

"Rich visuals and an unusual mystery make
this short novel an intriguing read."

— *Kirkus Review*

The Thieves of Shiny Things

a Stone Age mystery



Charlie Dickinson

 a cet^{us} original

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Cetus Editions | Portland, Oregon USA | 2013

ALSO BY CHARLIE DICKINSON

The Cat at Light's End (stories)

The Wire Donkey

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Summary: A murder mystery from the Stone Age, the novel takes place among the Miwokitl tribelet of cave-dwelling Native Americans in what became the Sierra Nevada foothills of Northern California. When Jupa discovers his father lying dead, he and Keleli, a wise elder, must solve the crime using only keen observation, persistent questioning, and their wits. The story weaves murder, Jupa's coming-of-age, and social bonds in a Native American community now vanished.

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FIRST EDITION

For Nancia

CHAPTER ONE:
BUNCH GRASS, BLACK OAK, BRACKEN FERN

Jupa rubbed his left temple. *These ravens?*

He glanced down to where he might climb off the path. Then his gaze ascended a dirt bank thick with the sere yellow of wild rye fallen upon itself. Above, a bone-gray sky drifted closer in late afternoon and already shrouded verdant conifers higher up the mountain. The ravens flapped dusky circles about an oak tree, raucously. Alone atop the bank, the black oak stood in silhouette.

He stared at its tracery of leafless branches, his left thumb and fingers toying with the bristly strap of his mule-deer buckskin, a garment worn to bare leather in more than a few spots.

But these ravens, what were they *krahnking* about?

He hooded his eyes, his left palm tight to the spill of dark hair at his eyebrows. Did they know of something hidden by the wild rye? He was on his way back to the caves of his people, the Miwokituls, and an evening meal of the sweet acorn porridge everyone would soon enjoy. After dark, in this eleventh moon, was when they ate around a fire on the commons. But that meal could wait.

The looping ravens--wings *whumping* overhead--teased with possibility. He heard that ravens often gathered in an oak--flapping up, off, and then back on the branches--making a commotion for what

purpose only they truly knew. Dozens of them. An insistent cacophony of *krahinking*. The shaman Nyma said they were young ravens socializing, getting to know each other before pairing off as mates.

Jupa squinted. The black gliders climbed and turned against the pearl sky. One flared, dropping to the ground, out of sight. One dark sentinel *krahinked* away in the tree. His throat tightened. These ravens--five of them--might be working a kill.

Maybe all the fierce *whumps* of strong wings, the head-thrusting *krahinks* were to protect a carcass from yet another unseen carnivore. Jupa's hand slipped off his forehead. He had to see for himself.

He leaned forward and pushed on his thighs. His stomach protested hunger, again. But the meal back at the caves could wait. Off the well-trod, chalky dirt path, his feet plunged, trampling lank rye grass the wind had crippled, though it still rose knee-high. Any other time, the lowly cockle-burs would have stung his shins, but not then, so eagerly up the grass-clad bank he bounded.

Now a young man, Jupa knew the others in his hamlet saw him as a hunter in the making. He had learned much from his elders among the Miwokituls, the people who lived in mountain caves. When ravens circled low like this, he was taught, they deserved special notice. Their slow feathery glides usually meant a fresh kill. His eyes strained at the skeletal crown of the leafless black oak atop the hummock. At its foot, just out of sight, he was summoned by what his head held as a picture of a fallen mule deer, half-eaten. Jupa shot a glance higher up the mountain. The tawny, rangy cougar who lived there probably killed its hapless prey in a rage of tooth and claw.

The big cat would rip and devour flesh ravenously until, abruptly, it stopped, unable to stomach another mouthful. Then, often dragging the lifeless carcass to a tree, the cougar would leave it for a later meal. The ravens, though, seemingly had ideas of their own about sharing the cougar's cache. This, of course, was all Miwokitul hunting lore Jupa had in his head as he thrashed through the last of the wild rye, ready to

mount the bank.

Suddenly, the ravens took off. *Krahnking. Krahnking. Krahnking.* A burst of *whumps*, then the dark, sinister gliders flying flat to the next black oak. A flaring of wings. A spreading of talons. A grappling to the skeletal branches. Jupa stumbled, picked himself up, sure the smell of death the black scavengers loudly enjoyed was about to engulf his nostrils.

But when the withered stalks finally gave way, Jupa froze stock-still among a scattering of moldering leaves. The fallen form under the lone black oak was no mule deer. In the waning pearl light, he saw the otherness was not otherness. He choked. He could not, would not, utter the cry climbing inside. On the ground, the foot of the fallen figure wore a milkweed-stitched deerhide moccasin, a *momko*. His hunger, now nausea. His legs, heavy as stone, now would not move. Seeing more would add nothing. Seeing more would take nothing away.

The *momko*. His eyes would not leave that *momko*.

That one *momko*. Then slowly his rapt stare softened. Yes, the *momko* attached to a leg unnaturally bent. Jupa panted, breath on breath.

Finally, the legs freed. A few hesitant steps forward.

Again, the throat seized, held back something. The eyes glanced about for more.

He knelt beside the body. The thick, dark hair. The full beard. The steely eyes. The forehead scarred at the brow. The mouth, the missing teeth at the tight upper lip. The rabbit-skin blanket covering the body, a most prized possession. Jupa's mouth sagged and the salt of tears found his tongue.

"Pa," he said softly.

Then for the longest while, his head, still as his father's, held the emptiness.

His father's head listed sideways. Jupa's ribs flexed and rose gently.

Tears rolled off his cheeks. The two open, steely eyes had clouded over and now fixed on nothing. He palmed his tears.

He took a deep breath and bent lower. He let his eyes, fingers carefully scrutinize the body. For all the rowdy cacophony the ravens had been making, the body was surprisingly intact. He dragged his index finger across the softness of the cold clavicle and bit his lower lip. Ravens were scavengers. Yet their hard, black beaks had not torn open the flesh. A spent body: eyes unblinking, nose and mouth waiting on the next inhalation.

Jupa rubbed his temple. *When a cougar kills, its claws, its fangs rip flesh as quickly as the unfelt sharpness of an obsidian knife. Blood all over the ground. He wasn't killed by a cougar.*

Jupa slid fingers through the coarse hair. Some grit in the shaggy strands--chalky soil. Nothing else. No blood. No bruising, no swelling, no skull break the back of the head. His father didn't fall, hit his head on a rock. *Why is he dead?*

He stood to his feet, legs tensed for the run back to the caves, his ma, Sawaja, and the other Miwokituls. But not before a picture in his head arrested him: "I'll see you soon," his pa had told him when he left, determined to bring back a basket of *jumutu* potatoes.

He glanced wildly about the prone body, the chalky ground, the skeletal black oak.

Tossed to the side, closer to the tree, the basket of twined rushes his ma had wove, flopped open, empty. He plunged forward, saw in the beaten-down grass, half-hidden, the digging stick, a length of mountain mahogany, scraped barkless and sharpened to a point. Again, he wiped away tears. *He didn't even have time to dig for jumutu.* He put the digging stick with the woven-rush basket to take them both away.

He could not carry the body by himself. Heavy, bigger than he, he needed help. The ravens--now silent--would smell death, even at night. They would be back. He had to get his pa to the hamlet for a proper burial. He had no time to waste.

In the eastern sky, a waxing half-moon floated free of the mountain ridge and shone weak, cold light on the indifferent body. Jupa had returned to the black oak with three Miwokitul men from the hamlet: Keleli the Elder and the two hunters who were out with Naketi recently: wiry Mojku and stout Lewi. Jupa leaned forward, hands on thighs, breathing hard. Nearby, Keleli the Elder set down his walking stick next to the corpse and muttered a word or two.

Keleli had been, without a doubt, the best Miwokitul hunter alive. He would easily read sign after sign and in his prime always knew the best places to hunt animals.

But Keleli no longer hunted. He didn't chase game animals. Age had slowed him, made his walking stiff and labored. And so he was often seen with the walking stick he set down. Tall with wispy, white hair, he unhurriedly moved his hands across the body, appearing to search for signs of why Naketi lay dead. His fingers followed the contours of the stubborn form, as if he knew death well from the times beyond count he had been hunting. "Your poor father, he comes to a sorry end, but not by beast. He's unmarked, see?"

"Yes. No blood," Jupa said.

The elder said nothing to Jupa's words and went back to examining the rigid body in shallow moonlight. The young Miwokitul tucked his hands against a hollow, hungry stomach--he still had to eat. He glanced sheepishly at the others: Mojku and Lewi, both keen-eyed and ready, chests heaving lightly under their buckskins. They had to, as Jupa, wait for what Keleli the Elder decided was next.

His face listing right, Naketi lay with mouth gaping surrender. Buzzy black flies alit and scurried over the flaccid lips. Jupa wanted to hurry up. He scowled and his eyebrows tightened with impatience. *Pa shouldn't rot here. Why can't we take him back, Keleli see him there?*

Keleli slowly zigzagged the spread fingers of his right hand over Naketi's lips, as if searching for traces Death might have left. Then quickly, he swot the air above the lips, shoos the buzzy flies. "How

did your father die? Not by beast, we know that. But did his body give up? Were his lungs tired? His heart weak? Is that why he fell?"

Why do we stay and he ask such questions? Again, the picture in his head came back: Only that morning, the day like so many others, his pa set out, in good spirits. "I won't be long, I have a new place to look for *jumutu*," he said. Jupa winced that it could have been true.

"See these lips," Keleli said. "In the mouth too. I don't see blood. I don't see vomit. Nothing. You hear what I'm saying?"

"No, what?" Jupa replied.

"Your father didn't die because his body gave up. Of this, I'm sure. I've seen death many times and always in the last, great battle, the body tries to fight it off." His right palm swatted the air above the corpse. "The body doesn't want to die. Why would it? You see, the body then fights back and throws off what it can, trying to escape. I always, with dying animals, see this. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. But no animal, no man dies peacefully, his mouth open this way." Keleli paused. "When the heart gives out, if nothing else, he must dribble spit."

Jupa averted the elder's searching eyes and glanced away toward the moon, more unsure than ever why his pa had met Death like this.

The pale moon. The skeletal oak. The sprawled corpse.

Keleli was palming Naketi's forehead. "The warmth of blood left his body before midday. But he is not yet cold. He's not been dead a day. That we already knew. He died today." Jupa felt lightheaded with hunger and less sure about these odd ways of finding truth. Keleli rambled on--one observation after another--none closer to why his pa died.

Suddenly, Keleli's words quit. His hand shot from the face and its fixed, steely eyes to a flap of the rabbit-skin blanket and then reached beneath. "What's this?" Keleli asked. His finger prodded the back of Naketi's rib cage. "Oh, what's this?" He held up his hand. The fingers wet with blood. Jupa's throat seized at the raised hand, the carmine

sheen.

Fresh blood, not sticky, but flowing, streaked the fingers Keleli held high.

Tears welled in Jupa's eyes.

His pulse raced and he wiped a wet cheek with the back of his hand. *Why this blood? Bleeding out his back--*

Keleli pulled close his cane and got to his feet. "Here, help me." He summoned Mojku and Lewi with the blood-tipped hand. "Let's turn him over."

Jupa wanted to help too, but Keleli's red fingers made his legs go weak.

Mojku and Lewi took arms and legs and carefully turned Naketi over.

A large circle of blood stained the back of the rabbit-skin blanket and to the side, a pool of blood, uncovered, reflected moonlight.

"The blood from his heart soaks the ground," Keleli said softly, as if he, too, were shaken by the full horror of how Naketi's life ended.

Violently.

A tired, hungry Jupa could only stare as Keleli lifted the blanket away and exposed the back and its wet coat of blood. "See here, this hole," Keleli said, pointing to a purplish puncture in Naketi's upper back. "The small arrow must have gone deeply here, pierced his heart. His heart kept beating, kept pushing out blood." With delicacy, Keleli traced his fingers around the wound. The reason Naketi died was obvious.

He was murdered.

"But the arrow, where's the arrow?" Jupa asked, his eyes unable to look elsewhere, his gaze on the pool of blood so fixed.

"Must've been pulled out," wiry Mojku said in a thin, reedy voice.

"Yes, with such arrows the Hutasil shoot small animals." Keleli replied. "They taper the flint both ends. It pulls out easily."

"Why would they do this?" Jupa asked, still staring at the blood pool. "Why shoot the arrow, then pull it out?"

"Simple." Keleli smiled as if welcoming the question's challenge. "If I had the wood of the arrow, the stone of the flint in my hand, I could name the killer of your father. This way, he covers his tracks."

"The four of us, we'll search and, believe me, he'll turn up," stout Lewi said, patting Jupa on the shoulder.

"This is all we'll find tonight," Keleli said. "The arrow, maybe, is in the grass. We'll come back tomorrow with the sun out and I can see more. But first we must bury your poor father."

"Mojku, you ready to carry?" Lewi said. "We're strong, it won't be hard."

Keleli scanned the trampled grass once more for anything obvious he missed.

"Let's set him right, take him home," Keleli said.

For his part, stout Lewi easily took Naketi's head, shoulders and arms on his back after they stood up the corpse. Wiry Mojku took a leg in each arm and they were ready to leave. Jupa wanted to help, but also felt nauseous and weak with hunger. His legs moved with effort and he walked behind Mojku and Lewi; Keleli, willow cane in hand, leading the way down the path.

Naketi's head sagged sideways off Lewi's broad back, his head lowered, his steely, frozen eyes seemingly glanced backward at his son. Tears welled in Jupa's eyes. His pa was saying good-bye. He really was leaving.

The four Miwokituls plodded down the path, one of their own held on high. Despite listless legs and arms, Jupa had to keep up with the others. He openly wept, but his pa was now going home. In the sky above the mountain ridge, a buoyant waxing half-moon rose.

In the east and past the grass-thick hills dotted with black oaks, a broad, hard-limestone outcropping jutted from the mountain called Hilica Peak for its reputed cougars. There, numerous small shelter caverns gave subterranean refuge to generations of Miwokituls. The caves were all dry, and any limestone deposit formations were long detached and crumbled underfoot, beneath woven-tule mats.

For thirty-odd men, women, and children, the hamlet had no shortage of protected cavern spaces to sleep on a deerhide bed, cushioned by mounds of dried bracken fern. The interiors were always cool and dark, so the Miwokituls saw caves as only a place to sleep and take shelter from storms.

Any other time, the Miwokituls wanted to be outside. The men would range across the rolling foothills and oak-studded savannas hunting mule deer and smaller animals, gathering downed oak limbs for firewood, digging up root plants for food, and spearfishing in the nearby Locomo River; and left the women to work their cobblestone pestles in the limestone mortars, meditatively pounding acorns into flour.

This acorn preparation--the seemingly endless pounding and soaking day after day--was something Jupa's ma, Sawaja, and the women did from a pure sense of duty, for every Miwokitul knew, men included, the oak acorn was far more dependable for food than the mule deer the men were hunting with less and less success.

At the end of the day, the porridge was cooked and everyone shared the daily meal and told stories around the snapping, effulgent fire on the commons. Only when eyelids began drooping, did anyone retire to the caves and sleep.

It was to such a meal, everyone eating on the commons, the foursome--and the body of Naketi--came home, and commotion quickly broke up the usual nighttime routine. Sure, everyone knew when Jupa came back at early evening, Naketi was dead.

But seeing the blood-soaked, rabbit-skin blanket clinging to the lifeless body convinced in a different way. The Miwokitul headman

Wota--and everyone else--quickly came up. They crowded Jupa out of the way, clamoring for a closer look at the corpse.

With furrowed brow, Wota stood by Keleli. The headman's long black hair showed he had not become leader by age among the hunter men--that distinction belonged to Keleli--but instead had the position handed to him from his late father Pisu. Not surprisingly, from time to time, grumblings were voiced about the elder Keleli--not headman Wota--having the wiser words. So perhaps without much apology, Wota often asked Keleli what to do.

Ignoring the onlookers, wiry Mojku and stout Lewi didn't stop and took the body straight to the grand cave, where a small interior fire burned, illuminating the rust-hued limestone walls.

Keleli glanced briefly at the pair and the corpse they carried past. "What happened, I want to tell you. Listen. The husband of Sawaja, the father of Jupa was murdered."

A gasp stilled the crowd murmurs. "I say murder," the elder said. "The body has only one small wound in the back. That pierced his heart. He bled to death where he fell."

Keleli's eyes darted about, his white hair unruly from exertion. "So we bury our dear brother, but we'll also find the murderer," he shouted. "And the murderer's people will pay."

Yeaaaa----- The crowd hurrah brought out a smile in Keleli's somber face.

"He was a good man. We should kill two of them," Wota shouted.

"No, this isn't what we seek." Keleli scanned the crowd, half were still eating, yet clearly some were also hungry for a serving of revenge.

"We'll find who murdered this good hunter and left Jupa here fatherless and Sawaja alone. Once we know--" He paused, looking the headman standing next to him in the eye. "Wota will go to the headman where the murderer lives. They can do with the murderer as they wish, but for us, the Miwokituls, we must get something to make up for this

loss." The headman Wota nodded. As Keleli shouted these words, as Keleli insisted on getting some blood money for the loss of Naketi, the crowd quieted.

"How much?" Wota asked.

"Possibly the mule deer he would have killed in one season, possibly two seasons. We don't know yet," Keleli replied. "For now, we must bury this brother to us all."

Jupa turned away to contemplate the torch-lit portal of the grand cave and Naketi's body resting on several logs pushed together. He also had to get a helping of porridge.

The next day, the late afternoon sun teetering and tipping in the west, four men, Mojku and Lewi included, hoisted Naketi's body and carried him for the last time. They were to be followed by every Miwokitul--children, too--to a lower meadow covered with bracken fern.

Earlier, Ujuju and Ywyja had dug a grave with antler picks, wooden mattocks, and bare hands. They knew where to dig. Bracken fern wouldn't grow on the other graves.

So at the Miwokitul graveyard, the earth had been opened and fresh, soft dirt was banked high beside a shadow-filled pit that waited.

The Miwokituls soon congregated. Naketi's body, arms crossing his chest, lay composed on the dirt bank one side of the trench. The other side, the headman Wota, long dark hair to his shoulders, stood slightly apart from everyone else and stared at the open grave. At his right, the elder Keleli with white, wispy hair stood with Jupa and lowered his head out of sorrowful respect. At Jupa's side stood his ma, dressed in her usual fringed buckskin skirt and rabbitskin poncho, and her face reddened with tears.

Wota cleared his throat, began speaking. "Today, we bury one of our own. I'd like Keleli to say a few words." Nervously, he looked to the elder.

Keleli started speaking. "I have known our departed friend all his life. I wish I had known him longer." His wispy beard whipped about in the breeze. He leaned on his walking stick. "I know all of us wish that."

Jupa put his hand to Sawaja's shoulder. She wept gently, but her face showed quiet strength. Most of his fellow Miwokituls also remained quiet and stoic--Naketi's numb, mute body there but one more time.

As Jupa and the others knew, what they saw before them--an early death--would probably be their lot. Few would live as long as Keleli. Most would die from fevers and sicknesses that would not go away. But if Miwokituls often died early, it was seldom murder like this, for Jupa's people tried to live in peace with their neighbors.

Jupa shut his eyes. Keleli spoke about what Naketi had done for the hamlet. When his eyes reopened, the young girl Akra was fidgeting to his right. Even little Akra, wearing a one-deer pelt garment, might not live long.

"Certainly, we will miss this brother to us all," Keleli said. *Krahnk, krahnk, krahnk*. The elder's wispy beard whipped about, as he ignored, in the north sky, at his back, several noisy ravens landing, strutting about, each seemingly eyeing the funeral from afar.

Were the ravens waiting until everyone left? A shiver ran up Jupa's spine. Were they the same black scavengers from yesterday circling the oak tree? They had to be.

Jupa wanted to chase them, throw stones at them, but Death had arrived to stay.

He frowned at the blanched body dropped on the fresh, crumbly dirt, that look of a face irrevocably stilled. Even with everyone by his side, Jupa had been abandoned. He was lost. His throat tight against a cry climbing to get out, a hurt he couldn't let go, not with everyone there.

