the base of the tree with her digging stick and found the small pit in which, last year, they had placed the flint they needed to make new tools. Mutil smiled and laughed. He hadn't known that the trees would give them new flint for the year.

By the time evening came, they were all tired. The smoked and dried food they had brought was nice, but they all looked forward to having good roasted meat to eat and succulent fish. Mutil especially liked the long green fish in the lake. Neska loved the roots of the bog bean and the mushrooms they found in the woods later in the year. They both went to sleep next to each other excited at what the next few days would bring.

Chapter 2. Making things.

Osaba sat outside crosslegged on the birch bark mat. He had lumps of the flint they kept from last year, and was weighing one in his hand, looking for a suitable flat surface to strike with the smooth pebble in his other hand. A quick motion of the hand later, the surface was struck and a small flake of flint fell to the ground off the cobble. He looked at the scar showing the inside of the flint and grunted with satisfaction. This was a good cobble of flint, smooth and dark grey inside. He began knapping the nodule, quickly making a lot of small flakes.

Neska loved watching her uncle making tools. He had made the lovely wooden paddle for the coracle last year and covered it in beautiful designs. She liked the skill of his hands as they worked, and the sound of the hammerstone hitting the flint. Mutil was with her, equally entranced. He reached out to pick up one of the small flakes.

Neska smiled, remembering when she had done that. She would let Mutil find out for himself how dangerous that was. Osaba finished making the flakes and picked up the antler prong he kept in the leather pouch hanging from his belt. He then used this to press the sides of the flakes, shaping them into the tools he wanted. Some of these were precious ones called 'aitchiki', the little stones.

Ama was off searching the fish and small animal traps, while Aita had gone off into the wood to find firewood and good timber for tools. Neska was hoping Osaba would teach her how to knap the flint like he did, coaxing the right shapes out of it by hitting it just right with the pebble or the antler. She loved making things and was good with her hands. She took after her mother that way. Aita was a good hunter and kind to his family, but awfully clumsy and really not very good at knapping. It was one reason he was glad his brother Osaba had stayed with them this year.

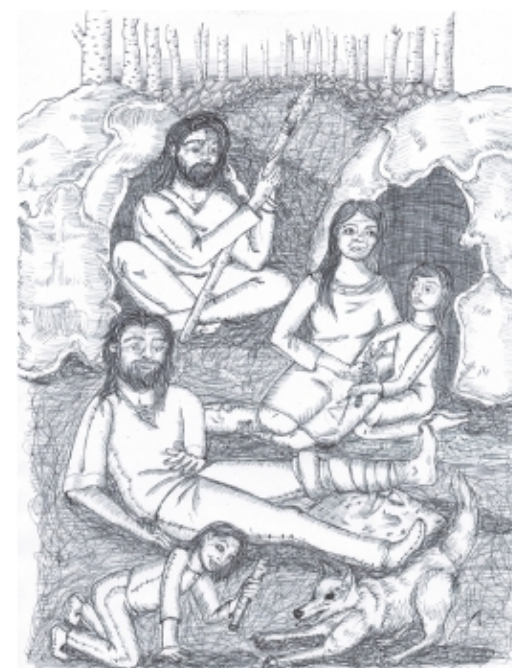
Aita came stumbling back into camp. He was limping and holding his leg with one hand. They could all see the blood that had seeped down his leg. Ama and Neska rushed to help him and they got him lying down in their house by the hearth. He had accidentally startled a boar and her piglets in the wood. The boar had attacked him and her sharp tusk had pierced his leg. Boars really were dangerous. Ama collected the herbs she kept in a bag and pressed them to the wound, tying them in place with strips of leather. Aita was brave but let out a cry of pain. Neska was worried. If Aita lived, then it would take a while for him to get better. She didn't like to see her father hurt, but she also wondered how Osaba would manage to hunt on his own.

After eating, Osaba began sorting out the hunting equipment, while Ama and Neska sat together making tools. Ama had nimble hands and began cutting slits into the smooth wooden shafts they had brought with them. Neska helped to heat the birch resin they had, for Ama to glue one of the tiny 'aitchiki' at the point, and others along the edge at the end of the shaft. These would make fine arrowheads for hunting with. Neska was entrusted now with adding the feathers at the other end of the shaft that would help the arrow fly straight through the air. Tomorrow, she would help her mother make knives by fitting 'aitchiki' in a different way into a wooden handle.

They had found plenty of shed antlers when they had all gone through the woods a few days ago. Osaba though had some antler taken from the store in the pit they had left on the site last year and was working the ends with a stout flint tool. He carefully cut pointed teeth along one edge, all pointing in one direction backwards from the point. He had some already prepared, and began tying two of them to the end of a long wooden haft. The two were angled slightly apart and, of course, had their teeth pointing backwards. Mutil would be happy Osaba had made these as they would enable him to enjoy his favourite food.

