

The Watcher

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See Sharp Press  Tucson, Arizona

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Oakley, Nicholas P.

The watcher / Nicholas P. Oakley – Tucson, Ariz. : See Sharp Press, 2013.

ISBN 978-1-937276-45-4

1. Social change - Fiction. 2. Culture conflict – Fiction.
3. Utopias — Fiction. 4. Science fiction.

823.92

THE WATCHER

PART I

CHAPTER 1

THE WATCHER WAS HUGE, far taller than Tian had ever dreamt. The monster climbed down from the tree above where Tian had strung her hammock for the night, its long legs unfurling, revealing strong, sinewy limbs covered in coarse black skin. The Watcher must have been at least three meters from head to toe. And it was heading right for her.

Tian lay unmoving and unblinking as the monster slowly emerged from the darkness and came to a halt a few meters above where she lay, helpless. She was petrified. She struggled to stifle a scream. Her heart thumped, and her breath came in quick shallow gasps that she tried, poorly, to conceal. She remained as still as she could. In the moons' pale light bathing the grove, though, it was clear that the Watcher, dangling precariously above her from a branch by one extraordinarily lank arm, was looking directly at her.

"You have no reason to fear me," said the creature, breaking the silence. Tian started violently. The voice was strange but clear. "I need your help, Tian.

Tian was four days away from the village, camping in a grove she often visited. This was the place where, five seasons before, she had killed one of the largest boars that her tribe had ever seen. The memory of that triumph was one of her fondest. She could recall the details with vivid clarity, even now. The tracking, the quick kill, the long journey home with the burden, and the smiles that greeted her arrival, all were unforgettable.

Ever since that day, she had returned often to this place, especially when she needed some time alone. To escape her thoughts, her fears, or vent her anger aloud to the glittering, star-encrusted sky above. The trees here were much sparser than in the surrounding woods, and Tian often lay down on the spongy ground looking up, watching for hours the moons trace their paths overhead. There was an aura around the place, the hint of something special that kept her coming back here, something that made her feel safe.

Tian had come to the grove after fighting with Grashin in the circle again. She had left the village several nightfalls before, wandering for days downriver before at last turning back and making camp here, the soft moss underfoot reassuringly familiar. She strung her hammock between two trunks and let her fingertips trail idly across the floor. The horse, Nimsha'h, was tired, and, in her haste to leave after the argument, Tian had forgotten most of the hunting and sleeping gear she normally carried with her on expeditions into the deep forest. Still, even as unprepared as she was, Tian had resolved to stay at least a couple more nights before returning, even though the nights were becoming cooler and she missed her warm autumn clothing. Though she wouldn't admit it to herself, she missed Erkan a little, too.

But she didn't want to go back. Not yet. The argument with Grashin had turned violent. Just the thought of it brought tears of shame and rage to her eyes. She couldn't bear to face the tribe yet. She was unsure whether she would be allowed back at all, or if she even wanted to go back.

Over the past few seasons she'd had a string of confrontations with Grashin. Their latest had come at a bad time for both her and the rest of their tribe. Early autumnal rains had swept down from the mountains, causing a flood as unexpected as it was devastating. Tian recalled the horror on the faces of her brothers and sisters. She remembered the panic as they led the horses to safety, and the shrieks of the younger children as the brown torrent cascaded through the trees and into the village. What the flood waters didn't carry off was ruined. The flood waters left the village decimated. The bedding was covered in a slimy, smelly sludge, the sleeping huts that were still standing were uninhabitable and, worst of all, the food stores had either been spoiled or swept away.

It was a disaster. Not only would the tribe have to start all over again, it was facing starvation.

The morning after the flood Tian had set out into the forest with a few others, determined not to return until they had some game to bring back with them. Those less proficient at hunting and trapping made preparations to travel to the silo, around twenty days trek away, to fetch supplies. They would be forced to take most of the surviving food with them on their long journey.

That meant Tian and a few other hunters had the formidable task of feeding those too old or young to go, nearly half the village, while the others went to the silo. It would be tough. Most of the big game in the area had already moved on or been killed by the village's hunting parties, and Tian knew it might be several days before any of them came across anything worth bringing back. There would be a lot of growling stomachs before she saw her tribe's faces again.

They had been in this area for many months, and the tribe had been preparing to move to the warmer, drier north when the flood hit, ruining their stores and plunging them into their current desperate state. Tian had suggested that the tribe move north early, a week before the flood. She'd seen how little game remained in the forest around the village, the empty traps, and

the days without spotting, let alone killing, any game big enough to feed all those mouths. The forest seemed to have made the decision for them of when they should leave, and she'd said as much in the circle.

That was one of the reasons she left the village early that morning, before the others had even set out for the silo. She knew she wouldn't have been able to hold her tongue if she had seen Grashin before she left—his cronies had blocked her proposal to move the villages early. To Tian, the man's stubbornness made him at least partially responsible for the tribe's predicament.

Tian often hunted with a small group, usually four or five others. Although she was a good shot, she wasn't as agile as most of the others, and she found it difficult to find or follow tracks on the forest floor. She had her head in the clouds and not on the ground, one of the elders used to tell her when she was younger. Perhaps it was true. Either way, Tian relied on the others to locate prey. When they did, though, she usually took the first shot. She rarely missed.

They'd been out in the forest for two days after the flood when Tian found herself alone with Erkan, a youth several seasons younger than her. The others had peeled off gradually, following different trails, and now just the two of them crept through the undergrowth, the sounds of the forest around them their only company. Erkan was an excellent tracker, and as nimble as anyone in the village. They made a good hunting pair. She watched him ahead of her, stopping occasionally to listen to some distant twig snap, head tilted, looking intently at the ground. He was quiet and, unlike most of the other young men in the tribe, thoughtful, contemplative. Tian enjoyed his company, and they often hunted together.

Although the nights were getting colder, the middays were still very hot, and sweat trickled down her back. She missed Nimsha'h, her favorite horse.

"You should climb up sister," Erkan said, from a branch

above, where he'd paused for a break and a better view of the forest ahead. "It's much cooler up here." She unslung the bow from her back and passed it to him before scrambling up. Erkan was right. Just a few meters above the floor, the temperature and humidity dropped noticeably. They sat in silence for a while and took big draughts from their water carriers. The noise of the forest around them, the midday heat, and their tired legs soon lulled them both to sleep in their aerial perch, limbs and hair entwined.

Tian awoke at Erkan's soft tap on her forehead. He was crouched, listening intently, motionless. The heat had dropped off considerably, and the beads of sweat on her neck and chest made her shiver. Erkan's head turned sharply to the left, eyes squinting, focusing on a particularly dense area of undergrowth fifty meters upwind. He pointed toward the area with two extended fingers, glancing sideways at Tian.

Tian peered into the thick undergrowth trying to get a glimpse of whatever Erkan had spotted, but she could see nothing, so she climbed down, holding the bow loosely at her side, and crept forward as silently as possible. Apart from bird calls and the wind, the forest was quiet.

She stopped about thirty meters away from the area that Erkan continued to observe from his perch. She could see him fully now. The tree bark camouflaged his dark brown skin well. She had hunted with him for many seasons, and shared a blanket with him for two, but in that moment—poised, alert, ready to pounce like a leopard—she realized that Erkan was more man than boy, now. He was as tall as she was, and his shoulders were becoming broad and powerful. He glanced down at her as she stared. She nodded almost imperceptibly, adrenaline heightening her perceptions of her surroundings. A big boyish grin spread across Erkan's face. His anticipation was infectious. A small smile crept across Tian's lips, her first in many days.

Erkan made a number of small hand gestures—quick, precise. Tian nodded again, bringing the bow up. Her grip was

light, practiced. She drew the string back until her knuckles just grazed her ochre-colored cheek. She still could not see the prey in the bushes, a young deer, according to Erkan's gestures.