Keleli finished speaking and stepped back. Nyma, the young

shaman, came forward. Tall and lean with long, stringy, black hair falling out from under his high leather hat--among the Miwokituls only the shaman wore such a hat--his slight body seemingly lacked enough flesh to fill out his buckskin. His eyes swept over the assembly and he cleared his throat.

"This man has left us. His body here on earth will now rest in the soil because his spirit has taken flight to the other world."

Lifting his head, Jupa took a glimpse into the scudded sky.

Somewhere, some elsewhere not under that crumbly dirt tumbled into the gaping pit was a place for pa. A place for pa's laughter. A place for those words of pa's he would never forget. No, never forget. How his pa's gentle voice told him to stop and listen to the crackle of dry leaves when the mule deer's hooves delicately slipped between tall fir trees. Once resting and buried in the deep-sided pit, what he knew as his father had to be more than food for worms, even if the pale flesh would certainly be spared humiliation by those *krahnking* ravens, across the way, tottering about.

"The other world we do not see, we do not hear, we do not feel, but, always, it is with us. See, he remains here. His spirit is now everywhere with us. Across these rolling hills, running through these splashing streams, his spirit now joins those who went before."

His throat stayed tight. If his pa's laughter and gentle voice took flight everywhere, as Nyma said, if they ran through the waters and flew through the sky, then maybe this sorry body, now so pale, must be buried.

"We must, of course, be sad, be happy at the same time. This is not easy. But we know when such a spirit is released he goes to a home which always was, always is, and always will be."

Jupa's head sagged, mulling over what Nyma was saying, knowing before him was simply the last good-bye. Salt of tears slipped between his lips, quivering and lost to words.

Thick, dark hair, colorless forehead, scar at the brow. Full beard, gaping mouth, missing teeth below upper lip. Lifeless, blanched arms falling outside the rabbit-skin blanket Sawaja had sewn together. None of it mattered. The pa he had known moving about inside that stunned body was gone.

With Nyma's words finished, Ujuju and Ywyja stood in the trench and four other men helped slide the corpse to the bank's edge and then gently lowered it into the gravediggers' waiting arms. The two again composed Naketi's body with care: righting the head, crossing the arms, shifting the legs. Once satisfied at how Naketi looked, they pushed themselves out from the trench.

Jupa clenched his teeth, as if that would stop the tears flowing freely down his cheeks. He palmed his face, both sides. *Now the dirt, the dirt. But let his spirit stay clean, clean as blue sky, clean as falling water.*

His gaze quit the blanched remains. Keleli had walked to the other side, to the bank of soft dirt and taken a handful. Others followed, also taking a handful and tossing it in the open grave for a last good-bye. Jupa did too. His ma Sawaja, however, kept staring at the Naketi she had lost.

Before long, Mojku and Lewi and other men were pushing the remaining dirt on the prone corpse.

Across the way, Jupa noticed the ravens taking wing, gliding overhead in silence. He squinted. *Do they know a closed grave means a lost cause?*

Then everyone left.

Jupa paused. He was last. The slight mound of fresh dirt on Naketi's grave would soon level and harden like the rest of the graveyard. He smiled. *No ferns will grow there anymore.*

Back at the hamlet, Keleli said the next day he wanted Jupa, Lewi, and Mojku to return with him to the black oak where they found the

body. They needed to look for signs of the murderer. Keleli scanned a dim sky, filling with clouds from the west.

CHAPTER TWO: PLAYACT, KNIFE IN THE WATER, BARGAIN BRIDE

Before next sunrise, however, drenching rain blew down from the north. Enough to fill out the day. The cavebound Miwokituls waited.

"Why do the gods punish me with this?" the elder Keleli asked. "How will I find anything in this rain? This washes away the tracks of the killer."

Jupa rubbed his left temple in puzzlement at Keleli's complaint. Rain had to come when it came. Jupa couldn't see the gods wanting to remove signs of his father's killer. No, they must have sent the rain to wash away everyone's tears once his pa left for the other world.

Moreover, he was tired. He had slept fitfully, waking so often in the night to think about his pa. He didn't feel like doing much. Yet, all about him, in the grand cave, he was surprised at how busy the Miwokituls kept with their routines. It was as if they forgot what he could not forget: his pa.

For men, boisterous talk, headman Wota's raucous laugh, and knee-slapping stories whiled away the long day sitting on log benches. The women, however, spoke little and only then in whispers and kept busy preparing food. As they had to, day after day. They simply moved their work indoors.

That meant preparing acorns. They took their woven-grass trays over to one of the tall storage baskets, by the far wall, filled with such foodstuffs as *jumutu*, to take handfuls of the acorns kept for pounding in

the confines of the cave. The women set up their own portable wooden mortars to replace their usual ones on the limestone shelf outside.

Standing at the cave portal and glancing back inside, Jupa noticed his ma, Sawaja, among the women, worked as if apart from the others. While she also sat on a tule mat with a wooden mortar between her outstretched legs, and would take a handful of nutmeats from the woven-grass tray, her arm moved listlessly. She seemed to work purely from habit. She would slowly lift the pestle, as if heavier than it really was, then let it fall onto the acorns, crushing them.

Jupa hadn't seen that sluggishness before, but knew her sorrow was deep. Still seeing her there, resolute to the pounding made him proud of her quiet strength. He closed his eyes, holding tight the welling tears and looked away at the rainfall puddling across the way on the chalky commons. He'd, too, keep on. He would help Keleli find who murdered his pa.

The next morning, Jupa arose from his bedroll of mule-deer blankets on dried-fern stuffing and stepped outside. The puddles from yesterday had drained. Jupa wondered what would be discovered by that forlorn black oak. He needed to see Keleli.

Keleli was sitting on his favorite boulder and the two soon found Mojku and Lewi. "Perhaps now," the elder said, nodding upward at the blue sky, "we'll see what signs the murderer left by the black oak."

Grizzled Keleli, long wispy beard jiggling in the breeze, led as they plodded down the westerly path from the hamlet, bound for the hummock with the black oak. The dirt path they walked, while wet, had no standing water and--as Keleli expected--no footprints anywhere. The four dressed in similar buckskins. Keleli carried his cane too. Jupa agreed with Keleli it was also a walker's good friend for stepping through abundant bunch grass, to discover any hidden snake before it found him.

"So what's to look for?" Mojku shouted ahead to the elder.

"The murder weapon, of course," Keleli said.

"Yes, but what, an arrow he took away?"

Keleli halted. Turned about, faced the three. "Once we had the body home," he said, gimlet-eyed, "I studied it very closely. Had a small torch. The wound wasn't made by an arrow. The wrong shape. Too round."

"Oh, so how'd the wound pierce his heart?" Mojku asked.

"A long, thin knife. A wooden knife. The wound had wooden splinters. They must've broke free when the knife was pulled out."

Keleli continued. "So I quickly got Lewi--" Lewi smiled. "To move the body--"

"And with a fine wooden pick, I got the splinters out, folded them in a small leather, and put them away. You see, if we find the wooden knife, we can match the splinters. Then we'll know, for sure, the murder weapon."

Jupa marvelled at what Keleli's eye found telling. Wood fibers suggesting a knife--obvious once said, but before that?

"So let's find it," Keleli said.

After a while, they reached the old black oak on the hummock. The Murder Tree.

"Here's where we found the body," the elder said, his right index finger leveled at the thin patch of blood-soaked grass. "Now, we'll do it again. We'll playact. We'll murder him on this spot. Then we'll guess what the murderer did next."

Jupa looked at the others, wondering who would be chosen to act as if he were stabbing with the knife. He suddenly had a foul taste in his mouth. "I won't be the murderer," he said.

"No, I couldn't ask you--"

"Good."

"I want you to be your father."

"Oh, that's best." Jupa arched his back and stood taller. At last, he could help. He couldn't sit and watch this playacting. He had to be his father, surprised with a knife in the back. Odd. But what happened in that very last moment, he really needed to know.

"I'll do the stabbing--" Mojku said.

"No, you're a witness who wasn't here. Stay where you are." He palmed Jupa's shoulder, guiding him toward the patch of blood.

Keleli dropped his willow cane sideways. "Jupa, you're here. You walked past the tree. You ran into whomever I am," Keleli said. "I start arguing. Maybe about something I see you have. I yell louder and feel inside me the violence grows. And it's you, me, no one else around."

Keleli leveled his gaze at Lewi, "Sorry, you're not here either."

Lewi laughed and crossed forearms over his face.

Keleli balled his right fist and pretended to hit Jupa in the face. "Or you might strike first. I'm not sure." Keleli shrugged. "We saw no marks on the face. Hands unmarked too. Nothing suggests he hit anybody with his fists. Your father, was he quick to anger?"

"No, slow to anger." Jupa raised his head from the mock fight. "But, if he fought, he made sure he won."

"So no punches to the face. But we don't know for sure. We know, though, this person soon stood behind your father."

Keleli slipped behind Jupa, right hand pinning the younger's shoulder. "Stay like this."

Then left forearm in a pretend chokehold about Jupa's neck. Then from under his buckskin, a small length of wood. "See, my right hand goes back, I choke his neck, he can't move and, see, I stab the knife deep."

The pressure of the wooden point, though blunt, felt like the surprise of a stinging hornet. Jupa gasped.

"The knife pierces the heart, his legs, they wobble, he falls." Keleli

gently shoved Jupa, who let his legs buckle; he dropped to the ground.

"What's this?" Keleli bent over the sprawled body. "He falls, face kisses the dirt. But Jupa said the face was up. Why?"

"That's easy," Mojku said. "Only dead eyes tell the kill's good. He could be playing the opossum if the knife missed his heart."

"Yes, I must see the eyes." Keleli slowly went to his knees beside Jupa and tugged at him to roll over. Keleli's thumb pushed open Jupa's right eyelid. "He's dead. The spirit's gone." Keleli glanced about. "My killing's still secret, but I must be sure nobody saw me."

"No witnesses then." With effort, Keleli got back to his feet. He held up his hands, the knife in the right. "But my hands are bloody, the knife's bloody. What must I do?"

"If I were you," Jupa said, his eyes taken with liveliness. "I'd run off, wash my hands. Otherwise, the one who sees you next will be suspicious."

"Oh, you make my work easier. From here, we don't know where the murderer went. The rain washed away his footprints. So the murderer had four directions to go. He chose one. Which one?"

Jupa's head buzzed as if, on fire with anger, it were the head of his father's killer. He opened his mouth. The words choked him. "Jupa knows the answer," Keleli said.

Jupa raised his hand, fingers pointing beyond the sinister oak, the Murder Tree. "Up there, up there." A glance at the patient faces. "Over the ridge, those poplars, a stream."

"Yes, the blood on the hands, the knife begs to be washed away," Keleli said.

Jupa nodded.

"Yes, we'll walk there now," Keleli said, evidently pleased Jupa had seen the same image in his head.

"Here we came from the black oak," the elder said. They stood amid a stand of stunted poplars before Tototo Stream. "Down the path off the ridge. This is where the murderer must have stood, ready to wash away blood." Keleli swept his hand toward the moving water. "The knife's all we can hope for."

"How's that?" Mojku asked in his reedy voice. "Any knife of wood floats away."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," Keleli replied. "As he stood here, bloody hands, he washed them, washed the knife, then he got out of the water--too cold. The knife in his hand. Did he keep it? Why? To kill again? No. A knife used to murder is bad luck. He never would want to see the knife again. So what did he do?"

"Easy," Mojku said. "Threw it in the water." He arched his arm outward.

"Yes, simple. Threw it in the water." Keleli knelt on the sandy bank. "He could throw it right. Or left. Upstream. Downstream. As Mojku says, the water would take the knife away because wood floats. If he threw it upstream, it still went downstream. We need to look downstream."

"There's so much water," Mojku said.

"No, we'll only look where the knife might get caught under a rock." Keleli pointed to one of the boulders resting in the stream bed.

And so Jupa, Mojku, and Lewi waded rock by rock a goodly length of the icy stream. Keleli watched from the bank.

Jupa lagged behind the other two, letting his feet, his fingers go numb as he checked the upstream, mossy side of each rock in turn. He even checked a second time some of the same rocks Mojku and Lewi had gone over.

The search went on for a while--methodically, patiently--the three working their way downstream, Keleli following, along the bank.

"Wooooo!" Lewi yelled, his right arm breaking free of the water, a

wooden length clutched in the hand he held high. Water dripped off what above water was clearly not a shaped object. Even Jupa could see that, standing in cold water up to his thighs the other side of the stream.

"No," Keleli said. "A twig, a unusually straight twig, but a twig--"

"I was so sure when I saw it here," Lewi said. "So straight. It might be sharpened to a knife." He laughed and threw it to the right bank, opposite the one Keleli walked. "No use finding that again."

Mojku stared at the twig tossed on the bank, then turned to Keleli. "What if he just washed away the blood?" Mojku said, "Then tossed it over there like Lewi. Or buried it. We might be looking for nothing."

"What I said before," Keleli said. "He wanted to be rid of the bad fortune of that bloody knife. Once he tossed it in the water, he ran from here."

Jupa saw Mojku give Keleli a doubting look, as if questioning more searching downstream, but Mojku then simply waded to the next rock.

Keleli said nothing about how long they should look before giving up, so the three kept looking, rock to rock. Looking, looking, looking. Jupa's legs went numb with cold and he moved slowly in the stream, now unsure who would find anything.

He stood in the stream by a large boulder Lewi had already passed on, steadying himself, his left hand on its roughness. Suddenly, his foot slipped on mossy rocks. He fell sideways. The cold water slapped his face. He flailed, hands and arms seeking the boulder again for support.

Then underwater. Out of breath. Hand clutching a stick. Sputtering. His face finding sunlight again. He fell backwards against the boulder, its roughness keeping him steady against the stream flow. His hand went upward, the stick in his hand now something he could see as the water ran from his eyes.

He cried out. What he held up, in his wet hand, was a long wooden knife.

"That--that might be it," shouted Keleli.

His right hand clutched the wooden knife high and dry and his feet no longer felt stiff and numb, but instead joyously alive. He stamped and splashed his way out of the stream. Mojku and Lewi followed. The three joined Keleli on the bank.

Jupa gave Keleli the knife, who delicately pinched it, as if it might be the murder weapon.

He set down his walking stick, then scrutinized the knife he held lengthwise between his hands. Mojku and Lewi came closer.

"This was made not long ago. Not yet polished with the oil of hands." Then Keleli took Jupa by the shoulder, turned him sideways. "So if I hold the knife next to Jupa's chest like this, we see the blade's long enough to easily pierce his heart.

"Another thing. The wood's dark and fine-grained, see? The splinters in the wound were also dark. If we understand the other signs right, this *is* the murder weapon."

"A knife in the water, but the killer's gone with clean hands. How do we find him now?" Mojku asked, the question seemingly more skeptical coming from his reedy voice.

Keleli looked skyward, as if Mojku's question, for now, had no answer. He put the murder weapon inside his pelt and took up the willow cane. The three waders also got busy putting on their *momkos*.

Jupa closed the front flaps of one *momko*, made of the thick hide from the neck of a deer, and pulled tight the thongs and glanced toward Keleli, who had begun climbing to the ridge, alone.

He got the other tied and then on his feet, hustled to join the elder. "Whatever I can do, Keleli, I want to help find the killer."

"I know, Jupa. But be patient, what's next takes time. But with this," he said, patting the wooden knife inside his pelt apron, "we have something that might lead to who killed your father."

Lewi and Mojku soon joined the ascent toward the ridge. Jupa plodded along. Though they had found the murder weapon, his enthusiasm about finding the wooden knife was going away, much as the morning's clear sky now scudded over with gray clouds.

Jupa's head ached with questions. Mostly of the sort: *Who among people we know would kill pa? Why?* Tears welled in his eyes for the sorrow, so fresh, was deepening.

After a long while, the foursome arrived in the hamlet. Everyone busy as not. Men still out, hunting mule deer. Women, on the grinding rock, making acorn flour.

"Come with me," he said to his companions. "We'll compare this knife with the splinters I removed from the wound."

Later that evening, after the Miwokituls had shared the day's meal of filling, creamy porridge, the headman Wota stood before everyone assembled in the rust-hued walls of the grand cave. His unruly dark hair spilled off his shoulders and he took a deep breath. "Keleli tells me." He paused. "No, you tell us what you've been doing today."

Standing next to the headman, Keleli shot back a dismissive stare and Wota stepped aside.

Keleli waved the wooden knife over his head of white hair. "Everyone, you see this," he said, keeping it high. "This knife killed the brother dear to us all. Please look closely. Tell me if you've seen it before, tell me if you've ever seen anyone with this knife."

The Miwokitul faces gleamed in the light of the fire by the cave entrance and seemed mesmerized by what Keleli held in his hand: the murder weapon. Nobody spoke.

Jupa sat by his ma, Sawaja, his heart heavy.

"You men, when you hunt for mule deer--yes, I know few are left--you see other hunters, our neighbors. See the pictures in your head, all the times you meet these hunters from elsewhere. You stop, you talk and maybe joke about the few deer. But from these pictures, see if one

shows this knife." He kept holding it aloft, his wrist twisting so all might see its length. "The wood is dark and fine-grained, an unusual color. See if you can recall in your head who might have had a knife like this.

"We'll find the killer. Do we agree?"

A chorus of hearty yeas answered.

"Good. That's all I have to say. We found the murder weapon. Now we'll find the killer."

The next morning, Keleli rose early. Birds were singing in the pines, tree to tree. He had many people to talk with if he was to find the murderer. He might have started by talking with Wota, but the headman was still asleep so he walked over to the arrowsmith Pajpuli--a light sleeper--sitting outside his cave entrance. White-haired Pajpuli, nearly as old as Keleli, lived alone, a widower whose son and daughter had gone elsewhere. His small cave hollow had scant room for a bed and fire. The bows and arrows--always in the making--spilled out.

The entryway of his small cave was covered with wood shavings from the arrow shafts he made. Off to one side, the wolf puppy Pajpuli had adopted dozed in fitful sleep.

"Last night, you saw this wooden knife," Keleli said, retrieving it from inside his buckskin pocket. He held it out. Pajpuli set down the obsidian arrowhead he was fashioning. He made his arrows from obsidian instead of the baser flint because only obsidian gave an edge so keen it cut flesh with no sensation and left only blood.

"Yes, very unusual," Pajpuli said. He turned the knife over. "This wood's not from here. Comes from the North Country. Yew. Evergreen tree, pungent smell, a dark hardwood, but easy to carve and shape."

"You agree, this knife's recently made?" Keleli asked. "The color still fresh, blade marks visible."

"Yes, but possibly this wood was traded, brought from the North Country." Pajpuli kept studying the worked surfaces.

"I would not make this knife, this is only to kill another man by surprise. You grab him by the neck in your forearm," Pajpuli said, miming the action, "You take out the knife with your strong arm, you drive it in his back." He groaned, then smiled.

"Yes, that must've happened. But you give me something important: The wood is yew from the North Country."

Pajpuli stroked his chin with his thumb, holding out the knife. "You know such a knife from obsidian is impossible. This is too thin, too long. Obsidian will break." He handed back the knife. "Yes, we only make an obsidian blade this long," he said, pinching the arrowhead he was fashioning, "when we want to make it thin to penetrate flesh. Otherwise, it snaps in two."

"But with bow and arrow, you don't kill face-to-face, grabbing the neck."

"No, that knife's the weapon for cold-hearted murder. You seek an evil man, Keleli."

"I know, but we'll find him."

Keleli gave Pajpuli a smile of satisfaction. He now knew the knife was of wood from elsewhere. Now who could get yew wood from the North Country?

Before Keleli could go out searching for the killer and take Jupa with him to question neighboring peoples, he needed to go about talking more with the Miwokituls themselves.

Question after question is what he asked for the rest of the day and the next. He sat down with any Miwokitul who had ever been around Naketi. Keleli always had Jupa sit with him, so the two could go over what they heard and see if one had missed something the other got. They started with Sawaja.