Mutil was playing with the dog again, throwing sticks for it to catch, but being careful

not to throw a stick in the water in case it should disturb and make angry the water spirit. Ama watched over him while she took the smellier organs from the latest deer they had caught – the stomach and intestines. These had already been washed and cleaned. She took them off their stretching frame. They would make good bags and containers, or even hats now that they were stretched and dried.



Later, during the evening, they all sat around the hearth while Ama told stories of the forest and the spirits of the trees – how each spirit had its own personality. She told of how some trees and plants were kindly spirits, while others were not and did their best to harm people. Most of the others listened while they twined the fibres of plants they had taken a few days ago, twisting them to make string and cord: some thick, some thin, some long and some short.

Osaba though was working on some flat pieces of grey shale. He cut them into round discs and then began drilling holes through the middle. With some string, they would make a nice necklace. One larger piece of shale would be cut and coloured with red ochre to be a pendant to wear. He would carefully scratch on the design of a tree, a special symbol of the woodland that gave them so much. The trees watched over and protected them. He would give the pendant to Aita to wear so the trees would protect him in future from the boar.

In time, as they grew sleepy, they went to bed happy that they had had a good day and achieved a lot.

Chapter 3. Food.

Mutil was hungry. He sometimes felt he was always hungry. He loved the fish that came from the lake. But, he was beginning to think perhaps the smoked venison they sometimes ate was almost as good. What was Ama cooking today? More roots and leaves. He was not happy.

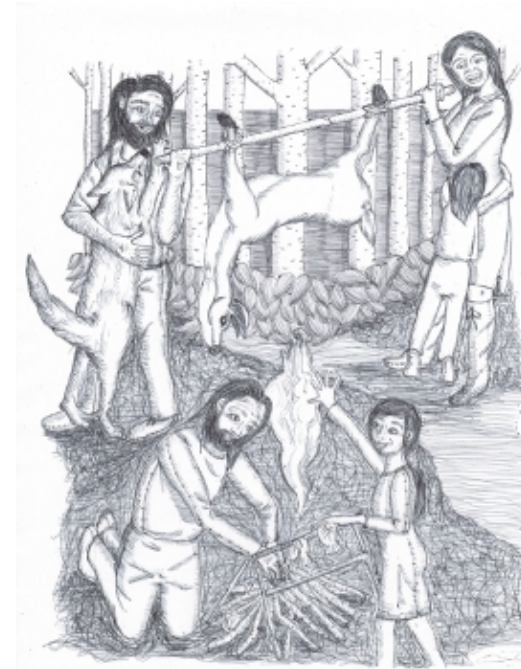
Neska had come back from along the lake shore with some different green leaves she had tried to tempt Mutil to eat. He made such a face though as he tested one in his mouth before spitting it out. Never mind. She liked these leaves, trying to remember what Ama had called them last year. It may have been mint. She would have to tell her where she had found a clump of them growing.

Ama and Osaba had already gone when she got back. Ama had been firm, telling Osaba that she too could use a bow and would help with the hunt now that Aita was injured and still too ill. Neska was annoyed. She felt she was old enough now not to get in the way and had desperately wanted to go and help with the hunting. Mutil was still too young. He would make too much noise and scare off the prey. Perhaps Osaba would take Mutil out fishing in the lake tomorrow, testing his new fish spears carved out of antler. She would leave that to Mutil. Once Aita had taken her out in the coracle and she had tipped out into the lake and had to be pulled back on board spluttering and half drowned. She had always felt the water spirit did not like her and was happier in the woods.

Neska and Mutil did go and inspect the traps. They came back with some fish, and one hare from a trap in the woods. Mutil helped Aita build the fire for cooking them outside the house. He helped place some dry wood on the ground and then some dry moss and fungus, and then piled up some small twigs before putting some bigger branches in a kind of pyramid on top. Aita took a long twig to the hearth, lit the end in the fire and took it to the wood pile, poking it through to the moss and fungus. Mutil knew what to do next, crouching down and blowing gently to let the sparks catch and grow into flame. He loved helping make the fire, often staring into the flames, entranced by their yellow-red dancing in the breeze.

Later that day, the two hunters came back singing softly through the woods, carrying a deer on a long pole between them. The song was a song of thanks to the deer spirit for being kind and letting them take one of his precious deer. Everyone stood up to greet their return, smiling and happy, knowing the deer would provide food for them for some days to come. Chakur ran towards Mutil for a big hug in thanks for his part in tracking the deer and helping the hunt. Neska and the still limping Aita already

had their best knives in their hands waiting to help butcher the carcass.



