

# KIYA AND HER CHILDREN

## Rise of the Titans

### Part I. Clan of the Serpent

#### 1. Vanam

In the 42nd year from the birth of Vanam

Chief Vanam dismissed the hunters from the hunter's fire and signaled Kiya.

Kiya dismissed the women from the gatherer's fire and obediently followed Vanam into the nearby grove. She turned, raised her tunic, fell to her knees and elbows, and waited.

Aggressively, he entered her and thrust until he was sated. He savored the moment, withdrew, rose, straightened his tunic, grunted, and left.

Kiya maintained her position until he was gone. -- *i should be grateful -- he seldom comes to me anymore -- i've borne him five healthy sons and am the most respected woman in any tribe -- what more does he want?* -- She rose, straightened her tunic, and returned to her family.

Vanam was sitting on his resting stone, ignoring their daughters playing nearby. He did not acknowledge her approach.

"Did I please you?" she asked.

Vanam glanced at her, shrugged his shoulders, and replied, "You were fine."

"Is there more I could do? You don't seem pleased if I move or reach to touch you. I would do more if I knew what to do." -- *i want more than 'fine.'* -- *i want to provide you joy -- to please you -- to excite you -- to make you proud of me --*

"You're fine," Vanam replied. "You're available when I call you. That's all I want."

Her effort to engage in meaningful conversation ended as it always ended, without meaningful conversation. She tried a different tack. "Your children adore you. They are proud their father is chief of a great tribe."

Vanam glanced up. "The females are not mine. You accumulated them from other tribes." He paused. "And the males? Are they mine? They seem to be sons of a different man. They are more like girls than men. Their thoughts are always elsewhere. They cannot hunt or track or dress game. They do not think of the things men think about. They think of women's things, just like my little brother. Maybe Pumi fathered them instead of me."

Kiya offered a gentle laugh as she, at last, replied, "No, Vanam. I have mated with no man but you. If your sons are not to your liking, blame me; not them. You have never guided them or told me, or them, that you wish them to be hunters. They don't know your expectations. And they *do* wish to be like Pumi. He is their father's little brother and the most respected man in the land, for one who isn't a chief, of course. Pumi respects and loves you. He has never even asked me to mate. He is certainly not the father of any of your children."

Vanam rose, stared at her, sneered, and spat out, "Address me as CHIEF Vanam. Mate with whomever you wish. Your sons are an abomination." He stormed off to nowhere.

Kiya glanced at her daughters who studiously kept their heads down and continued their play.

Vanam's words festered in Kiya's mind. -- *i knew that our relationship had weakened, but i did not realize that it had sunk to this -- becoming chief has changed you, vanam -- you were so attentive before becoming chief -- is the pressure too great? -- does the great success of pumi and valkei lessen your sense of self-worth?-- i would help you, vanam, if i knew how -- but all you do is verbally abuse my children and now you cast me into the company of other men --*

She looked at her younger daughters, playing nearby. -- *our relationship is wonderful and warm -- you giggle and laugh as i tell you stories of my childhood and about boys and their nature -- my sons are a different matter -- i expected vanam to provide their training and education -- actually, i have never counseled my sons in any matter -- they keep to themselves, away from both of us --*

Kiya suddenly saw her sons in a new, chilling light. A light brightly illuminating that upon which it fell.

## 2. The First Family Campfires

Several days passed. The hunters left for the hunt. That day, Kiya did not lead the gatherers into the countryside as was normal but instead asked Panti to lead them. She then asked her five sons if she could travel with them. "I would like to see what my sons teach themselves and how you spend your days." She now realized that they had no guidance during their daytime activities. It was well past time that she, since Vanam would not, took an interest in their development. All five boys were excited that an adult, a parent, was interested in them. The older two were old enough to hunt but, as far as she knew, neither had ever been allowed.

"Yes, Mother, please," said her second son, Iran. "Can you prepare food for us? I will plan our day to show you all the places we go and the things we do. We can start as soon as you have prepared."

Kiya was taken aback by Iran's precocious response. She looked at the other boys for signs of disagreement, but they seemed to accept Iran's pronouncement. -- *i may know less about my sons than i know about my mate -- . what kind of woman am i? --*

"You are my wise child," she replied. From this day forward I shall call you 'Sagacity.'"

Sagacity replied, "That would please me, Mother. Thank you."

Kiya retired to prepare provisions. When she returned, the boys, too, were prepared with their hunting pouches containing who knew what.

Sagacity declared, "Well, let's be off. This way, Mother. Let me know if you tire. Follow me."

The band obediently fell into line behind Sagacity and Kiya. They walked, not trotted, westward toward a band of trees. Entering the sparse forest, Kiya heard running water in the distance. Her oldest son, Mutal, suddenly became animated, ran toward the sound of water, and called back, "This way! Follow me."

Without objection, the other boys fell into a single file and followed Mutal. Kiya made her way to the stream where the boys hunched over watching Mutal poke at rocks and move them around. He altered the water flow to create new eddies and expose small fish and things that swam rapidly away. The boys were intrigued. Mutal held up his hand to silence their chatter, "Wait, there should be a frog somewhere over here." Mutal crossed to the other side of the stream and pushed back a pile of leaves. A large frog jumped high into the air at the unexpected intrusion. The three younger boys gave chase and the youngest of the three, Ain, caught the frog before it could hop again. All laughed with delight. Ain asked, "What will I do with it? Eat it?"

