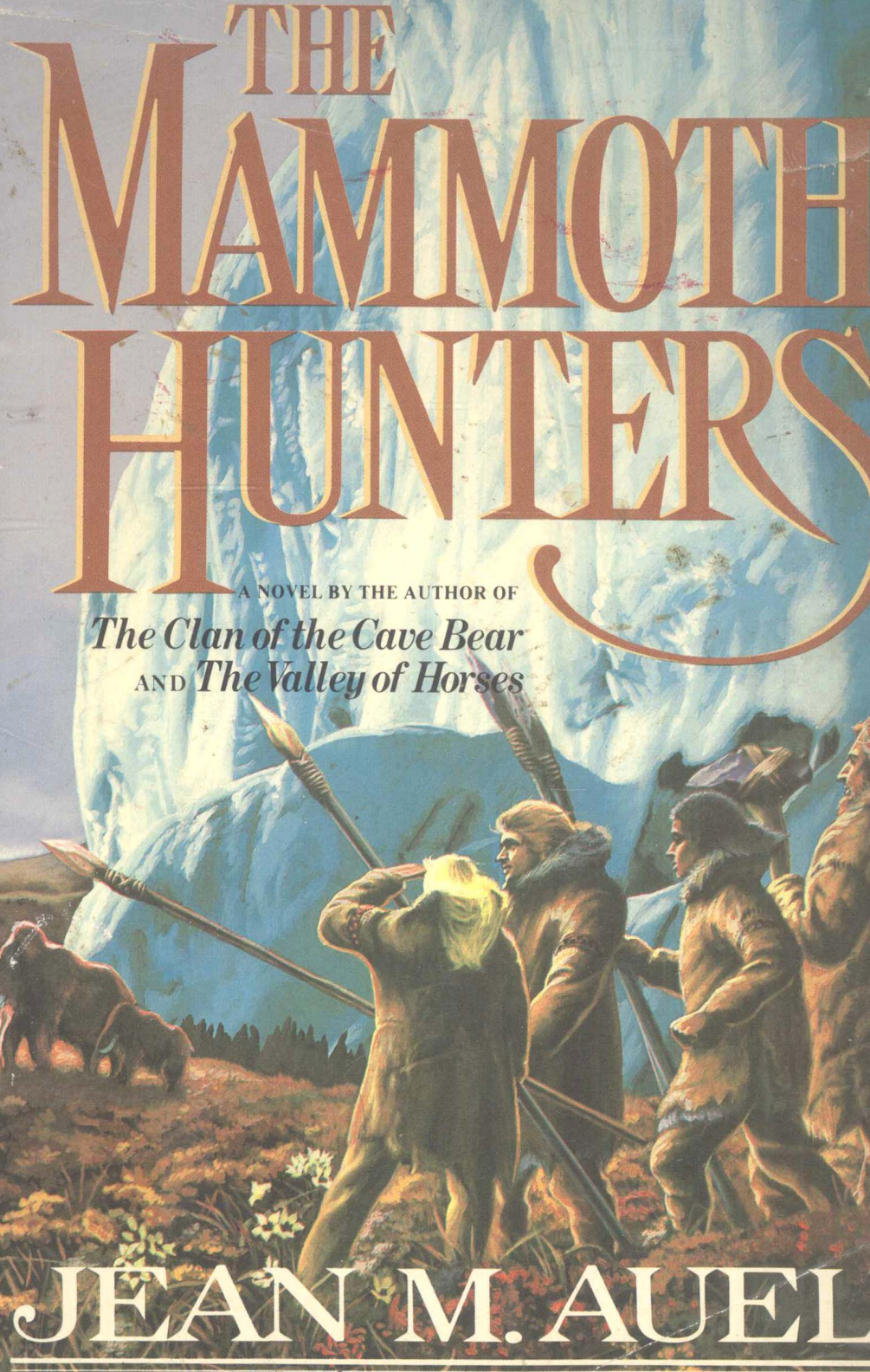


THE MAMMOTH HUNTERS

The background of the cover is a painting of a prehistoric landscape. In the foreground, three hunters in animal skins are walking towards the right. The hunter in the center has blonde hair and is holding a spear. To his right, another hunter is also holding a spear. In the background, two mammoths are visible on the left, and a large, snow-capped mountain rises in the distance under a blue sky with some clouds.