So much of the deer would be used. They hung the doe upside down from a strong tree branch and began to cut it up. The blood they collected in a bowl underneath it to use later. Once they had taken off the hide, they cut off the meat and took out the internal organs. It was their custom that the animal's liver would be given to the hunters' wife or mother, so Ama was really pleased. She gave the liver to Aita, joking that she was the hunter today, and Aita was her 'wife'. Some of the meat they would eat that day. The rest they would hang over a fire to smoke, so that it would be preserved. The smoked meat would be delicious over the next few weeks. Mutil was looking forward to the breaking of the bones. Inside was the delicious, sticky marrow, full of fat and yummy. Aita and Osaba would fill the long intestines with the blood and some herbs, and some of the fat, to dry and become a delicious black pudding.

Ama had her favourite basket already by the hearth, tightly made and waterproof. Inside, she had a porridge of nettles and dock leaves, soaking in water. Smooth stones were lying in the hearth getting very hot. Using sticks, she picked up each stone when it was hot enough and dropped it into the basket. The hot stones steamed and began to heat the mixture of green leaves and water. By the hearth were some large flat stones. These were also getting very hot. Slices of the deer

meat were laying on them, cooking slowly. Ama also placed some of the store of bulrush shoots they had collected a few days ago on the stones.

Everyone was very hungry. But they all stopped and sat together and each gave thanks to the spirits for providing them with food to eat. Ama and Osaba apologised for only bringing back one small and not very good deer. Aita then assured everyone that the nettle and dock leaves this year were really not as tasty as they should be. Secretly, they thought that the meat was good, juicy and succulent. The nettle and dock porridge, flavoured with mint leaves was tasty and the bulrush was a special favourite. Mutil said that he didn't care, the meat tasted really delicious and the marrow was the best he'd ever had. This earned him a stern stare from Ama, but a quiet wink on the side from Aita. Neska was secretly proud she had found the mint to give the nettle and dock porridge some more flavour, and was looking forward to going out tomorrow to see what small animals she could find in the traps and snares.

Chapter 4. Friends and strangers.

The family had been at the lake now for several days, almost one full turning of the moon. Mutil was out in the coracle helping Osaba with the fishing. Out in the middle, he had a good view of both sides of the lake and the end of the lake where it narrowed into the river. In the morning, he had glimpsed some deer on the opposite side of the lake coming down to drink. Now, he thought he saw some movement in the trees on the same side as the family were camped. There was a patch where the birch trees were thinner, and he could now see that the movement was a small group of people moving towards the camp. He new it wasn't Aita, Ama or Neska. He had seen five adults and three children.

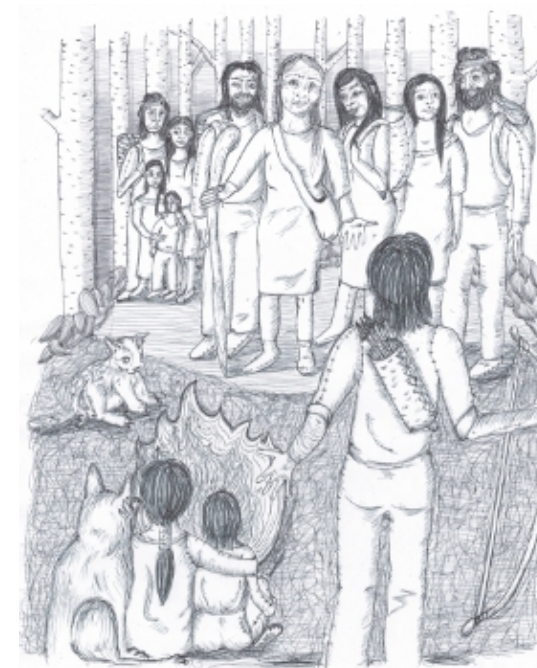
Mutil nudged Osaba, who turned and also saw the strangers. Quickly, he turned the coracle and began paddling to the shore. Mutil wanted to shout out to warn the family, but then the strangers would hear him too. As the coracle reached the shore, he jumped out and ran to the camp, while Osaba went to retrieve his bow. The strangers could be dangerous.

Ama was out of camp with Aita, checking the traps and hoping to come across an animal to hunt. Ama loved these times alone with Aita, they so seldom had chance just to be together. Neska was tending the hearth and mending some of the arrows. Mutil burst in wide-eyed yelling about strangers. Neska reached out to quieten him and they both nervously looked out of the doorway of the house as Osaba stood in the middle of the camp waiting for the strangers to appear.