The three sat on boulders near the grinding rock where Sawaja spent her days preparing acorn flour. At first, Jupa sat with head bowed, as if he wanted to hear, but not watch Keleli question his ma. Without

looking up, Jupa knew Sawaja was respecting the story to be told of Naketi for both of them: She answered softly. "He came back evenings so tired," she said. "Ate dinner and quickly got sleepy. He wasn't like that before."

Jupa lifted his gaze, surprised Sawaja knew his father acted differently before he was killed. Jupa hadn't seen the change. "I don't know," she said, then paused. "He had something to say, but wasn't ready to talk." She searched Keleli's eyes, then Jupa's, and her gaze lingered, as if she had lost even more not knowing what had been troubling Naketi.

"And you didn't ask?"

"No." Said as softly as a falling flower petal.

"Perhaps it's best we stop these questions for now and talk to others." Keleli swung out his walking stick. Jupa got to his feet too. His ma's face had gone slack. Several yards away, on the grinding rock, a woman dropped a pestle on a handful of acorns in a mortar. *Thunk*. The endless work summoned Sawaja.

Sawaja left Jupa and walked slowly toward her family mortar on the limestone and those hours of acorn pounding that would follow and yet a smile snuck over her face as if she was recalling--her head holding a picture--when he *was* with her.

That first time, the warm summer night when Naketi and a handful of other Miwokitul men took her away from where she lived with the Omo people by the Toloma River.

She had gone to sleep knowing, of course, Miwokituls, cave people from the mountain, might soon raid and take her as the woman for the young man Naketi: All this was arranged earlier--even the payment to Sawaja's father.

Sawaja woke suddenly. Men outside her bark wikiup whooping loudly, dancing, waving knives, bows, spears. The raid of the Miwokituls that night had begun, even if only for the show.

Sawaja felt a quickening in her body: She was about to leave everything familiar to her. For what? For that young man Naketi dancing about in the moonlight, right arm waving his bow up and down, the smile of anticipation plain in his face.

The dancing suddenly changed. The chanting Miwokituls took Naketi's lead and followed him around the wikiup. Encircling the dwelling. Without pause, their *momkos* shuffled a tight circle much closer to her.

She gazed upward, her pulse racing like falling water. He stood before her. Still. Naketi. The dancing stopped.

Rivulets of sweat streaking the face. Wet, glistening in moonlight.

Beside him, two Miwokitul men brought ten mule-deer skins they dropped in a pile beside the doorway. She blushed.

Her moment. Tears fell from her eyes. Then Naketi dropped to his knees, held out his right hand.

Her left hand out, unsure what was to happen next. Her pulse wild as river rapids. His fingers took hers. His strong hand tightening. Slowly, they stood, she following him to her feet.

Tears in her eyes then, now. The picture in her head brought back the moment. She recalled how quickly that summer night she became Naketi's wife. But now he was gone. She must singe her hair.

Meanwhile, Jupa and Keleli went about talking to others, mostly men who knew Naketi in the field. They recalled Naketi wading a stream, walking a ridge, or crouching in the grass stalking deer. The pictures in their heads came back easily, but unfortunately nobody could say when. As more than one said, "The days we're out hunting are all alike."

Keleli and Jupa were frustrated: The Miwokitul men knew too little about Naketi. They returned empty-handed so often, every day out hunting was soon forgotten.

But the next day, when they got to Nyma--the youthful shaman--

they heard something new. Nyma sat outside the main cave, drinking acorn shell tea, a Miwokitul favorite made by roasting broken shells, then steeping in hot water. His stringy, black hair under his high leather hat swung forward as he nodded, acknowledging their approach.

"Some time ago, we talked. He seemed greatly troubled, as if he didn't know what to do." Jupa, seated on the ground between Nyma and Keleli, felt his ears prick up at this echo of what his ma had said. Nyma, tall hat tilted forward, paused and stared at the ground, as if trying to recollect words.

"So what'd he say?" Keleli finally asked.

"He had this pouch. You know, this leather pouch, he'd burned a mule-deer figure on the flap." Nyma took a long breath. "Opened up the flap and shook out a big gold stone, the largest I've ever seen."

Jupa gasped, and his chest tightened. *Gold? Gold can be traded for anything. The Wotoki in the south want it. Nothing's more valuable.*

"How big was it?" Keleli asked.

"Large. This big." Nyma held up his hand, his index finger and thumb forming a circle. "You didn't find *that* pouch with his body, did you?" asked Nyma.

"No, we didn't see any pouch and no pouch with a mule-deer figure."

"Oh. I must also add he then said the gold was from waters south of here."

"I see now why he was troubled."

Nyma nodded assent.

"But those aren't our hunting grounds," Jupa said abruptly.

"Of course not," the elder said.

Then the three of them sat a while, not speaking. Finally, Keleli summed it up: If Naketi took gold from the land of the Nokotuls, one of

them, hidden from view, might have seen him open and put gold stones in his pouch.

Keleli slapped his thigh and stood. "Tomorrow Jupa and I will pay a visit to our Nokotul neighbors."

Jupa got up too and after he and Keleli parted, he sauntered off, still reeling from the suggestion his father might have been killed for gold.

Out in the west, the sun, bright as gold, was sinking. Why would this stone, so often sought, sometimes show its power by bringing out evil?

Usually, stories were told about how having this shiny stone, especially worn about one's neck as a luminous disk would help the deceased with a special light for safe passage down the dark path to a happy afterlife.

Jupa looked to the west, to the afterglow the sun had left. He nodded, recalling among the southern peoples, the Wotoki--who like the Miwokituls still buried their dead--strongly believed only those wearing gold could be sure of a happy death.

He heard that the first Wotoki must have put gold pebbles in a stone depression and using a tule reed blown air through a flame at the gold. The gold pebbles melted, merging into each other. Soon, such hot liquid gold was poured into wooden molds.

The molds were simple open circles, representing the sun itself. After the gold cooled, the solidified disc was knocked out of the mold. The Wotoki people then took these as amulets--they shone like small suns--and drilled a hole at top and wore them about their neck for a good death.

Jupa turned away from the sun's fiery splash, convinced gold, unlike what it was for the Wotoki, had only brought his father bad luck. The next few days would be difficult. He might even see his father's killer face-to-face and not know it.

CHAPTER THREE: LIZARD CHASER, BARK PAINTER, STREAM WADER

The next morning, Jupa awoke on his deerhide bed and sat up. At last they were going somewhere they might find his pa's killer. He reached down, put on *momkos* and went out.

Across the commons, Jupa found Keleli sipping that Miwokitul favorite: acorn shell tea. Seated on a large boulder, he seemed at the ready for the day's hike and asked, "Are you afraid?"

Jupa searched the elder's face for levity: The question made no sense. "Afraid of what?" he asked.

"Your father's killer, you might want to beat him senseless."

"Oh, yes, if I don't, he might finish me off like my pa--"

"But you'll be there," Jupa added. "You'll save me."

"Yes, and now we must go." Keleli stood, grabbing his walking stick.

The two quickly set off. To the west, rolling hills, and a lower valley where the Nokotuls lived beside Kosomu Stream. Jupa trailed Keleli's dogged steps, punctuated every now and then by the walking stick striking a stone. Step after step on the chalky path, wet from recent rain, past the solitary leafless black oaks that had given up their bounty. Clearly, they walked in lands of the Miwokituls, the first acorn eaters.

Passing one such regal oak, Jupa called out, "What was that old story of how Miwokituls came to eat acorns?"

Keleli stopped, turned. "Oh, in the early days, for food, our people, they'd dig *jumutu*, they'd spear fish, they'd shoot deer, but no acorns."

Jupa frowned, never knowing when Miwokituls didn't eat acorns.

"Our people, in fall," Keleli continued, "would try eating those nuts, so easy to pick up and yet every time, they got such stomach pains. They would howl and tell everyone, no acorns. Poison." He paused, then added, "But one day they'd forget and try again."

"What happened?"

"They tried everything. Mashed it, pounded into flour, mixed it with water. Stirred, let it sit. Wanted the poison to float and pour it off. But then they ate the acorn paste--" Keleli grimaced, holding his stomach.

Jupa laughed.

"One day, a shaman," Keleli said, "he saw this and from his dreams said adding white soil, what we stand on now, would take away the evil taste of the acorn paste. He said only light-colored soil would kill the dark poison of the acorn."

Jupa gaped: The answer was in dreams.

"It worked," Keleli said. "Unfortunately, the name of the shaman is lost. If we knew his name, we could respect him for changing us Miwokituls into acorn eaters."

Jupa took a deep breath. Where the nameless shaman and his helpful dreams went, he didn't know. The angular-armed black oak, to the right. The pools of chalky slurry everywhere on the path from the overnight showers. Those, however, were still about.

Finally, before them, a few dozen conical, cedar bark huts clustered on a grassy bluff overlooking the unseen, but audible, burbling Kosomu Stream. With ferocity, the sun beat down. Jupa pushed aside the dark locks at his forehead, hooded his eyes and fixed on the Nokotul hamlet. No voices. Nobody.

Ahead, a walkway ran between the huts, their slabs of cedar bark tied with grape vines. Suddenly, right to left, a small, tousle-haired boy scampered, chasing after a large lizard. He glanced at Keleli resting on his walking stick, who also seemed puzzled.

"Why don't you ask where everybody is?" Keleli said.

Jupa nodded and went after the kid.

"Tell me, where are your people?"

"They in water," the kid said not taking his eye off the lizard, now paused, four reptilian feet supporting the heaving flanks of a leathery body with a long tail. A string of a tongue unrolled from its pink mouth.

"Oh, a hot day like this," Jupa said. He again hooded his eyes from the glare.

"Yes, today they go in water."

Jupa turned to Keleli, who had ambled up behind them. "It's so hot, they're all in the stream--"

"Could be another reason." Keleli winked.

"What?"

"Possibly the flakes of sunshine sparkle under those waters. Gold," he said softly.

Jupa shot a glance back to the kid, wondering if he might have overheard the word *gold*. But the kid was gone: twig in hand, whipping at the lizard scooting across the dirt.

"We need to talk with others," Keleli said.

They trudged on. A sandy passageway between bark huts. An occasional shriek from the kid, now unseen, but otherwise all was eerily silent. Jupa peered for signs of life, but nothing moved. The bark huts, the towering black oaks nearby, the mountain rising to the sky: Everywhere, stillness.

Jupa saw Keleli, whom he now was following, look off to the right,

his head nodding at something. He caught up with the elder who had stopped and he saw what caught Keleli's eye.

At the right, a small man sat before a hut. Legs stretched out, right arm against his body in a sling. His useful arm, the left one, held in its fingers a brush, which he dipped in paint and daubed on a bark sheet. Jupa and Keleli exchanged glances and approached tentatively.

"Hello." Keleli spoke before the cripple could look up.

He put down his brush and turned his head sideways, still hunched over, as if the lame arm kept him crouching. "Who are you? Where're you from?"

"We're Miwokituls, from the north caves. We want to see your headman, Hajapo, but everybody's gone, except you."

The painter picked up his brush, again daubing the sheet of bark. "They're in the stream. Looking for gold. But they won't find anything." He chuckled, the tone of which struck Jupa as false.

"You really know that?" Jupa asked. "You looked yourself?"

"No," the painter answered softly. "This arm, hard to wade in that cold water," he said, holding out his paint brush, its bristles dipped in ocher. The bark painting was odd: several acorns, nothing more. Jupa bit his lower lip. He easily saw the cripple couldn't do much of anything out in the stream with just one good arm.

"Well, I'm Keleli, this is Jupa, and you're?"

Again, head kept low, he looked them up and down. "Wyla. I'm called Wyla the cripple. This arm's useless," he said, turning his right shoulder their way. "All I do is paint, but sometimes I go to the stream and collect mussel shells," pointing to a small pile of what all Miwokituls used as porridge spoons.

"We didn't mean to disturb you. We're surprised to find anybody," Keleli said. Suddenly, a shriek from elsewhere, obviously the lizard-chaser.

The elder nodded his head toward the youthful cry. "Except for the kid."

Wyla stared blankly.

"The person I'd like to see is Hajapo, your headman. You know where he is?"

"Oh, Hajapo, he's this way--"

"Straight ahead?"

"Yes, watching those fools wade in the water."

"Thanks," he said, lifting his willow cane.

Jupa saw Wyla quickly returned to daubing paint on the bark sheet, as if happy to be done with them.

They walked on, Jupa's *momkos* padding along each step through the sandy lane between bark huts.

At the overlook, the Kosomu below riffled, tossing foam ribbons around dozens of figures, the Nokotuls, all stooped over in the water. Hands clamped to front thighs, the tense men, women--children, even--searched the stream bed with meditative focus. Not a word to be heard. "Harumph," uttered Keleli.

Further up the stream bank below them a stooped figure leaned on a walking stick. "Let's go see Hajapo," the elder added.

The headman of the Nokotuls stood, bent from old age, his white hair hung skimpily about his shoulders.

"Your people, Hajapo, they look for gold," Keleli called out.

Hajapo turned, his brow furrowed above his dark eyes. He appeared eager to complain about the whole hamlet out wading the stream waters. "Well, nobody's picking up anything. It was all gone lifetimes ago. Nothing's left.

"Yes, but they're still out--why?"

"Well, our young Katwa, he always talked about leaving, going to

the South Country--"

Hajapo said Katwa's desire to leave came from frustration at finding a mate among women of the water people. The Nokotuls, like the Miwokituls, were land people and came from bear, fox, and raven ancestors. Moreover, Hajapo added, Katwa's harsh looks and red hair probably made him less than appealing to any suitable water women nearby, who descended from the otter and deer.

Thus, Katwa decided many moons ago to go far south, where neither land or water people lived and the rule no longer held.

"This morning he took off, but first--" Jupa noticed a hint of disgust in the Nokotul leader's words at the young man's impulsiveness. "He had to show several people gold pebbles he had. He said he got them here." Hajapo jabbed his walking stick streamward.

"Then what happened?" Keleli asked.

"Oh, he left. My people could talk about nothing else. They want gold. The shiny metal trades for anything. So soon they're out like this. They find nothing. No hunting, no porridge today. I came down here, wondering when I'd tell them, Stop, get back to usual life."

Keleli shook his head. "I'm sure this causes heartache, your people so foolish."

"Yes, it does. So what brings you down here?"

"Keleli glanced over at Jupa. "He lost his father. Murder."

"Oh, I'm sorry. How was this?"

"Stabbed in the back, bled to death."

Jupa noticed nothing to suggest the Nokotul leader knew about his pa's death.

"Where'd this happen?"

"Under an old black oak north of our hamlet."

"So not around here?"

"No, on our lands." Keleli reached inside his buckskin. "I have the murder weapon with me."

"Please, I'd like to see it."

Keleli slowly pulled the knife--its thin, blood-stained length--from his inside pocket.

"As you can see, a long wooden knife. Solely to stab a man to death. No other use. Have you seen such a knife before?"

Hajapo shook his head. "No, we don't have need for that. We only hunt mule deer. This would be worthless." His fist tightened on the walking stick as if he needed support, as if the knife unnerved him.

"See, this knife's carved from wood we don't have," Keleli continued. "It's yew from the North Country. You don't have any such wood, do you?"

"No, never seen it."

"Will Katwa ever return?" Keleli asked.

"No," Hajapo said. "He's gone. He seeks a mate to the south. It's good he wants to start a family." He laughed, his mouth showing a few snaggle teeth, but mostly gums.

"Well, Hajapo, you've helped us make sense of all these people out there."

"Yes, I hope they get as frustrated as I am and go back to the usual life--"

"They will, I'm sure. Nothing's out there. Well, we must talk to others, but this knife's our first good sign and we might yet find someone who's seen it before." Keleli reached out, putting his hand to Jupa's shoulder.

"If I find anything important, I'll come and tell you."

They both shook hands with the Nokotul headman. Jupa turned and slipped off his water bag. The ferocious sun overhead was not letting

up. He licked sweat off his upper lip. He gazed at the Kosomu, still full of thigh-clasping Nokotuls hungry for the sight of a gold fleck. He and Keleli needed to top off their water bags for the hike back home.

Keleli had also slipped off his water bag and no sooner had they walked halfway to the stream, but Hajapo yelled out. "I can tell you another person who might know something." Hajapo smiled that they turned and walked back. He was so old, rushing after anybody was out of the question.

"Katwa's brother Kon. See there, the willow?" he said, pointing along the bank. "In the water, the fellow, he's standing up straight now, that's Kon. Ask him about Katwa, if you like." Jupa sensed Hajapo was sincere about helping. They thanked him and walked directly to the willow, where Kon waded.

Jupa and Keleli reached the willow, and the grizzled elder called out to Kon--black-eyed, black hair falling to the shoulders, and wet bronze skin glistening under the sun--and introduced themselves. "We want to ask about your brother."

"Katwa?" the young Nokotul strode toward them, but stayed in the water. "Nothing to say for him, he's gone."

"Any reason he took off today?" Keleli asked.

"No, a long time, he wanted to leave."

"How's that?"

"You know, he would never find a woman of the Water People around here," Kon said jocularly.

"But Katwa took gold with him, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes, you're right, he took a little gold," Kon said quietly.

"How's that, a little?"

"Oh, not much. Something if he needed to trade."

"Didn't he have a large gold stone?" Keleli asked.

"No gold stones, no none at all. Just a few pebbles, none bigger than your smallest fingernail," he said, pinching the tip of his last digit.

Jupa frowned. *How does a gold pebble get big as a bird's egg like the one Naketi showed the shaman Nyma? If Katwa didn't take Naketi's gold, who did?*

"Your brother found gold right here, in the Kosomu?"

"Sure, he said so."

Jupa stared at the churning, gurgling waters slipping past, unsure what to make of Kon. Nobody would find gold. Did Katwa deliberately mislead them, saying to look there?"

"You sure he wanted to leave for a while?" Keleli said with skepticism.

"Yes, ever since the woman of the Omos made her father refuse payment. He talked about nothing else."

Kon turned away, his dark eyes seemingly ready to search again the flowing waters.

"She probably turned your brother down," Keleli added, "knowing her heart was for some other fellow. All this helps."

"Helps? What did you say?"

"We need to find--" Keleli paused to look at Jupa's drawn face. "Who murdered his father."

"Murder. I'd not heard of that." He glanced at Jupa, his face opening with concern. "I'm sorry for you."

"And Katwa had something to do with that?"

"Gold was taken from the body. We know that."

Again, Kon turned toward the Nokotul gold seekers in the stream.

"One more question," Keleli continued. "Your brother ever have a wooden knife?"

"Wooden knife? No. Never."

Keleli slowly extracted the long wooden knife from his inner pocket so Kon could easily see it. "You ever saw this knife?"

Kon stared, as if something--the narrow, deadly length, the dark, sinister wood, the tapered, flesh-piercing tip--stole his attention, wouldn't let go. "That, that knife. No, my eyes never saw that knife. No, just now, until just now."

Keleli cleared his throat.

"Well, I have nothing more to ask," Keleli said, putting the knife back in his pelt apron. He thanked Kon. The two soon left and Kon went back to searching for gold glints.

As they walked away, Jupa mulled over the expression on Kon's face. "Kon back there," Jupa said, once out of earshot of the Nokotuls, "he seemed upset about the knife."

"Yes, when he saw the knife, his words came out loosely. That I noticed."

"So Kon protects his brother Katwa?" Jupa asked.

"Possibly. And you see Katwa might've done it?"

"Yes, he took flight."

"Well, I was struck at how quickly Kon recognized the knife. Surely, he has seen it before. Probably Katwa also saw the knife. My guess is they saw it in the hand of the person who might have killed your father."

"Why wouldn't it be Katwa?"

They reached a ridge overlooking a meadow full of tall waving bunch grass and paused to rest. "One simple reason. Katwa, as Hajapo said, did not have the big gold stone the shaman Nyma knew about. Hajapo said he had gold pebbles, Kon said the same words. So the real killer still has the big gold stone, not Katwa--he only has pebbles. I have no reason to doubt Hajapo tells the truth. For Hajapo, leader of the

Nokotuls, is a great man. Of that I am certain."