A NOVEL BY THE AUTHOR OF

The Clan of the Cave Bear
AND *The Valley of Horses*

JEAN M. AUUEL

THE MAMMOTH HUNTERS

JEAN M. AUUEL

EARTH'S CHILDREN™

Crown Publishers, Inc. New York

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Published by Crown Publishers, Inc., 225 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003 and simultaneously in Canada by General Publishing Company Limited

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For MARSHALL,

who has become a man to be proud of,

and for BEVERLY,

who helped,

and for CHRISTOPHER, BRIAN, and MELLISSA,

with Love.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could never have told this story without the books and materials of the specialists who have worked at the sites and have collected the artifacts of our prehistoric ancestors, and they have my deepest gratitude. To several people, I owe special thanks. I have enjoyed the discussions, the correspondence, and the papers, full of not only facts but also ideas and theories. I must make it clear, however, that those who provided me with information and offered help are in no way responsible for the viewpoints or ideas expressed in this story. This is a work of fiction, a story of my imagination. The characters, concepts, and cultural descriptions are my own.

Sincere thanks first to David Abrams, professor of anthropology and tour director extraordinaire, and to Diane Kelly, student of anthropology, and master of human relations, who planned, arranged, and accompanied us on the private research trip to sites and museums in France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.

My thanks and great appreciation to Dr. Jan Jelinek, Director, Anthropos Institute, Brno, Czechoslovakia, for taking the time to show me many of the actual artifacts from Eastern Europe that appear in his book, *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Evolution of Man* (The Hamlyn Publishing Group, Ltd., London).

I am grateful to Dr. Lee Porter of Washington State University, and to whatever fates put her, with her American accent, in our hotel in Kiev. She was there studying fossil mammoth bones, and meeting with the very person we had been desperately trying to see. She cut through all the red tape, and arranged the meeting.

I am indebted to Dr. J. Lawrence Angel, Curator of Physical Anthropology at Smithsonian Institution, for many things: for some positive and encouraging words about my books; for giving me a "backstage" look and an explanation of some of the differences and similarities between Neanderthal and modern human bones, and particularly for suggesting people who could give me further information and assistance.

I deeply appreciate the special efforts of Dr. Ninel Kornietz, Russian expert on the Ukrainian Upper Paleolithic, who was gracious and kind, even on short notice. With her we saw artifacts in two museums, and she presented me with the one book I had been searching for on the musical instruments made out of mammoth bones by Ice Age people, and a recording of their sounds. The book was in Russian, and I owe deep thanks to Dr. Gloria y'Edynak, formerly an assistant of Dr. Angel, who knows Russian, including the technical terminology of paleoanthropology, for arranging for a translator for this book, and especially for checking it over and filling in the correct technical words. Thanks are also due for her translation of the Ukrainian language articles comparing modern weaving patterns in the Ukraine with designs carved into Ice Age artifacts.

To Dorothy Yacek-Matulis I owe great appreciation for a good, readable, workable translation of the Russian mammoth bone music book. The material has proved invaluable.

Thanks are also in order to Dr. Richard Klein, author of *Ice-Age Hunters of the Ukraine* (University of Chicago Press), who kindly provided additional papers and information about the ancient people of the region.

I am particularly grateful to Alexander Marshack, research fellow of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, and author of *The Roots of Civilization* (McGraw-Hill Book Co.), for copies of the results of his microscopic studies of Ukrainian Upper Paleolithic art and artifacts, which appeared in *Current Anthropology*, material from his as yet unpublished book on the Eastern European Ice Age people.