The five boys looked to Kiya who was apparently judge and jury. Kiya studied the frog for a moment and then gravely asked the group, "How does my council advise me in this matter? Does the frog live or is it to be our lunch?"

"Lunch!

"Kill it!"

"Let it go!"

"Throw lots!"

"Keep it as a pet!"

"Oh, dear," Kiya said. "There is no consensus here. Return the prisoner to from where he came. He will not be so fortunate the next time he is captured." This appeared to be a popular decision. The prisoner was returned to his abode, unscathed. The boys continued their exploration of the stream and its inhabitants. Kiya watched with keen interest.

Finally, Sagacity announced, "It's time to eat and regain our strength. Do you have nourishment for us, Mother?"

"Why, yes, I do. Both food and drink" replied Kiya. "Shall I prepare a place for us?"

"Yes, please," said Sagacity. "On the knoll over there will be suitable, I believe."

Kiya withdrew a large blanket from her gathering bag and placed it neatly on the ground. She took various breads, meats, and sweets from the bag and placed them on the blanket. She withdrew a stoppered urn and told her sons "I also have an urn of water sweetened with different herbs and spices which may be to your liking. But know that many hunters will not drink this mixture for fear of being likened to a woman."

The five boys exchanged glances as they considered this information. "We see no dishonor here," Sagacity replied. "Let us taste this water and decide for ourselves that which is appropriate."

"My, what a wise and manly decision," she replied to the group. -- *they're communicating only with their eyes -- there is more to my sons than their father sees -- or perhaps he does! --*

As they ate and drank, Kiya turned the conversation to Mutal as she said, "There is one here who apparently knows more about streams and water than even the scholars at Tallstone."

Mutal's face brightened with the recognition of his knowledge. Sagacity opened his mouth to respond but Mutal gave him no chance. Mutal cut him off with, "I remember attending a winter festival and trying to find someone interested in water. Everyone listened but the talk always went to sky or stone or building or planting or animals. There wasn't any interest in water, which must surely be the most important thing in nature after the sun."

"I have never thought about that," Kiya replied. "But, yes, we can live a long time without those other things but only a short time without water. Perhaps water is the most important thing there is."

Mutal sat happily basking in his mother's interest. The other four boys were impressed. Perhaps they would hold their oldest brother in even higher esteem. "From this day forward," Kiya told Mutal, "I shall call you 'Rivermaster.'"

"'Waterboy' would be better," Sagacity quietly interjected.

The boys stared at one another in silence. Kiya had thought that 'Rivermaster' would be accepted with celebration.

Finally, Mutal spoke, "Yes, 'Waterboy' would be better."

"I see," replied Kiya; not seeing at all. "And why is this?"

"Because," Mutal began without emotion, "our father has told us that we will never be men. That we will remain boys all our lives or, worse yet, become girls. He has told us that we will never become hunters and that we are useless to the tribe. He pities us and is embarrassed because you present us as his children. That is why 'Waterboy' is better, Mother. It is a name that will not make my father mad at me."

Kiya thought -- *can this be true?* --

The five boys stared at her expectantly and apparently in complete agreement with Mutal. She knew then that his words were true.

Kiya replied, "I see no dishonor here. Let us taste this water and decide for ourselves what is true." She stared at Mutal and demanded, "Are you 'Rivermaster', Son?"

Her oldest child silently held her gaze. The other four boys looked back and forth between their brother and their mother -- waiting.

The boy rose, straightened his back, and looked at each brother. "I am 'Rivermaster.' Now, let's find some colored rocks for Brother Ain."

"What a delightful idea," Kiya said as she stood. "You all go on ahead and I will catch up after I pack the remains of our lunch." She wanted to give the boys time to themselves to come to terms with this development. Strangely, Kiya was not upset. She now understood her sons and her mate. Why this was Vanam's attitude, she did not know, but he had drawn a clear line between himself, her, and their -- her -- children. She would now journey across that line without consideration for CHIEF Vanam's desires. -- *vanam is a man of great strength and temper, but i am not afraid -- i will raise my children to be not afraid -- a mother cannot bestow manhood onto her son but perhaps a boy's brothers can -- colored rocks? -- well, then -- let us look for colored rocks --*

The afternoon was spent as Kiya and her sons scoured the creek bed for stones streaked with color. None were found. Ain was disappointed. There was nothing to add to his collection.

They arrived back at camp late. The women's fire was already burning. The older women and children, including Kiya's three youngest daughters, were gathered around it anticipating the evening's activities. The gatherers, including Kiya's three oldest daughters, were not yet around the fire. Their daily collection of plants was bountiful. Sorting and storing the plants by their use would take a while longer. They were meticulous with their craft. They would not be hurried. The male children ran and rough-housed. She told her three youngest sons to join the other boys. Rivermaster and Sagacity would be out of place with the younger boys since both were old enough to be on the hunt with the men and older boys. Yet here they were with Kiya and not on the hunt or around the fire. She had never noticed before where the two boys were at this time of day, so she asked, "Where do you two go in the evening?"