Jupa let his head sag. What Keleli figured out only raised another question. "But why did Katwa flee?" he asked.

"Katwa might have been paid to leave."

"Really?" Jupa's tongue licked the salty beads of sweat on his upper lip. They still had a long walk back to the hamlet and his throat was beginning to hurt from desire for water. Unfortunately, both his water bag and Keleli's were empty because they forgot to refill them back at the stream, so engrossing was the talk with Kon.

"He might know too much. Accidentally, he could have learned what the real killer had done. That person--another Nokotul, perhaps--knew the simplest way to keep the murder a secret was to buy off Katwa with gold. That person might say, Seek your future elsewhere, this will help. So Katwa left the hamlet right away."

"But my father was killed for gold. Why would the killer give away gold to buy silence?"

"The killer still has the large gold stone he took off your father's body. But I don't know if gold stones, gold pebbles were why he killed. I sense whoever killed your father was moved by something stronger than wanting gold."

"I see. But this person--mustn't he be a Nokotul?"

"Even that we do not know yet. Even that. For all I know, and this is difficult to say, the murderer might be one of us. A Miwokitul."

Jupa's eyes widened with shock at the name of his own people. "No, how can you say that? It can't be one of our own people."

"I am sorry, but I need to look at all the possibilities. Who would better know your father's habits, where he went, what he did than someone from our hamlet?" Keleli paused, resting on his walking stick, taking survey of the vast meadow of bunch grass. "We don't know enough. Today, we only added two names. The whole story we won't know for a while. Katwa and his brother Kon. They know something."

And we can only talk to one right now."

When they reached the hamlet, Jupa eyes darted about, unsure if his Miwokitul home had changed. Certainly, the same hillside slope pocked with cave openings on his right, the gathering of women cooking dinner around the fire on the commons. But his spine shivered for what might be hiding nearby. The murderer of his father could be anyone, anywhere. Keleli had said the murderer might be another Miwokitul. That possibility could not be ignored.

But soon he joined in the usual routines before mealtime. Always, the food was acorn porridge, and too infrequently, a side of deer meat.

A few men kept the cooking fire well-supplied with wood, while most of the women shelled acorns, ground acorns, and all the other tasks that would finally lead to cooking the acorn porridge they enjoyed every evening.

Surprisingly, gathering enough acorns to feed the Miwokituls all year took but days in autumn. Every tenth moon, or soon after, the leaves on the oaks would turn yellow and fall to the ground, as would the acorns too.

Only when the acorns were on the ground did the Miwokituls know how good the harvest was. Jupa was told, as a small boy, no one ever looked at the oak tree, hoping to see acorns. To do so brought bad luck. One might scare the acorns away. So all Miwokituls waited on the acorns, every tenth moon, to fall to the ground.

So many acorns fell from each tree, the mighty oaks at times seemed draped with a solid sheet of acorns about the foot of their trunks. It was the last of the tenth moon and Jupa knew, after brisk autumnal winds blew, bringing the happy sounds of acorns dropping to the ground all day--*bunt, bunt, or bant* when it hit another acorn--Miwokitul shaman Nyma would step forward, long, stringy, black hair falling out from under his high leather hat, and declare the harvest of acorns ready to begin.

Once he gave the words of blessings, every Miwokitul woman

went to her family oak tree, passed down through generations, and began gathering acorns. On her knees, she picked up every acorn, studying its tan shell for any signs of insect or worm infestation. Only if it was healthy would she toss it into one of the woven bear-grass winnowing baskets, often held by a child at her side. If the acorn was bad, she left it on the ground. What she didn't take was gratefully returned to the earth or left as food for squirrels. As the winnowing baskets got full, she emptied them in a larger burden basket that later, in turn, was emptied in the storage *cha'ka*.

So the harvest only took days.

What did take time, however, was the tedious, unrelenting task of shelling and pounding each acorn to make porridge for three dozen Miwokitl mouths every day.

This meant every day taking from the *cha'ka* granaries, the day's worth of stored acorns that had been drying from last autumn. Then, one by one, they would drop an acorn into the mortar and crack it with a tap of the stone pestle. Their fingers, toughened from rubbing against stone, separated the hard, pricking acorn shell from the soft, tan nutmeat. Acorn shell fragments piled on one side, nutmeats on the other, until enough shelled acorns--several handfuls--were ready to pound.

Next, the women, like Jupa's ma, Sawaja, took a handful of nutmeats, dropped them in the mortar and with a few deft blows, crushed the acorns. Then with the stone pestle she would pound repeatedly until the crushed acorn bits became finer and finer. She would take her soaproot brush and sweep together the crushed acorn into a new mound. She reformed the mound as often as needed so there was always a layer of flour to pound. She could not have any bits of rock from the pestle directly hitting mortar bottom.

And so pound, pound, pound--new mound--pound, pound, pound until her leathery fingers scooped up an acorn flour she would put in a woven hopper basket. No one ate such acorn paste. It was far too bitter and would only give stomach pains. So she would take the acorn paste

and soak it in a mixture of limewater and ashes overnight.

Next morning, the tannic acid-infused water was poured off. The acorn paste left was mixed with the right amount of water and put in a large, tightly woven basket, whose sides were coated with pine pitch to make the vessel watertight. At the same time, men heated up several soapstones, two-clasped-hands in size. The soapstones, unlike many other stones, could absorb a tremendous amount of heat quickly without cracking.

Everything ready, one woman took a heated soapstone with wooden tongs from the fire and dropped it in the porridge mixture. Another woman stood ready to catch the blistering hot stone ball before it sank in the bubbling porridge with the looped end of her dogwood *pinita*, a long stirring paddle she skillfully used, moving the stone about the porridge, taking care to keep the heated stone away from the sides of the basket.

It took time, but after a while of stirring--and after three heated stones in succession had been added and rolled about, the bubbling porridge thickened and was ready for eating.

With all the mealtime preparations underway, Jupa left Keleli chatting with and probably advising headman Wota. He sought out his ma, Sawaja.

A small, unobtrusive figure, she sat on a log bench by the expansive opening of the grand cave meditatively absorbed in the repair of a deerskin water bag in her hands. Jupa knew she was mending a water leak. He saw her do it many times. She used a flint to shave hair off one side of a small piece of deer hide. The bald side of the hide would face the hole to be fixed.

He sat on the log beside her. He didn't look her in the eye, and let one *momko* slide forward in the dirt.

Sawaja asked what he and Keleli learned by visiting the Nokotuls. He shook his head at her question. "Oh, those people there are

gold-crazy. All of them are in the Kosomu looking for the yellow stones." He chuckled and studied her patient hands fixing the water bag.

"Did you and Keleli find out anything? Who the murderer might be?"

"I don't know. We seem to learn new questions more than anything--" He bowed his head: They had little to show for the day.

"You must let the answers come in their own way," Sawaja said, turning her handiwork in the light to see if anything else needed doing.

Sawaja saw Jupa walk away, no doubt to talk with the men--Mojku, Lewi--she wasn't sure, his slow, aimless shuffle was simply away. She sighed. Naketi's death left Jupa without a father just when he was about to become a man. She wanted the other Miwokitul men to look after him.

She studied the hide patch she had glued inside the pouch. The deer hoof powder made strong glue, but it would have to dry for at least a day. She went back into the cave, and in the dim light, took the pouch and put it on a flat rock slab and then took a large rock and placed it on the patch. In a day, the pouch, once again turned right side out would be as good as if it were just made.

She learned this hide-patching technique from Tomu, the old aunt who was such a superb maker with deer hide pelts. Tomu had passed on, but left Sawaja with many techniques, which she would tell herself she had to eventually teach another young woman before long, or the hamlet would lose them and then who would repair a leaking deerskin water bag?

Sawaja walked back outside the cave, going over to rejoin the women who were working on the evening meal.

The ends of her hair were cut short, burnt to a crisp, utterly unattractive to all men. Earlier, a young mother, Lupu, had helped her singe the shorn locks with a torch. Sawaja would now live alone with her grief until the next eleventh moon. Only then would Naketi's brother

take care of her.

So she sat again at her mortar on the limestone. Shelling acorns until the meal. Pointy end of acorn on the flat rock. Flat end up, struck by the falling weight of the hammerstone, a granite cobble that had come from Lima Creek. *Dum, pop, dum, pop, dum, pop*. One after another, she cracked acorns, tossed the shells--split twos and thirds--into the bear-grass winnowing basket on her left and reached for another acorn from the rightmost basket. Although working steadily, she moved slower, meditatively.

Sawaja did not care who murdered her husband. That was something the men, Keleli and Jupa especially, might discover. All she knew was the death gave her a great undoing she had to endure.

Dum, pop, dum, pop, dum, pop.

CHAPTER FOUR:
DRIED FIDDLEHEAD, OBSIDIAN ARROWHEAD, EWTI

Eventually, Jupa sauntered over to the young shaman Nyma, recalling the good words he spoke at his pa's burial, just before the dirt was pushed in the grave. A wiry build and stringy, black hair below a high leather hat, Nyma looked like his shamanic appetites were controlled and few. One of them was drinking acorn shell tea.

Jupa halted, his eyes brightening: If anybody could seek out his pa in the other world and ask about the assassin with the yew knife, it was--

"Shaman Nyma, how do you go where my pa went?" He searched the eyes of the wise one who knew the world of departed souls and unseen giants busy wheeling stars through the black skies, there, there, and there--more than beyond reach--night after night.

The steady, dark eyes seemed possessed with deep knowledge, which Jupa knew Nyma spent a long time learning. As a small child, Nyma was selected as apprentice to the aging shaman, Kotoka. Even then, so the story went, the shaman Kotoka noticed Nyma liked being alone. Kotoka had been the same as a kid too, content to sit in a field and study clover blossoms.

So until Kotoka eventually died, Nyma became a shadow to the shaman, absorbing such esoterica as healing with herbs and reading what signs were about: messages from spirits in the other world. Unfortunately, the apprenticeship ended abruptly. Nyma was then only a young man--like Jupa--when Kotoka took sick with a cough that would not go away and passed on to the other world. In that moment, Nyma

became shaman for the Miwokituls.

Jupa saw the dark eyes soften, the head nod, the lips ask, "You want to go also--what would you ask?"

"Oh, I'd want to know who pa saw last, who it was with the yew knife."

Nyma nodded as if he wanted to hear more.

"It hurts with pa gone. But it's more pain not knowing."

"So you want me to go to the other world and ask this?"

"Yes."

"This question, it's not one to be answered in the other world."

"Why not?"

"Because you ask for something."

"Just an answer."

"Yes, but all that we have is given to us from those in the other world. We must honor the gift. We can only ask what they want us to do in this world. See the difference?"

"You mean I can't ask who?"

"That's true."

"Would my pa want me to quit looking for the murderer?"

"No, of course not. You honor him with that search. What you can't do is ask him to do your work for you."

"So I go on with Keleli and make the best of it?"

"Yes, that's all you can do."

"But I might never know who--" He kicked his *momko* in the chalky soil.

"Or why," the shaman added.

"Keleli, he said it might've been more than gold."

"Oh, gold often clears the path for bad fortune, even murder like this." Nyma paused, as if the words were taking effect.

Jupa's head filled with images: his pa's heart pierced with a stab from the knife, the falling to the ground, the being left to die. Then his back stiffened, felt as solid, as strong as the trunk of an oak tree. "I would like to take the wooden knife we found and, as he did my pa, drive it through his heart."

"No, such violence, it solves nothing--" Nyma's gaze grew stern.

"But what he did Pa, he could do someone else, even me."

"You say that because you don't know who it was."

"If I knew, I'd take his life--"

Nyma set down his wooden cup of tea, pressed his fingertips together, his high leather hat tilted forward. "Far better your father killed by the *hilica*, the cougar, here on the mountain. Then you would suffer, but one day see it as past."

"Perhaps what you say is true. I just have this feeling to make something right again."

"Make right again?"

"Like before, when my father walked with me."

"Jupa, forget revenge. It's the not knowing that troubles you. You might never know. If you can't accept this, your days from now on will come hard to you."

Jupa didn't want to hear that. He suffered so much for what he didn't know. He scowled.

The next morning, Jupa awoke on his roll of deer hides amid light flooding the cave's cool interior. He sat up, his arms tight with anticipation. He pictured mule deer in his head. He quickly rolled off the bed, stepping on the tule mat, put on *momkos*, picked up the bow, a deerskin water bag, the arrow quiver fashioned from the skin of a black fox, and walked outside.

He waved and walked across the commons to Keleli.

"So today you hunt with Mojku and Lewi," the grizzled elder said, eyeing the younger's hunting gear strapped to his back.

"Yes, Mojku says for what deer are left, the weather might help."

"More so with your father gone, it's important you hunt with Mojku and Lewi."

How could he forget his pa? From Jupa's arm dangled the cedar bow Naketi had fashioned for him. Flat, broad in its midsection, his pa had lightly carved figures of mule deer along its length, as if those images would more surely guide any arrows shot from the bow to real-life counterparts. "I want to hunt, but I also want to find my pa's killer--"

"Today's your day to hunt. Don't worry, we'll visit the Nokotuls again soon, we've more to find there. So study Mojku and Lewi today, learn how they stalk the mule deer."

"Yes, so much to learn. I haven't been out since pa took me."

"Ahhh. Hunting. The one thing I miss about being young. I can no longer run in the field. And you can," Keleli said with a chuckle.

Next in quick strides, Jupa went over to the wooden cistern for water and joined his hunting companions, Mojku and Lewi. They had filled their water bags. He began filling his.

"Here, eat these, drink some water," Mojku said, holding out a handful of the dried fiddleheads everyone claimed masked human scent from mule deer. Jupa put a pinch in his mouth and chewed on the crackly black fern and made a face. *Bitter*. He took a swallow of water, swished it about, trying to rid himself of the gagging taste. Mojku smiled, held out even more.

Not that he hadn't tasted dried fiddleheads before, but these seemed more bitter. Jupa scrunched up his face. Mojku said he he'd picked them late in the season because they were stronger. Jupa shrugged and downed the rest.

The deerskin water bag full, the fiddleheads eaten, Jupa was ready. The three soon left the hamlet and were stepping down a dusty path in their deerhide *momkos*, cedar bows in hand, quivers of arrows, tipped with obsidian points, slung across their backs. They were leaving the steep hills--thick with conifers and oaks--for the rolling savanna of scattered oaks and low hummocks.

Destination: a lower valley to the west. These day-long hunts were often worth it. For if even one mule deer was brought back to the hamlet, it was more meat for everyone than if the men had spent days chasing squirrels or birds.

Mojku said the mule deer would be eating the last yellowing leaves from a stand of young aspens. Aspen leaves were favored by mule deer. As Mojku said, whenever he saw the lowermost leaves of an aspen in a straight line--the height of a mule deer's mouth--the hunting would be good.

"The aspens lose leaves fast now," Mojku said in his reedy voice. "Mule deer must eat what's left." Mojku always knew where they would go hunt. Any aspens with leaves left on their branches stood in the lower, warmer lands, a distance from where the Miwokituls lived.

They walked briskly. His back straight, Jupa, however, wasn't rushing every step down to where the mule deer now fed. For in his head, one of those lost yesterdays came back. He saw a picture. What they were doing, going to the low lands was part of that great circle of life by which each of the four seasons led to the next. What happened every fall and what they were doing was, of course, the opposite of what happened two seasons earlier, in spring, when snow on the mountain was melting. Then tender, green bunch grass sprang up everywhere. The mule deer climbed higher and higher, grazing away. The Miwokitul men with their bows and arrows would follow right behind. Jupa, with his pa, was one of them and the picture of leaning forward into each labored, ascending step had stayed with him.

Flying past his head into the wild rye, a *koco's* hard, green body

sputtered on thin, dark wings: a grasshopper. He smiled at how the *koco* flew by. He, Mojku and Lewi, carrying bows and arrows, in comparison, were slow-moving, on a long, tiring walk to the hunting grounds. They felt free to talk among themselves, for their loud voices would not spook any deer nearby. Mojku--optimism in his reedy voice--speculated they had to do well: The shaman Nyma had said the weather would be good.

Before long, however, the monotony of steps down the chalky path caused Jupa to see other things in his head.

Off the trail on the right, banks of boulders in the morning sun gleamed white. He learned early in life to stay off those rocks, always. Once when he was much younger, he stepped on a rattlesnake, a *wakali* sunning itself. Fortunately, the *wakali* didn't strike out, but only rattled its tail.

Later, when he told his father about the rattler, Naketi said he was lucky: When their fangs bit, they usually killed. And because the *wakali* liked sunning itself on rocks, Jupa needed to stay off such rocks in bright sunshine. One of so many things his pa said about going on a hunt. He looked up: The two heads of his companions bobbed side-to-side, step after step, down the path. He grimaced. It would be harder to learn as much without the father with whom talk flowed so easily.

"Wind blows south," thin-limbed Mojku said to Lewi, who looked as if he always ate more than his share at the daily meal. He wet his finger on his tongue, held it high. "Blows south all across here."

"Then we go right?" dark, curly-haired Lewi asked. He had stopped, too, was squinting, cupped hand shading craggy brow. Jupa also paused, sure his hunting companions were trying to pick what direction to go: The wrong choice and most certainly they would return to the hamlet empty-handed.

"Yes," Mojku said in the reedy voice. "We'll stay near the stream. Sometimes, they stop to drink. We'll go there first, then decide how to approach upwind."

Jupa rubbed his forehead with the back of the hand holding his bow. *Upwind, downwind?* This, he learned early on, was all hunters talked about when they went after deer. He wasn't sure if it mattered, didn't know if deer could smell Miwokituls on the wind any more than he could smell mule deer. He had eaten fiddleheads. He could only trust everything Mojku, Lewi--and before them, his pa--had said about how to hunt. Until he himself brought down a deer, all he had were unproven words about how to stalk and kill a deer. One they could hang by its hooves from a pole and take home. He scowled, his arms dropped. This was his second season with his own bow. He had yet to shoot a single arrow at a deer.

Mojku and Lewi stopped talking. The path had run out at the rock-strewn, sandy banks of the Apanta Stream. The three listened to the splashing water, flowing swiftly, right to left, white slips bubbling between rocks in the stream bed. Upstream, a turtle, an *awanata*, was poised atop a tan boulder and sunned itself over the surging waters. Right before them, Jupa saw a water beetle, a *catanana*, skated, spinning, but keeping to its feet on the water surface.

"Let's cross." Lean Mojku pointed at a group of boulders. Jupa nodded. They could easily jump boulder to boulder without taking off *momkos* and wading.

Each, in turn, did so, then walked south along the bank. Mojku shook his hand at the ground ahead. Jupa's heart leapt in his chest. His eyes widened. *The mule deer walked here and not long ago.* In the wet sand, deer tracks, a trail of sinkholes impressed by pointed hooves.

Mojku stopped, wanding his bow at the ground. Before them the welcome of glorious green deer droppings. Mojku's eyes came alive with wily anticipation, but he said nothing.

Wet, shiny, the droppings were fresh. Mojku kneeled close, as if the smell itself might reveal more. "Yesterday, possibly this morning," he whispered. His hand swept out to where the points of the hooved marks went, as if he knew the deer--and Jupa guessed there were more

than one, judging from the cluster of tracks ahead--must have kept close to the stream bank and gone south to the stand of aspens where the stream widened.

Mojku stood and they went back to walking by the stream. Jupa glanced back at the green deer droppings. He, too, wouldn't have missed seeing them. He would have seen the direction of the tracks. But what would he have made of it? How did those signs lead to mule deer?

He toed into each step. He had to keep his footfalls silent. He tightly gripped his bow, padding along in the crouch of a hunter who wanted to keep attention away from himself. He stepped across the soft, giving sand of the stream bank, making sure not to rub any brush. One rustle alone might spook a deer he had yet to see.

But the hooved tracks had stopped, gone elsewhere. Of course, Mojku and Lewi must have seen that too. He glanced west, across the meadow. Where had the thin-legged, tall-eared runners fled? Was it possible the mule deer, under the cover of shadow, were stripping those aspens of low-hanging leaves?