My sincerest appreciation to Dr. Olga Soffer, Department of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, and probably the leading expert in the United States today on the Ice Age populations of Russia, for the long, interesting, and useful conversation in the lobby of the Hilton, and her material, "Patterns of Intensification as Seen from the Upper Paleolithic Central Russian Plain," from *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers: The Emergence of Cultural Complexity*, T. Douglas Price and James A. Brown, editors (Academic Press).

Gratitude in great measure goes to Dr. Paul C. Paquet, co-editor, *Wolves of the World* (Noyes Publications), for interrupting his vacation to return my call, and for the long discussion on wolves and their possible domestication.

Thanks again to Jim Riggs, anthropologist and instructor of "Aboriginal Life Skills" classes. I continue to use the information I learned from him.

I am indebted to three people who read a fat manuscript on short notice and offered helpful comments from a reader's point of view: Karen Auel, who read a first draft and got caught up in it, and let me know I had a story; Doreen Gandy, poet and teacher, who squeezed the reading into the end of her school year without any loss of her usual insights; and Cathy Humble, who managed, again, to make astute observations.

Special thanks to Betty Prashker, my editor, whose perceptions I value, and whose commentary and suggestions were right on target.

Words are insufficient to thank Jean Naggar, friend, confidante, and literary agent beyond compare, who has continued to exceed my wildest expectations.

Sincere appreciation to the production and art departments of Crown Publishers, whose care and expert workmanship consistently turn out beautiful and well-made books.

I am grateful to Judith Wilkes, my secretary and office assistant, whose intelligence I have come to depend upon, and who eases the pressure of my increased volume of correspondence, so I can write.

And to Ray Auel. . . .

Lion Camp Earthlodge

ENTRY area—storage of fuel, implements, outer clothes

FIRST hearth—cooking hearth and space for gathering

SECOND— *Lion Hearth*

Talut—headman

Nezzie

Danug

Latie

Rugie

Rydag

THIRD— *Fox Hearth*

Wymez

Ranec

FOURTH— *Mammoth Hearth*—space for ceremonies, gathering, projects,
visitors

Mamut—shaman

Ayla

Jondalar

FIFTH— *Reindeer Hearth*

Manuv

Tronie

Tornec

Nuvie

Hartal

SIXTH— *Crane Hearth*

Crozie

Fralie

Frebec

Crisavec

Tasher

(Bectie)

SEVENTH— *Aurochs Hearth*

Tulie—headwoman

Barzec

Deegie

Druwez

Brinan

Tusie

(Tarneg)

Trembling with fear, Ayla clung to the tall man beside her as she watched the strangers approach. Jondalar put his arm around her protectively, but she still shook.

He's so big! Ayla thought, gaping at the man in the lead, the one with hair and beard the color of fire. She had never seen anyone so big. He even made Jondalar seem small, though the man who held her towered over most men. The red-haired man coming toward them was more than tall; he was huge, a bear of a man. His neck bulged, his chest could have filled out two ordinary men, his massive biceps matched most men's thighs.

Ayla glanced at Jondalar and saw no fear in his face, but his smile was guarded. They were strangers, and in his long travels he had learned to be wary of strangers.

"I don't recall seeing you before," the big man said without preamble. "What Camp are you from?" He did not speak Jondalar's language, Ayla noticed, but one of the others he had been teaching her.

"No Camp," Jondalar said. "We are not Mamutoi." He unclasped Ayla and took a step forward, holding out both hands, palms upward showing he was hiding nothing, in the greeting of friendliness. "I am Jondalar of the Zelandonii."

The hands were not accepted. "Zelandonii? That's a strange . . . Wait, weren't there two foreign men staying with those river people that live to the west? It seems to me the name I heard was something like that."

"Yes, my brother and I lived with them," Jondalar conceded.

The man with the flaming beard looked thoughtful for a while, then, unexpectedly, he lunged for Jondalar and grabbed the tall blond man in a bone-crunching bear hug.

"Then we are related!" he boomed, a broad smile warming his face. "Tholie is the daughter of my cousin!"

Jondalar's smile returned, a little shaken. "Tholie! A Mamutoi woman

named Tholie was my brother's cross-mate! She taught me your language."