"Oh, we find a spot away from the noise and review our day," Sagacity said. "If we found some good rocks, we build a fire and study them. The colors and patterns can be quite interesting."

"How nice," Kiya said. "It's too bad we did not find any. A fire just for us would be nice." Kiya stood silently and considered her family; her immediate family, not her extended family. -- *my two oldest sons are estranged from our clan -- my three youngest sons are someplace playing with the other children -- my three oldest daughters are sorting plants with the other women -- my youngest three are playing someplace with the other children -- i know little about the nature of my sons other than that none are interested in the hunt -- but one knows everything about water -- one is more articulate than me -- one loves colored rocks -- my adopted daughters are delightful and smart, but*

*soon enough, vanam will have me trade them to other tribes -- i won't be able to laugh with them -- teach them how to handle males -- how to gather plants -- how to experiment to achieve different results -- at best, all of my sons will be traded to other tribes because vanam dislikes them -- they aren't like him -- they embarrass him -- vanam will discard me soon enough -- i will grow old --then make a last camp someplace -- then die -- this is the way things are -- this is the way things have always been --*

She looked toward the heavens with sadness. -- *sister valki -- you are pumi's mate -- his equal --you are wise - - what should i do? -- what can i do? -- would you remember that i once said to you, "rather than finding out what the plant will do, decide what you want to be done, and find the plant to do it?" -- we both laughed -- i see now, we laughed with fear -- but surely this is possible -- but no one has ever tried because this is not the way things are done -- to leave the path of 'the way things have always been' is terrifying -- 'to do something different' is uncharted, dangerous territory -- you could be left behind from the tribe -- perhaps banished --*

Kiya saw that which she wanted. -- *i will NOT do things the way they have always been done! -- i shall make my own path!* -- Strangely, she was not afraid.

### ~ The First Family Campfire ~

She said, "Rivermaster, build us a fire. Sagacity, gather your brothers and sisters, all of them, including the older ones. Say that I wish for us, and only us, to gather around Rivermaster's fire. Tell Ain to bring his collection of rocks. His family wishes to learn about rocks."

A surprised Rivermaster gathered the necessary materials and built a circle large enough to hold a fire for his family. He found a rock suitable for his mother to sit upon. By the time Sagacity had gathered his brothers and sisters, the fire was burning, Kiya sat upon her rock; hands folded in her lap. Ain arrived and arranged his collection of precious, colored rocks in front of his mother. The children approached the fire tentatively, unsure of what protocols were in place. Was this fire only for females? Would there be a different fire for the males? In any case, where would the children sit in relation to adults? They arrived and stood around the fire in confusion.

Kiya said, "We are one family. Sit in a circle around Rivermaster's fire. My two oldest daughters, sit on either side of me, and then a son and then a daughter. Rank is for members of our tribe, not for members of our family. I am told that my oldest son is an expert in the knowledge of water. I bestowed him the name 'Rivermaster.' You have a brother wiser than your mother. I now call him 'Sagacity.' And Ain is a collector of colored rocks. I did not know these things before today. It is my wish that each of us knows the other. I have asked Ain to begin by showing his family his collection of rocks." She paused, waiting for reactions.

The concept of 'one family' was foreign. They were members of a tribe, each member having specific expectations and duties, always aware of rank, and always observing established protocols. For a female to show interest in the dealings of a male was not wise; certainly, a male would never show interest in the interests of a female. And children? Do not be the child that crosses an adult, not even a young adult. Retribution is swift and without mercy. Her children cast unsure glances at one another; not wanting to be the first to commit.

Sagacity took control from his mother. He said, "Themis, you are the oldest daughter, sit on Mother's right. Mnemosyne, you sit on her left. Nan, sit next to Mnemosyne, and then Phoebe, Manar, Rhea, me, Tethys, Rivermaster, and then Theia and Themis. If I left anyone out, make yourself a place."

Her children took their assigned places. The females were nervous sitting next to a male around a campfire. The children were excited to be sitting around *any* campfire. There was no laughter, no giggles, no bantering. All was serious. Deadly serious.

Kiya said, "Ain, show us your rocks, tell us about them."

Hesitantly, Ain began. He picked up a rock the size of his fist and held it high for all to see in the firelight. The stone reflected deep blue stripes alternating with thin gray striations. He began. "You have to look carefully to find these colored rocks; in creek beds and near foot-hills where the earth has been washed away. When you clean them and crack them open, beautiful colors might appear. Some stones can be separated many times to create smaller stones of pure color; deep blue, bright green, pretty red." He talked into the night about his collection of rocks. Ain came upon a necklace he had made by piercing a hole in five thin, colorful stones and placing a cord through them. He had never thought that his mother might care about his obsession and care enough to let him show off to all his brothers and sisters. Ain was still young and not accustomed to recognition from anybody in any form. Tonight, sharing his treasures with his brothers and sisters by their campfire, he burst with pride with a feeling of belonging. Belonging to his mother, to his brothers, to his sisters. With joy and a little fear, he presented the colorful stone necklace to his mother. "Mother, would you wear this necklace I made?"