Seeing that she was ready, Erkan dropped down from the tree. It was a good two meters, but he didn't hesitate for a moment. He landed softly, but birds took flight above them, squawking angrily. Tian saw movement, the hint of pale fur, a bundle of nervous energy.

She released her grip on the taut bow-string. The arrow flew straight.

The deer stumbled and fell, and Erkan was upon it, grunting as he slit the fallen animal's throat.

They returned to the village before nightfall, a drizzle soaking them and muddying their path. The other members of the hunting party had killed several monkeys, and the tribe welcomed them back warmly, the worry on some of the older faces easing. The cooks quickly stripped the carcasses of their meat, which they placed in a broth simmering on the open fire in the center of the village. It was the first proper meal since the flood.

Their hunger satiated temporarily, Tian and Erkan lay near the fire listening to the songs and birds in the forest around them. Erkan ran his rough fingers across her back, and felt the stress that had gripped her fall away under his caress. She drifted off to sleep, her stomach full and her legs tired from the day's hunt.

A short while later she sensed Erkan leaving her side. She smiled without opening her eyes, basking in the fire's heat. She listened to the snatches of conversation that bubbled around her over the crackle of burning wood. The fears that had been allayed by the food were already beginning to creep back, but the warmth of the fire kept her worries at bay, for the moment.

Tian was just dozing off again when she heard her name spoken softly in the distance. She cracked her eyes open, looking towards the washing area. Erkan was speaking to someone. A

bent figure in the shadows. She opened her eyes a fraction wider for a better look. The faint orange glow of a pipe revealed a familiar face: Grashin's. She scowled, closing her eyes, pretending not to have seen. After a while, Erkan returned to her side, touching her on the shoulder as he lay back down next to her.

"What did he want?" Tian asked. Erkan jerked in surprise.

"Who? Oh, nothing," he said. Tian remained silent, trying to compose herself. "Just congratulating me—us—on the kill, that's all."

"Playing his games again," she said.

Erkan only shrugged.

Tian knew Grashin, and knew his methods. He was an old man, too old to do any hard labor in the community, but appreciated as a scribe and historian. He often traded tales with visitors from the other tribes, recording them on fragile parchments he kept stored in the deep mountain caves where they spent the winter. Everyone in the village liked him—a nice old man, who spoke quietly yet pleasantly, barely above a whisper.

Tian was convinced it was just an act. She'd had first-hand experience of his more manipulative side when she first started asking questions about the way things were done. At first, she didn't realize what was going on, but gradually she worked out the pattern, and told her friends about it.

Then Grishin had some quiet talks with her friends in the tribe, and they grew distant. Some of them began to shun her, and she hunted alone more often. She started spending a lot of her time alone in the forest. The benches around her in the Circle emptied over the weeks.

When she called out Grashin in one of the meetings, accusing him of manipulating her friends with promises or whispered threats, they shouted her down, called her an egoist, a troublemaker. Exasperated, lonely, she lost her temper. That was the first time she was removed from the Circle for refusing to relinquish the floor, for refusing to let one of Grashin's

cronies block another of her ideas without consideration. She'd glared at Grashin as she left the Circle. He sat on his bench, his bony legs crossed, pulling serenely on his pipe, a small grin on his face. His eyes glistened, mocking her.

She knew then that he'd played her, that she'd fallen into a trap. She saw plainly in that moment the manner of his power, and choked back tears. She felt sick with helplessness in the face of this old man who, with a whisper in an ear or a casual remark, held more sway in the tribe than she ever possibly could.

Tian had spoken to Erkan about Grashin on several occasions out in the woods. He had been sympathetic, but refused to believe her. He found it inconceivable that the old man could have as much influence as she said he did.

"That's absurd, Tian," he said to her as they made camp one night after an exhausting day of hunting, and after Tian had loosed another diatribe about Grashin. "You know no one can rule us like that. Even I could block his proposals. We have the Circle, after all. The Circle stops all of that, all the things you accuse Grashin of doing. He just can't do it; we wouldn't allow it."

Tian grunted.

"I don't understand why you're so fixated on Grashin, anyway," he continued. "I don't even remember the last time he blocked one of your proposals, or even said anything about them."

"No, of course not. That's exactly my point. He doesn't need to say anything in the meetings. Things are already decided days, weeks before. He insinuates, he suggests... talks about the old days, about the ways things were before. I've seen him do it. The others, get the hint. He gets his way, and he stays as this nice little old man who spends too much time with his papers." Tian couldn't help the bitterness in her voice.

Erkan was silent, thoughtful for a few minutes as he undressed. "You make it sound like he controls us—like, he's a leader, or something." Erkan's voice lowered as he uttered the profanity. "We would kick him out of the community if he ever

tried to pull that here. But he never makes any proposals. I can't see how he could have control when we have the Circle, when we have the Way."

"The Circle doesn't do anything. You know Grashin never makes any proposals, except to do with his stupid histories that he's so protective of, that nobody else even cares about. He doesn't *need* to do anything. Everything is the way he likes it, the way it's always been. His power is *outside* of the Circle. Don't you see that? He protects the old ways. The old ways protect him!"

"Because the old ways work, Tian."

"Not always."

The long benches in the Circle seemed empty. With half the tribe away, there were many empty spaces on the long benches. Several other hunting and scavenging groups had arrived since Erkan's and Tian's group returned, some bringing meat, but most bringing sacks of roots and berries. The tribe was not at immediate risk of starvation. Ulgha roots were prevalent throughout the forest; when boiled and mashed with water, they made a barely edible paste that was at least minimally nutritious, for both for humans and the horses. The tribe could, and had in the past, lived on ulgha for weeks, but it was a food that tasted of hardship, of failure. So the tribe was reluctant to resort to ulgha yet, and the game and berries were welcome.

Tian could see a few of the hunters slumbering in the huts, the canvas doors pegged open. The summer villages were usually spare and unelaborate, because the tribe sometimes moved three or four times during the long season depending on the game, water supply, and weather. Despite the regular upheaval, it was Tian's favorite season. Summer meant game, warmth, hunting trips, long days and short nights.

This season had been easy until the flooding. They had only had moved twice that summer, and had been scheduled to

leave just a quarter-moon after the flood struck to escape the approaching fall and the heavy rains. The flood could not have come at a worse time. It had ravaged the stocks of food they had amassed in preparation for their relocation, stores they could ill afford to lose so close to their move. They now had to hope for good hunting and that those traveling to the silo would bring back enough to keep them going until they could resettle in the warmer north.

Most of the younger villagers had volunteered to go to the silo, taking with them most of the horses and all of the dogs. The morning bustle of the village was muted without them.

The tribe always held Circles at night, after the final meal, before the nightly recreation. Tian couldn't remember the last time they'd held one in daylight, let alone before midday. The grey dawn was on the cusp of turning into bright sunshine, the unseasonably rainy weather apparently behind them now.

She chose an empty bench in the Circle and readied herself. Erkan came across the grassy communal area to the benches, sat down next to her.

"Feeling better?"

"Not really."

She hadn't seen Grashin yet this morning, but she was still furious with him. "None of this would have happened if he had given my proposals a fair chance in the Circle."

"Please, don't start anything today." He knew exactly who she was talking about.

He reached out for her hand, and she let him take it. The benches around them began filling up. Grashin ambled over from a workshop—he used a small workbench in one of them upon which he was often writing—talking quietly with several of the older villagers.

Erkan noticed the way Tian was looking at the Grashin and said, "It's been hard enough these past two days. Look around. Everyone is tired, scared. This isn't the time for this... for your egoizing."

Tian snatched her hand away from his, and stood abruptly. She turned her angry eyes on Erkan, now.