"Of course! I told you. We are related." He grasped the hands that Jondalar had extended in friendship, which he had rejected before. "I am Talut, headman of the Lion Camp."

Everyone was smiling, Ayla noticed. Talut beamed a grin at her, then eyed her appreciatively. "I see you are not traveling with a brother now," he said to Jondalar.

Jondalar put his arm around her again, and she noticed a fleeting look of pain wrinkle his brow before he spoke. "This is Ayla."

"It's an unusual name. Is she of the river people?"

Jondalar was taken aback by the abruptness of his questioning, then, remembering Tholie, he smiled inwardly. The short, stocky woman he knew bore little resemblance to the great hulk of a man standing there on the riverbank, but they were chipped from the same flint. They both had the same direct approach, the same unself-conscious—almost ingenuous—candor. He didn't know what to say. Ayla was not going to be easy to explain.

"No, she has been living in a valley some days' journey from here."

Talut looked puzzled. "I have not heard of a woman with her name living nearby. Are you sure she is Mamutoi?"

"I'm sure she is not."

"Then who are her people? Only we who hunt mammoth live in this region."

"I have no people," Ayla said, lifting her chin with a touch of defiance.

Talut appraised her shrewdly. She had spoken the words in his language, but the quality of her voice and the way she made the sounds were . . . strange. Not unpleasant, but unusual. Jondalar spoke with the accent of a language foreign to him; the difference in the way she spoke went beyond accent. Talut's interest was piqued.

"Well, this is no place to talk," Talut said, finally. "Nezzie will give me the Mother's own wrath if I don't invite you to visit. Visitors always bring a little excitement, and we haven't had visitors for a while. The Lion Camp would welcome you, Jondalar of the Zelandonii, and Ayla of No People. Will you come?"

"What do you say, Ayla? Would you like to visit?" Jondalar asked, switching to Zelandonii so she could answer truthfully without fear of offending. "Isn't it time you met your own kind? Isn't that what Iza told

you to do? Find your own people?" He didn't want to seem too eager, but after so long without anyone else to talk to, he was anxious to visit.

"I don't know," she said, frowning with indecision. "What will they think of me? He wanted to know who my people were. I don't have any people any more. What if they don't like me?"

"They will like you, Ayla, believe me. I know they will. Talut invited you, didn't he? It didn't matter to him that you have no people. Besides, you'll never know if they will accept you—or if you will like them—if you don't give them a chance. These are the kind of people you should have grown up with, you know. We don't have to stay long. We can leave any time."

"We can leave any time?"

"Of course."

Ayla looked down at the ground, trying to make up her mind. She wanted to go with them; she felt an attraction to these people, and a curiosity to know more about them, but she felt a tight knot of fear in her stomach. She glanced up and saw two shaggy steppe horses grazing on the rich grass of the plain near the river, and her fear intensified.

"What about Whinney! What will we do with her? What if they want to kill her? I can't let anyone hurt Whinney!"

Jondalar hadn't thought about Whinney. What would they think? he wondered. "I don't know what they will do, Ayla, but I don't think they would kill her if we tell them she is special and not meant for food." He remembered his surprise, and his initial feeling of awe over Ayla's relationship with the horse. It would be interesting to see their reaction. "I have an idea."

Talut did not understand what Ayla and Jondalar said to each other, but he knew the woman was reluctant, and the man was trying to coax her. He also noticed that she spoke with the same unusual accent, even in his language. His language, the headman realized, but not hers.

He was pondering the enigma of the woman with a certain relish—he enjoyed the new and unusual; the inexplicable challenged him. But then the mystery took on an entirely new dimension. Ayla whistled, loud and shrill. Suddenly, a hay-colored mare and a colt of an unusually deep shade of brown galloped into their midst, directly to the woman, and stood quietly while she touched them! The big man suppressed a shudder of awe. This was beyond anything he had ever known.