The strangers walked to the edge of the trees, standing still while the eldest among them, a grey haired woman came forward. She stood, holding a staff to lean on, with a leather satchel on her left side. Showing an open palm to Osaba, she spoke,

saying they had walked far and were glad to come upon the family. Their winter by the river had been mild and they had stayed longer than usual. But now they were come to the lake to join the others.

Osaba also held his palm open and welcomed the group to the lake. He recognised the woman at once. She was his mother's sister, Amona. They belonged to the same clan, the eagle clan, the Arrano. The group was made welcome. They would have to share food with them this evening when Aita and Ama returned, but Amona's family were friends and would share with them on another day.



Neska ran out to greet the newcomers. She recognised the children. The eldest boy, Lagun, was three years older than her, and almost ready to be made a man. They had played together a lot last year and she was happy to see him again. She was nervous this year, wondering if he would be happy to play again or whether he would think she was too young now. Mutil wondered where the other child was. There had been four of them last year, not three. The youngest was Gorri. He had really enjoyed helping to look after him.

Later that day, after they had eaten, the old woman, Amona, gestured to her son Gizon. He sat upright and began to tell their story, of what had happened to them

since they had last met. They had left the lake to return to their home in the west, by the river. It had been a good winter there, mild and with plenty of fish in the waters. But, they had met another group of people, strangers they did not know who spoke in a different way and had come from far away in the east. They struggled to understand each other but it seemed like they had left their home when it had been flooded by the sea. Amona thought they said that the sea was rising every year and would soon drown the whole of their land. She wasn't sure she had understood them right and couldn't see how the sea could do this. The strangers had killed a deer in the family's forest. This was wrong to do without first asking permission. They got angry and eventually had to threaten the strangers with their bows and spears. The strangers had disappeared and were last seen heading to the west.

Gizon's voice changed and became sadder. Not long after that, two of the children had become ill. They had become very hot and shivered, not wanting to eat and sleeping all day. Young Gazte had recovered after a few days, but Gorri had not. He had died. Neska and Mutil were sad. They remembered Gorri as a fun friend.

Then Gizon smiled. They had a new addition to the family. Emazte had been married to Amona's younger son, Senar. She had come from the wolf clan, the Otso. Otso and Arrano were allowed to marry. Their clans were long-time allies and friends.

After Neska and Mutil went off to play with Lagun, Gazte and Ume, the elders sat and talked until the sun set. They were eager to meet the other families who would soon be coming to the lake, to hear their tales of the wider world and swap marriage partners and gifts. Ama had a store of the firestone, pyrite, she would give in exchange for some of the baskets that her friends could make better than her. The families would remember those who had died, and celebrate the girls and boys who were to be accepted now as women and men. They would make and share spears and bows, bowls, baskets and clothes.

The next day, Mutil came across an injured young wild cat. It lay shivering and mewling, not moving to run away as most cats did. Mutil carefully took it up and cradled it in his arm. Bringing it back to camp, he announced to everyone that he had found Gorri. Gorri's spirit was reborn in the cat and Mutil would look after it to make sure it got well again. Everyone was pleased, and went to over to welcome Gorri back to the family. He did get well again, and Mutil and he played together just like they had last year. The lake truly was a happy place. Mutil and Neska were glad they were back.

Chapter 5. A hint of winter.

It was chilly this morning as Mutil poked his head out of the door of the house. Neska was snoring quietly. Of course, she said she never snored but he knew better. Aita

and Ama were already up and about. Ama was checking the fish traps in the lake, while Aita was sitting making new shafts for the arrows. Osaba was nowhere to be seen. Mutil shivered then quickly gave Neska a kick to wake her up before running out of the house.

Neska was annoyed. She hated it when Mutil woke first. She was even more annoyed he had kicked her and woken her out a nice dream about finding a log with loads of juicy snails. Yawning, she went to sit with Aita. Without saying a word, he handed her a wooden stick. She knew what to do. Taking the small notched scraper in one hand she began scraping it down so that it was smooth with no bark left on it.

Mutil was playing with Gorri. He dropped leaves and feathers down for Gorri to try and catch. Ama saw him playing and smiled. She knew this would not last long. There was never enough time to let the children play. After a while, she called him to her and began teaching him once more the names of the different fish in the lake, which tasted best and how best to catch them.

Osaba came walking back. He had spent the morning with Amona's family, helping them make tools and chatting. Both families were keeping an eye on the weather. There were more cold mornings now, and the sun was getting lower down in the sky. The nights seemed longer than they used to be. Everyone had been talking recently about when it might be time to move back to the coast. Amona's family were thinking that they might go there too this year.

... [To be continued]

Chapter 6. The bad old days.