“No, Tian, I didn’t mean...” he said, reaching for her withdrawn hand.

She got up and left without a word. Erkan didn’t dare follow, and sank to the bench, crestfallen. Tian marched across the Circle, all eyes on her as she went, brushing past Grashin and his companions. The benches were organized in a broad circle, with a large central area for a fire. It had been constructed in this fashion for as long as Tian—and everyone else for that matter—could remember. This was the way it was done, and had always been done.

And, for as long as Tian could remember, there had always been one particular bench almost imperceptibly closer to the fire than the others. For it was upon this bench Grashin had sat, in every village across the forest, in every consensus Circle. Tian had spoken about this to her friends. They had laughed. Then, when realisingrealizing she was serious, they made awkward excuses, changed the topic, or told her it was a trifle.

Right now, it was this bench, that was the focus of Tian’s rage. It was doubtful that any of the other villagers had noticed its position. If they did, it was unlikely that they thought anything of it. But everyone noticed it now. Tian forced herself past him Grashin, throwing herself down on the benchit, staring back ack at him contemptuously, as if daring him to sit on it next to her.

Grashin faltered for a moment as Tian glowered at him. Then, raising his long pipe to his mouth and taking a sip, he smiled and bowed his head. He gave his companions a quick glance and a small shrug. With knowing smiles they sat on an adjacent bench.

Tian was practiced at hiding her true feelings. She was used to the snubs, the condescending nods, the patronizing, smug way Grashin spoke to, and about, her. She had burned with embarrassment and shame the first few times he had deflected

her anger with the wave of a hand or a shrug, as if she were a petulant child. She had felt the eyes of the whole tribe on her; they had seen her public dismissal—the dismissal of a rebellious adolescent throwing a tantrum, and nothing more. She had suppressed the blushes, the tears, the feeling of loneliness.

But this time it was different. She felt no shame. She felt contempt—for Grashin and the rest of the tribe. Even Erkan couldn't see what she meant. She remembered the time she had tried to explain to him about Grashin's bench. Like the others, he had laughed it off. When he realized she was serious he became awkward, withdrawn. Erkan hadn't seen it. He was young, sure, but she knew it wasn't just that. No, the only person who ever understood, who could ever understand, was no longer around. That still burned inside of her, more than any shame or embarrassment old Grashin could ever force her to feel.

CHAPTER 2

The Watcher's eyes were bright yellow, almost cat like, a stark contrast to the black, hairless head in which they were set. As it stared down at her, Tian's hand slipped down to her side, to the knife in the belt she wore. It was the only weapon she had. The Watcher simply smiled.

"I'm afraid your weapon is too blunt to hurt me much, Tian. You should have had it sharpened before you left." The voice was strange, melodic. It was higher than any man's, but too low to be female. It seemed to shift tone after each word, as if the Watcher were singing rather than whispering to her. It was peculiarly calming, and entirely nonhostile. But Tian couldn't calm herself. The knot in her stomach was awful. She swung wildly with the blade, baring her teeth and attempting a threatening noise. It caught in her throat, and she merely whimpered hoarsely.

The Watcher didn't move, only cocked its head, as if appraising her. Just like Erkan, she thought.

"Am I all that frightening?" it asked. "I thought that someone like you wouldn't find me threatening. Especially as you spend so much time out here alone. Here," it said, spreading its arms wide, palms facing her. "I mean you no harm, and I apologize for scaring you. I'm sorry to see the problems you've been having with Grashin in the village, Tian. Very sorry." The Watcher shook its head with what seemed to be real feeling.

Tian struggled onto her elbows, the hammock rocking violently back and forth violently as she did so. The panic, the horror, subsided somewhat in the face of the Watcher's urbane manner and sudden change of topic. How in Veyshlur did the Watcher know about Grashin? She sheathed the blade, which seemed like a child's toy in comparison to this huge, lanky creature.

"What— Who are you? How do you know me?" she stammered.

"I'm a Watcher. Don't you recognize me, from the stories? That isn't my real name, of course, but Watcher is fine. In fact, we sometimes call one another that. Some of us are actually rather fond of the name."

"We...?" Tian glanced around her, expecting to see the trees full of glowing yellow eyes.

"Oh, no, you misunderstand. It's just me here. We travel alone most of the time."

"So, what do you want?" she stuttered.

"I told you. We need your help."

"With... with what?"

"The Qah."

Tian took a sharp breath.

"They have killed some of my people. Their bands are ranging farther and farther south. We need your help to stop them."

Erkan had not been Tian's first partner. It was common for children in the tribe to lie with others as soon as they desired. Taboos existed, though unspoken. Older adolescents and adults rarely lay with younger members of the tribe, and long partnerships between adolescents of any age were uncommon. Short, casual couplings were the norm.

Tian was sixty seasons old when she first lay with Priash, a girl several seasons older than her. It was later than most of Tian's friends. She had several casual partnerships with friends of her own age after that first time with Priash, but these soon reverted to platonic kinship.

She always returned to Priash.

Tian often thought about Priash in the grove, and late at night in the village. Haydill, a girl who often slept in the cot next to Tian, snored just as Priash used to., and Tian often had to move during the night to an empty bed to get any sleep. Although Tian never remembered them, she knew that she dreamt about Priash from the damp sheets and wet forehead she woke up to almost every morning. If she disturbed the rest of the tribe with her nightmares, though, they never once said anything to her about it.

Tian had never known real loss before Priash. Elders passed away. She saw brothers and sisters die of illness, of accidents, and she mourned them as the community did—publicly, openly. She overcame this kind of sorrow with the help of the tribe. But she was never able to come to terms with losing Priash. It was too personal, the grief too raw. She raged, she cried, she fought. But she could never forget. Priash had been everything to Tian. A sister, a lover, a guide, a friend. She could be intolerable company, but Tian couldn't live without her. Being with Priash was like nothing being with no one else, like the rest of the world dropped into a pale shadow, an insignificant blur next to her.

Priash was taken while Tian was away hunting.

Unlike Tian, Priash was a poor hunter. She worked instead

with some of the elder herbalists in the village. When she went on expeditions with them, she was always one of the first to find what they were seeking. As Priash grew older, her natural ability and burgeoning expertise with the plants of the forest exceeded even Tian's proficiency with the bow. So it didn't surprise Tian when Priash, along with Grashin and several of the other elders went on a long expedition to gather medicinal plants and seeds that didn't grow locally and that were only found high on the wintry mountains slopes, where the community spent the cold winters in a maze of caves.

"Why don't you get these seeds when we go up to the winter caves, Priash?" Tian had asked when Priash first told her of the journey. The mountain range was also where Grashin kept his histories in one of the deeper, more inaccessible caves, and Tian suspected that this was the real reason for their expedition.

"Don't be stupid, sister. If we could do that, do you really think we'd—I'd—be spending twenty days traveling to get them? Twenty days I could be spending with Yuri?"

Tian pinched her hard on the thigh. Priash laughed, a loud, infectious laugh. Yuri was a popular older boy who lay with many of the girls in the village. Priash often teased Tian about him. Priash was one of those Yuri had partnered with regularly before Tian.

"Well, why bother going at all then?" asked Tian.

"Do you really think I'll be going with that stubborn old shitstool Grashin if it wasn't important? He's going to add at least four days to our journey, whilst he plays around with his books in his cave. No, of course not. The plants are seeding now. By winter they're all gone. Dispersed, buried, eaten. We need them. For one thing, we use the seeds from tulva to make the ointment you hunters put on your blisters. That's why I'm going. And you'll just have to lump it. Unless you like blisters?"

"No," said Tian, sulkily. Tian was no herbalist, and she hated when Priash started talking about the different plants that she worked with. Tian had the distinctly childish feeling of being

left out. Reading her perfectly, Priash laughed again, pulling her down to the floor. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it. Try not to have too much fun while I’m away.”