Was she Mamut? he wondered, with growing apprehension. One with special powers? Many of Those Who Served the Mother claimed magic

to call animals and direct the hunt, but he had never seen anyone with such control over animals that they would come at a signal. She had a unique talent. It was a little frightening—but think how much a Camp could benefit from such talent. Kills could be so easy!

Just as Talut was getting over the shock, the young woman gave him another. Holding onto the mare's stiff stand-up mane, she sprang up on the back of the horse and sat astride her. The big man's mouth gaped open in astonishment as the horse with Ayla on her back galloped along the edge of the river. With the colt following behind, they raced up the slope to the steppes beyond. The wonder in Talut's eyes was shared by the rest of the band, particularly a young girl of twelve years. She edged toward the headman and leaned against him as though for support.

"How did she do that, Talut?" the girl asked, in a small voice that held surprise and awe, and a tinge of yearning. "That little horse, he was so close, I could almost have touched him."

Talut's expression softened. "You'll have to ask her, Latie. Or, perhaps, Jondalar," he said, turning to the tall stranger.

"I'm not sure myself," he replied. "Ayla has a special way with animals. She raised Whinney from a foal."

"Whinney?"

"That's as close as I can say the name she has given the mare. When she says it, you'd think she was a horse. The colt is Racer. I named him—she asked me to. That's Zelandonii for someone who runs fast. It also means someone who tries hard to be best. The first time I saw Ayla, she was helping the mare deliver the colt."

"That must have been a sight! I wouldn't think a mare would let anyone get close to her at that time," one of the other men said.

The riding demonstration had the effect Jondalar had hoped for, and he thought the time was right to bring up Ayla's concern. "I think she'd like to come and visit your Camp, Talut, but she's afraid you may think the horses are just any horses to be hunted, and since they are not afraid of people, they would be too easy to kill."

"They would at that. You must have known what I was thinking, but who could help it?"

Talut watched Ayla riding back into view, looking like some strange animal, half-human and half-horse. He was glad he had not come upon them unknowing. It would have been . . . unnerving. He wondered for a moment what it would be like to ride on the back of a horse, and if it would make him appear so startling. And then, picturing himself sit-

ting astride one of the rather short, though sturdy, steppe horses like Whinney, he laughed out loud.

"I could carry that horse easier than she could carry me!" he said.

Jondalar chuckled. It hadn't been hard to follow Talut's line of thought. Several people smiled, or chuckled, and Jondalar realized they must all have been thinking about riding a horse. It was not so strange. It had occurred to him when he first saw Ayla on Whinney's back.

Ayla had seen the shocked surprise on the faces of the small band of people and, if Jondalar had not been waiting for her, she would have kept on going right back to her valley. She'd had enough of disapproval during her younger years for actions that were not acceptable. And enough freedom since, while she was living alone, not to want to subject herself to criticism for following her own inclinations. She was ready to tell Jondalar he could visit these people if he wanted; she was going back.

But when she returned, and saw Talut still chuckling over his mental picture of himself riding the horse, she reconsidered. Laughter had become precious to her. She had not been allowed to laugh when she lived with the Clan; it made them nervous and uncomfortable. Only with Durc, in secret, had she laughed out loud. It was Baby, and Whinney, who had taught her to enjoy the feeling of laughter, but Jondalar was the first person to share it openly with her.

She watched the man laughing easily with Talut. He looked up and smiled, and the magic of his impossibly vivid blue eyes touched a place deep inside that resonated with a warm, tingling glow, and she felt a great welling up of love for him. She couldn't go back to the valley, not without him. Just the thought of living without him brought a strangling constriction to her throat, and the burning ache of tears held back.

As she rode toward them, she noticed that, though Jondalar wasn't as big as the red-haired man in size, he was nearly as tall, and bigger than the other three men. No, one was a boy, she realized. And was that a girl with them? She found herself observing the group of people surreptitiously, not wanting to stare.

Her body movements signaled Whinney to a stop, then, swinging her leg over, she slid off. Both horses seemed nervous as Talut approached, and she stroked Whinney and put an arm around Racer's neck. She was as much in need of the familiar reassurance of their presence as they were of hers.