Kiya was taken aback and shocked to receive a gift, a beautiful gift from her child, her youngest son. It was so unexpected. "Why, Ain, it is beautiful. I will be proud to wear it every day. I shall show it to all the other women. What you have made and given to me is wonderful, I shall treasure it forever. Look, you have pierced holes into the stones. From this moment forward, I shall call you 'Piercer.' Would that please you?"

For a boy to be given an adult name, especially one as young as he, was a high honor. His two oldest brothers had been given proper names only today. His eyes widened. After staring at his mother for a few moments, he replied, "Y-yes, Mother."

The girls were overcome with excitement; gifts, names, sitting around a fire, seeing and learning about beautiful things. They clapped their hands and shrieked together with delight, "Pier-cer! -- Pier-cer -- Pier-cer!"

Piercer turned red. He looked for a retreat but there was none. He could only stand there, staring at the ground, with no more words to say.

Kiya said, "Piercer, think of the wonderful things you could do with your rocks if you were an apprentice stone cutter. Now, it is late. Rivermaster, escort your sisters and brothers back to our sleeping area. I will remain and extinguish the fire and be along shortly."

Phoebe rose, walked to Piercer, stooped down, and embraced her brother. "'Piercer' -- that is a lovely name, a manly name. Carry it with pride. I love your collection of rocks. I had no idea that a rock could be so beautiful. I am proud that you are my brother and that we are in the same family."

As the others left, Rivermaster said. "I will be happy to take care of the fire, Mother."

"Thank you, Son, but I might stay a few moments to collect my thoughts. You make sure everyone gets back safely."

He nodded and joined the others, walking and talking their way back to their beds.

Kiya continued to sit and stare at the dying fire. She looked into the distance where the women's fire had burned and was now extinguished. -- *the women will have talked about me -- they would wonder what all*

*this meant -- how the chief's mate -- the leader of the gatherers -- had abandoned her post -- her duties -- to build a separate campfire -- a campfire mixing men, such as they are, and women, and children together without regard to rank -- vanam would certainly want to know of this! -- so, what does this mean? -- what would chief vanam do? -- what should i do? --* She considered her question. *-- the answer is clear -- 'decide what I want to be done and find the plant to do it.'* -- The night had exceeded her expectations. *-- my three oldest daughters were upset that they had been called from the women's fire -- it's still new and exciting to them -- but they had excitedly joined discussions of rocks and new names -- my daughters addressed their brothers without notice of rank or position -- my sons responded in kind -- the fire brought everyone closer together -- the women's fire promotes sisterhood -- undoubtedly, the men's fire promotes camaraderie among the men -- phoebe made a strange comment to piercer, 'i'm so glad we are in the same family' -- but she was talking about those gathered around this campfire, not of their tribe -- this is a new way of looking at 'family'-- why does this statement feel so strange? -- so right? --* She sat quietly for a moment. *-- i have left the path of the way things have always been -- where do i wish this path to lead? --*

She laughed out loud. *-- i must find the right plant! --*

She rose, extinguished the campfire, and went to her bed.

~ Kiya and Panti ~

Sunrise.

The camp bustled with activity as the women prepared for their day. Kiya found Panti to talk with her.

Panti would have replaced Palai as the tribe's elder woman except Vanam had become Chief at the same time Palai made her last camp at Urfa and had left the tribe. As the new chief, Vanam appointed Kiya to be the tribe's new elder woman. Panti was older than Kiya and had far more experience in matchmaking and dealing with issues that arose among the women. Kiya's appointment was not met with universal approval because Panti would have been Palai's natural successor. But it was grudgingly admitted among the women that Kiya was a superior master of their art, both in identifying and usage of that which they gathered. What Kiya lacked in experience was offset by her knowledge and intelligence. Panti never objected, but still the slight was with her. Kiya remained solicitous of Panti's advice; even when not really needed. Panti took over the duties of the chief gatherer when Kiya remained in the camp; such as yesterday.

"Panti, I need your help," Kiya said.

"You need to remain in the camp again, today?" Panti asked.

"No. I need someone wise to talk with. You are the wisest person in the tribe. Can we work side-by-side today so that we can talk about things?"

Panti brightened with the warm words. Her mood shifted from 'put-upon' to 'needed.' She said, "This sounds serious. Are you with child, yet again?"

Kiya laughed. "No, no. That, I could handle easily enough. No. I wish to talk of things not so easily handled. Will you join me when we get to the fields?"

"Yes. I look forward to our day together. I shall find you and we shall talk as we gather."

Kiya thanked Panti and donned the broad-rimmed headpiece she wore in the fields. Each continued their preparations for the day.

The gatherers finished their morning routines and walked to the fertile fields far from the camp.

Panti found Kiya advising three younger women on their art. "Do they learn anything?" Panti asked.

"Yes," Kiya replied. "They learn well and will be excellent additions to whichever tribe accepts them."

The three young women giggled. Compliments, becoming women, finding a mate, going to a new tribe -- what was there not to giggle about?