They kissed. Tian clung to her tightly as they made love that night.

Ten days after Priash left with the others in search of the seeds of the mountain orchid, Tian returned from her hunting trip. Wails greeted her return. She rode up to the Circle, not bothering to dismount from Nimsha’h.

“What happened?” she demanded. She scanned the crowd and saw Grashin, huddled and dusty in the center of the tribe. She asked again, shouting over the weeping. She guided Nimsha’h through the villagers toward Grashin. “What happened? Where is she?” He looked up at her. Looked into her eyes. She was a frightening sight. Astride Nimsha’h, she looked fierce; her long plaited hair swept across her shoulders, her eyes wild, her mouth twisted in rage, her knuckles white on the reins. “Where is Priash!” she screamed. She saw him cower from her. She saw the fear in his eyes. In that scene of public grief, amongst the entire tribe, in the Circle—the closest the village had to a sacred site—she saw into his soul.

She saw the guilt, and she heard him lie.

“I could do nothing, child. They took her.”

“Who took her?”

“The Qah.”

Tian left the village. She searched for weeks, roaming roving all over the forest. Eventually she fell in with another tribe. They accepted her without question, without judgment. Unlike her birth tribe, who only moved four or five times an orbit, they were entirely nomadic. They ranged across the vast steppes, where meat and water were scarce and the days were longer. They had no winter caves, no regular settlements, no histories stored away on frail parchments. Life was hard, but Tian grew to enjoy life on the move, never in one place for more than a few nightfalls.

She remembered little of that time now, only the emotional pain and the loneliness, and that the constant travel offered her an escape from her memories. The pain never lessened, but her longing for the forests became greater. Every new face that arrived in her adopted tribe was a disappointment, her hope fading even as the grief remained raw, an open wound. The seasons on the plains were unremarkable. The game never changed, only the color of the grasses and the length of the nights.

There was the threat of violence, there, too. During her time with the nomads, she heard rumors of burnt villages, mounted warriors, and slaver raids. They came across small bands of refugees, brimming with horrific stories of dead brothers and sisters, of enslavement and armies. The tribe welcomed those survivors, just as they had welcomed her. Life was tough, and these people had little, but the principles of mutual aid and the Way were still strong. Some chose to stay. Others feared the threat they had fled and headed onwards.

Away from the Qah.

Tian's return to her birth tribe had been difficult for her, but they welcomed her back warmly. She never talked about Priash, and none of the others mentioned her, at least in Tian's hearing. She hadn't discussed it even with Erkan. It was too private to talk about, even with him.

* * *

The Circle started soon after Tian had usurped Grashin's bench for herself. The facilitator was Bal, one of Grashin's closest friends. After some short speeches in thanks to the hunting parties—no one looked at Tian—they began discussing the progress of the clean up, and the state of the food stocks.

Shoëen, an elder, stood up and began to talk.

"It seems pointless to begin any rebuilding. I think it's warm enough to sleep out here for a few days, in the open. We'll be on the move soon, and we should focus on the journey to the new village."

“I agree. Sleeping outside for a few nights won’t do any harm. Besides, the smell in the huts is terrible.”

“Where will we store our food? If the rains come again...”

“The workshops.”

“Good idea.”

“Agreed. Consensus?”

“Consensus,” echoed all of the voices. Even so, with so many gone, it was much quieter than normal. Eerily so, Tian thought.

“What about these pools of water? The midges are getting pretty bad.”

“Mosquitoes, too. I woke up covered in bites.”

“There’s not much we can do except leave.”

Thrake, one of the elders, stood up and took the floor. “There’s also the matter of food. Thanks to some of the younger ones, we have some meat, roots, and fresh berries, but we ought to gather more ulgha.”

There were a few disgusted grunts.

“I know, I know. Just as a precaution. We can’t be too careful. Consensus?”

“Consensus,” said the Circle in unison, even Tian mouthing the familiar word, as unenthusiastically as the rest.

Consensus could sometimes be a long process, even on insignificant matters. During meetings of the Circle, many of the tribe occupied themselves with small tasks, especially when consensus wasn’t reached at the outset. Marthya’h, Tian’s bloodmother, sharpened the knives and smaller spears the hunters used on their expeditions. Erkan whittled or cleaned his nails. Grashin smoked his pipe. Others plaited hair, knitted long socks for the winter caves, or chewed nalga root. Idophes made some of his prettiest necklaces and bracelets at the Circle by the light of the fire.

Tian did nothing at the meetings, except occasionally scowl. As a girl, before Priash, before her time away from the tribe, Tian found Circles long and boring, and a little intimidating. She was always eager to get them over with so she could enjoy

the stories and songs before the tribe retired to bed. She used to spend most of the time in the Circle meetings looking at the faces of those speaking, discussing, and arguing by the fire and moons' light. Tian rarely paid attention to the interminable speeches, the constant calls for consensus, the cryptic processes, the intricacies of which she had often heard, but which she never really cared to remember. Instead, she would watch the other children, pulling faces at her friends, or sneaking around and pulling their plaits or tickling their feet, making them cry out, drawing a sharp look from the adults.

But mostly she watched the brown, lined faces. She loved the way the skin around their eyes crinkled when they laughed, the way their dimples showed when they smiled, the way their hands would dance when they explained, the way their eyebrows rose and fell when they agreed and disagreed, the way their noses wrinkled and their lips pursed when they were frustrated or angry. She enjoyed watching and learning the faces and emotions of these people, her people, the brothers and sisters of the tribe.

Tian watched them now in the Circle, all these seasons later, but she felt little of her former love for them. No, she realized suddenly, she didn't belong here any more.

There was a lull in the discussion. Tian knew that most of them were expecting her to speak, and she wasn't going to disappoint. She rose to her feet. The few conversations that had started during the short break ended abruptly.

Before she had slept the night before, she had thought for some time about what she would say. She imagined rallying against Grashin, calling him out for his short-sightedness, his stubbornness, shouting at him, shaking him by his skinny shoulders, to make him understand, to make him listen, making accusations, making the rest of the tribe see him for what he was.

To change things.

She said and did none of this now. Instead, she walked to the

center of the consensus Circle. She gazed around at the faces of the tribe.

“I’d like to make a proposal to the Circle. It’s one that’s been made before, but it’s worth making again in light of recent events.” She gestured toward the devastated food huts. “I’d like to take the pips of the indus fruit, and the seeds of the ghat grass. I’d like to cut large clearings in the forest, and plant these seeds in the ground in the spring, and cultivate them in the summer, and harvest them in the fall. I’d like to make wine and jam and preserves from the indus, and beer and bread with the ghat. I’d like to have plenty of food all year round.”

As she spoke, she thought of Priash. She spoke Priash’s words, Priash’s phrases. Gave voice to her dream all these seasons later.

They had had many discussions about this. Priash had strong feelings on the subject. Tian had spent many afternoons with Priash out in the forest, Priash showing her the seeds, roots, grains and fruits that she longed to plant and cultivate. She spoke to Tian of orchards, of fields full of grains, of vast stores of food that would free them from the incessant upheaval, offer them freedom from the hardships of nomadic life. Priash had told her urgently, passionately about the opportunities it would bring the tribe, the opportunity to make a permanent place for themselves in the forest, to build warmer sleeping quarters, make sturdier stables and kennels for the animals, larger and cleaner kitchens and washing areas.