It had been a cold day. The wind had come down from the north and brought with it a blast of cold that had made them put on their fur cloaks. It should have been warm and sunny. After all, this was summer. Now they were sitting around the large fire in the open, between the houses. The children were bored. They begged the elders to tell them a story.

Emakume smiled and eventually said:

"All right, I shall tell you a tale of the old ones. A tale that my grandfather told me when I was young."

"A long time ago, before anyone can remember, we lived a life just like we do now. Only, the trees had yet to cover whole the land and, in places, you could see far away into the distance. We moved around a lot, following herds of strange animals without horns but with big hooves."

“Then, as we waited for winter to turn into summer, we were disappointed. Summer did not come. The sun rose high but the wind remained cold. The fruits were few, the animals hard to find and our bellies were hungry. When winter returned, we had the great snow, covering all the land. It was hard to find food. Still, we said that summer would come again. It did not. Again, the sun brought little warmth and the wind made us shiver.”

“The trees began to die and the wide open plains grew bigger. The deer, the aurochs and the boar headed south to be with the sun. We were hungry. The first ones to die were the elders, our grandparents. We knew then that the spirits were angry with us, but we did not know why.”

“The families prepared their elders for burial. They laid them out with respect on the little hill top they had always used, and let their bodies crumble away to release their spirits to the sky. We hoped their spirits would plead with the winds to stop and bring back the warmth. Alas, they failed and the spirits remained angry.”

“Then some of the rest of us began to die. We lost many, and grieved long into the night. In the end, we moved away, south and east, far from here and onto the wide plain where there would at least be rivers that we might fish in. We met others of our kin, who had come from the east. They also were fleeing the angry spirits and the cold winds.”

“The shamans often went into their trances and tried to speak to the winds and the sun. By then, we were few and our kin to the east also were reduced in number. Others who had always lived in the lowlands would share food with us if they could and slowly we learnt the ways of the new land we lived in. Still, we missed our old land.”

“One day, one of the shamans, Mamizlari, went into a deep trance. It was so deep that everyone thought his soul had permanently left his body never to return. He journeyed far in the spirit world. Instead of speaking to the winds and the sun, he went searching for the deer, the aurochs and the wild boar. He sought fierce spirits who could stand up to the wind and the sun and force them to bring summer back to the land.”

“Mamizlari woke at last and came back to us. He had found the spirits of the deer. They told him that they had been hurt and upset that we had not shown them the proper respect and so would not defend us against the cold from the north. Mamizlari taught us a new way to respect the deer and to hunt them properly without causing offence. The bow and the arrow were the right way, not the spears that we had always used.”

“Of course, we had used bows before, but only for hunting the small game, like hares and badgers. We thought it would be insulting to use them to kill deer. Alas! We were wrong. The deer felt great kinship with all the fur-bearing animals. They were insulted that we thought them not worth hunting with the bow. We soon mended our ways, Mamizlari teaching us the right words and gestures to use to show our respect to the deer.”

“Not long after, the spirits heard us and began to fight back against the wind and sun on our behalf. The summers grew warmer, the snow in winter less deep. We now felt comfortable among the trees, and had learned the names and uses of the plants they sheltered. As the trees marched back north, we went with them, seeking our old land and our old lake.”

“So, here we are. Back where we belong, showing our respect properly to the deer, and listening to the words of our shamans. Of course, the spirits of the dead old ones were happy. They no longer had to wander trying to speak to the wind and the sun. They come back to earth and found new homes in the children now being born. The old ones are still with us because we ourselves are the old ones, reborn in new bodies time after time.”

The children clapped and chanted, “we are the old ones”. They were no longer bored and ran off to play at hunting the deer with bows and showing it proper respect. The adults smiled, knowing the children had learnt an important lesson – show respect to the animals, behave in the right way and listen to the shamans.

Chapter 7. Boy or girl, animals or plants?

Gazte was seriously annoyed. Mother had told her she had to come gathering the berries with her today. She, mother, Ume and Gorri would all go off into the wood with their wicker baskets strapped to their backs and search for all kinds of ripe berries. Meanwhile, her brother Lagun was off with their father and Osaba and Senar in a different part of the wood going after the animals. She would much rather be with them.

Where was the fun in creeping up on a blackberry? Emakume had taught her all the names of the plants since she had been a young girl. She knew their uses, which ones were good for settling a sick stomach or taking away the headache. She knew which ones tasted good with the wild boar, and which went better with the fish. Gazte felt her head was filled with all this knowledge. It was heavy, weighing her down, stopping her from having fun.