Kiya and Panti strolled off, monitoring the women in the field.

"So, what do you think?" Kiya asked.

Panti replied, "I think what I'm told to think. No more. No less."

Kiya laughed. "Well said, Panti. Now, what do you think?"

Panti replied with caution, "About what, Kiya?"

Kiya was silent for a while. "About Chief Vanam. About how he leads the tribe. About how he cares for me. About how he cares for his children. Yes, start with Chief Vanam, and let's see how it goes from there."

This time, Panti was silent for a while, then said, "Oh," and was silent a while longer. "I would never question my chief in any matter or find fault with anyone in my tribe. You know that."

Neither woman spoke for a long time.

Then Panti released her long-repressed diatribe. "Vanam is a much better chief than Talaimai. Our tribe prospers under Chief Vanam. This is what matters. That he mates with other women and pays little attention to you or his children is of no consequence to the tribe's well-being. That he finds his sons to be weak and unfit for hunting is none of my concern. If not fit for hunting, they could become skywatchers or stone cutters. He has only to direct them. That he does not do so, is of concern. Your two oldest sons handicap our tribe. They are old enough to be contributing to our welfare. Has Vanam not decided on what to do with them? I assumed he directed you to trade them to another tribe, even without compensation. Maybe the strange people at Tallstone would want them. None of your other sons have even gone on a training hunt. You are fortunate that your daughters are from other tribes. They could take protectors from this tribe. There is nothing for you to do. Everything will come to pass as it always comes to pass." Sated, she offered, "Your necklace is beautiful. Where did you get it?"

"Piercer, my youngest son, made it from rocks he had collected. No mother has ever received a better present."

The two women worked on in silence. Kiya said, "The day grows hot. Let's find shade and rest." As they walked toward a shade tree, they inspected younger women's harvests; complimenting or cajoling as needed. After resting and eating, they continued their day; gossiping and sharing knowledge.

As the day was ending, they readied for their return to camp. Leading their charges back to the camp, Kiya said to Panti, "It is you who should have been our tribe's elder woman; not me. Vanam did our tribe no favor by appointing me. I wish to spend the next few days with my children. Will you take care of the gathering duties?" It was not a question.

~ The Second Family Campfire ~

Upon her return to camp, Kiya found her older sons and said, "I enjoyed our family gathering around your campfire last night. Shall we do it again tonight? Will the others approve?"

"Yes, let's," Rivermaster said. "Piercer found some stones in the creek bed today. They're small but interesting. Especially where they were found in the water. They were in a place I would not have expected."

Kiya replied, "How exciting! We will have to hear from both of you. And maybe your sisters can tell us about what they found in the fields today."

"That would be interesting," said Sagacity. "Who knows what goes on in the minds of women when they are out gathering?"

Kiya laughed. "Yes, who knows?"

That night, her family gathered around their second family campfire. Food was shared, and all was good. Piercer showed off three small stones. Their surfaces were streaked with dull red. He was considering breaking them open to see how deeply the colors ran, but he had not yet decided. Rivermaster explained how he was surprised to find them on the edge of the bank, out of the water. Colored stones were usually found by picking up all the pebbles from the bottom of the stream and sifting through them. He was unsure how these had gotten out of the water so he would have to pay closer attention in the future.

Sagacity stood. "All that's interesting, but let's find out what our sisters search for and how they know when they have found it. Plants may not be as interesting as water and rocks, but they are still useful. Themis -- did you have a successful day? Tell us about it." Sagacity sat down.

Themis, Tethys, and Phoebe looked at one another. A female did not talk about gathering with males. -- *of what interest does a male have in this?* --

Mnemosyne spoke up. "Yes, tell us. I have had some training, but I have never been on a real, honest-to-goodness gathering. Was it exciting? Are you pleased with your harvest? Was Panti pleased? I saw her receiving and sorting everything from all the gathering sacks."

Themis's eyes brightened and she excitedly began to speak.

Sagacity glanced at his mother as she listened to Themis with rapt attention. -- *how strange, what they do excites them -- there are a lot of different plants and they each probably do different things and taste different -- maybe there is more to gathering than one would imagine -- it's better than killing animals, i suppose --*

The night and conversations went on. The fire drew each closer together. At last, Kiya asked her youngest son, "Piercer, why don't you ask Chief Vanam to make you an apprentice stonecutter? Wouldn't this help you master knowing what's inside your colored rocks?"

Rivermaster and Sagacity tensed. Piercer was too young to comprehend the implications of what was being proposed. Piercer said, "That would be fun. I could cut my rocks open and give them pretty shapes. Do you think he would let me do that?"

Kiya said, "I don't know. Why don't you ask Rivermaster and Sagacity to advise you?"

Rivermaster was horrified. Sagacity stared at his mother. -- *you know what you do, don't you, mother?!* --

Sagacity replied, "Yes, Piercer. We will advise you tomorrow on what to say and how to say it."

Kiya continued, "And my two oldest sons are young men. You should be contributing to our tribe's well-being. Your father has not told me how you should do this. Has he told you?"