Ahead, the two kept on the move. What were they looking for? A flash of movement? A rustle among the fallen leaves across the way? Anything that broke the silence. Once they saw or heard a sign, Jupa was sure, they would freeze, get down on their haunches, ready for what to do next.

The sandy bank of the Apanta Stream narrowed, slipping behind a stand of aspens, yellow leaves jiggling on the breeze. Mojku stopped, raised his arm, pointed across the meadow. Jupa smiled: He knew they were about to close in on any mule deer grazing among those aspens.

Mojku and Lewi turned and began advancing through the tall wild rye, withered from the punishing summer heat. The buzz of a *koco* taking flight above the stalks. Jupa clenched his teeth and fell in step. He had no choice but to push on, noisy as that was, with a chance of alarming the thin-legged, hooved deer who sped through the same grasses so effortlessly. Jupa moved deliberately, plowing on slowly, as

slowly as wind swaying the stalk tips, if that were possible. Anything to keep his approach silent.

Following the part in the wild rye where his hunting companions pushed on, Jupa clenched his bow even tighter. He pictured in his head the same bow he would soon raise after fitting an arrow to its leather string. As he heard so many times from his pa, stalking the mule deer was mostly waiting for a chance to shoot. His ready arms wanted to release that arrow, but when, if at all, was as hard to know as when or where the wind might blow. Still, before they quit the day, he wanted to shoot at least one arrow. That was all. An arrow singing across the open space to a deer close by now spurred him on through the dry, bristly grass.

Suddenly, Mojku stopped. Held his right hand up, high over his shoulder. Brought fingertips to his mouth. Jupa leaned forward, squinted. *What does he see?* He and Lewi froze with anticipation.

Across the grassy meadow, birds chattered in the crowns of aspens: white-headed *cipose* sparrows. Below, up from the ground, the yellow leaves started where hungry deer mouths would reach.

Lean Mojku raised his head, as if looking above the tree tops, then slowly moved his head left to right, then right to left.

Jupa smiled. His pa had taught him the same trick to catch sounds on the air. "I hear like the mule deer," Naketi had said. "They move their head and ears side-to-side when you get close." Jupa swept his ears side-to-side, straining to hear anything, trying so hard, he held his breath. His ears ached to hear a mule-deer hoof break a branch twig: *snap*.

Mojku turned about, facing his two companion hunters. Said nothing. His right hand told them what to do. Lewi: Circle south, out to the left. Jupa: Go right, to the top of the stand of trees.

Jupa leaned forward, ready to move. Mojku made sense. If a deer bolted, one of the three might have a shot if it didn't run westward out the aspens.

He went right, moving on his haunches, slow as a stalking cougar. If he could, Jupa would have even wished away the dry sound of his *momkos* sliding on the fallen grass, gone dead in the burning heat of summer. Going forward, being quiet. His brow furrowed at how to get closer and not be seen, not be heard. He paused, peered at the stand of trees, hoping for a twig snap, a flash of fur so he could draw an arrow across the bow in his hand.

His eyes strained at the gray-trunked aspens beyond the parted rye. He bit his lower lip. *They can't see me. I can't see them. I can only wait.*

And so he did, so long the sun seemingly fell closer to the top of the aspens. In the blue sky, on high, a wide-winged, black condor, the *moloku*, turned empty circles. Ever so often, a leg would tire and he shifted his weight from one haunch to another. Or he would take the bow shaft and part the rye left, then right. But always, his eyes on those gray aspen trunks beyond the wavering grass tops. He licked sweat beads from his upper lip.

He had to get closer. He wasn't seeing the deer they knew were there. Just the low line of chewed yellow leaves. Kneeling, bow in hand, he crawled. Barely moving the parted rye. He crawled, patient as a hungry cougar. Slowly, slowly. Then he looked up. The gray trunks weren't that much closer.

He went back to haunching.

Suddenly, *click*. Directly ahead, a twig snap. Another *click*. A deer. He haunched lower, not wanting it to spook and run away. A heavy breath, then another. The pulse pounding in the ears. The deer moving his way.

Slowly rose from his haunches. Slowly parted the bunch grass with bow, trying to move as in a predator's silent world. Again, small *clicks* ahead in the trees. Distinct. Louder. Held the next breath. Then a deep breath, as if trying to draw into his lungs the scent of the deer on the move. *What was it doing? Ready to panic and run? Going tree to tree, nibbling at leaves? Click. Click.* The pointy hooves of a deer he could

not see.

More than anything, Jupa wanted to stand up, see what Mojku said to do next. But that would only spook the deer. So he stayed on his haunches, his pulse racing, knowing the deer was nearby. His left hand with bow, an arrow, trembled. He licked more sweat beads off his upper lip.

Snap. Snap. Snap. Panicked thrashing. Jupa eyes widened. Now. Among the trees, a flash.

From the trees, through the rye, running at him, a fawn, a *ewti*. A small mule deer. No more than shoulder-high. Directly at him. Huddled low in the grass, raising his bow to face the stalked prize, clumsily fitting arrow across bow, knowing he had one shot, knowing the arrow must hit. The deer running--this time his only chance--taking sight of the mule deer rushing at him, dark fear in the large eye that finally saw him, so close he could reach out and touch if he were to lunge. Then letting go the arrow.

The arrow flying forward in the air off the string: *Thunnnnnn*. The black obsidian arrowhead hissing an evil arc across the reach of air to the deer's flank on which he took aim. The keen-edged arrow soundlessly piercing the hide of the mule deer. Blood spurting. The running, the arrow not shaking loose, the running, the not slowing. Jupa sliding another arrow across the bow. Letting that arrow fly at the deer, crashing forward.

The next arrow struck broadside, near the heart. Jupa wanted the deer so badly he leapt, but missed taking it to the ground. Despite two arrows, the deer charged on. But its body moved faster than legs.

Jupa grabbed a third arrow, pulled the bow string back and crashed forward at the deer, then the deer turned, paused, seemed confused. Jupa let the arrow fly at the brown furred flank. Blood gushed. The deer wobbled, then collapsed. The small body with its broken sticks of legs akimbo was at last down and still.

He scrambled through the wild rye to kneel beside the deer. The

glassy eye staring. The third arrow had gone deep. Blood spurting from the wound. The small deer heart pumping blood until spent. He stared at the arrow. Blood stopped: The heart had given out. Tears welled in his eyes. The picture in his head: his pa lying on the ground, blood seeping into the chalky soil beneath the black oak. His pa died like this.

He would not cry about the small death. The arrows had to be pulled. Starting with the first one, wedged in the heavy neck muscle. Rocked it back and forth on its shaft, releasing the arrowhead and pulled it free. The obsidian point was tightly bound to the shaft. Pajpuli made the best arrows. Jupa would tell him.

He took out the second, the third, pausing with the latter, which had pierced the heart, much as the yew knife had pierced his father's. He clenched his teeth, set his jaw. The small fawn on the ground was too young to die. But he could kill now. The collapsed body on the ground proved that. Jupa fought back tears. *Better if this ewti lived, if I had put this arrow in the heart of pa's killer. If this deer were not food, if my people weren't so hungry for this meat.*

Jupa stood up. He killed a deer, however small. The Miwokituls might take him now as a man. The hamlet would enjoy venison tonight and it was Jupa's kill alone, no help from Mojku or Lewi. This was not a hunting party circling a deer and shooting arrows from several directions. This was a lone kill.

"Here," he yelled as loud as he could manage. "Here. Here. Here."

A head, unmistakably the long-haired, bearded Mojku sprang out of the rye stalks, close to the stand of trees and repeatedly shook his bow downward.

Jupa stared at Mojku: What was he to do? They had to know he killed a deer. But that shaking the bow down meant only one thing: Jupa should go back hiding.

His legs, locked, though, would not sink back into the grass beside the dead deer. He knew he couldn't move. He also couldn't yell. It would upset Mojku. He didn't know what to do. Across the way, their

leader shook that bow downward. Jupa had to fall back in the grass.

Jupa glanced at the fawn, why they were out hunting, what they had to carry back to the caves. He couldn't hold back any more.

"Mojku," he yelled, "I killed the deer." He waved his bow on high.

Not taking his eyes off Mojku, Jupa started pushing through the bunch grass. Mojku slapped his bow down at the stalks. "I killed a deer," Jupa said again.

Mojku came closer, kept slapping the grass, sour look in his face.

Finally, yards away, Mojku stopped. "Why the yelling?"

Jupa's throat tightened. He looked back to the fawn lifeless on the ground. Fresh blood coating its fur.

Mojku scowled. "A pair of deer, you started yelling. Of course, they ran off." He gave Jupa a withering look.

"But I killed a deer, back there, come see."

"You must know one thing. Sometimes we kill more than one deer. Three of us here, you see, we each have a chance to kill a deer. And I just saw two run away. This better be a big mule deer. You scared off two for Lewi and me."

"No, a small deer, come look."

"Well, let's see what we have for this day's hunt. He turned south and gave the loud bird call of the *copata* jay. "Lewi," he then yelled. "Come out. The hunting is over."

In a little while, Lewi joined them before the small deer on the ground. "Small," he said with a quick laugh. "True, we don't go back with empty hands." He patted Jupa on the back.

"More than the new moon goes by--" Mojku said in his reedy voice. "Since our people ate meat. I suppose this will have to do."

"They're all hungry for the sweet taste of deer. Jupa, you picked the best time for your first kill." Lewi patted him on the back.

Mojku looked about as if something were missing. "We need a long branch."

"Yes, Jupa doesn't carry." Lewi laughed. "He brought it down."

Jupa smiled. Lewi was easier on him than Mojku. He hadn't ruined the hunt for everyone, after all. He had killed a deer, even if a *ewti*. When Lewi mentioned he and Mojku had to carry the kill back to the hamlet, that seemed to soften up Mojku. Jupa stood taller and the two were busy with the immediate task of lashing the deer to a fallen branch Lewi brought back from the trees.

They circled about gathering handfuls of the tallest wild rye stalks. Next they next lashed the deer's four legs to the branch, front and back.

Mojku said the time had come to bless the kill. He dropped to his knees, motioning for Lewi and Jupa to do so too.

Jupa put his hands on the deer corpse, joining the other four hands on the small body. In a steady monotone, reedy-voiced Mojku chanted what he evidently learned from the shaman Nyma. Jupa's brow furrowed. The words made no sense. He stared at the backs of his hands pressed into the deer's stiff fur. Were they real words? He understood from other hunts and blessings, this was what, Nyma said, the gods understood, those who looked after the Miwokituls and gave the bounty of mule deer, acorns, and everything else they ate.

Mojku stopped chanting. Opened his eyes and stood.

Back on their feet, Mojku and Lewi hoisted the deer to their shoulders. Mojku asked Jupa to lead. This would be the first time he headed a hunting party. He hoped this honor would happen again soon.

The trip back to the hamlet, crossing the stream, climbing the mountain, was long. But Jupa walked on, smiling and free of the weight Mojku and Lewi willingly bore. Finally, he was a hunter bringing food home to his people.

CHAPTER FIVE: TRAINING OFFAL, YEW WOOD, BOWL OF THE SPIRITS

When the three hunters with the small *ewti* arrived home, everyone in the hamlet quit what they were doing and hurried over. Led by headman Wota, the men, the women, the children couldn't take their eyes off the mule deer hanging head down from the branch Mojku and Lewi carried between them.

"Already, I'm starving," Wota, dark hair spilling off his shoulders, yelled.

True, a small deer, a fawn far from fully grown. But for the Miwokituls, the promise of even a few tasty, sizzling mouthfuls of venison set their mouths watering.

Mojku and Lewi halted and dropped the *ewti*. "Jupa's first deer," Lewi shouted. "We carry for him."

Sawaja pushed forward. "Your father would have been so happy to see you today," she said, her face beaming as only a proud mother's could.

"By himself, he shot three arrows in the animal," Mojku said. He nudged the rump of the fawn with his toe. "Lewi and I weren't even near when he called us--"

"I was surprised," Lewi said. "Not many days ago, little Jupa couldn't pull a bow string."

Laughter. A lingering guffaw. A slap on the back from the man next to him.

Then Keleli shuffled up, prodding the ground with his walking stick. "Today, you raised your bow with great skill. In all my days, I recall nobody killing their first at such an early age." Keleli rocked back on his heels, as if taking measure of his companion the last several days. "The venison we eat tonight will be all the more tasty because of what this means to you and to us."

Jupa looked up. Everyone smiled his way. He had done what he always wanted to do: be a provider for his people like his pa. He had been praised by not only his ma, who would easily be proud of him, but by the elder, who would not lavish words foolishly, for he would want to be seen as wise.

It was time, however, to again carry the deer. At ends of the branch holding the deer, Mojku and Lewi knelt and stood, hoisting the weight of the small *ewti*. They were only headed across the commons to the stone slab for butchering. About half the Miwokituls followed Mojku and Lewi.

The other half seemingly gathered around Jupa, pressing in close, asking questions. "Ah, Jupa, you killed your first deer, but no mouthful for you!" "Oh, Jupa, did you sneak up, catch the *ewti* by surprise?" "How many arrows you shoot?" "Your father would be proud." "I'm so hungry." Jupa took a deep breath, looked away to see that Mojku and Lewi had set down the *ewti* on the butchering slab, cut free the lashed legs, and tossed the branch. He wanted to watch that--even if he ate nothing from his first kill.

When a Miwokitul killed his first deer, it was, of course, only for others to enjoy. The Miwokitul tradition prohibited his eating any of it. Only when he killed a second deer would he enjoy what his own bow and arrow brought down. He pulled away from the questioners, striding quickly. They followed, with more questions.

The carcass lay the length of the long, flat gray stone. Mojku kneeled beside it with flint knife in hand. He reached down with his left hand and rolled the belly of the carcass toward him, positioning it at the

stone's edge. The four legs stuck out, collapsed, akimbo, seemingly broken. Next, his left hand, fingers spread, slid over the furred underbelly, as if feeling for the bottom of the abdominal cavity, the organs inside. Then he gently slid the knife into the furred skin he tugged on, right above the *ewti's* privates. Blood spurted from the cut, copious--red as late-summer raspberries--and his hand glistened. He tugged at skin and cut, tugged at skin and cut upwards.

Up and down, he worked the knife, moving across the furred belly toward the chest. Blood washed out freely and emerging, but held in place, were dun-colored organs, teasing to the eye as a newborn, but Jupa frowned for this was death, even worse than death: This was the dismemberment, the destruction, the disappearance of what it meant for the poor *ewti* to be alive.

With the cut completed to the rib cage, Mojku stopped, then with a grunt, drove the knife through the bony sternum, splitting it and sawed up to the bottom of the throat. He shoved his left hand inside, deciding where to dislodge the internal organs. Then a cut of the esophagus atop the stomach. Then back down for the same with the intestines. Quick severs of arteries, veins until he freed up the organs. He reached in and--*huff*--ripped loose vitals he tossed in a large wooden bowl sitting in front of the stone slab. Jupa eyed the organs with interest.

No Miwokitul could be expected to eat that spill of organ meats, but Jupa knew who would. He stepped forward, scooped two handfuls and took it straightaway to where the arrowsmith Pajpuli sat outside his cave, absorbed in fashioning the prized obsidian arrowheads that took on such a keen edge. Beside him, his small puppy Cuku, little more than a handful, took immediate notice of Jupa. His large-pawed feet caught up in the many wood shavings about Pajpuli's cave entrance, his nostrils seemingly animated by the scent of raw meat.

Jupa smiled at eager Cuku, begging, standing on his hind legs, then falling back to all fours, unable to let go the smell of the warm, wet organs in Jupa's hands.

"What do you have?" Pajpuli asked, setting down his chipping stone.

"For Cuku, from my first deer kill. He'll enjoy it." To tease Cuku, he dodged his cupped hands left, then right.

"Wait, let me pour off the blood, I need mule-deer blood for training." Pajpuli stepped back into his cave and got a small wooden bowl into which he took Jupa's offal and decanted the blood.

"You give him half to eat. I'll keep the rest for training."

Jupa tossed out a handful and the puppy plunged into feasting. While little Cuku held the meat with his front paw and ravenously ripped off mouthfuls of meat with his pointy teeth, Jupa recalled how the puppy arrived at the hamlet.

A small wolf puppy he would name Cuku, Pajpuli had taken it away from its bitch mom. He was sure a young wolf puppy with its keen sense of smell--only that of the bear was supposedly better--could be trained to track mule deer. Once Cuku could follow a trail of mule-deer blood and not give chase, not spook the deer, then the Miwokitul hunter would easily find and finish the kill. Usually, the deer got away, taking arrows with it, which meant Pajpuli was always making replacement arrows.

The puppy greedily chewed the bloody organs, pausing only to look up for more. Jupa knelt next to Cuku, realizing he gave the puppy his first deer meat in a long while.

At last, the pup stopped eating the chewy, muscled heart of the deer. He sniffed the rest of the meat on the ground to see what, if anything, was tempting. He had finished everything his small, sharp teeth could easily pick up off the ground. Evidently, the detrius left, being partly mixed with chalky soil, had no appeal.

"Puppy, when I killed this deer, I didn't know you would be the first to enjoy it." Cuku licked his chops, his large tongue wiping the blood from his lips. Then Cuku slowly walked away, showing not the

slightest appreciation for the splendid meal and stopped by Pajpuli, who worked away, as ever, chipping and shaping obsidian arrowheads, and the puppy then lay down for the nap of one satiated eater.

Jupa stepped closer to the two. "Pajpuli, I want to tell you, your arrows are excellent."

Pajpuli kept at chipping a new arrowhead.

"I really mean it, I took three arrows out of the deer. The points held firm."

"That's the way I want them," the arrowsmith replied. "My arrows don't come apart like others, like those flimsy Nokotul arrows," he said with a sly smile.

"Yes, they come out easily so you don't need to fix them," the young fellow said.

"The worst was when your father came back and said a mule deer had run off with five arrows stuck in it."

"My pa said that?"

"Yeah, and Cuku, once he gets trained on blood, will run down those wounded deer so I won't have to be making so many arrows." Pajpuli looked up, holding out his chipping stone, and smiled. Jupa agreed: Little Cuku would soon grow up and make hunting mule deer easier.

The youth turned about, his nostrils livening to hissing slabs of meat on wooden spits over the open fire. A tasty feast for him to watch, but not for his tongue to enjoy. At the butchering stone, the deer was gone: rendered into unidentifiable pieces. Except for a head and empty, attached hide. As always, one batch of the meat was for the evening meal, the other pieces salted to keep away flies and stored in the cool, dry interior of the grand cave.

Twilight had a chill, which only added to people's hunger for something more than the daily meal of acorn porridge. Everybody now milled about the fire, faces glowing orange by the flames. Jupa's mouth

watered at the sizzle of fat drippings on the burning logs. Everyone would enjoy dinner from his first kill and he wouldn't even have a morsel. Of course, once everyone ate, he needed to talk with Keleli. Was tomorrow the day they returned to the search for Naketi's killer?

Grizzled Keleli sat before the big cave on a boulder. "Jupa, that was some tasty venison you brought us." His tongue slid slowly, left to right, in obvious delight. "A young, small deer, no? Those succulent chunks of venison still linger on my tongue."

Jupa sat down beside his mentor, feeling a bit less the suffering son who lost his pa. "So after this deer today, should I also hunt tomorrow? Maybe the good fortune stays with me."

He studied the elder for a reaction. "But, Keleli, is there something else we should do tomorrow?"

The old man's hand hiked up the walking stick. "Well, first I must tell you about an interesting visitor I had while you were hunting."

"This morning, soon after you left, Temali the trader came by, you know the fellow who once had this huge black bear hide to trade, but he wanted too much. Oh, I would have liked that bear skin to replace this," he said fingering the strap of his dingy mule-deer pelt, a garment so old Jupa saw it as more spots and creases of bare leather than fur.

"So anyway, he had the usual bags of stuff with him, what he carries on that pole across his shoulders. He unwrapped it and my eyes grew big because in the pile were at least a dozen lengths of yew wood. I asked him what they were for and he said they made fine knives."