Tian had long known how much Priash hated moving season after season. Before a move, she would be grouchy, snapping at the most harmless comment or remark. Tian tended to avoid her at such times. The horses could only carry so much, and the tribe tended to travel light, carrying only tools, bedding, clothing, and provisions for the trek, as well as a few personal possessions. There was little room for Priash’s large collection of herbs, seeds, powders, oils, and extracts that she built up in every village. Priash was forced to leave most of these behind with every move, carrying as much as she could in the horse

bags, and in deep pockets she stitched into the her clothing and bedding she used. But it pained her to leave so much behind, to look at the shelves in the herbalist hut and make her choices, and start afresh every move. It was a constant irritant.

It hurt Tian to see Priash so upset, especially about something that was, frankly, alien to Tian. Apart from a few bracelets, she had nothing to take, and nothing to leave behind.

If Tian needed something, she took it, or made it, or asked for it. The hunters shared their gear, and she rarely used the same bow twice; tweaking the tightness of the string to suit her draw took just a moment. If there she couldn't find one she liked, she would cut the wood and bring it to Garuthka, one of the better bowyers in the tribe, or make the bow herself if he was busy. The same went for the knife she used, even the clothes she wore, and the saddle she rode upon. If she needed an axe or a new belt, she took it from the stores and replaced it once she was done with it, or discarded it if it was broken. She remembered a verse from one of the old songs the tribe sang as they were building their a new village, one of Tian's favorites—favorites that she often hummed to herself while she was out alone or hunting.

*Empty and be full;
Wear out and be new;
Have little and gain;
Have much and be confused.*

Priash didn't shared these sentiments, but they meant much to her. If she were completely honest with herself, Tian found Priash's dream of settling in one place strange, and not a little boring. She enjoyed moving, and she took great pleasure in the slow treks by horse along narrow animal paths in the forest, exploring areas they'd never been in, that no one had stepped in for seasons. She found it invigorating to clear a virgin area of forest and construct their new home, together, from nothing. This normally took three of four days, and the festivities

that followed were always loud and boisterous. Once the final log pole was placed, and the last rope pegged, the whole village would take part in the first hunt. Even those who rarely hunted, the younger children and the elders, would come along. Whatever game they caught, which, with all the noise and commotion, was usually too slow or old to run very fast, was brought back to the village in triumph. The consensus circles on the first night were jovial, full of laughter and dancing. It was in these times that Tian felt most alive, felt the most love for the tribe. It was for these times that Tian had returned from her self-imposed exile with the plains tribe after Priash was taken.

So when Tian spoke that morning in the Circle about the ghat and the indus, she was remembering Priash's dream, not her own. Yet she knew it was the only way to save herself, to save them, from Grashin. The constant rebuilding, along with the circle rituals, was lulling the tribe into a false sense of security. They believed that power, hierarchies, leaders could not exist in their society. But Tian could see that the constant rebuilding was not a source of strength, but weakness. It was one of the sources of Grashin's power, a way of erasing the past, of covering his tracks.

In her heart, she knew that they would shout her down and, perhaps, she longed for it. Besides, Grashin had taught her well; she was setting her own trap.

"I'm tired of moving. I want to settle somewhere and never go hungry, never worry about floods or droughts or the game moving on or the fishing being bad."

The reaction was slow to come, the tribe still tired from the previous day and the sleepless night before. At first there was exasperation. Then anger.

"What you are asking for is *agriculture!*" a voice from the back shouted, spitting the last word.

"Yes," replied Tian. "Exactly."

More shouts rang out; several villagers were on their feet gesturing aggressively. Bal, the facilitator, called for Tian to be removed. The timekeeper, a young woman named Aavyen,

shouted an objection, and called on him to ask for consensus. Reluctantly, he called for it. Unsurprisingly, there was none. The ensuing debate was loud, but predictable. The elders used scare words like agriculture, technology, culture, civilization. Some of the tribe called her an egoist, shouted at her for disrupting the meeting. Aavyen called for a break, and walked over to where Tian sat alone, on Grashin's bench.

She had slept with Aavyen a couple of times, but they were not close, and hadn't spent much time with one another for a number of seasons. Now Aavyen appealed directly to her, pleading.

"Why are you doing this, Tian? You know they'll kick you out of the meeting. Stop now, before it turns nastier. Stop being so selfish. Can't you see we're struggling here, that people are afraid, exhausted? The trip to the silo is dangerous, autumn is coming, and we have no provisions. You start talking about indus and ghat at a time like this?"

"This seems like the ideal time to be talking about it," said Tian calmly.

"You're being deliberately provocative. Pursuing your childish agenda, your damned vendetta against Grashin now? You won't withdraw? You want this to continue?"

"I'm afraid so. I won't withdraw."

Aavyen's head dropped. With a sigh, she turned, gesturing to Bal that the Circle could be reconvened.

The reaction was as strong, if not stronger, than Tian had anticipated. The tribe rallied in opposition to her proposal, united by tiredness, worries, and fears. Even her closest friends spoke passionately against her. Never had the tribe turned on a proposal, on an individual, with such a united voice. Aavyen tried to moderate the more extreme speakers, but with little success. The ghat and indus proposal became merely a pretext to denounce Tian and all of her ideas as divisive, dangerous, reactionary. The tribe released all of its fears, all of its frustrations at her recent conduct in the Circle.

Tian sat impassively through it all. She watched Grashin out

of the corner of her eye. His face was blank. She wondered what he was thinking, what schemes were fermenting behind those small grey eyes.

Then he surprised her. He stood up, slowly, silencing the shouts. The sun shone brightly in the sky now, and he squinted against it. The tribe was used to hearing his voice. It was gentle and familiar, and he would often read from his histories or recite from memory stories of the old times or the Way, as well as the myths and legends that had scared Tian as a child. He tended to ramble, his stories full of asides and embellishments, but he was a good storyteller. His usual verbosity deserted him today, though. He uttered just one word. The first time Tian, and many of the others sitting in the Circle that day, had heard him say it.

“Block,” he said.

Tian smiled.

CHAPTER 3

Tian could see the Watcher’s face more clearly now by the light of the fire. She was still wary. Neither of them had spoken since it had mentioned the Qah. It seemed more real, now, sitting across from her its back against a tree. Its face was open, expressive. Its long fingers and big palms were crossed in its lap. It actually looked relaxed, calm. Non-threatening, almost.

After some time she broke the silence.

“I used to have nightmares about you. You were part of our nightfall stories. A myth from the old times. A monster to scare children with.”

“Yes, I’ve heard some of those stories,” the Watcher said. “In a tribe far to the east, they call us Zasophan. The night demon. Heard that name?”

Tian shook her head.

“We had a bad reputation there. They said we ate babies. Puppies, too. If someone fell sick, a horse tripped and fell, or a wolf took a fowl, we invariably got the blame. They took to hanging the bones of dead dogs above the doors to their sleeping quarters to ward us off, stop us snatching their children from their cots.” An involuntary shiver ran through Tian. She had often woken in the night, convinced a Watcher was creeping around in the shadows. The Watcher noticed it, but continued as if it hadn’t. “I’m not entirely sure why they thought dead dogs would work, apart from the smell. Anyway, I wasn’t engineered to be particularly friendly looking. But these keep me hidden, safe.” It pinched the rough black skin on its arms, ran a big hand over its hairless skull, and gestured at its long legs. Tian watched in silence, drinking in the sight of the monster’s weird body, trying to suppress the prickly feeling on the back of her neck. “I’m designed for observing and survival,” the Watcher continued. “Not to intimidate, or scare. Or even eat imaginative young children.” It smiled again, small blunt teeth a shocking white against its dark face.

“Well, those stories scared me. I still have nightmares about the Watchers,” Tian confessed. “About you.”

“There are many more dangerous creatures than me in these woods, Tian.”

The smile faded. “If I were you, I’d be dreaming about them, not me.” The Watcher’s voice dropped, as if talking to itself. “*When the people do not fear what they ought to fear, that which is their great dread will come on them.*”

Tian was taken aback by the peculiar phrase; she thought she had heard it somewhere before, but couldn’t place it.

