*The Opal Cavern,* Sample Chapter

Five

Base Camp Village

Curl slid down from Grand’s broad back and moaned.

The tall stallion with the dark-gray back and blaze had been well-

named. Even as a foal, he had towered above the colts in his part of the

woods. When he grew up, he stood head and shoulders above every other

horse in the Stalli Mountain Range.

Mindik had put Curl on Grand because of his smooth gaits. A

smoothly gaited horse was easier to learn on, the expedition leader had

assured her. Since she had never ridden a horse before this trip, Grand

was the best choice for her. The other Stallis on the exploration team had

agreed with him. Curl hadn’t. In her opinion a rather important fact had

been overlooked. The stallion’s back was a mile wide. She had moaned deeply

after her first day of riding. Now ten days into the trip, she was still moaning as

she dismounted.

As soon as she finished her moan, she grumbled, “Sitting all day

ought not to hurt. Where’s my salve?”

Chera delved into one of the supply packs for the Stalli salve that

eased aching muscles.

“We need to pick up more at the next village. You’re going through it

too fast. I’m sure it didn’t take me this long to learn how to ride.”

Raising her nose and sniffing at him, Curl proclaimed haughtily, “I

have already learned how to ride a horse. It is simply a matter of good

balance. However, contorting my legs out of their natural comfort zone

fourteen hours every day—”

 “You have to tighten your knees as well as balance, and we don’t

ride fourteen hours a day,” Chera argued before Mindik broke into the

familiar sparring.

“I wish we did. We’d get there faster. Staying overnight at all these

villages slows us down. Are you certain we need to stop again?”

“Yes,” his younger brother stated firmly, and Curl supported the

statement with an equally firm, “We need to.”

They had found it necessary to speak that way to Mindik. Otherwise

he might overrule them, and Chera and Curl liked stopping at villages. They

liked it very much. Each village had its own personality, making overnight

stays educational. Also people thrilled to the goal of the trip, making the

Stalli villagers feel involved in exploration.

Those were the reasons Mindik would listen to, and Chera and Curl

used them often. Everyone they met shouted praises toward the explorers

themselves, but Chera and Curl didn’t mention that particular fact. Mindik

wouldn’t have considered it a reason to stop, though it was their personal

favorite. They enjoyed praise. They thought the group should stop more

often.

“Stew’s hot,” chimed in Pesom, one of the two additional explorers

who had joined them.

Curl approved heartily of Pesom as a fellow explorer, but not because

she was another woman. The attractive Wassandra didn’t often make

friends with other women her age. She didn’t like competition.

Fortunately, Pesom didn’t present any. The top of her head barely

passed Curl’s elbows. Furthermore, she had a stubby nose, and the dark

hair and eyes of the Stalli people, excepting Chera, of course. Curl knew

Chera was the only one of Lynn’s three boys to have inherited his mother’s

blue eyes.

As she came out from behind the bush that had screened her while

she applied muscle salve to the places that needed it, Curl wondered, *What*

*would happen if a Wassandra married someone with blue eyes? Would*

*their children*—

“Curl, hand me the salt,” Botan, the other explorer who had joined the

group, ordered when she came into view.

Curl tossed her head at the order and picked up the salt. However,

instead of handing the container to Botan, she carried it directly past his

outstretched hand to Pesom.

“Pesom’s a better cook than any of us,” she declared jauntily.

Botan grabbed a water bottle and headed for the nearby stream.

They didn’t need more water right away, but they’d surely want some soon.

In any case he needed an excuse to leave. Curl was the most exotic

beauty he had ever seen, and he felt hopelessly wrong around her.

Everything he did was wrong.

His habit of ignoring her unless he asked her to do something was

wrong; his short barked-out sentences at the times he did speak to her

were wrong; even his height was wrong. Botan stood a foot shorter than

Mindik or Chera, which made him shorter than Curl too. His body had failed

to grow tall enough, and he felt intense guilt over its inadequacy.

As the red-faced young man left, Curl watched Pesom sprinkle salt

expertly onto the stew.