"Did ... did you ask him who was buying them?"

"I was ready to ask, but I know he's a trader. I first let him talk, couldn't let him know about my keen interest."

"But you asked something?"

"Oh, yes, where they came from, why hadn't I seen them before."

Jupa's dark eyes opened wide, as if he were more than ready to

hear about the wood for the murder weapon.

"He said they were something new. Got them from a trader further north, the country of deep snow, brought them by here his last visit."

"And you didn't see them?" Jupa asked.

"No, I must have been away that time he came around."

"So where did he trade them?"

"I hate to say this, Jupa, but he said last time he sold one was south of us. You know what that means."

"So it appears we need to go back and ask more," Jupa said.

"Yes, it points that way. I let Temali go and make his trades with the Nokotuls." He struck his walking stick in the ground.

"So we should see the Nokotuls tomorrow?"

"No, not at all."

"Why not?"

"I want to ask Temali what he traded with the Nokotuls today."

"Will Temali come back this way?" Jupa asked.

"Oh, usually. A day or so. We can see what he tells us then. Whatever else I can say about Temali, he's an honest man. Builds his trade like a raven's nest. Gathers what he knows far and wide and that's why he trades well."

"I see." Jupa liked how the old man plotted his moves carefully, putting together whatever he could find out before taking action. He was not impulsive like Lewi.

"So back to what you asked in the first place, before we got to talking about Temali and the Nokotuls. You go hunting tomorrow. I agree. See if you can bring another mule deer--"

"I'll see," Jupa said.

"Be sure and shoot one a little larger." The old man laughed. "We

want more meat to go around."

Jupa quickly left Keleli, seeking out Mojku and Lewi to tell them he would be joining them to hunt. He had to keep helping Keleli find the killer of his father, but he also knew it important, as his pa would agree, to improve his hunting skills.

The next morning, Jupa awoke to hear Sawaja moving about. The dim light in the dank interior revealed in her hand a cedar bow, something she then put back on a heap. "Here, your pa's possessions," she said, her ears evidently having caught Jupa stirring out of sleep.

He sat up. She had stacked the possessions on the tule mat. "Is that everything?" he asked, eyeing the heap of skins Naketi had worn, deerskin *momkos* for his feet, the mahogany stick to dig *jumutu*, the quiver made of a black fox skin--hair side in, tail left attached as a pendant ornament and lying forlorn sideways on the ground beside the obsidian tips of the arrows the quiver held--the bow she placed on them, a water skin, the favored black oak cup for drinking acorn shell tea.

Once more, he scanned it all to be sure. The pouch was gone, the one decorated with a mule deer he and Keleli thought the murderer took with gold stones.

"No, he was buried wearing his rabbit-skin blanket," Sawaja replied.

"Oh, his favorite," Jupa said, knowing his father had worn that garment every day except for the hottest when he only wore a loincloth.

Sawaja again picked up the cedar bow, held it crosswise, and looked as if what she were about to say could not be ignored. "You were to learn the ways of the bow from your pa."

"I know."

"That's a promise that can't be kept," she continued. "It is broken by his murder. You must learn from the others. But you're now to use his bow and arrows."

Jupa gulped. He already had the bow his pa had made for him. His

eyes latched on the bow in Sawaja's hand, what it meant. It was also true the son of a fallen Miwokitul man had to put aside his own hunting weapons and take up those of his father. "Yes, it has to be."

"But these skins--those you--nobody--can wear," she said, pointing at the heap.

The deerhide skins, the leggings, the apron, the loincloth--his pa had *worn* them all. "Even now, his spirit's in them," he said, the pictures in his head coming back, his pa in these clothes.

"Yes, his spirit."

"We burn them?"

"Yes, soon. The fire will release his spirit left in them."

"And the spirits of animals who gave up life to clothe pa."

Sawaja nodded. "Yes, and spirits of the animals who went first."

Later, Jupa went hunting. And the next day too. Mojku and Lewi shouldn't have joked about his beginner's luck failing him--though they did--because they all came back empty-handed. Not one arrow left anybody's quiver.

The second day, they gave up early. Mojku, with a hard-earned humor from so many times out hunting, said the deer knew of Jupa's kill and were avoiding the area. They knew hunters were about, slowly stalking, holding bows, arrow quivers slung across their backs.

"How do the deer know anything like that?" Jupa asked. "They only know how to eat leaves and run if they sense danger. Otherwise they're dumb as stones."

"I don't know," Mojku said. "I just see it all the time. They feel when they might be killed. They know it in a way we cannot see, touch, hear, smell, or taste. They just know, that's all I can say."

"But why are they staying away? No fresh droppings--"

Mojku tapped his thin, hawklike nose. "They also smell death in

the air. Once a deer falls, it gives off the scent of death. The other deer stay away."

Jupa let his bow dangle at his side. Beside him, in the wild rye stalks, a *koco* grasshopper took flight and buzzed forward. "If deer have a such keen sense of smell," he said, "why does Pajpuli train little Cuku for the scent of deer? Won't the deer know Cuku is about?" He studied Mojku skeptically, wondering how his teacher knew the deer's keen sense of smell firsthand. Or was this a reason to quit hunting for the day?

"You ask," Mojku said, "does the deer smell the wolf puppy first? Don't we all know the wolf nose is far larger and quicker to know smells than a deer nose? The wolf will always know the deer is about before the deer knows about the wolf. Among all that walk the earth, only the nose of the bear is keener than that of the wolf."

Jovial Lewi nodded, and another *koco* noisily took to the air out of the wild rye. Jupa had to admit Mojku was right. Pajpuli would not go to the effort of training Cuku if wolves hadn't proven themselves for hunters in the past. As Pajpuli said, he was only following the way of others.

"So should we bother to hunt tomorrow?" Jupa asked.

"Let's ask Nyma if the weather will hold," Mojku said.

For a long while, the trio hiked their way home, up the mountain, to the caves. Out of the wild rye, across the babbling stream. Once, a dark, angular, broad-winged *moloku* condor traced circles in the blue sky overhead, but not a sign of mule deer. None too soon, the bright afternoon sun revealed the hamlet ahead, and once they came within shouting distance of the caves, Jupa saw Keleli.

He broke into a brisk walk, leaving the slower Mojku and Lewi to meet the elder who hobbled toward him, steadying himself with his walking stick.

"Temali the trader came by again, we talked, he had real news," the

old man said breathlessly. His long white locks and beard seemed more disheveled than usual.

"Yes." Jupa's arms went slack in anticipation of something good to hear.

"Katwa is back, he's with the Nokotuls now." Keleli took a sharp breath and steadied himself on his walking stick, clearly agitated someone who possibly knew about the killing of Naketi was back with his people and apparently welcomed.

"We need to talk with Katwa, don't we?" A surge of strength enveloped Jupa's body at the prospect he might finally face the one person who fled soon after his pa's murder--and with gold to boot. If that didn't point toward guilt, Jupa didn't know what would. They had to take steps.

"Yes, we do, but not at first. We need to talk with more Nokotuls about what Katwa was doing when your father was killed."

Jupa scratched his temple. *What did Katwa do before he fled? Who saw him leave? Those questions?* Jupa beamed at how he started to picture what happened like his mentor, the grizzled, wise one. He looked over at his hunting companions, Mojku and Lewi, and saw they listened to Keleli, too, but then walked away, leaving Jupa to make plans with the elder.

"Yes, we will visit the Nokotuls tomorrow." He stamped the walking stick.

"Oh, did Temali say anything about how they spend their time in Kosomu Stream looking for gold?"

"No, he didn't. From what he said, they seemed to sit around their huts as usual and weren't buying anything from him."

Jupa felt odd. He now had both hope and discouragement in his heart. Yes, they were closer to finding who the murderer might be, but also facing the frustration of not knowing who. Tomorrow was going to be long and exhausting with the walk down to the Nokotuls and all the

questioning they would have to do. But it had to be done. They needed to find Naketi's killer and could not let him stay free and unknown--he might even kill again.

The next morning, Keleli and Jupa arose early and were soon on their way. The day was so clear they easily picked out smoke from fires in the distance as they hiked the oft-trod path between the two settlements. The hike was uneventful: a clear sky with occasional birds on the wing and closer to them, noisy *kocos* taking short flights, skimming the tops of the wild rye. Jupa wanted to move faster than Keleli and his walking stick, but, of course, did not. This was the day they might find out more about Katwa. He felt as if the doubt and grief about his pa's murder would be less once they got closer to finding who did it.

Before long, they reached the gathering of conical cedar bark huts by Kosomu Stream. Jupa grinned: This time everybody wasn't in the stream looking for gold. But only women were about, not men. Women busied themselves with the usual tasks: preparing and cooking acorns for porridge to eat later, repairing sandals and pelt garments, looking after children, nursing infants. Jupa knew it was the men, however, they needed to see and ask questions.

He followed Keleli, who shuffled over to where a woman nursed a baby. She sat on a boulder in tree shade, out of the sun's glare. Dark-haired, a grimy face, she was typically small, shorter than Jupa, and much shorter than Keleli. Her right arm and shoulder were out of the strap of her pelt garment, revealing a brown-nippled breast from which the smallest of heads noisily suckled. The old man cleared his throat to speak. The woman with child did not raise her head and acknowledge them. "Hajapo, your leader and my friend, all the men--" he said, waving his hand about the village, not an adult male to be seen. "Where are they now?"

She took her gaze off the suckling child, meeting Keleli's eyes, adding a weak smile. Evidently, from his white hair and the way he held himself, she thought him a wise elder of a neighboring people.

"They all leave, except Wyla, the cripple. I don't know where he is."

Those words brought a picture back inside Jupa's head: a small man, his arm in a sling, who seemed to spend all his time by his cedar bark hut, doing little. An unwelcoming, sad sight. On the earlier visit, when he and Keleli saw him, Jupa felt pity Wyla could not hunt and had only the use of one arm.

"They went somewhere?" Keleli was asking, wanting something specific. Jupa saw how the elder studied the woman intently for an answer.

"Yes, Bowl of the Spirits," she said, pointing up the hillside, past the scattered black oaks, the other side of the burbling stream. There, in craggy splendor, looking like outsized fingers on the hands of a god, rose a group of reddish megaliths, which stood up stark against the monochrome landscape, as if the rocks issued from deep within the earth itself.

"Will they be long?" Keleli asked, seemingly oblivious to the suckling noises from the infant at his mother's breast.

"I don't know. Maybe they return for the meal. I don't know."

"We won't interrupt," he added, turning to Jupa and flashing a smile. "But do you know why they meet?"

She jiggled her nursing child a bit, bouncing it on one of her thighs. She smiled at the baby's contentment, then a look of puzzlement took over her face, as if she were deliberating the question. "I don't know. Much excitement with Katwa late last night."

"I see," Keleli said. "Thank you. We'll go now to see if the meeting is over."

He turned away from the woman. She finished nursing her infant, whom she bounced vigorously in her lap. Jupa left, too, and saw Keleli had new enthusiasm: He handily swung out his walking stick, taking quick steps toward the lapping sounds of the stream. Jupa eyed carefully

the run of the water, searching out where they might best cross. The Nokotuls evidently had neither the know-how nor inclination to build a bridge.

They walked on a bit. Then Keleli stopped. They were out of earshot of the informative mother. "Jupa, we are, I believe, in the best possible luck."

"You say this, why?" He eyed the large monoliths across the way, knowing, yes, if the meeting were about Katwa, it probably had to do with Katwa's abrupt departure after his father's murder.

"One reason explains this meeting and we'll hear it ourselves." He stamped the ground with his walking stick and bit his lower lip in the self-satisfaction he might have hatched a plan.

"Can we go to the meeting?" Jupa asked, glancing away to the imposing monoliths.

The mentor shook his head. His wispy beard flagged about in the breeze. "Of course not. What would we hear if we sat with them?" He shot Jupa a sharp look. "Nothing. They'd all clam up."

Jupa shrugged his shoulders, letting go the bad idea. They were at the sandy bed of the stream and had to get ready to wade across, the waters splashing by, tossing up white slips of bubbles over the mossy boulders in the stream.

Keleli paused, as if unwilling to go forward until he decided what to do next. "The big rocks," he said, pointing overhead. "See the three, they rise tall as smoke. The rocks are like fingers that catch the voices of people sitting up there. Yes, the voices do not escape, but instead the rocks make the voices louder." Keleli held a cupped hand to his ear, covered in grizzled locks.

"Oh, I see," Jupa answered. "We stay out of sight and we overhear what they say."

"This is so." Keleli smiled as if he were pleased Jupa had figured out what he knew as soon as the mother said they were meeting about

Katwa inside the bowl of big rocks.

"If they hear us--" Jupa said, caution ripe in his voice.

"We just say we came to join them, that the women in the hamlet told us they were there."

CHAPTER SIX: RUFIOUS HAIR, STICK HUT, DEATH MASK

The pair climbed to the Bowl of Spirits with caution, taking stealthy steps so no rock rolled away to noisily tumble down the slope. They dodged any dry, dead branch that might *snap*. The Nokotuls gathered below in the Bowl needed to believe their meeting was still private. Then a crested bluejay, a *copata*, shrieked from an overhead fir branch and broke the silence.

At the first megalith, Jupa glanced up. It rose at least another sixty feet and must have stood from the eons before his people had stories to tell. But the ancient megalith and the two other red limestone towers, seemingly erupting out of the hillside, canted sideways, as if ready to topple. Jupa put his hand to the rough stone wall, knowing if it ever came down both he and Keleli would, fast as a hand slap from the gods, be no more. The two exchanged glances. Keleli's pale, wizened face gave up a smile. He then set his walking stick against the megalith.

Jupa, however, posted under a nearby scrub pine. A stone's long fall below, twenty or more men, garbed in deerhide ponchos, sat in a half-circle on an expansive limestone slab--the floor of the Bowl of Spirits. Jupa heard their words as if spoken close by.

"Where'd you get the gold?" one questioner demanded, leaning over a rufous-haired man, who sat hugging his knees.

Jupa bit his lip. *Is that him? Is that Katwa?* He had never seen Katwa and guessed the poor fellow, neither cowering nor defiant, but stubbornly silent, was the one. Who else could he be? In the back of the half-circle, he recognized Katwa's brother Kon.

The rufous-haired man brought forearms to head, and said not a word. Jupa stared intently. The forlorn figure slowly put his arms down, shaking his head side-to-side. Who else could Katwa be?

"Then you ran away, but came back. Why?" The question, imperious, rebounded from the walls. Jupa's brow tightened--for he now knew Katwa, indeed, was being questioned.

Katwa slumped forward, put his hands down, then pushed up and struggled to his feet. "The gold, I didn't find gold in the Kosomu."

"We looked there too. Found nothing. Of course, you didn't find gold in the Kosomu," another voice shouted.

"You took the gold from someone, who?" Yet another voice.

"I didn't."

"But how'd you get gold? You weren't born with it." Voices laughed.

Jupa leaned forward, his hand clasping the needle-laden branch of the scrub pine. Katwa sat down again. Jupa pursed his lips. *If Katwa doesn't have any gold, why are they so hard on him? They must be greedy themselves.*

Jupa turned sideways. Keleli held fingers to his lips, evidently not wanting his younger companion to be saying anything when the shouting below stopped.

"I don't have any," Katwa cried out.

"Of course, you don't. Why else would you come back, unless you were robbed?"

"That's not the only reason--"

"You once had gold. Several gold stones. You showed them off. Where did you get them?"

"I can't say." Katwa sat defiantly with chin up, facing questioners. Katwa's brother Kon seemed unconcerned. He was there only because

all Nokotul men must have been called to interrogate his brother.

"Tell us who gave you gold--"

Katwa said nothing and glowered.

"Do you want to stay a Nokotul?"

Again, the rufous-haired one kept silent.

"Tell us, or we'll throw you out."

Katwa's head dropped in his hands. From the way Katwa hugged his head, Jupa guessed the reluctance was not only about telling who gave him the gold, but the inevitable question: Why did that person give you gold?

Katwa was protecting someone. Of this, Jupa was certain.

The questioner hovering over Katwa raised his arms in the air, as if accepting they would get no confession. The others sat in silence as still as Katwa. Keleli glanced at Jupa, as if to make sure he didn't move either. Jupa figured they were giving Katwa time to ponder his future punishment now that he refused to say anything.

Finally, Katwa lifted his head. Slowly shook his head side-to-side: He wouldn't answer; he wouldn't tell who gave him the gold. His eyes swept over the interrogators. He got to his feet. Then he spat. Said nothing. Began walking away, head proud, ignoring murmurs of those in the half-circle. Walked out of the Bowl of the Spirits. Past the megaliths reaching skyward. Jupa stared at the lone, rufous-headed figure. Lonely footfalls paced off his sorry path.

Katwa's head must boil with anger. He walks away slowly. Why would he hurry with no place to go?

Then a voice from below. The white-haired, stoop-shouldered Hajapo, headman of the Nokotuls. "Today, we cast Katwa out of our hamlet. By his choice. After he takes his belongings, he must leave. After sundown, he cannot stay."

"But he knows where the gold is. We must force him to tell--"

another voice shouted.

"No, we follow rules," Hajapo answered in a wavering, but insistent voice. "We cannot bind and punish with hot stones and torture those of our own and make them talk. How could they live with us afterwards?" Leaning on his walking stick, Hajapo stared at the questioner, who had gotten to his feet.

"Don't you see, Katwa knows where the gold stones are."

"Possibly. But it would be a far greater wrong to force Katwa to talk if he knows nothing." Hajapo waved his arm in a weak motion for everyone to get up. The meeting was over.

The men left the Bowl of the Spirits, silent, walking the path single-file, Hajapo in the lead. In no hurry, the men walked as if, Jupa guessed, they were giving Katwa time to grab his belongings and flee. The rufous-haired one was about to quit the Nokotul hamlet yet another time.

"We have learned much of interest here."

"Poor Katwa, he comes back so they can throw him out."

"You don't suspect anymore he killed your father, do you, Jupa?"

Jupa still was gripping the needly branch of the pine tree. "No, he doesn't act like a killer. He didn't really escape. Running away, coming back, running away again."

Keleli nodded, leaned forward on his walking stick, as if to acknowledge his assistant was getting wiser about people. Keleli liked that. "Yes, I agree. True, we can always be fooled by how people act when they're not themselves, but very few people who kill would act as--" Keleli paused. "Stupidly. Yes, stupidly. That's how I see Katwa. He's stupid the way he acts."

"So even if Hajapo said it was all right to force Katwa to confess where he got the gold stones, nothing would come of it?"

"Oh, he got the gold stones somewhere. The question really is, Did he take them from your father after killing him? But I don't see the rufous-haired one as likely to kill."

"But Katwa had gold stones." Jupa's face was puzzled.

"Yes, and he foolishly showed them off before he left. Stupid fellow must've never expected to see those people again. Then the gold was stolen. Again, he probably went around showing it to strangers, so he got robbed." Keleli rubbed his forehead. "Stupid."

Jupa let go the pine branch, saw his hand sticky with sap. He sighed, knowing their eavesdropping had failed to answer the important questions.

"We know a few things. Listen. Your father had a large gold stone. Nyma told us this. Katwa never had one like that, as big around as this." Keleli held up his hand, his thumb touching his index finger. "So whoever killed your father probably has the big stone. That person might've given smaller gold stones to Katwa, telling him some gold would help him leave the village and find a mate." The elder nodded as if contemplating the possibilities. "Katwa had talked about that for a long time. But why he'd leave just after your father's murder? Was he supposed to throw us off the trail of the killer? Possibly. But, of course, Katwa wouldn't know that--he soon came back. If he was paid in gold stones, it must've been some reason we can't imagine."

Jupa winced: *Katwa knows who took the gold stones, who killed my pa? Why can't Katwa be forced to tell?* "He protects someone--" was all Jupa could manage to say.

"If he protects someone, we don't know why. Might've nothing to do with your father's murder."

"You're saying Katwa protects his brother Kon?" Jupa asked.