Rivermaster and Sagacity exchanged glances. It was Sagacity who spoke. "You know full well, Mother, what we will *not* be, and he gave us no alternatives. We will talk with Piercer tomorrow, and we have

two more brothers. The five of us will have a full day of discussions tomorrow. After that, we will all know what to say and how to say it."

Kiya nodded approval. -- *tell him what you will become, my sons -- and how to make it so --*

~ The Third Family Campfire ~

The next day, Kiya asked Panti if her three oldest daughters might be excused from the day's gathering so that they might be better instructed in the ways of men.

Panti, with an air of resentment, acquiesced to Kiya's request and led the women into the gathering field. An older male child, oversized spear in hand, maintained watch over the playing children. Although both Rivermaster and Sagacity were older than the watcher, neither son had ever been given this responsibility. For the first time, Kiya took notice of the slight.

She and her three oldest daughters walked through the children, gathering her three youngest daughters around them. They walked toward the south, away from both the gatherers in the east and her sons presumably in the creek toward the west. Kiya said "I spent one entire day with my sons and now wish to spend an entire day with my daughters. Let us talk about boys and babies and the things we can do with plants."

"Let's talk about what we can do with boys," Phoebe interjected. "Especially what I can do with Sagacity." The girls giggled.

"Are you attracted to Sagacity?" Kiya asked.

"Oh, yes!" Phoebe replied. "He is so smart. He knows things that nobody else knows. I could listen to him talk for hours. And he is so handsome."

"All of my sons are handsome. And Sagacity is not your blood brother. You joined our clan from one of the northern tribes. He might be a good mate for you." Everyone giggled.

"And Rivermaster is so manly, so interesting," Tethys offered.

"Well, girls, let's divide up your brothers. Manar is close to manhood. Who claims him?" Giggles turned to laughter.

Phoebe turned serious. "Will we be allowed to remain with our tribe, Mother? Or are we to be traded away?"

Kiya replied, "I will do what is best for my family."

The girls remained silent. These were not the words of an elder woman.

For the remainder of the day, her girls found interesting plants. Kiya identified each plant with the proper name and explained its various uses. "And, sometimes, you just have to experiment with what different combinations of plants might do. And, sometimes, you might need something new done and you will need to find the plant to do it."

That night, Kiya and her family gathered around their third personal campfire. Kiya noticed that Phoebe had taken a place beside Sagacity and that Tethys sat beside Rivermaster. Flames danced.

Kiya said, "This will be our last gathering for a while. It is disrespectful enough to build a separate fire from the women. The hunters return tomorrow. I certainly cannot build a separate fire from them."

"Mother, I built the fires, not you," Rivermaster said. "I bear responsibility for their judgment."

Kiya smiled. "Yes, I understand. Nevertheless..."

Sagacity changed the subject, "We discussed our situations today. We each have a proposal for our father and intend to request an audience at tomorrow's campfire. We are uneasy, but our proposals are well thought out and advantageous to the tribe. We have high hopes that he will be pleased with our proposals and will decide favorably for us."

Phoebe listened to Sagacity with rapt attention and wide eyes.

The campfire brought them closer together.

### 3. Kiya

The hunt had been good. Six antelope were killed. A light-hearted Vanam led his hunters triumphantly into the camp of adoring women and cheering children. The game was laid out to be butchered. Life was good.

Kiya stayed back while Chief Vanam performed his routine rituals of return. Finally, he retired to his tent and sat down to rest. Kiya brought him a drink and sweet bread. Vanam perfunctorily thanked her and noticed her necklace of colored stones.

"Where did you get that necklace?" he asked.

"From a young admirer," she replied, fingering the necklace. "Your youngest son. He made it himself and gave it to me. I was thrilled. I bestowed him the name 'Piercer.' I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" Vanam grunted. "No. It's good that one of them is good for something. Maybe I should make him an apprentice stonecutter. What do you think about that?"

Kiya replied, "That sounds wise, but I know nothing of such things. I know the strengths and weaknesses of our women, but the affairs of the males are beyond my understanding. Whatever you decide will certainly be best for the tribe. More sweetbread?"

The next evening Chief Vanam sat in front of the brightly burning campfire. On his right sat Kiya, the tribe's elder woman. On his left were his skywatcher, Vouch, and next to him Valvuna, Vanam's second-in-command. Littlerock, the tribe's stonecutter, sat nearby. The hunters sat around the campfire discussing concerns from the recent hunt. The women sat behind the hunters, gossiping. The children quietly played in the background.

Vanam spoke, quieting the noise. "How many spears and spearheads did we lose?"

Valvuna went into detail identifying what was lost during the season, what remained, and what was needed. Littlerock explained the recent unavailability of proper rocks for forming spearheads but the next time they passed near Rockplace he could create an oversupply of the critical equipment. Vouch announced that the tribe would journey to the next camp on the third sunrise and that the tribe would pass near Rockplace after the next camp. Kiya identified a young woman who would be available to other tribes at the upcoming Winter Solstice Festival. She praised several women for their outstanding contributions to the tribe and praised Panti profusely as an outstanding inspiration and leadership of the women.

Vanam listened intently and said, "It is doubtful we will attend the Winter Solstice festival. We might do well to devote our energy to hunting rather than play."

No one spoke.