“The Qah are coming south, enslaving and killing. Surely you heard the stories while you were on the steppes?”

Tian hid her shock that the creature knew such specific details about her life. “We thought they were rumors, like the Watchers. But what can I do about it? Why do you need my help?”

“The silos, Tian. They are using them as bases, building

sprawling, permanent encampments around them, using them as staging grounds for raids on the surrounding territories. They are sweeping across this continent like a plague, hopping from silo to silo. Now they are here, in the forests, and they are close.”

“The silos?” Tian whispered, her heart beating fast. The memory came back to her of the morning after the flood as she’d fled into the forest to avoid seeing Grashin. That last look back at all those loved ones preparing to head out into the forest to the silo rushed back.

“Yes. The Qah have found a way to circumvent our safeguards.” Tian noticed the pain in its eyes, its resonant voice expressing the faintest note of anguish. “Once they did so, they’ve been expanding their little empire exponentially.”

“I don’t understand. How do you know about the silos?”

“Oh. Simple. We built them, of course. My people live in them.”

Tian stared at the Watcher, into its large, strangely friendly eyes, trying to read them.

“I’m sorry, Watcher, but that’s hard to believe. It’s impossible. Even if you did build them...” she hesitated. The Watcher gave her a little affirmative nod. She continued. “Your people couldn’t live there. We’d have seen you.”

“It’s unlikely. Very little of the silo is above ground. What you see when you go there is just a fraction of what is really there. We live in bunkers underneath, in a cave networklike that of your winter village.”

“But, the smell,” said Tian, repressing a gag at the memory.

The Watcher laughed loudly in the dark, scaring Tian. Its laugh was melodic, and sounded distinctly, like birdsong. It was strange to see this lanky creature emitting such a beautiful yet frightening noise.

“I’ll let you in on a secret Tian. We make the smell, too.” Its yellow eyes sparkled, amused.

Tian had been to a silo twice. The first time she had been very young, twenty seasons perhaps, too young to remember the details clearly. She knew it had been a long, dry summer season; she recalled the dust that covered the village, the bedding, and her clothes, in every wrinkle, every crease and fold. She had forgotten the trek to the silo, but she remembered the nauseating smell, the pungent taste, distinctly. Tian had remained behind with the children and their caretakers, three or four days away from the silo, but even there the smell was foul.

The second time the tribe had resorted to a silo she was much older, forty-five seasons. She'd been old enough to remember the hard winter and the long journey to it. The game was slow to recover that spring. Winter had lasted weeks longer than usual, and they had consumed all of the preserved meat and most of the fruits. They even had to eat the gritty ulgha paste.

The smell hit them when they were around fourteen days into the journey. It started as a faint odor, but quickly became overpowering. The others had warned her that the food silos were unpleasant places, and children as young as her rarely made the entire journey. But she had pleaded to go along, unwilling to be left behind.

She later wished that she hadn't been so adamant.

Only a few hours after they left the younger children behind, the smell became overpowering. Her eyes stung, she vomited several times, and she suffered dizzy spells. She stuffed strong smelling herbs up her nose and chewed takka infused with banjali root, as the others did, but it was no good. Tian could *taste* the aroma. It clung to the back of her throat, however much she packed her nostrils. Tears poured down her cheeks. With every step she took closer to the silo it seemed to worsen. She imagined it coating her lungs and insides with a rank, black sludge—feces, dead fish, burnt flesh, and decomposing animal guts.

That night she wrapped long scarves soaked in pungent ointments around her head, as the others did, but she got little sleep. Her stomach turned over unbearably, the stink never abating.

The rest of the journey was a haze, a blur of nausea and the stench of decay.

The silo itself was small, circular, flat, out of place here amongst the ancient trees. Encased in a dazzling hard shell, it was completely alien. It stood silently, the surrounding forest eerily silent. Tian was surprised to see cold fire pits and the remains of small shelters around it. She'd asked an elder what these were.

"Sometimes people live here," he'd said.

"Who?" she gasped.

"It depends. Mostly hermits, freeloaders. Some deviants unwelcome in the tribes. Small groups of bandits sometimes. But they always move on. No one can stand this place for long. Still, this is a very dangerous place, little one. Stay close."

Tian nodded, reaching for his hand. She dreaded staying another night in this place. The thought that people might actually choose to live here, even temporarily, astonished her.

A wide door on the south side of the silo was the only entrance. Above it was a strange circular symbol, with unfamiliar writing around it. She didn't ask what it was, she was too eager to get inside, to get away—she hoped—from the smell. As they approached, the door slid open. Feigning confidence she didn't feel, she followed the others inside.

The silo was cold and very quiet. The smell was horrific, even worse than outside. It was like running into a wall. She nearly fell over. She could see the effect it was having on the others; they too staggered. Someone fainted behind her.

She swallowed dryly, glancing around. The silo was empty. The walls were like those outside, white and shiny, and they seemed to absorb sound. But here they also radiated a soft light. Perturbed, Tian looked at the others, trying to understand. Where was everything? Had the bandits taken all the food? Had they traveled all this way, through the stench, for nothing? Tears welled in her eyes. Disappointment hit her like a punch in the gut.

* * *

Tian hadn't anticipated that Grashin would be the one to block her proposal, let alone that he'd propose to exclude her from the tribe. She'd underestimated him. She thought him too cowardly to act himself, relying on others to do his work for him. But he'd seized his chance to be rid of Tian. He knew that the tribe was exhausted and angry, and open to extreme measures. Yet Grashin had misjudged her, too.

"For proposing the adoption of agriculture, and in doing so undermining the values, customs and traditions of this tribe and the Way, I propose that Tian be expelled from the Circle and from the tribe. Immediately, and indefinitely."

The tribe was shocked. There was a palpable unease the moment he paused. He quickly continued, his voice rising above the murmurs that had broken out.

"Tian has persistently attempted to introduce hierarchical beliefs to our society, has incited the tribe to discard the Way, and has made proposals to the Circle that endanger our way of life. She has pursued a personal vendetta, a feud against me, and in doing so has persistently disrupted the Circle, jeopardizing the safety of our society for the sake of herself. It is for these *crimes*," he said, using a word unfamiliar to many of the villagers, "that I propose she be expelled and excluded."

They had all learned as children that planting seeds or fruits was dangerous, a precursor to exotic, forbidden things such as civilization, hierarchy, law. There were ancient and mostly unspoken taboos in the tribe, ones that ran deep, tangled up with the mysterious and unknown. No one ever elaborated on these things, on why they were so bad, so frightening, and Tian got the sense that her elders didn't grasp the concepts too firmly themselves.

But they often talked about the histories and the Way. Grashin cited these now.

There was still a strong sense of discomfort in the Circle. Tian knew that, despite the things many of them said only mo-

ments before, that most had never contemplated her expulsion.

Grashin sensed this. He changed tack.

“We all know the histories talk about the before time, a time before consensus, before we understood the Circle and the Way. The scrolls talk of huge villages living in squalor, tied to one place for all seasons. Places of misery, where some feasted every nightfall while others starved, where some toiled all day while others played, where brothers and sisters killed and enslaved one another over the dirt, the air, even over the rocks in the ground. What she,” he gestured at Tian, “is suggesting will lead us back to those times, will introduce to our society all that we have for generations striven to protect ourselves from. We must not allow her egoizing to corrupt us any longer, to threaten our brothers and sisters, to threaten our future. I call for her banishment. I call for consensus.”

Tian didn't stick around to hear the result. She walked out of the Circle, heading towards the workshops. The tribe watched her in silence as she went. Nobody tried to stop her. Grashin eyed her closely as she walked by him, trying to figure out her next move, and whether what he had said was enough to make her leave. A public humiliation that she would or could not stand.