Gorri loved coming with his sisters on the search for the berries and the leaves and roots. He could think of nothing better than the colours and smells of the forest. Back in camp, he would shuffle up close to mother when she was preparing the roots or mixing the berries and leaves with the fish. Now that he was seven, he was being trusted to go off on his own and explore the forest a little, just so long as he stayed within site of camp. His father Gizon would beckon him over and show him how to strike the flint with the antler to make new blades and shape them into pieces they could fit into the wooden handles and shafts to make arrows and knives. Flint was hard, harsh and made a thin sound. It was nothing like the softness, colours and smells of the plants he loved.

They had a good day collecting in the woodland and back in camp they set their baskets on the ground and stretched. Gazte wanted to run off and use up some of her energy. She saw Aita's bow resting up against the wall of his house. She cast envious glances at it. She yearned to pick it up and fire arrows with it, but did not dare. It was one of their rules: you never fired someone else's bow. The bow was part of them, an extension of their arms. Even to touch it without asking would bring a stern rebuke.

Instead, Gazte had to sit with the others sorting through the baskets of fruit, mushrooms and leaves. Sitting, when she wanted to be active, stalking through the forest, searching out the animals, following tracks and signs to where they might be.

Gorri was happy, with the others chatting and picking through the fruit, getting rid of rotten ones and thorns. Seeing a strange leaf, he would ask Emakume what it was. Slowly, he was learning about the names of the plants and their uses. He sometimes asked Gazte to tell him these but she was always irritable and reluctant to talk about

them. Last month Ume had had a headache and he had hugely enjoyed helping Emakume go and collect the willow bark, then pound it and add the water. Sloshing it around the birch bark bowl, the thick murky liquid could then be drunk. It didn't taste nice. He had laughed at Ume's face when she drank it, but he had enjoyed helping and was glad when Ume's headache went away.

Later that day, the men returned with a wild boar slung on a pole between them. Their hunt had been successful. Not only the boar, but Senar had managed to shoot a hare as well. As the men carefully hung the boar from the strong branch of a tree, Gazte ran over to see. She knew they would soon be getting their flint knives to cut open, skin and butcher the boar, and she wanted to be there to help. Gizon looked over and rolled his eyes at Emakume. They had talked about this before. It was Gorri who should be eager to help, not Gazte. Emakume just smiled back and shrugged. After all, she remembered that her cousin Ama had loved helping with the hunt when she had been young.

Mutil, Aita and Ama had been away along the lake shore all day, checking fish traps and collecting rushes. Mutil came over wanting to play. Gorri and he went off along the lake and the woods but not too far from the camp. He liked Mutil and it was good to have someone to play with now that his sisters were getting older. Playing at hunting with Mutil was OK, but he usually wanted to be the deer hiding and running away before Mutil could tag him.

Gizon and Emakume talked quietly by the fire in the evening, while their children were over with Aita and Ama helping to put new thatch on their house. Gizon was worried. Their son Lagun had turned out to be a fine new adult, helping with the hunt and eager to learn. He had hoped that Gorri would be the same. He was trying to teach him how to knap the flint and help with butchering the animals but he could tell that Gorri's heart wasn't in it. Gorri seemed much keener on being with his sisters.

But then Gazte was a worry too. She would soon be a woman and they needed to think about whom she might marry. There were a few young men in the other families who she might like. Gazte though was more interested in wanting to go and hunt. Gizon knew she wanted a bow of her own, although that seemed simply wrong to him. A woman should not own a bow! He loved his daughter but wished she was more like her sister Ume or her cousin Neska. Emakume was less worried and urged Gizon to at least let Gazte come and help on the next hunt. It might make her understand how difficult it was. If not, then at least the family might have another good hunter. At least Gorri was taking her place in the gathering and was really keen to learn about plant lore.

They all went to bed thinking about the future. Gizon worried about whether to make a bow for Gazte. Emakume was wondering who Gazte might end up marrying and

hoped she found someone as good as Gizon. Gazte herself dreamt of tracking aurochs through the woodland. Gorri fell asleep remembering the smells and colours of the plants and berries they had gathered that day.

Chapter 8. Coming of age.

Lagun was feeling very nervous this morning. This was the day he was both looking forward to but anxious about. His father had told him at their winter home that something special would take place for him this summer at their lake home. He knew he was looking forward to seeing Neska and Mutil again, but wasn't sure whether he would enjoy playing with them the same way as he had last summer. He felt he was older, and some of the games they had played seemed a little silly now.

He still wasn't used to waking up alone in the small hut. He was used to sharing a bed with his sisters and brother in the same house as his parents. However, Gizon had explained that part of the special ceremony was to sleep at night on his own from one full moon to the next. At first he found it hard to sleep without his sisters and brother next to him to keep him warm. Now he quite liked being alone.