"Valvuna, what do you think about that?" Vanam asked.

"Well, mighty chief. Whatever you decide. But the games are exciting and young women are plentiful and the various foods are different and delicious and there is usually a great deal to be learned of hunting techniques and I do enjoy winning the games of strength. We have not attended the festival in many years but whatever you decide will be best for the tribe."

Vanam sat thinking. — *yes -- my tribe enjoys renewal at my little brother's creation each year -- his little festival grows larger and larger -- he adds more and more monoliths to his little observatory -- more tribal chief sitting stones -- more apprentices to his little guilds of learned people -- more builders and farmers for valkei's little farming communities -- she feeds all the tribes gathered at the little festival from her einkorn fields -- i provide the tribe with food and warmth eleven seasons of the year but what excites them is my little brother's winter solstice festival -- something is wrong with this --* "I will think upon your words and decide before we break camp." He paused. "Are there any problems with my tribesmen that I need to resolve?"

From the children's area beyond the circle of women, a voice asked loudly, "Chief Vanam, may I and my brothers approach you with requests for your consideration?" The voice belonged to Rivermaster. His words had been chosen carefully. Sagacity had suggested most of their words. Each of the brothers had memorized and rehearsed what they were to say to their father. Rivermaster and Sagacity had understood and agreed that Rivermaster, as the oldest, should be their spokesperson, even though Sagacity was much better with words.

Vanam looked at the speaker and recognized him as his oldest son. He said, "You may approach." His eyes tightened. His five sons walked to the chief and faced him. "All right, Mutal, what is your problem?"

Rivermaster replied, "I have been given the name 'Rivermaster' because I am not worthy to be a hunter and that is my problem. I am no longer a child, and I must contribute to my tribe. Since I am not skilled enough to be a hunter, I request that you consider adding a Scout to your tribe. Large tribes have a scout and you have made us a large and wealthy tribe. Consider commanding that I teach myself how to be a Scout. I would report back to you at the times you require, Chief Vanam!" Rivermaster had learned his words well and had spit them out not allowing Vanam to become angry or regale him for the name 'Rivermaster'. He had glossed over Vanam's humiliation that his oldest son was not skilled to be a hunter while giving Vanam an out for removing him from the tribe and stroked Vanam's ego with the reference to a 'large and wealthy tribe.'

Vanam replied, "Said well enough, Mutal. You may go."

"My name is Rivermaster."

Sagacity stepped between the locked stares of Rivermaster and Vanam. "Ah, my Chief. If I may make a similar request. My problem is the same as Mutal's. I will never make the first-rate Scout that Mutal will become; the envy of all that hear his reports to you. But I would like to accompany Mutal as his apprentice. It may take both of us to capture enough food to live on since neither of us is an accomplished hunter. But between the two of us, we can capture enough food to survive. I hope you will look favorably upon my request."

Vanam said, "If not enough game, perhaps enough berries and grass to live on."

Sagacity laughed. "Berries, yes. Grass? Better to starve, Great Chief"

Vanam grunted and said, "There are three more of you."

Sagacity pushed Manar to the front. Tentatively, Manar began, "I am not yet a man, but I am interested in the moon and the lights in the sky. If Master Vouch needs an apprentice, my interest and dedication

to his skills would be unfailing. If you think me worthy, I would like to be considered as Master Voutch's apprentice skywatcher."

A bit stilted and forced, Sagacity thought, but good enough.

"Next," commanded Vanam.

Nan said, "Father, I am still a child, but I would like to be taken on some training hunts to see if I am worthy."

-- *good, good--* thought Sagacity as he pushed Piercer to the front.

Piercer said "I like rocks. They are interesting. If you believe that Master Littlerock should take an apprentice stonecutter, I would like for you to consider me."

Sagacity stepped aside so that Rivermaster could address Vanam. "You are kind to listen to our trivial problems, Chief Vanam. Thank you for doing so. Are we dismissed to return to the children?"

Vanam sat staring at them, coldly. -- *you and the next little bastard are certainly not mine -- kiya should have at least told me that i was raising children that my little brother planted inside her -- but, at least, you are both smart enough to leave the tribe before i banish you -- and mutal had the testicles to stand up for himself -- maybe nan will turn out to be a hunter -- at least he is willing to try -- and ain, another of pumi's little bastards? -- anyone who asks to become a stonecutter will never be worthy of being anything other than a stonecutter -- piercer, was that his new name? -*  
- Vanam glanced at Kiya, who sat watching the fire, a slight frown on her face.

She was thinking -- *my sons, i am so proud of all of you -- you spoke so well -- you stood up for yourselves and your choice of words was so skillful -- even pumi, himself, could not have manipulated thoughts and desires toward his own goals so skillfully --* She frowned slightly as she remembered Pumi. -- *when you looked upon me, you were always so intense -- so demanding -- so desiring -- but you never asked me to mate -- i bore vanam five fine sons -- he despises them -- you would be so proud of them -- pumi, what shall i do? --*

Chief Vanam said, "My decisions are made. Mutal and Iran will part the tribe at this camp breaking. They will try to become 'scouts' and if they survive, they will report to me at the Winter Solstice Festival, which we will attend this year. Littlerock, take Ain as an apprentice stonecutter. Voutch, talk with Manar. If you think he is capable and so desire, you may take him as an apprentice. Valvuna, is Nan capable of being a hunter? I doubt it! But take him and find out. Let me know his worth." He paused. "We have had an excellent season. We break camp in three sunrises. You are dismissed."

