

Prologue: “Fourteen Stones,” a Namoran folk tale dating to the earliest years of worship of the Goddess Kenavi (first century SM)

Once there was a woman who wished to build a house. Not a house for her husband and children: she had no husband yet, was too young to have children, and in any case she meant to live alone a while longer. She loved the scent of the wind, the warmth of the sun, and the sound of the sea as it rushed and broke against the rocky shore of her land. While she could, she wanted to have those things all to herself.

She was a strange woman, or at least, so her people thought. She had strange eyes, the color of the sky on a cloudless autumn day, and she had a strange will, all edges and corners, without any softness. And she did not seem to understand that people must find their safety in each other. The world was an uncertain place. Enemy tribes roamed the land. Wild creatures fed on the tame goats that meant food and certainty. In such a world, people must live together behind high stone walls, with spears to guard themselves.

This woman loved to walk beyond those safe walls, fearing no strange man or creature. Her people called her Klaya, which means wanderer. She walked under the sun that browned her skin and let the wind brush her hair, let the sea lick her fingers. At those times, delight softened the proud blue of her stare, but none of her people were there to see it.

When her people built houses, they made them of stone. Stone houses clustered like eggs in a nest behind the stone guarding wall where spear-wielding men paced back and forth. The village stood on a long green hill at the end of a peninsula. To build a new house, people dug rock out of the hill or carried it from the shore. You must build your home out of the homeland.

But Klaya loved the wider land. The peninsula and the village rested in her heart, but the broad mainland fanned itself out before her eyes. She walked there at will, greeting the woods,

learning the feel of the grass of the plains under her bare feet. She knew she would build her house on the green hill, but she would build it separate, touching no other walls, sharing no other air. And she would build it not only out of the stone of home, but out of pieces of the world beyond.

Houses needed many heavy rocks, carried and shaped and laid into place by scarred and callused hands. Klaya's hands were strong, toughened by years of weaving rope and working skins, of digging and planting in the earth. But her body was slender, a tall young tree. Her muscles were not hard but supple, her chest and shoulders fine and narrow.

One day, her people watched her leave behind the safety of the guarding wall and walk out to the mainland. They muttered and whispered about her strangeness, the house she meant to build and live in all alone. They asked themselves why she could not be a woman such as any other. And they watched, later, as she limped back, dragging behind her a rough-made sledge of branches that carried a single large stone.

The next day they watched her go out again. And they whispered about how she could dig stone here on the green hill, or carry it up from the shore. She wished to punish herself, surely. She wished to show how wayward she was. They said they would leave her to it.

But on the third day, as she left again, one man went with her. She did not ask for his help; she lifted her head proudly and walked alone, with him following behind. When they came back, the sledge held two stones.

That night, over his cooking fire, the man told others that, during their day of searching, Klaya had explained herself to him. That alone surprised those who heard. The explanation surprised them more: that Klaya wished to bring stone from each part of the mainland she knew – the forests, the coast, the grassy plains – and have pieces of each place she loved in her home.

What difference did it make, the people asked. One stone looked like another. Surely no one could see the difference between a stone dug from the hillside and one carried from the mainland

forest. But the next day, two men left the village with Klaya. When they came back, the sledge held three stones.

On it went. Another day, and another, and now the women of the village joined, and then the children. Always Klaya walked at the head of the group, her head held high. Each day the sledge returned with a bigger load.

On the day they brought back eight stones, they built a bigger sledge. And still they went out again, and again. On the last day, all of the tribe went. The smallest children rode on their parents' backs or in their arms. The elderly leaned on the strength of the young. When they came back to the village as the sun dipped down to the horizon, the sledge carried its biggest load of fourteen great stones.

Klaya declared herself satisfied. She could build her house out of the stones the tribe had helped her carry.

She meant to live alone, but the village did not leave her to build her house alone. The people stayed, helping Klaya cut and shape the rock with chisel and mallet, helping her lift and set each piece into place.

Then the house was finished and the village went about its business. Klaya lived on the green hillside with the freshness of the sea wind and the warmth of the sun around her, and the home her people had helped her build out of the world she loved.

Chapter 1: in Lassar, Year 1665 SM

On the morning that marked the start of her sixteenth year, Khari sat cross-legged on the floor of the tent she shared with her *amma* Vatiri, trying not to notice how strange the new fabric of her white blouse felt around her body. The tent flap hung open, letting in a ripple of breeze that still tasted of summer and the fragrance of the tall grass that ringed the tribe's camp. Early morning sunlight slanted through the open tent flap and fell across Khari's back and shoulders, so that she thought the white blouse must glow like the Moon Woman herself.