Tian had to suppress a smile as she walked through the flood-wrecked village. All she had intended to do was trick one of Grashin's allies into condemning the cultivation of seeds. She expected a mild rebuke, and some choice quotes from one of his cronies that she might be able to throw back in Grashin's face in the Circle. She hadn't anticipated that events would play out like this, so perfectly. When he began speaking, she tried to calm her excitement, the happiness that was bubbling up inside of her. She was still half expecting another of Grashin's ploys, expecting him to have outsmarted and outplayed her yet again. But as he rambled on portentously, self-righteously about the Way, she knew he'd stumbled, overestimated. His keen eye for the right move had failed him this time. Deep down, she even

felt a little sorry for him, this frail old man. Then she thought of Priash.

She peeled back the hide from the door of one of the smaller workshops. This particular one was often used to carve tool handles handles and arrow shafts, and it smelled strongly of wood shavings. The faint smell of ink and yullah pulp, which was used to make the parchments Grashin wrote upon, was also in the air.

She looked at Grashin's bench now. This was invariably his. Nobody else in the tribe used it. Some of the other benches had tools left on them, and one had a dirty plate on it, but generally they were tidy, ready for the next user. In stark contrast to the other desks, Grashin's was piled high with parchments, drying yullah papers, small pots of ink. Several of his pipes and other assorted personal possessions littered the bench. Nobody else had such exclusive use of one particular station. Another of his unquestioned perks, Tian thought to herself. She opened a drawer crammed with miscellaneous junk, empty ink pots, broken nibs, even some moldy havish berries. She opened another, finding stacks of papers covered with small, neat writing filling it to the brim. What she was looking for was at the back. She took it out and placed the bowl on the work surface, gently lifting the lid.

A faint smile came across her face as she peered down at the contents and murmured, "I've got you now you old shitstool."

* * *

Over the seasons, Priash had dropped several hints to Tian about Grashin. They were in the spring camp, where the woodland was less dense, and gave way to wide expanses of plains. Tian had returned that morning from a two-day hunting trip, and she was lounging on the ground, enjoying the sun's warm rays.

“Those damned bloody people! They are so... so primitive!” Tian looked up. Priash came storming over to where Tian lay, caring little who heard her.

Tian had been talking most of the afternoon with Haroon and Reid about one of the brothers, Jaal, who had spoiled yet another hunt. He was young and headstrong and, not for the first time, had tried to spear a bison before the hunting party was ready, while they were still encircling it. It could have been potentially very dangerous. Fortunately, he was a poor shot and had missed the throw, and the bison had simply charged off harmlessly through an open gap in the hunters’ circle. A loud argument ensued, souring everyone’s mood.

Seeing the look on Priash’s face, Haroon and Reid glanced at Tian and drifted away toward the kitchens.

“What do you mean?” Tian asked.

“It pisses me off that some people around here get away with anything; everyone turns a blind eye. Yet, if I did it, or was even caught dreaming about possibly thinking about doing it, the wrath of the Circle would come down on me so hard my head would spin, and they’d be invoking the fucking demons—Civilization and Hierarchy—denouncing me as a deviant, and condemning me to Veysh’lur for all eternity.”

Tian enjoyed listening to Priash when she was angry, and she often had to suppress a smile when Priash began one of her rants.

“Bad day, then?”

Priash glared at her. Tian wondered for a second if she’d pushed it too far. She hadn’t. Priash’s face softened.

“No. Yes. I’m sorry. Just those fuckers with their Way and their stupid outdated boarshit customs. *But Priash, these are the old ways. But Priash, we tread lightly in the forest. But Priash, these are not our woods, we receive its bounty as gifts. But Priash, we must leave no mark. But Priash, we’ve always done it like this. But Priash, But Priash.*” Priash did a passable impression of Nealah, one of the herbalists she often worked, and clashed,

with. “Fucking barbarians and their stupid Way,” she spat.

“You mustn’t let them get to you, sister.”

“I know, I know. But if one more person says ‘harmony’ to me today I’m leaving for the mountains and never coming back.”

“Can I come?” asked Tian, shifting closer to her.

“Yeah, I guess. I’d need someone to scrub my back and keep my feet warm. Those mountains get pretty cold at night. I missed you last night, by the way,” she added, her voice softening. “Did you lie with anyone?”

“No, too busy,” Tian said.

When Priash looked at her quizzically, she briefly explained the problems they’d had with Jaal.

They settled down on the ground for. Tian stroked the back of Priash’s hand, circling the knuckles and inspecting a few nicks and cuts half-interestedly.

Tian began to drift into sleep. Some time later, Priash rolled over on to her side. Tian could feel her warm breath on her face.

“You remember when I said I couldn’t work out what it was that Grashin and some of the other old ones smoke in their pipes, but that it wasn’t yusha grass?” Priash asked, her voice hushed.

Tian’s eyes opened, alert.

“Yes. It smells like yusha to me.”

“Well it’s definitely not. But I couldn’t tell what it was. I thought maybe they were mixing it with thamba roots or oop leaves. The smoke is too pungent and the ash too white to just be yusha.”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me. Anyway, I think I might know what it is now. You won’t believe...” Her voice trailed off; Haroon was walking towards them.

“Forgot the shoes,” Haroon said, pointing to them underneath Tian’s legs. Haroon sat down to put them on, but lingered for a moment. Neither Priash nor Tian said much; she got the hint and moved to another group after a short while. Priash

waited until she was out of earshot before she started talking again.

“I was out yesterday with Nealah and some of the others. We were out hunting for suba saplings.”

“Remind me...”

“We mash it up and paste it in on the insides of delicate pots to stop them cracking when we fire them. Anyway, we were down towards the river, around the spot we had the fish festival a few weeks ago. Remember?”

Tian nodded.

“Well you know how big the rocks down there are, the ones right on the bank?”

Tian nodded again. The river to the south of the spring village was narrow and winding, the banks strewn with boulders, some bigger than their sleeping huts. In places it cut straight through the rocks, leaving cliffs towering over the water on both sides. It also had deep calm pools. It could be a dangerous river to navigate, but great fun for diving and playing in, even though the water, running straight from the mountains, was freezing, heart-stoppingly cold.

“We’d been searching for the suba all day, and we hadn’t had much luck. Most of the ones we found had been stripped by animals. We’d stopped on the bank for secondmeal, and I was tired, couldn’t keep my eyes open. After eating, I went down to one of the pools to dip in and wake myself up. I told the others I was going for a swim and I’d catch up with them in an hour or two.”

“You must have frozen,” said Tian, a frown creasing her eyebrows

“Yes,” Priash said, grinning. “I didn’t stay long, just a few minutes. It was just too cold. But it woke me up. Anyway, I hadn’t gone far from the group, and I was climbing up the rocks back towards where we’d eaten. Everyone but Nealah, Bal and Yi’sul had gone already, suba hunting.”

“Your favorite people.”

Priash ignored the jibe. “They were talking, and there

was something up. Something about their body language, you know?” Tian nodded. “They looked really peculiar, so I stopped. I thought they’d seen me, but they didn’t stop talking and none of them looked up at me. I was only thirty meters away, but the sun was behind me and they were too involved in their conversation to notice me. Well, I dropped off the rock I was on, and quietly, like the way I’ve seen you doing it when you’re out hunting, snuck up on them. I got behind this huge boulder about ten meters from them where I could hear them pretty clearly.”

“What were they saying?”

“Nealah was doing most of the talking, and I could barely hear her. But whenever Bal or Yi’sul talked their voices carried better, and I heard almost everything they said.”

“You should have moved closer,” said Tian.

“I couldn’t; there wasn’t much cover. Besides, I’m terrible at hiding, and I was sure they could hear my teeth chattering even from there. I’m sure you could have sneaked up on them and sat on Bal’s lap and heard every word without them ever noticing you, but I’m not that good.”