The Stalli girl really did cook better than anyone else in the group.

She didn’t mind cleaning up after a meal either, and it was those two

 virtues, added to her stubby nose and plain face, that had won Curl’s

wholehearted approval of her as a member of the team.

“What village comes next?” Curl asked Chera as she lowered herself

carefully into a cross-legged position near the fire.

“We should reach a small village called Base Camp tomorrow,” her

friend answered.

“Why is it called Base Camp?” she asked next, shifting into another

position.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Base Camp’s very old. Mountain climbers used it as a base camp

once, and the name stuck,” Mindik informed the two of them without looking

away from his favorite map of Rosehip Mountain.

“You mean we’ve reached the high mountains?” Curl squealed,

throwing expressive hands out to either side.

Mindik glanced up this time and smiled at her excitement. “We’ve

reached one of them, but not Rosehip. We’ll have to go around this

mountain and cross two hills. Base Camp’s the last village on our route, so

there won’t be any more good roads. I don’t know how long it will actually

take us to get to Rosehip.”

He glared at the two individuals sprawled in front of him.

“What I do know is that the longer we stay in Base Camp, the longer it

will take us to set up our own camp.”

“Yes, yes,” they chorused with bright amenable smiles.

Mindik sniffed doubtfully but didn’t say anything further. After his face

lowered to the map, Chera and Curl winked at each other. There was no

need to discuss the situation. If Base Camp was the last village before

Rosehip, that made it their last opportunity for fawning adulation.

They meant to make the most of it.

News about their trip had traveled ahead of them. Children from

the village scampered out to meet them with whoops of joy.

“Hooray for the Opal Cavern!” .they shouted.

“Take me with you,” the more daring yelled, and Mindik smiled and

shook his head.

“Bring me back an opal rock,” several of the boys and girls begged,

but the expedition leader lost his smile at that request.

He didn’t want the Opal Cavern tom into pieces by people who

wanted a small part of it. Once they had found the legendary place though,

anybody could go to it. How would they keep the souvenir hunters out?

The question preoccupied Mindik as he followed the others into the center

of the village. Curl and Chera had become the center of a laughing,

chattering group before he even dismounted.

He was rubbing his mare down and wondering how much time the

horses needed to rest before they left again, when a low voice interrupted

his thoughts.

“An old man wants to talk to you about the Opal Cavern,” Pesom

whispered.

Mindik’s head jerked up, and he nodded his thanks, not only for the

news, but also for the whisper. Pesom had known he wouldn’t want the

nearby noisy group to join in this kind of talk.

“Where?” he murmured.

Pesom motioned and then led him to one side of the small blue

meadow that formed Base Camp’s meeting place.

Every Stalli village had a centrally located place to meet, but not all of

those meeting places were meadows, and very few of the meadows that

served such a purpose were as old as the one in this village. Former

settlers had shaped grass into a circle and clustered their cottages around

the place where they would gather for warm fellowship with Keshua and

each other. Over the years the wooden homes had leaned forward more

and more, as if their situation so near to the coldest mountains in Stalli

made them want to hold out eager hands to warmth of any kind.

Curl liked how the Stalli cottages leaned in toward the circle of thick

blue grass. She found the whole arrangement appealing and favored it

with a glance of approval—in time to see Mindik follow Pesom out of the

crowd of people into a cottage on the other side of the meadow.

The expression of approval on Curl’s face began to change to a

frown, but she smoothed out her facial features before the frown could

wrinkle them. Too many people stood around her, gaping. They had never

seen such a tall woman before, not to mention a tall woman with light-

brown curls, golden eyes, and golden tones to her skin. Her long arms and

fingers waved gracefully in the air as she talked, and her words sounded

like a beautiful song.

In fact, she was the most beautiful woman ever to step foot in Base

Camp Village. That’s what the young men said anyway, and Curl believed

every word of it.