"Possibly. Kon, I'm sure, has information we need. He knows more

about the murder, I would guess, than Katwa." Again, Keleli rubbed his forehead. "Katwa, so stupid."

They were ready to walk back to their hamlet, having gathered about as much as they could about Katwa. Keleli said they could bypass the hamlet of the Nokotuls and take a path higher up the mountain. The conflict in the hamlet among Nokotuls was enough without Keleli and Jupa walking by and questions being raised about what the two Miwokituls were doing.

While Keleli and Jupa returned home, rufous-haired Katwa set himself up downstream on the Kosomu in a forest clearing among lofty fir and pine trees. A place he and others knew well. Travellers might stop there overnight, which was obvious from old ashes in the stone pit used for fires to keep warm.

He brought little. The pelt on his back and a few deer fur blankets from the hut he had shared with his older brother Kon, the wife and small son. Their parents both died in a coughing sickness the Nokotuls suffered winters before. So while the parents were alive, the hut was even more crowded--little more than space for everyone to lie and sleep. But Kon's hut was no longer home.

He dropped the deer fur blankets and went over to the tall conifers, looking for firewood. Scattered everywhere, plenty of small twigs for starting a fire, but first he needed dry moss. A few handfuls and he could start a fire with the flints he always carried.

He went deeper into the forest. Soon he knelt by a fallen branch covered with moss. He pinched some in his fingers. It gave easily, still full of life, dark green. He needed some that crumbled. He kept looking.

In a little while, by a nurse log sprouting new saplings, he found brown moss scattered on the ground. He took a clump, rubbed it together. Crumbly bits spilled from his hands: The moss was right, so he went back to the circle of stones to build a fire.

He laid the moss on a small stack of twigs and needles and began striking together flint stones. Orange sparks spit out. Quickly, the moss

turned to orange flames, the pine needles too. Then the small twigs crackled with fiery life.

He brought over branches. He couldn't cut them shorter, as he and Kon would do with flint axes, so they would burn the whole night. And he would not push them in the fire through the night. Sleep would see to that. He was so tired.

With the sun gone, Katwa lay beside the popping fire, taking care to be far enough from shooting embers that would burn the blankets he pulled up tight around his chilled, weary body.

Katwa slept soundly. He woke not once.

In morning, a splash of sunlight. The fire was out. He sat up, stretched and yawned.

He went to sleep without eating, being thrown out of the hamlet. But before he left, he told Kon where he was going and his brother promised to bring food soon.

He gazed at the fire ring. Twigs, pine needles, and dry moss: He needed those to get the fire going. It was chilly and he had nothing else to do.

After a while, fire blazing away, Katwa's ears pricked at footsteps in the distance. An approaching walker. He kept his eye on the trees to east and soon dark-haired Kon, large woven sack over his shoulder, appeared.

"Good morning, brother," Kon said cheerily. The older brother, bigger in build than Katwa, adjusted the weight of the sack.

"I hope you bring food."

"Yes, enough to keep you several days."

Kon set down the sack and began taking out what starving Katwa saw as simply mouth-watering.

Tied in bundles with grass string, dried mule-deer strips that took so long to eat: They were tough, but also very satisfying. A small leather

pouch of dried blackberries, one of Katwa's long-time favorites. And last, a bowl of cooked, cold porridge from the night before.

"You can't live like this long, can you?"

"Yes, but I have to," Katwa said.

While that morning in the forest Katwa spoke with his brother Kon, away in the Miwokitul hamlet, Keleli sought out Nyma, the young shaman. He found him sitting on a boulder next to his dark, empty cave entrance, wearing his customary high leather hat, drinking the tea of crushed acorn shells.

Keleli leaned on his walking stick. The shaman looked up. "Nyma, it's been a while since you said the good words to put our departed brother's body at rest over there." Keleli glanced out toward the field of bracken fern below the caves where every Miwokitul eventually told the sun good-bye.

"Yes," Nyma said.

"I want to see the body again," Keleli said. Nyma's hand nearly spilled his tea. The elder kept speaking in a steady voice. "I, of course, cannot have Jupa know about this, much less see such a horrible sight with his own eyes--"

Quickly, Nyma calmed and set his wooden cup of tea down. "Jupa would suffer knowing his father's passage was stopped, so why do this now?" he said, eyebrows arching beneath the leather hat.

"Well, splinters from his wound matched wood of the knife."

Nyma nodded.

"But after the burial, one more thing came to my head."

"Not about the gold?"

Keleli took the yew knife from inside his pelt apron. He held the knife high and slowly brought it forward and downward. "No, the person's height. If the person was taller, the knife enters one way. If the person was shorter, the knife enters differently. Another look at the

wound might tell if the killer was taller or shorter--"

"I've never before had this request."

"Yes, it's unusual and breaks passage to the other world, so your permission is needed."

"I'd like to take this to dreams. Tomorrow morning, I'll offer you a decision."

"I understand. But you also must see our safety depends on discovering the killer."

"Tomorrow, you'll have the decision."

Keleli nodded.

Nyma awoke on his deerhide bed the next morning, his head full of animal dreams, for he often dreamt of raccoons, cougars, and ravens who actually spoke words no one ever heard in waking life. Dim light livened the darkness about him.

His eyes swept the room, then came to rest on the light outside. In the stillness of the moment, he knew he would tell Keleli he could exhume the body of poor murdered Naketi. His brow furrowed at this decision for this would not happen among other peoples. The Miwokituls were unusual. They were probably one of the last people who buried their dead. Others, such as the Nokotuls to the south, cremated the dead, and let the hasty fire quickly take the deceased spirit to the other world instead of patiently waiting for the way of the earth to break down the body day-by-day, moon-by-moon, and finally, season-by-season.

Nyma as shaman understood why some peoples wanted the power of fire to transport spirits quickly, but he also held to the Miwokitul belief the deceased might not be ready to go to the next world in leaps of flames and the watering of onlooker eyes. Especially if the deceased, like Naketi, left suddenly, without warning, in an act of murder.

Nyma made his way to the outside light and knew from these dreams, the voice of Naketi might have wanted Keleli to know more

about his murderer, something about the assassin his body, putrid, decaying, repulsive though it might be, buried in the earth for days now, might show. Possibly only then could his passage to the other world be complete. Nyma had to tell Keleli the answer was, Yes, you may exhume the body.

Keleli was drinking tea. "This has never happened before, but when I awoke I knew your idea to remove the body from the grave must be accepted."

"So we can go ahead?" Nyma nodded. Keleli smiled, grabbed his walking stick and stood. "Many thanks."

Nyma made a sidestep before the taller Keleli, then brought his palms together. "I suggest," the shaman said, "you, I, of course, the grave diggers, be the only ones to see the body. You agree?"

"Yes, no one else need suffer seeing that poor corpse again."

"Not even Wota."

"He's out hunting."

"Or Jupa. Especially Jupa."

"Especially Jupa. I agree wholeheartedly."

"That's why yesterday I told Jupa Mojku and Lewi had asked for him to go hunting with them. I made sure they left earlier." The elder lifted his face skyward, his white hair swimming in the breeze, as if to confirm he had taken care of what was truly objectionable about the exhumation: It would be too upsetting for Jupa.

"Good, that was troubling for me," Nyma said.

The two parted and Keleli set out to find Ujuju and Ywyja, two burly men who had dug Naketi's grave and before that, many others. Fortunately, the two were still in the hamlet and both agreed, with freshly turned dirt at the grave, they would make quick work of the excavation.

Later on, Keleli stood facing the body of Naketi, which now rested on a mound of dirt.

Off to one side sat the two gravediggers with Nyma, who as shaman was to oversee the exhumation and insure respect for the spirit of Naketi. After the digging, Ujuju and Ywyja drank water and Nyma, tall leather hat on his head, contented himself with sips of acorn shell tea. The shaman nodded approvingly as Keleli set about to clean the body

The elder took a small fur pelt, dipped it in water and began rubbing dirt off the hairy chest, revealing nipples turned black. He continued over the rest of the chest, the stomach, the legs, and the face. Free of dirt, the body looked horrifying. The skin, shades of unnatural blues, purples, browns, and blacks. The face, a shocking death mask of skin separating from bone and worms spilling out the mouth choked with dirt. But more than anything, the stench of rotting flesh.

Keleli asked Ujuju and Ywyja to keep others away. Nyma, also sitting on the log, kept drinking tea. From brow to toes, nothing escaped Keleli's attention. He was soon ready to see Naketi's back, to see the wound of the yew knife itself. He asked for help.

Ujuju and Ywyja got up and set about gently raising and turning the body over. Keleli then cleaned the back, dipping the fur pelt in water, washing away more caked dirt. He slipped off the shoulder strap of the pelt apron and gingerly cleaned about the wound, a lifeless black in color, but amazingly, the flesh there was still firm, even if the smell was putrid.

Keleli stepped back, took a deep breath, trying to let the cool morning air expunge his sinuses and lungs of the stench. While Naketi was alive, he, of course, stood. Now dead, Naketi lay face down in the dirt.

Keleli's brow furrowed. *Standing or lying? How would the angle of the knife in the wound change?* He took another deep breath, wanting to be completely sure before reinserting the wooden knife back into

Naketi's sad, decomposed body.

If anything, Keleli decided, the weight of Naketi's body when it was standing would tend to pull the knife blade down. With the life spirit gone from his body, with blood no longer coursing through the vessels, Naketi's body was like a tree whose branches hung down as the weeping willow. The muscles in his body, the muscles giving strength--they no longer were of use and did nothing to firm his flesh, but instead only let his flesh cling to the boniness of his skeleton as best it could.

That settled, Keleli took the yew blade and with delicacy slid its tip into the wound. The flesh parted and by pushing very slowly, Keleli felt the channel of the wound guiding his hand forward until--tensely holding his breath--the blade had gone its full length--two hand widths. He might have imagined it, but his reluctant fingertips seemed to have felt the walls of the heart chamber give way where the blade re-pierced its fatal entrance.

Keleli let go the blade, stepped backwards, and looked to his right, where Nyma stood now at a remove from the stench. For Keleli, however, the smell was far worse than discovering rotted fish. Nonetheless, he pressed his forehead with his fingertips, and continued to study the corpse. *The knife handle comes straight out his back and tilts down. Moreover, the weight of the body does not pull the blade down.*

Again, he glanced at Ujuju and Ywyja, who watched intently to know what was next, and flashed both a smile, suggesting to each he had another request to ask.

"I'm sorry, I know the smell is unpleasant," he said, nodding his head slightly, "but I need you to lift the body one more time."

Ujuju and Ywyja both looked surprised, as if they expected their next task would be simply to turn Naketi over and return him to the grave pit. But to Keleli, the Miwokitul elder, they could say nothing. They simply got off the log and went about bringing Naketi to a standing position. Nyma stepped back, tea cup in hand, to make room

for the grave diggers.

Their task was not easy. Both coughed. Their noses winced at the putrid smell seemingly no air would move and take away. The sickening smell stuck in their heads as only rotting human flesh could. But finally they held up the lifeless heaviness and Keleli circled the muddled body. As he expected, the wooden knife handle came out at an angle very much tilted down. Keleli touched the knife blade, wiggling it, then released it. Still it pointed just as much earthward. "You can put him down," he said to the gravediggers, their faces reddened with exertion.

They laid Naketi's body face down, seemingly made sorrier by the exhumation, back on the pile of dirt. Keleli scanned the body again.

Black patches of flesh, ready to fall off its bony frame. Mud-encrusted hair on the head. Discolored flesh--blue, purple, brown, and black--hanging without shape on the skeleton, revealing its angular boniness. The malodor caused him--unsuccessfully--to hold his breath. It stunk so.

He rubbed his forehead. *To go deep and pierce the heart, the knife was probably thrust overhanded. Whether the body stands or lies, the knife enters upwards. The person who killed Naketi most likely was shorter, and not likely taller.* Keleli knelt by the body, his walking stick steadying him. He took Naketi's right hand in his, looked it over, front and back. Not a single mark. He got up and went to the other side of the dirt pile, examined the left hand too. Again, not a single mark. Naketi offered no resistance. No marks from a fight on his hand. The assailant caught him off-guard with the wooden knife. Which, of course, was the whole point of a knife used on another person: surprise.

Keleli stood up. So a knife pulled in surprise and the knife thrust overhanded but up into Naketi's back by a shorter person. Despite the revulsion, Keleli sorted out what else he might need to examine. This was his last chance. Nyma would never allow him to exhume the body again.

He reached over and withdrew the knife from Naketi's back,

covered with dark necrosis. The blade had not a drop of blood on it. What he expected: Where would the blood come from? Obviously, blood had long stopped moving in Naketi's body. He lifted the pelt apron away, peered at the naked buttocks, the small of his hairy back. No other wounds. Motioned for Ujuju and Ywyja to turn Naketi over. He again confirmed no wounds there as well.

He had checked for other wounds when he first examined Naketi, when they brought him back from the black oak to the hamlet. But with the distraction of people running about, he was not sure how closely he looked. He knew now. It was one stab in the back--only one--that killed Naketi.

Keleli eyed Ujuju and Ywyja, shaking his head up and down. "I'm done." The body was ready again for worms and maggots and the spirit would find lasting release.

Nyma set down his tea cup and stepped over. He lay a palm on the sorry body and said a few words, unintelligible certainly for the other three, but most likely sure to speed any remnants of Naketi's earthbound spirit on its way to the other world. Then Nyma raised his hand and said to the two grave diggers: "He is ready to be buried and left alone."

Next, the two lifted the corpse and with care lowered it, now face up, into the pit beside the dirt mound. Using their wide-bladed mattocks, they tumbled the dirt back into the pit and before long, the reburial was done.

Keleli sat on the same log as Ujuju and Ywyja earlier. Nyma joined him, tall leather hat cocked on his head, and resumed sipping his tea.

In some ways, opening the grave and finding out the suspect was short made Keleli's task more difficult. This was something he wasn't sure he wanted to talk about with Jupa.

Keleli stood up, satisfied he had done enough work for the day. He would let his head picture all the possibilities before he even talked with Jupa about what he saw.

CHAPTER SEVEN: TWO CUPS TEA, BANISHED BROTHER, EAVESDROPPERS

Later that day, Keleli stood on the commons and scanned the western sky. There, below the spent sun and silhouetted trees on the downslope, the small, distant figure of Jupa approached, making it back to the hamlet with Mojku and Lewi behind him. Keleli's heart pounded in his chest. The shoulders of Mojku and Lewi carried a four-point antler mule deer. A fair-sized buck too. Keleli grinned: Jupa once again led the hunting party, but this was far better. This was a big mule deer.

His pa's cedar bow in hand, Jupa strode with the satisfied tiredness of a successful hunter. His companions, seemingly indifferent to the load they bore, were all smiles too. Keleli stepped over to greet them. As did headman Wota and other Miwokituls. Meat for the evening meal had arrived.

"Jupa, you now eat some of your own kill," Keleli said, raising his willow cane. Jupa's smile broadened, as if to say he was lucky.

The meat-hungry Miwokituls seemed ready to bite into a tasty hunk of meat before the hunting trio were even near the butcher's stone. Long-haired Wota stood before the crowd, arms outstretched, trying to clear a path for the hunters and the deer. He wasn't having much luck.

Jupa looked about anxiously, not sure what was next. He looked past the empty limestone mortars, the women having finished grinding for the day, to the butcher stone the other side of the commons. As they drew closer, Jupa saw the butcher stone remarkably clean, rain having washed away the blood from the last mule deer dressed there, the fawn he killed earlier. Lewi and Mojku set the mule deer down.

Jupa stood off to the side, seemingly smaller than he really was, his bow in hand, happiness *and* consternation stuck to his face. "One arrow. You see, one shot to the deer right here--" beaming Lewi said, tapping his index finger on a spot the middle of his chest. "That arrow in the heart, the deer fell dead away." Lewi shook his round, flat face and took a deep breath, as if retelling Jupa's deed was as exciting as if he were the deerslayer.

The flanks of the mule deer lay across the butcher stone, antlered head sagging off one end and the four legs in front, akimbo as broken tree branches. The expanse of rain-washed limestone would keep the butchered meat free of dirt until ready for cooking. "I'll need the longest knife," Mojku said in his reedy voice. He stepped decisively over to the butchering implements piled in a twined rush basket and took a glinting obsidian beauty, its blade three fingers wide and long as a man's hand and wrist. Mojku raised the knife and slammed it in the deer's flat side. Jupa gasped at the violent stroke. Then with sawing motions, Mojku pulled the knife the length of the trunk. Dark red blood spurted.

Guts poked out the slit. Mojku rolled the carcass and the legs stuck up. He pulled the carcass open, pushing inside with the blade and cut away lungs, heart, liver and freed other dun-colored, blood-washed organs. Pajpuli stepped up and filled a wooden bowl with blood from the heart, then walked away.

Jupa dropped his bow and grabbed one of the butcher bowls too. He smiled at Mojku, who seemed to agree with what he was about to do: scoop the offal spilling out sideways. He bent down, sure the raw, uncooked organs--none as tasty as deer muscle--would be a feast for somebody. "This is for Pajpuli's wolf puppy, Cuku."

On his haunches, he looked sideways, across the commons to Pajpuli's cave with its small, crawl-inside entrance, more than a hundred paces away, where the arrowsmith had Cuku tethered on a milkweed cord. Jupa could see Pajpuli walking away from the cave, busy laying out a trail of blood splashes.

"Why does that puppy eat before us?" a voice from those crowding about the butcher stone asked.

Jupa glanced upward from what would be Cuku's meal. Ywyja was laughing. Jupa's brow tightened with determination. "He's eating what has to come out of the deer first and what we won't eat anyway."

"He could wait until we all ate," Ywyja said, not willing to concede Jupa's point.

"The reason he eats now is he has a good nose and Pajpuli is giving him a lesson in tracking mule-deer blood." Jupa pointed to Pajpuli's cave. "That puppy nose one day might help us all hunt. That's why Pajpuli trains him."

"Yeah, I'd like to see him work harder for this big helping of food." Ywyja laughed again.

Jupa stood up, ready to take the bowl for Cuku to Pajpuli. Ywyja still had the mocking grin. Jupa's arms felt tight with anger. He glanced away. It was his mule deer he killed. He didn't need ribbing and quickly walked away.

He made straight for the meadow where Pajpuli seemed finished with the last of the blood trail. Quite a few paces away, something like an arrow flight or two.

"Good," Pajpuli said, seeing the offal Jupa held before him. "I won't need much of that, just one small handful."

Jupa looked back to the caves and saw, every few paces, where Pajpuli splashed a trail of blood. "Next, I go back, get Cuku and his nose will twitch, of that I'm sure." He took some offal from Jupa's bowl, dropped it at their feet.

The youth frowned at the organs on the ground. "Won't Cuku simply run over here," he said pointing back to puppy staked by the cord, "and gorge himself?"

"No, that's why he's on the milkweed cord. I'll walk with him, let him follow the blood on the ground, see. But I'll hold that cord in my

hand so he goes slowly. I want him to learn to track slowly. *Slowly.*" The arrowsmith gave Jupa a broad smile. "He'd be useless if he ran down wounded deer and scared them into running even faster. I want Cuku to learn to sneak up on deer."

Jupa rubbed his left temple. *Of course. That way Cuku will take us to the wounded deer, that way we get the deer and we also get back the arrows so poor Pajpuli doesn't have to make new ones.*

They left the offal on the ground and started walking back to get Cuku for the lesson.

"Wait, stop," Pajpuli said. They were halfway back to his cave. "Why don't you take that bowl to your cave. I don't want Cuku getting excited for the wrong reasons. He'll smell what you've in your hands. I want him to only know the scent of blood I've laid down on the ground."

"Yes, we can't confuse him with too many smells. I'll watch." He left the arrowsmith and a while later, beamed at the sight of the small wolf puppy, nose practically scraping the ground, following the trail of blood. Pajpuli held the milkweed cord taut, walking behind him. Yet another reward for his successful hunt. His chest swelled: Cuku would soon be a superb mule-deer tracker.

The rest of the evening was festive, people ate and talked and kept congratulating Jupa. They smacked their lips and told him they hoped he really was a gifted hunter because they liked meat on a regular basis. Jupa said he was a good hunter only when deer were about.