"Rivermaster," Rivermaster muttered to himself.

~ The Understanding ~

Kiya retired to her sleeping area. Her daughters soon joined her. Kiya asked them to find their brothers and sleep elsewhere tonight; she would like time alone with Vanam. The girls looked at one another, giggled, and left. Kiya put out flavored water and bread for her mate and waited.

Eventually, Vanam came. He seemed relaxed and took the proffered water. "The problem of your sons has taken care of itself," he said as he sat down. "And much to my liking. I may even get one hunter out of the lot. Valvuna will forge Nan into a hunter. I know he will. Ain is slight and weak, so making him a stonecutter was brilliant. Stonecutting is a lowly craft but necessary and not in the least an embarrassment. A skywatcher son might be a source of a bit of pride. A skywatcher is below only chief. The two girl-boys will be gone, probably forever, after we break camp. Yes, much to my liking."

Standing behind him, Kiya bristled at the characterizations of her sons. -- *they are fine young men -- they just didn't turn out to be hunters -- rivermaster and sagacity may surprise you -- i know you are disappointed that you*

*don't see a chief among them, but you are still young and have many years before you must name a successor -- chief talaimai was fortunate that he had you as a son -- you are a wonderful chief -- talaimai retired in peace knowing you lead his tribe --*

Vanam said, "I plan to get rid of your daughters at Winter Solstice. Two or three are old enough to take mates, anyway, aren't they? The others could be bartered away with them. Maybe with all of them gone, I can start over trying to sire a leader. You say that they are all my sons but we both know that none of them are like me. They are weak and inept. No one believes that I am their father. Do you think that you bear me an adequate son if you put your mind to it? You have not done well, so far."

*-- well, vanam -- exactly what effort did you put into raising your sons? -- i seem to remember that you spoke harshly of them since before they could walk --* She asked, "Get rid of our daughters? But it was you who accepted them from other tribes to curry favor with their chiefs. They are not of this tribe and can take mates from within your tribe. You need not 'get rid of them.'"

"I have decided! Get rid of them all at Winter Solstice. I will keep the three youngest boys. I will start fresh and have Panti watch you at all times to make sure you don't mate with anyone but me. You will bear me manly sons -- hunters. Sons I can be proud of. Not girl-boys like Pumi."

Angry, Kiya responded, "I will *not* get rid of my daughters. You will *not* get rid of your boys. I have given you five fine male babies. You are their father. They are all gifted. You are the only one who believes them inferior. I shall bear you as many children as you can sire but you will *not* get rid of any of them. And none of them are girl-boys and if they were -- what difference?"

Vanam stood and faced Kiya. "You will get rid of the females at the Winter Solstice Festival and if the two older ones happen to survive and show up, I will banish them! Do you understand?"

"None of what you said shall come to pass! Do *you* understand?!"

Vanam slapped her hard enough to knock her to the ground and stood glaring over her.

Slowly, she rose and, inches from his face, smiled sweetly as she hissed, "None of what you have said will come to pass. Strike me again or try to 'get rid' of my children, then as you sleep in the night, I will cut off your penis and testicles. I will fashion a necklace and wear these things around my neck. I will go to each female with whom you have mated and say to her, 'Look what I have around my neck. I took these things from the great CHIEF Vanam. He is like a woman now, perhaps we can invite him to go gathering with us.' Do you doubt my words, CHIEF Vanam? Do you think me too weak or too timid to do that which I say? As you lay sleeping, CHIEF Vanam. You may kill me and face the shame from your tribe, or you shall do as I command, CHIEF Vanam. You will never touch me again and you will never threaten my children again. You are dismissed!"

He could have easily killed her but did not. He glared, spat, "Bitch," turned, and stormed away.

She stood silently and watched him leave; empty of emotion; strangely not caring; relieved. *-- i can see now that this has been coming for years -- you were so kind when you accepted me -- so considerate until you became chief -- you think pumi is the father of your sons -- i gave you no reason -- i was above reproach -- a mate dedicated only to you -- to your success -- but you are right -- your sons are not like you -- they are not like other boys -- they think rather than act -- they are content to stay within their own thoughts -- they don't seek the praise of others -- but neither are they like pumi -- pumi could move among hunters and women and skywatchers and children without regard to their station -- and all respected him, even as a child -- all thought of him as helpful even as he bent their will to his -- pumi loves you, vanam -- his success is not your failure -- you are great, Vanam -- by every measure -- to every man -- to every woman -- still even to me -- i am now your burden -- you will never be free of pumi until you are free of me -- vanam -- oh, vanam --*

~ The Fourth Family Campfire ~

The next day Kiya found Panti and told her that it would take a while to become official, but that Panti should take it upon herself to take over the duties of the elder woman for the tribe. "Make whatever excuses you think necessary."