"Ayla, of No People," he said, not sure if it was a proper way to address her, though for this woman of uncanny talent, it well might be, "Jondalar says you fear harm will come to these horses if you visit with us. I say here, as long as Talut is headman of the Lion Camp, no harm will come to that mare or her young one. I would like you to visit, and bring the horses." His smile broadened with a chuckle. "No one will believe us otherwise!"

She was feeling more relaxed about it now, and she knew Jondalar wanted to visit. She had no real reason to refuse, and she was drawn to the easy, friendly laughter of the huge red-haired man.

"Yes, I come," she said. Talut nodded, smiling, and wondered about her, her intriguing accent, her awesome way with horses. Who was Ayla of No People?

Ayla and Jondalar had camped beside the rushing river and had decided that morning, before they met the band from the Lion Camp, that it was time to turn back. The waterway was too large to cross without difficulty, and not worth the effort if they were going to turn around and retrace their route. The steppeland east of the valley where Ayla had lived alone for three years had been more accessible, and the young woman hadn't bothered to take the difficult roundabout way to the west out of the valley very often, and was largely unfamiliar with that area. Though they had started out toward the west, they had no particular destination in mind, and ended up traveling north, and then east instead, but much farther than Ayla had ever traveled on her hunting forays.

Jondalar had convinced her to make the exploratory trip to get her used to traveling. He wanted to take her home with him, but his home was far to the west. She had been reluctant, and scared, to leave her secure valley to live with unknown people in an unknown place. Though he was eager to return after traveling for many years, he had reconciled himself to spending the winter with her in the valley. It would be a long trek back—likely to take a full year—and it would be better to start in late spring, anyway. By then, he was sure he could convince her to come with him. He didn't even want to consider any other alternative.

Ayla had found him, badly mauled and nearly dead, at the beginning of the warm season that was now seeing its last days, and she knew the tragedy he had suffered. They fell in love while she was nursing him

back to health, though they were long in overcoming the barriers of their vastly different backgrounds. They were still learning each other's ways and moods.

Ayla and Jondalar finished breaking camp and much to the surprise—and interest—of the waiting people, packed their supplies and equipment on the horse, rather than in backframes or haversacks which they would have carried themselves. Though they had sometimes ridden double on the sturdy horse, Ayla thought Whinney and her colt would be less nervous if they saw her. The two of them walked behind the band of people, Jondalar leading Racer by a long rope attached to a halter, which he had devised. Whinney followed Ayla with no visible guidance.

They followed the course of the river for several miles through a broad valley that sloped down from the surrounding grassy plains. Chest-high standing hay, seed heads nodding ripe and heavy, billowed in golden waves on the near slopes matching the cold rhythm of frigid air that blew in fitful bursts from the massive glaciers to the north. On the open steppes, a few bent and gnarled pine and birch trees huddled along watercourses, their roots seeking the moisture given up to the desiccating winds. Near the river, reeds and sedges were still green, though a chill wind rattled through deciduous branches, bereft of leaves.

Latie hung back, glancing now and then at the horses and the woman, until they sighted several people around a bend in the river. Then she ran ahead, wanting to be first to tell of the visitors. At her shouts, people turned and gawked.

Other people were coming out of what appeared to Ayla to be a large hole in the riverbank, a cave of some sort, perhaps, but like none she had ever seen before. It seemed to have grown out of the slope facing the river, but it did not have the random shape of rock or earthen banks. Grass grew on the sod roof, but the opening was too even, too regular, and felt strangely unnatural. It was a perfectly symmetrical arch.

Suddenly, at a deep emotional level, it struck her. It was not a cave, and these people were not Clan! They did not look like Iza, who was the only mother she remembered, or like Creb or Brun, short and muscular, with large eyes shadowed by heavy brow ridges, a forehead that sloped back, and a chinless jaw that jutted forward. These people looked like her. They were like the ones she had been born to. Her mother, her real mother, must have looked like one of these women. These were the

Others! This was their place! The realization brought a rush of excitement and a tingle of fear.