He left the hut and walked into the camp. The others treated him strangely. The mothers would encourage their daughters not to look at him and avoid talking to him. He noticed his mother Emakume quickly hide something so he could not see what she had been working on. The adult men would give him orders to do whatever needed doing around camp. This morning it was fetching firewood. They had told him to do this before, but this morning he noticed that the adult men were watching him as he walked into the wood. After a while he heard them follow him. Now, he began to feel nervous.

As he began to walk back with his arms full of firewood, he noticed the men had formed a rough line between him and the camp. Aita stepped forward, arms out and palms up as though talking to a stranger. He told Lagun to come with the men farther into the wood, away from the eyes of the women and children in the camp. They walked into a clearing in the forest, where they could no longer see or hear the camp. Lagun wondered what would happen next. Gizon had not said much about this part of the special ceremony.

They all sat, and Gizon brought out his fire-making kit of firestone and flint, and made a fire using the firewood Lagun had collected. They all sat round the fire and talked about what it meant to be a hunter, to show respect to the animals hunted and the sharing of the kill with the others. To learn all this, they said they had to know how it feels to be an animal. For Lagun to be one of them and leave his childhood behind, he had to become a deer and be hunted. His childhood would be killed and he could be reborn as a full man.

They stood Lagun on his feet and then strapped to his head a headdress made out of the skull of a red deer. Because he was still young, they had cut down the antlers to make it lighter for him to wear. Gizon as the eldest male took him to one side and

gave him his instructions. Lagun went off into the wood, out of sight of the men and wandered left and right through the trees. He listened carefully, trying to hear the hunters coming after him. They were skilled and made no noise. He crouched on all fours, hoping they would not see him. Crawling through the wood, he brushed against branches and rustled the leaves.

Suddenly, an arrow whistled over his head and landed in the earth to one side of him. He looked up, startled and began to run. Another arrow narrowly missed him. But the hunters had been careful, they formed a line in the trees and if one could not see him then others could. The third arrow struck him lightly on the side of his leg. He straight away fell down as Gizon had told him to do. The arrows were only light, blunt tipped with no flint arrowhead. The hunters only partly drew back their bowstrings so the arrows would not go far or fast. He was not hurt other than a bruise on his leg. The hunters came up and surrounded him. The one who had shot him knelt down and thanked the spirit of the deer for allowing one of his animals to be caught. It would feed the whole group for several days. The hunter then drew his knife and cut the leather strap holding the headdress on Lagun's head. He was now 'dead'. His childhood had been killed.

The men helped him back to the fire. They stood round chanting quietly. Their shaman brought out his drum and started beating it in a slow rhythm. Lagun joined in the chant. As they chanted, they swayed slightly. The drum was passed round the circle until it came to Lagun. Gizon had told him what to do. He kept the drum and began beating louder and faster. As he beat he turned round and round and began dancing with the others around the fire. The sound and the turning made him feel light-headed. His attention drifted away from the others. He stopped slowly stopped turning and could no longer hear the others. His world was only him and the fire.

Eventually, he noticed the flames of the fire had a life of their own. One flame grew big and came towards him. Others changed colour, from red to green to blue and yellow. His head began to swim and the trees around him began to bend and whisper. He felt the wood was whispering about him, judging him to be inadequate, not good enough to be a hunter. His vision narrowed until all he could see was a spotlight shining into the darkened wood. The spotlight searched this way and that through the trees. Eventually, it came upon a hare, sitting looking at him. The hare somehow spoke in his mind. He could not hear words but he knew what it was saying to him – “do not worry, you will be a good hunter, you will bring back a lot to share with your family”.

Lagun opened his eyes. He was kneeling on the ground and the men stood over him, smiling. They welcomed him back. They asked him where he had been, what he had seen. They explained that his spirit had left his body and travelled to the spirit world where everything is alive. Usually, only shamans could do that. If he tried

again, there was a risk that his spirit might never return to his body. He told them about the hare. This was good. The hare was his personal spirit helper, now and forever. He must always show respect to the hare in future.

They talked long into the evening, teaching Lagun about hunting and the making of bows and arrows. Later, they went back to camp. His headdress was given to the lake, for the spirits as a thanks for their help. Emakume welcomed him, embracing him and giving him a gift of leather trousers to wear now he was a man, and showed him his new bed in the house where he would now sleep. His sisters teased him of course, saying that now he was a man he should leave them and go find himself a wife. Across the camp, he could see Neska was looking at him but in a new way, very shyly, no longer as her playmate and childhood friend.

Chapter 9. A new life.

Neska groaned as she got up off the bed to go out and greet the morning. She felt so heavy these days. She wondered whether Ama had felt the same way when she had been pregnant with Neska. Lagun was already up and out in the warm sunshine. He was sitting and mending one of the fish traps. She never got tired of looking at him. His wavy brown hair framed his face with his eyes concentrating on his task. Her old home was across the other side of the clearing. Ama and Aita were busy about their work, while Mutil was now grown up and an adult. He was getting ready to go off hunting with Osaba.