Vatiri, Khari's mother-in-truth, knelt behind her, weaving Khari's long hair into braids. The two of them had done this every morning since Khari was eight years old and began having the dreams that marked her as a future Lamp-Carrier. As of today, the tribe had two Lamp-Carriers. Vatiri had held that place since long before Khari was born, and now, with the start of her sixteenth year, Khari stepped into it too.

Vatiri's quick fingers moved through Khari's hair, smoothing and dividing it. She said, "You should wear white ribbon today."

That made Khari smile. White ribbon braided in her hair, to match the blouse that showed her rank. At the same time, nervousness curled in her stomach. Tonight, the tribe's Lodestone, Pradesh, would have a council to decide where the tribe should spend the winter. Khari would sit at that council for the first time, in her new role and her new blouse.

"Whatever you think, amma," Khari said.

Vatiri laughed, a quiet sound like birdsong. "I remember when you weren't so cooperative."

Khari remembered it too. At age eight, she hadn't wanted to leave her parents' tent and her three older sisters to live with "the old Lamp-Carrier." She hadn't cared about learning to do the work, or how important the dreams made her, and she had actually fought and kicked when her

father bodily picked her up and carried her to Vatiri's tent. For the first couple of days with the older woman, she hadn't opened her mouth even to put food in it. She'd turned her back every time Vatiri spoke to her.

But Vatiri had never given up or lost her temper. Now, as much as Khari still honored her mother-in-body, she loved her mother-in-truth even more.

"I don't think I'll be much help at the council, amma," Khari said. "I didn't dream anything last night."

The tribe's Lodestone, always a man, had to set the course for the tribe's travels and direct its daily life. To do this, he needed the Lamp-Carrier, who was always a woman and always born to the work. Most importantly, she must have and interpret the pathdreams that helped the Lodestone make his decisions.

After eight years of training, Khari knew better than to expect pathdreams every night, or even most nights. Still, on the first day that she wore the white of the Moon Woman, the second-greatest of the three Powers that guarded the tribe, she wished she'd had more to offer.

"Don't worry, child." Khari felt Vatiri finish the second braid, tying it off with the end of the ribbon she had woven into it. "Pradesh will have all the guidance he needs."

Khari thought she heard something strange in the older woman's voice: a thread of something like sadness. When she turned around to see her, though, Vatiri smiled. The autumn sunlight washed over her face, bringing out the deep tracery of lines at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. She gently tweaked the end of Khari's braid. "Now your turn," she said.

They traded places. Exactly as Vatiri had done for her, Khari brushed out the older woman's hair. She wove it into a single long braid with a strand of white ribbon, to match her own, running through it. Vatiri's hair had once been as dark as Khari's, but now it was such a pale silver that the ribbon barely stood out against it.

For eight years, Vatiri had taught Khari how to dream with her “hidden eye” always open, watching the pictures that moved across her mind, constantly sifting them for what mattered. The Lamp-Carrier’s dreams were a gift from the Moon Woman, but it took skill to hold onto them in daylight and know what they meant. Vatiri said that Khari would soon be at least as good at that work as she was herself.

Khari had always felt proud of that. She’d liked to imagine Pradesh trusting her as absolutely as he, and the two Lodestones before him, trusted her amma. Now, though, she didn’t want to see Vatiri’s age, or think about the day when the tribe would only have a single Lamp-Carrier again.

“Amma,” she said, as her fingers worked quickly, “did you have a dream last night?”

They usually talked about their pathdreams, if one of them had one. Now Vatiri didn’t answer right away. Khari had worked her way down to the end of the braid before the older woman said, “We don’t need to think about it now.”

That same sadness. Khari tied off the braid. “But what was it?” she asked. She didn’t like the idea that she might have missed something in her own dreams. Today especially, she didn’t want to fail.

“Not now,” Vatiri said. When she looked over her shoulder, for a moment Khari saw the firmness she remembered from eight years ago, when Vatiri had finally set a clay plate of flatbread and roast venison in front of her and said that was enough nonsense, Khari wouldn’t leave the tent again until she had eaten every bite. Eight-year-old Khari had felt her stubborn anger shrivel up under those dark eyes. Besides, after two days, she’d been hungry.

For as long as Vatiri lived, Khari was supposed to obey her. “All right, amma,” she said. She held the questions in, but they still nudged at her.

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