Stunned silence greeted the strangers—and their even stranger horses—as they arrived at the permanent winter site of the Lion Camp. Then everyone seemed to talk at once.

“Talut! What have you brought this time?” “Where did you get those horses?” “What did you do to them?” Someone addressed Ayla: “How do you make them stay?” “What Camp are they from, Talut?”

The noisy, gregarious people crowded forward, eager to see and touch both the people and the horses. Ayla was overwhelmed, confused. She wasn’t used to so many people. She wasn’t used to people talking, particularly all of them talking at once. Whinney was sidestepping, flicking her ears, head high, neck arched, trying to protect her frightened colt and shy away from the people closing in.

Jondalar could see Ayla’s confusion, and the nervousness of the horses, but he couldn’t make Talut or the rest of the people understand. The mare was sweating, swishing her tail, dancing in circles. Suddenly, she could stand it no longer. She reared up, neighing in fear, and lashed out with hard hooves, driving the people back.

Whinney’s distress focused Ayla’s attention. She called her name with a sound like a comforting nicker, and signaled with gestures she had used to communicate before Jondalar had taught her to speak.

“Talut! No one must touch the horses unless Ayla allows it! Only she can control them. They are gentle, but the mare can be dangerous if she is provoked or feels her colt is threatened. Someone could get hurt,” Jondalar said.

“Stay back! You heard him,” Talut shouted with a booming voice that silenced everyone. When the people and horses settled down, Talut continued in a more normal tone. “The woman is Ayla. I promised her that no harm would come to the horses if they came to visit. I promised as headman of the Lion Camp. This is Jondalar of the Zelandonii, and a kinsman, brother of Tholie’s cross-mate.” Then, with a grin of self-satisfaction, he added, “Talut has brought some visitors!”

There were nods of agreement. The people stood around, staring with unfeigned curiosity, but far enough away to avoid the horse’s kicking hooves. Even if the strangers had left that moment, they had brought enough interest and gossip to last for years to come. News that two foreign men were in the region, living with the river people to the southwest, had been talked about at Summer Meetings. The Mamutoi

traded with the Sharamudoi, and since Tholie, who was a kinswoman, had chosen a river man, the Lion Camp had been even more interested. But they never expected one of the foreign men to walk into their Camp, particularly not with a woman who had some magic control over horses.

"Are you all right?" Jondalar asked Ayla.

"They frightened Whinney, and Racer, too. Do people always talk at once like that? Women and men at the same time? It's confusing, and they are so loud, how do you know who is saying what? Maybe we should have gone back to the valley." She was hugging the mare's neck, leaning against her, drawing comfort as well as giving it.

Jondalar knew Ayla was almost as distressed as the horses. The noisy press of people had been a shock for her. Maybe they shouldn't stay too long. Perhaps it would be better to start with just two or three people at a time, until she became accustomed to her kind of people again, but he wondered what he'd do if she never really did. Well, they were here now. He could wait and see.

"Sometimes people are loud, and talk all at once, but mostly one person talks at a time. And I think they'll be careful around the horses now, Ayla," he said, as she started to unload the pack baskets tied on both sides of the animal by a harness she had made out of leather thongs.

While she was busy, Jondalar took Talut aside and quietly told him the horses, and Ayla, were a little nervous, and needed some time to get used to everyone. "It would be better if they could be left alone for a while."

Talut understood, and moved among the people of the Camp, talking to each one. They dispersed, turning to other tasks, preparing food, working on hides or tools, so they could watch without being so obvious about it. They were uneasy, too. Strangers were interesting, but a woman with such compelling magic might do something unexpected.

Only a few children stayed to watch with avid interest while the man and woman unpacked, but Ayla didn't mind them. She hadn't seen children in years, not since she'd left the Clan, and was as curious about them as they were about her. She took off the harness and Racer's halter, then patted and stroked Whinney, then Racer. After giving the colt a good scratching and an affectionate hug, she looked up to see Latie staring at the young animal with longing.

"You like touch horse?" Ayla asked.