It would be soon now. Neska wondered if Ama or even Aimona would be the one to help. She would prefer Ama, her own mother, but Aimona had more experience of helping with the birth of a baby. She was eager now to see the new baby that had been growing inside for so long. She was sure it would be fine. She knew that the spirit of Chozuri would be watching over to help her. Chozuri had lived far to the east, where the sun rose. Chozuri was the same age as Neska, 19 years old. She had had her first baby but the baby boy had taken too long to come out. By the time it was born, she was very weak and could not stop bleeding. Chozuri had died, and her baby very soon after. They had buried them side by side, the baby laid on a swan's wing. The swan was their clan and the spirit of the swan would help guide the baby's spirit into the other world. Chozuri had chosen not to come back into the world reborn in another. She had chosen instead to stay in the spirit world and protect all future mothers.

Neska had made sure she followed the rules. She and Lagun had slept in separate beds for the last moon (she thought this was a stupid idea but kept that to herself). She had avoided eating any duck the others had caught as this was her particular spirit animal. Showing it respect would make the spirits be kind during the birth. She also avoided eating the leaves of the dandelion or any red-coloured berries. These were thought to be bad luck to pregnant women. However, she had enjoyed eating a lot of the deer and the fish, and had been really fond of the eating the cattails that she usually thought rather boring.

Lagun had finished mending the trap and he went with Neska into the wood looking for mushrooms and berries. He knew of a good place where he had spotted elder trees earlier in the year and there should be a lot of elderberries there now. The birch bark containers should be full by the end of the day. Neska was hoping for some good patches of mushrooms. They would be very tasty with the dried wild boar they had back at camp.

Neska began to feel a cramp in her stomach. A cramp that slowly came and went, as though her belly were tightening and loosening. Every few minutes Neska would stop

and breath deeply. Lagun looked across and nodded, suggesting they go back to camp. Their containers were only half full, but they both knew the baby was on its way. Then the water inside her released and came out. They got back to camp and Lagun headed off to get Aimona. Neska settled down on the bed in their house. At last, the baby would come. She was relieved but happy.

Aimona arrived and made sure Neska came with her to a shelter that had been built especially for this. This was the sign for Lagun to go away and wait with the men. He wasn't too happy, but knew that Aimona would take care of Neska. She told Neska to walk around the shelter. This helped her cope with the cramps. Every so often Aimona would give her some some dried fish and the herbal tea from the plants that soothed the body. After a while the cramps were more frequent. Aimona brought her inside the shelter and told her to kneel down and breath deeply in and out.

It seemed like a long time, but as Neska breathed, she became more aware of her own body and the world outside seemed to fade away. She began pushing from the inside. Neska breathed hard and moaned. Would the baby never come? Aimona smiled, and told Neska of when her daughter Emakume had given birth to Lagun. He had been so stubborn and refused to come out into the world for a long time. Neska's baby was not so stubborn. Suddenly, the baby's head appeared and Aimona guided it all the way out.

Aimona used the special flint blade that she had made earlier to cut the cord by the baby's tummy. She then carefully handed the baby to Neska. She looked tired but happy as she took her baby and held it for the first time against her chest. She could feel the little baby's heart-beat and hoped the baby could hear hers. The baby gurgled and Aimona helped her turn its head close to her breast and helped the baby begin to feed. Aimona had told her it was a girl. It didn't matter whether it was a girl or a boy. Every baby born into their world was precious. She wondered whose spirit had chosen to return the world in her new daughter.

Ama and Emakume were waiting on the edge of the camp. When Aimona called out, they rushed up to join Neska and look at the new girl in their family. Now Neska was a mother just like they had been all those years ago. They were happy Neska had grown up so well. The men then came to join them, standing to one side and nodding and smiling. Lagun came forward, eager to see his daughter and hold Neska's hand.

Back in the house, Neska and Lagun looked after their daughter together. He made sure that Neska took plenty of food to keep her strong. Neska was back the next day, helping out around camp and the day after came out gathering mushrooms with the others. She and Lagun wondered what the baby's name would be. Of course, they had to be sure it would live. They could not give her a name until after one full cycle

of the moon had passed. Even then, the baby might not live long. After all, Neska's mother Ama had lost one baby only a year after his birth, as had Aimona. The meeting of the families at midsummer was often a time when the children would fall sick.

Of course, the baby's soul would be an old one. One of the old one's will have decided to come back to earth and live among them again. Neska and Lagun were happy about that. They just hoped it was a wise and happy old one.