Mindik had already disappeared anyway. She shrugged

magnanimously. Whatever Pesom and Mindik needed to take care of must

not have required her presence. She would let it pass. Besides the

villagers were making plans that interested her.

 “We’ll have a village meal,” one of the more important men decreed,

and the people standing about clapped enthusiastically before hustling off

to prepare their best dishes, amidst cheers and suggestions.

The children pleaded, “Bake an apple pie, Miney. Bake a dozen of

them. Your pies are the best!”

“Dulcet, are you making potato salad?” a man hollered across the

blue circle of grass.

“No, I mean to fix mashed potatoes this time ’cause of leftover gravy

from last night,” Dulcet hollered back.

“Good, then I’ll make potato salad,” a new voice called.

“That’s not fair,” the first man protested.

Chera intervened. “We can’t have too much potato salad. It’s my

favorite.”

The two cooks waved each other away. They would both make

potato salad, and Curl knew her friend hoped they’d send all the leftovers

with the explorers. In Chera’s opinion, expressed often and loudly on the

trail, home-cooked food tasted a hundred times better than dried meat

stew.

She smiled in her friend’s direction, agreeing with him. Even pooma

tasted better than those disgusting meat strips, and she had outgrown her

taste for the Wassandra concoction of edible lake leaves mixed with sweet

underwater berries and then pounded together to form thick sticks. A

bundle of pooma had traveled with her though. At the last minute her

mother had thrust it toward her.

“I made it just for you,” Mist had told her daughter, and Curl had taken

it to please her.

 Tucking the small bundle into one of the storage bags, she had

forgotten about it in the excitement of leaving. Now her face brightened.

The next time the explorers offered stew, she would pull out a pooma stick

instead.

*But not tonight,* she thought, licking her lips. She loved Stalli food.

Stallis had a much wider variety of foods than Wassandra did. Underwater

living had its limitations in more ways than one.

“Isn’t this great?” Chera asked happily, as the people scattered to

prepare for the meal.

Meanwhile, Mindik and Pesom were listening attentively to a white-

haired man sitting inside the cottage they had entered.

“It was towards the end, when he’d given up and started on his way

home that he found it,” the old-timer said, blinking several times.

The door to the cottage opened, interrupting the story. Botan, who

had taken his turn at unloading the supply horses, entered the room and

sat next to Pesom, which necessitated the normal exchange of Stalli

greetings.

Mindik waited patiently. This old man had met someone who claimed

to have found the Opal Cavern. It hadn’t happened, of course. If anyone

had really discovered the fabled cave, the news would have traveled all

over Stalli.

*But you never know. A failing memory or sudden accident could have*

*prevented the spread of news beyond a few people. I need to take the*

*account seriously in any case, because it’s supposed to have occurred on*

*Rosehip. Maybe this old- timer will say something that will direct us where*

*to look.*

Mindik always listened to every story carefully, hoping to hear an

inconspicuous detail or a side item tossed into the flow of words. He was

confident he would recognize its importance. By now he had heard so

many accounts, he could sift out the fairy-tale additions.

He felt a familiar uneasiness. The Opal Cavern did sound like

something out of a fairy tale—a sparkling cave covered from top to bottom

with many-colored rocks. Other explorers had searched and failed to find it.

A good many Stallis thought it didn’t exist.

Mindik didn’t want to fail. He wanted the beautiful place to exist, and

he wanted to pinpoint its location for Tarth to see. Then they would have to

protect it from scavengers, but before his mind could wander back to that

problem, the old man started talking again.

“A bit of brightness hit his eyes first. The snow reflected bright, of

course, but he was used to that. This bit of light went into his head and

made it hurt so bad that he stopped and clutched his forehead. That gave

him time to wonder. Where’d that brightness come from? He wound up with

the biggest head pain he’d ever had, but he followed that light and was glad

he did. Inside a small opening, not one you’d notice much, he found the

Opal Cavern.”

The old man’s voice sank to a whisper. “He fell to his knees and gave

thanks to the Great One. It was that pretty.”

*Pretty*? The Oval Cavern deserved a much better adjective than that.