“Well, plants and berries don’t tend to run away from you,” said Tian, poking her lightly in the ribs. It was true, though. They’d always found Priash first when they’d played hide-and-seek as children. She would shuffle around, hum to herself, pick a terrible, obvious hiding spot—the first place anyone would think of looking. Tian was even a little surprised Priash was able to get close without them noticing her.

“It sounded like they were talking about the winter village. At first I thought I’d made a mistake, that they were just having a regular conversation, even if they were whispering a bit. I was just about to leave and head out after the others. But then I heard Bal mention Grashin, that he was upset, and something about one of the tribes to the east that we shared the cave with. Then they started to talk about ilyup.”

“Ilyup? What’s that?”

Priash shrugged “No idea. But they were talking about how the last batch hadn’t been dried properly, and I heard Yi’sul saying that it tasted too bitter. Nealah spoke for a while, I think she was saying something about having to get some more. But they kept mentioning it.”

“So it’s food, or an herb or something?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, so what? Is that all?” Tian asked, disappointed. She had hoped for something more exciting, some intrigue or juicy gossip about an elder.

Priash pouted a little. “I’ve never heard of ilyup. I’ve read all the stuff Grashin has on herbalism in the histories, or at least everything he’s shown me.” Tian knew that was true. Priash spent most of her winter seasons holed up with thick tomes with uninspiring titles like *The Uses of the Tanja Genus in the Treatment of Bowel Disorders* and *An Herbalist’s Guide to the Proper Fermentation of Unjia Berries*. Just the memory of those dusty old scrolls made Tian repress a yawn. She resented how much time Priash spent looking through those old papers, but she didn’t question that if Priash said it wasn’t in the histories, it almost certainly wasn’t.

“Perhaps you misheard? Might have been something else, not ilyup,” said Tian, feigning interest.

“No, I didn’t mishear. I heard them say it clearly several times. You know how deep Bal’s voice is. Even when he’s trying to be quiet you can hear him in the next hut. And the way they were saying it—why isn’t it in the histories? Why haven’t I ever heard of it?”

“Did you ask them about it?”

“No, of course not.” Tian hid a smile. Priash hated showing her ignorance in front of the other herbalists—one of the reasons she spent so much time alone reading the books in the winter season. “They wouldn’t tell me anyway. They’re always so... secretive.”

“Ursulah would tell you. Poulo too, if you asked nicely. Did you?”

“Nah, they only dabble in it. I like them, but they’re pretty casual. They probably wouldn’t know anyway. Poulo’s memory isn’t what it was, and Ursulah only uses what Nealah gives her for her medicines. I doubt she knows what half of it even does. No, only those three would know,” she said, meaning Nealah, Bal, and Yi’sul, the three most experienced herbalists in the tribe.

“Maybe Grashin, then. If he was upset, maybe he’d tell you. Plus he’d know if there were something in the histories about it.”

“Yes, Grashin.” Priash said, her eyes drifting toward the workshops. “That’s what I thought. So after we got back to village last night, I asked him.”

“And?”

“He lied to me.”

Tian’s attention had been drifting. She wasn’t interested in the herbalist workshop’s politics, and she’d started to think about Jaal again. She lifted her head up sharply, her interest quickly returning to the conversation.

“He lied? How do you know?”

“I just do. I was going to ask him straight out, but when I got to the workshop he wasn’t around. I waited for him a bit. I had a look through some of the papers on the bench he uses—have you seen the way he keeps it?”

“No,” said Tian, shaking her head.

“It’s a mess, stuff piled up all over it. Nealah would have a fit if I left a bench like that. Anyway, I was reading one of the papers on the desk that he’d left out. Some story he’d heard in the winter village that he was writing up. Pretty good, actually. Had one of your favorite characters in as a matter of fact. A Watcher.”

Tian sorely regretted ever mentioning her childish fear of the Watchers to Priash. She took great delight in poking her about them whenever the opportunity arose.

“So, did you ask him?” Tian said, wanting to change the subject.

“Who? Oh, Grashin. Yes, I’m coming to that. So I was read-

ing this Watcher story, which I'll have to tell you some time." Tian pulled a face. "Well, after I finished it, I turned to go, but something caught my eye—one of the pipes Grashin uses. It was sitting on the desk, already packed. I was just about to pick it up and smell it when Grashin walked in. Literally the second I was reaching for it, he was behind me."

"Spooky," said Tian. "He always struck me as creepy."

"Tell me about it. The old shitstool made me jump half out of my skin. He brushed by me, looking all flustered. He started dumping the stuff on the workbench into the drawers in big armfuls. I apologized for disturbing him. He was muttering something under his breath, the old fool."

Priash had clashed many times with Grashin over access to the histories in the winter village. She resented not being able to enter all of the passages that made up the sprawling library. Grashin always had an excuse for advising against her entry into the more distant alleys and tunnels, which made them a no-go area for Priash, unless she were to question his honesty in public. She made do with sitting on a wooden bench in the largest cave in the library with Grashin bringing her the parchments and books she requested. Occasionally he would permit her to take them into the sleeping quarters, if she remembered to treat them with the respect due to these fragile records of our tribe's past, as he put it. She resented having to get his permission, and the patronizing way in which he often spoke to her.

"He asked me what I wanted. I told him I wanted to know more about ilyup. I could see the question surprised him. He was still clearing the desk, and his head darted straight up to the pipe. He looked away really quickly, glancing up at me to see if I'd caught his slip. Of course I pretended not to have noticed. But he looked guilty. You know the way children look when they ask for a second serving of lastmeal? Like that. I saw him try to hide it, and he attempted this horrible little smile.

"Ilyup, sister?" he said. "Why, I don't believe I've ever come across that particular herb."

“It’s an herb?” I asked. I tried to keep my face blank. He started stammering. He must have realized his mistake.

“Well, since it’s you asking me, I assumed that’s what it was. Where did you hear about... what was it called again?” I could tell he was, trying to deflect me. I could see him desperately trying not to look at the pipe.

“Ilyup.” I said. “I thought I overheard someone talking about it. Thought you might know something about it.”

“Me, sister? You’d be better off asking Nealah or Bal.”

“I thought it might have been in the histories somewhere.”

“Oh, no, not that I can remember. Perhaps you misheard?”

You should have seen his face, Tian, the way he was looking at me then, trying to figure something about me, trying to read my mind. It was scary. I started backing away, tried to put his mind at ease.

“Probably, Grashin. I must have made a mistake. Sorry for bothering you, brother,” I said. I left after that.”

“So you think he did know what ilyup was, and was lying?” asked Tian, incredulously.

“Of course, Tian. It was so obvious. If you had seen the way he acted, the way he looked at his pipe, the way the others spoke about it yesterday.”

“But a lie? And about something so trivial?”

“He obviously doesn’t want people to know what ilyup is. It’s obviously not yusha in his pipe, but ilyup. I’ve no idea why he wouldn’t tell me about it, though, why the secrecy. Why a lie.”

Someone close by had started to beat a drum, slowly picking up pace as Priash told her tale. Small groups began to sing softly. A few people wandered out from the workshops, and three boys brought over water flasks and berries from the kitchens.

Tian stood up and said, “Come on. Don’t worry about it now. I’m sure there’s a good reason.”

Tian extended Priash a hand, to help her to her feet. Priash, still deep in thought, didn’t take it. As Tian stood, hand extended, Lumsha, a small girl of fifteen seasons ran up to them, want-

ing to dance with them, and asking Priash to sing. Her small voice broke Priash's train of thought, and Priash smiled at her, rose to her feet, and began singing with the others.

They danced until nightfall, the ilyup temporarily forgotten in the warm evening.