Without turning his head, Mindik glanced at Pesom. She gave him the

tiniest grimace. On her other side, Botan creased his forehead slightly.

Comforted by their understanding, Mindik focused back on the elderly man,

who clearly had told this story often enough to make it his own adventure,

not simply one he’d heard as a child.

 The old man stirred and sighed. “That’s about it,” he mumbled.

“Did he say anything about the location of the cavern?” asked

Mindik casually.

He had learned to speak casually. If he showed his real interest,

people started stuttering. They wanted to help, but the intensity of his

desire for information made their minds go blank.

“I’ve said it all. There’s no more,” was the only answer.

The white-haired head dropped forward, and his daughter, who had

sat in the back of the room during the story, went to his side.

“Pa, it’s time for a rest. You’ll excuse him,” she told the three

explorers.

“You’ve been very helpful,” Mindik said politely as he rose to

go.

“Thank you for telling us your story. Just think of seeing the Opal

Cavern,” Pesom added softly, and her words made the old man’s face light

up.

When Mindik, Pesom, and Botan stepped out of the cottage, they

found themselves in the middle of a crowd of people setting up tables.

Chera and Curl hurried over to them. They had learned over the past week

and a half that it was best to tell Mindik some things themselves.

Sure enough, their leader exploded. "They’re having a WHAT? I said a short time

here! You know I did!”

“We couldn’t do anything to stop them,” Chera assured his brother.

“We didn’t want to stop them,” Curl announced, putting her hands on

her hips and tossing her curls. “Honestly, Mindik, we have to eat. This way

none of us needs to cook supper. If we stay overnight, then none of us will

need to cook breakfast and—”

 Mindik growled his interruption. “We aren’t staying overnight. We would

never get away if you two had your way. This is an expedition, not a social

picnic.” He stomped away, muttering.

Chera cocked his head toward Curl. “I think that went fairly well,” he

said grinning.

Curl grinned back before asking Pesom, “What did you find out?” You

certainly stayed in that cottage a long time.”

“Another story about the Opal Cavern,” the short Stalli girl answered

briefly.

Curl refrained from groaning. She had joined this expedition willingly,

after all.

Chera groaned loudly.

“That’s good. Anything new?” Curl asked quickly to cover for him.

Pesom told her, “Not really. We’ll have to talk about it. Maybe we

missed something.”

“What do you think, Botan?” asked Chera, slapping the young man

fondly on the back.

*They grew up together*. Curl thought condescendingly. Her nose

tilted, and she looked down it as she waited for Botan’s answer.

“Ah, nothing—well, it was good, a good story, I mean. I’ve got to, ah,

see about the horses,” he said, his face turning purple this time. He raced

away.

Curl rolled her eyes. “What could the horses possibly need now?”

Chera replied, “Nothing much, but Botan needs them.”

Abruptly Pesom moved away toward the tables. The short Stalli girl

wanted to ask if she could help with the work, no doubt. Curl rolled her

eyes again at the thought of volunteering to help when they were the

honored guests.

Chera laughed outright and declared affectionately, “You are such a

lazy snob.”

“What? I don’t mean to be,” she responded in surprise.

The young man gazed at Curl with amusement. She loved to share

her beauty with the world, especially distracted young men. At the same

time, he knew her to be a warmhearted loyal friend. She just didn’t realize

how greatly she intimidated Botan. Actually, he didn’t think she got along

well with Pesom either, but up to this point Botan and Pesom had only seen

her flirtatious side.

He shrugged. The three of them would relax into friendship

eventually. They’d better! When the exploration group finally arrived at

Rosehip Mountain, they would be living in close quarters.

“Curl, why are you scratching your arm?” he asked.

The Wassandra girl gave him a withering look. “Because it itches,”

she said as if he had the brains of a minnow. “Why else do you think I

would scratch my arm! I think I got muscle salve on it.”

“Muscle salve doesn’t make you itch,” he answered, but the supper

bell rang as he was speaking, and he was distracted.