Later, Keleli brought up the search for Naketi's killer. He didn't tell Jupa what might be next, intent as he was on enjoying the meat in his bowl. He simply said, "We'll talk about that in the morning."

The next day, Keleli left his cave, looking for Jupa, and found him talking to the arrowsmith Pajpuli. Despite his seniority, he wouldn't interrupt. Instead he politely listened to the two converse about fixing an arrow for Jupa. Pajpuli was evidently happy to replace the arrow shaft--broken in the mule deer's death struggle--a small payment for

enjoying several more days of meat. He would give the arrowhead, recovered in the butchering, a new shaft of elder wood and two feathers from a red-tailed hawk.

"Keleli, good morning," Pajpuli said, rubbing the stone *hakyna* in his hand up and down the length of the arrow shaft he was making, so it would release easily against Jupa's fingers.

The elder leaned closer on his walking stick, his long white hair falling about his shoulders, relishing once more the good fortune young Jupa, who stood next to seated Pajpuli, enjoyed as a neophyte hunter. His gaze paused on Jupa: The young man, shorter than he, shorter than his father Naketi. Keleli pushed the image out of his head. "You make an arrow new, so Jupa will bring back yet another mule deer," Keleli said. He reached out, patted the young man on his back.

"Yes, you never know the lucky arrow you draw from your quiver, so each has to be made well, so all possible good fortune flies with it." Pajpuli used a flint to scrape at one particular bump in the arrow shaft. Around him, the ground was covered with the shavings from the shaft of elder wood he had been working. Such shavings, always in front of his cave, were never burned. The shavings from the elder wood were considered to be alive and were left to nourish the earth that gave all things life.

"Unfortunately, Jupa does not hunt today," the elder said. "We must visit the Nokotuls, question several people. We need to keep tracking down this killer."

He studied his walking companion for the day, his investigative partner, noticing he was, indeed, shorter than his father Naketi. All Keleli knew was Jupa came back to the hamlet and said his father had been murdered.

He gave Jupa a gimlet-eye. *True, he was where his father fell before anyone else knew. True, he could have tossed the knife in Tototo Stream. True, fathers and sons fall into bitter conflict. But, no.* He straightened up: He couldn't accept the image of Jupa that way.

He exhaled what he hoped was relief. Jupa's height alone didn't make him suspect. Many people were shorter than Naketi. All women, for one thing. This new sign they found for the killer was puzzling. Shortness made many people suspects--even Jupa.

He looked over his shoulder at where the morning sun had risen in the eastern sky and knew they had to be leaving. So with a few words, he told Pajpuli they were on their way, knowing the new arrow was certain to be ready by the time they came back from the Nokotuls. They were headed south, a hike that wouldn't tire and one made easier because of the clear weather. But the weather had turned decidedly chilly and both men added mule-deer capes over their apron pelts. The capes were simply large circles of pelts sewn together with a central opening for their head. The capes draped clumsily about their body, but were warm.

To keep their feet warmer, they stuffed grass into the *momkos*. They soon settled into a rhythm of slight scuffing down the path, mostly chalky, limestone dirt, but well-drained from recent rains. Back and forth they shouted while they walked single-file down the trail.

Keleli decided to tell Jupa a lie. He said when he finished removing the wood splinters from the body back in the grand cave, he inserted a small stick in the wound. The stick pointed downward the elder said. Jupa asked what *that* meant. Keleli said the murderer most likely was someone shorter than his father.

"If we look for a shorter person, that eliminates many, and yet includes many." Keleli pushed his walking stick in the yellow-white gravel, leaving Jupa to follow at what was, for the youth, a slow pace.

"Then we can no longer suspect Kon, Katwa's brother, as the killer. He's not short." Jupa said, enthusiasm in his voice for what they might discover.

"Well, we have to hear for ourselves his words when we talk," Keleli said, apparently not ready draw a conclusion.

They continued walking the path, their conversation drifting to

matters having nothing to do with finding Naketi's murderer: Temali the trader. Mule-deer hunting. How Cuku was being trained to hunt.

After a while, they arrived in the hamlet of the Nokotuls, the familiar sound of the splashing Kosomu Stream below. Keleli pointed his walking stick toward the water and started that way. Jupa followed. They had to replenish their drinking water.

Jupa shouldered once again the bulging deerskin water bag and climbed the bank of the stream behind Keleli. The elder pointed out the hut of Hajapo, headman of the Nokotuls. Jupa squinted at the cedar bark conical assembly, typically Nokotul, if larger than the others. They walked there straight away. Whenever Keleli would visit a neighboring hamlet, he said he always first sought out the headman to insure his welcome.

"We've come to talk with Kon about the murder of Jupa's father," Keleli said to Hajapo, white-haired, stooped over and shorter than the erect, regal Keleli. Jupa could manage no more than a weak smile. Hajapo frowned, as if ready to send the two visitors away. "Not that Kon is even suspected--" Keleli said with a nervous chuckle. Jupa saw his elder studied Hajapo's face for the favorable reaction--not, evidently, forthcoming. "But we know Jupa's father used to come this way often, and even--" Keleli continued, "mentioned talking with Kon more than once."

Hajapo looked away. "Kon is not around," he finally said. "Went to see his brother." He looked Keleli in the eye. "Katwa chose to live in exile, refused to live by Nokotul rules," Hajapo said with obvious disdain.

He did not, however, say what offense forced the Nokotuls to throw Katwa out. Jupa knew, of course, it was not telling where he got the gold stones. All of which they overheard days before.

"But Kon should be back soon," Hajapo added. "He does this every day, taking food to his brother in the forest. For that we do not object."

The two then shared acorn shell tea with Hajapo, making small

talk, waiting for Kon in the peaceful hamlet surroundings, the wind stirring the trees, the stream babbling, and small sparrows twittering in the branches above. Jupa noticed Keleli said no more about finding Naketi's killer and instead kept talking about how the season for hunting deer would end soon. It amused Jupa Hajapo held back about Katwa. Both he and Keleli knew what had been said in the Bowl of the Spirits.

They started their second cup of acorn shell tea when Jupa, glancing ever so often to Kon's hut, saw the tall, dark-haired figure. He had returned, was putting things in the hut. Finally, cup in hand, Kon walked away and headed for the wooden cistern of drinking water. He sat on a boulder, slaking his thirst.

Jupa, holding the black oak cup of tea with both hands, stopped drinking, his eyes studying Kon like a hawk. Then he looked back at the elders beside him, who were chatting about the lack of good firewood for the approaching cold moons. Keleli's long white hair wavered in the breeze. Neither evidently had noticed Kon was back. He shot another glance at Kon, as if to be sure. He carefully set down his cup and reached out to Keleli--who was busy recounting the winter the Miwokituls ran out of cut firewood--and tapped his shoulder.

The elder Miwokitul glanced at Jupa, who in turn pointed over toward the water-thirsty Kon.

"Oh, I see, the brother's back." He quickly finished his tea, profusely thanked Hajapo for the hospitality and planting his walking stick, got to his feet beside Jupa. They quickly walked toward Kon.

"Hi, Kon. Hajapo says you were visiting your brother. How is he?" Keleli asked.

"He's all right," Kon said.

"Hajapo also says Katwa lives away by his own choice."

"Yes, but it'll be difficult when the winter moons come."

"Katwa had gold stones and wouldn't say where he got them," Jupa suddenly blurted out. "Hajapo said so." His eyes went to Keleli, who

seemed to be giving a smile of approval for his young companion's bold interjection.

"Katwa might've taken gold from the stream," Kon said, jerking his hand over shoulder. "But only he knows."

"Well, Kon," Keleli said, evidently sensing Jupa had no more to say. "I last saw you, I showed this knife--" Keleli pulled the yew knife from his fur pelt pocket. "You seemed to recognize it. Did you know about this knife because of Katwa?"

"The kn-knife," Kon stammered. "I've never seen it anywhere else, never." Jupa studied him skeptically.

"Hmmm." Keleli stroked his beard. Jupa smiled, for he knew the elder was skeptical about Kon's words too. "The fear fills you that this knife is for evil. You've a brother who won't say who gave him gold stones. You know nothing. Of course, you are not a person we can suspect of this murder--"

"Why do you say that?"

"Several reasons, ones we need not discuss. Can you take us to see your brother Katwa now?"

"He wants to be alone," Kon said.

"He's expelled from the Nokotuls and winter will be cold. Would he talk to us about living with the Miwokituls?"

Kon gave Keleli an incredulous stare, as if to say, What offer was this? "He wouldn't want those questions you keep asking," Kon said.

"No," Keleli replied. "If your brother is not the killer, he'd have nothing to worry about. No Mikokitul would pester him. If his heart is clean, he can live among us. We don't care where he got the gold--" He paused. "Or what other problems he has with your people here."

"My brother should hear your offer," Kon said. Jupa gave the brother a double take, not sure what Keleli had said to get such conciliatory words from one who had been so obstinate with them only

a while before. "His life is hard now," Kon continued. "And I make many trips to take him food. Your offer might be better for everyone."

"You are, indeed, a loyal brother," Keleli said.

"It's not far. I'll take you there now," Kon said, adding they would not have to cross the stream.

Off to lower elevations, crunching down a path of broken twigs and pine needles, they walked under a leafy canopy deep into the forest. Kon kept walking as surely as a tumbling rock--he knew the way and only paused to see if Keleli kept up.

After a while, they reached a clearing with a stick hut before a fire ring. "This is it," Kon said. Put together with fallen branches, covered with deer skins, the casual hut seemed to hold little promise of ever keeping out wind, rain, or cold.

"Katwa, Katwa--" Kon called out. Jupa saw the hut shift slightly. A bedraggled figure emerged.

"Why are you back so soon?" The rufous-haired Katwa scowled. "And who's with you?" Katwa hunched forward, his hands on hips, as if daring anyone to get closer. But when he dropped his hands and stood up straight it was obvious Katwa was not short, though not taller than his brother. Jupa bit his lower lip.

"Brother, Keleli and Jupa are from the Miwokituls--" Furrowed brow above the dark eyes, Katwa stared back as if Kon had betrayed him. Kon shifted his feet nervously in the dirt. "You know, the cave people of the north. We visited them years ago after trading with the Modocs." Kon's gaze stayed on his younger brother.

"But why are you here?"

"Keleli," he said pointing to the grizzled elder, "had some questions."

"Questions? I don't answer questions." The laugh of the unwashed, bedraggled forest denizen echoed among the trees.

Keleli cleared his throat. "Jupa here--" He opened his palm toward his young companion. "Under the last half-moon and by a black oak north of our hamlet found his father murdered. Stabbed to death with a knife made of yew. Our questions are only to find who did this."

"Why ask me?"

"People told us this murder might've been for gold. Gold isn't common. We heard you left the hamlet with gold stones."

Katwa stared and said nothing.

"Gold in two places?" Keleli continued, "We had to see if your gold goes back to Jupa's dead father."

"I'm sorry you lost your father. But I did not murder him, anyone. Not with a yew knife, not with anything."

"Yes, what you say is true," Keleli said. "But you were banished for not telling Hajapo where you got the gold."

"What gold stones, I have gold?" Katwa laughed, as if where he lived made a lie of that.

"But at one time you did, didn't you?"

"I might've seen gold stones, just as you might've, but you can't blame me for something I didn't do. I didn't murder his father," Katwa said.

Katwa turned his back and stomped away, as if intent on gathering firewood. Then he circled back. Stood and glowered.

"We didn't come to disturb you," Keleli said.

Katwa stared at Kon. "All of you, all of you leave," he shouted. He waved them away with the back of his hand.

Kon's eyes, downcast, suggested this wasn't the first time his younger brother had ordered him out of his sight. Keleli picked up his walking stick, and stamped it on the ground, turned away from the sulking figure and began walking.

The three walked back to the hamlet, mostly silent. It was obvious to Jupa that Kon, with his head downcast, hardly ever looking up, was keenly disappointed with Katwa's rejection of them. Kon only wanted to improve things for his younger brother and was instead treated rudely. After they had been walking for a while, Keleli said the Nokotuls might eventually take Katwa back. Kon shrugged and kept walking.

When they got back to the hamlet, aromas from the cooking by the Nokotul women wafted through the hamlet, enticing Jupa's nostrils. His hungry stomach wanted a ladleful of acorn porridge. But Kon said nothing about them staying. While cooking aromas drew Jupa in, Kon's coldness pushed them away, as if he failed to help them with Katwa, and now they were to leave. Kon didn't really say anything. He just yelled to some Nokotul men, who were sitting about chatting, waiting to eat, and abruptly left the two Miwokituls to fend for themselves. Jupa looked at Keleli, curious what they would do next.

Then Keleli called out after Kon, thanking him for his help, though, not specifying what. Kon nodded, seemingly only an acknowledgement he had heard Keleli.

The elder turned away, looked up the path out of the hamlet. Jupa knew they would be leaving. Before they had gone far from the hungry, boisterous Nokotul voices, Keleli suddenly stopped.

"Kon helped us a lot."

Jupa wondered what that meant. Hungry and tired, he failed to see, after a whole day's work, they had learned any more about who killed his father. His eyes, downcast, were simply tired of the search.

"How is that?" Jupa finally said.

"Kon showed us where Katwa lives in the forest."

Jupa looked up, his eyes widening, as if to say, So?

"We can turn around and walk back there."

Jupa kicked the ground with his leather sandal. "Why?" His stomach hurt from lack of food.

"We hike back, go west of the hamlet, back in the forest. Then tomorrow, when Kon comes with food, we eavesdrop--just like we did at the Bowl of Spirits--and see what the two brothers talk about when we're not around. See if they know more than they've told us, which I'm sure they do." Keleli's eyes brightened as if the tactic might work. Jupa saw nothing would deter the elder, even if it meant skipping the evening meal back home. Jupa's stomach felt as tight as a knot. But he also knew Keleli was no less hungry.

"But what if Katwa hears us?"

"Katwa won't hear us," Keleli said. "Much like hunting, we stay downwind from the mountain breezes when we approach. Any sounds we make won't reach him."

Jupa winced. He couldn't argue with an experienced hunter like Keleli, even if the old man had stopped hunting many seasons ago. So if Keleli said they wouldn't be heard, Jupa knew he had no choice but to follow.

"But suppose Kon comes tomorrow morning with food and he and Katwa don't talk about anything having to do with my father. What would we have for all our effort?"

"Nothing," Keleli shot back. "But we saw Katwa only hours ago. He was agitated and told us to leave. Anger boils in his head. Before it goes away, he might feel like talking about us when he sees his brother tomorrow. Is that not so?"

Jupa couldn't miss Keleli's point. It was true if they went back to eavesdrop in a few days, overhearing something revealing would be much less likely.

So although his stomach was empty, although he was tired, and although sleeping overnight in the open would be cold, Jupa turned about and followed Keleli back down the path toward the hamlet of the Nokotuls a short distance. Then they circled well to the west and made their way into the forest, finally settling outside a clearing where they saw Katwa's hut as a black shadow by a roaring orange fire.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
FLYING STICK, HERBAL POULTICE, MOTHER EARTH RAGE

The next morning, beside a fallen log, Jupa awoke and rubbed his eyes. He pulled himself up. Across the way, bearded, lanky Keleli sat on another dead, mossy log, sipping from his water skin.

"I found a spot for us to listen while you slept," Keleli said.

"You want to go there, now?" Jupa said.

"Yes."

Soon, they were crouching across from each other at the base of two pine trees. Jupa's shoulder leaned on the rough, ribbed bark of the trunk and cautiously he peeked out at Katwa's hut, not that many steps away. Inside the stone ring, a fire smoldered.

Then noisy steps from the other side of the fire ring. A bedraggled, slow-moving Katwa came into view. In his arms, he carried branches and twigs.

They sat, tight-lipped, able to only hand signal now and then as Katwa repeatedly went back and forth into the woods, gathering firewood, and replenishing the fire.

At last, Katwa was able to fan some flames into his smouldering fire, but before he got the fire raging, a voice called out. Jupa quickly recognized the dark eyes, the shoulder-long black hair, the bronze skin of Kon walking toward his brother.

"Katwa, food. More food."

Kon said those first words in a strong voice, but once he stood by

Katwa and began giving him the food, the words went to whispers. Jupa frowned. Across the way, Keleli's face seemingly fixed in a scowl at the soft words of the two.

Then as if the air carrying their words shifted, Jupa heard Kon say, "I told him about Keleli coming around, asking about your gold--"

Jupa's ears pricked up and he leaned forward. He grinned at Keleli: This was what they wanted.

Then as if the air current shifted again, taking Kon and Katwa's words elsewhere, all, once more, was lost to whispers.

Jupa frowned and slipped a glance at Keleli, who shook his head at the the two brothers whispering.

And for the rest of Kon's visit, nothing. Some nods from Katwa. Then more whispers. Finally, Katwa patted his older brother on the back and Kon left. Jupa let his head sag, having lost the chance to overhear what the brothers knew.

Keleli, huddled by the other tree, must have had an even keener sense of frustration. But before they could leave, they had to wait for Katwa to go back into the forest for firewood another time.

Going home, they faced nothing more than a long, hard hike on the chalky, rock-jutted path with all the discomforts of empty stomachs. Or at least that is how Jupa saw it.

Ahead, Keleli's gaunt figure labored on the path with his walking stick. Jupa knew they had to talk about something to pass the time with so far to go. And soon, the two were joking about how much they would eat when they got back. Nothing remained to be said about the two brothers.

Suddenly, to the north and east, in the tall grass, a quick movement, isolated, apart from any wind. A rustle in the grass stalks. But nothing to be seen out there.

Then whistling across dead air. The flash of flying stick. Keleli falling, fast as a dropped stone. On the ground, gasping. Blood dripping

from an arrow lodged in the right upper arm.

"No!" Jupa cried.

The tall wild rye again rustling from where the arrow came. Out there, again nothing.

What Jupa saw jarred, went blurry. The unmoving wild rye stalks, Keleli's body fallen across the chalky path, the arrow shaft shot through his upper arm, its bloody flint head jutting out the other side. A chill ran down Jupa's back.

Keleli looked up. "Somebody doesn't like me." He stared at the arrow in his arm with the bemused look of a survivor. "Most likely Nokotul. Please, break it in two. Gently--"

Jupa found the arrow shaft surprisingly easy to snap. Then, he slowly tugged the shorter length with the arrowhead out the back of Keleli's arm. Jupa decided the elder was lucky. The arrow had not broken any bones, but glanced sideways in the flank of the upper arm.

"We need to keep both of those to find who shot that arrow and possibly--" He paused. "Killed your father."

Jupa picked up Keleli's willow cane, handed it to him. Keleli got to his knees, then stood. His face flickered with the exertion. "Will you be all right?" Jupa asked. The wound bled less with the piercing arrow removed, but they had so far to walk.

"It will be fine. I had a wound like this long ago," the elder said. "Talked to shaman Kotoka--Nyma was still an apprentice then--and he picked an herb poultice for it and I just got plenty of sleep."

Jupa wanted to believe it would be that easy. While Keleli stood and got his bearings with the walking stick, he followed the elder's instructions. Hurried over to the tall wild rye and yanked out a thick handful, pulling it out by the roots. The empty feeling in his gut grew: Someone had tried to murder Keleli. Someone he could not see. Quickly he wound the stalks about the elder's arm, tied it off about the wound. A few thin streaks of fresh blood slipped past the twist of tan,

dry stalks.

"This arm will be sore for a while, but I'm lucky the shot was bad."

Jupa could not laugh with the elder, the fresh blood leaving him unsure what would come next. He fell into step behind Keleli and the walking stick he now awkwardly swung left-handed.

The rhythm of the walking led to questions: Who was hiding in the grass? Who shot the arrow? Jupa agreed Kon and Katwa were not suspects anymore. But, as Keleli pointed out, they heard Kon's words he had told someone else about Keleli's questions. That person might have shot the arrow, might have stabbed Naketi. Jupa was sure it was the same person and Keleli said it was likely.

They talked like this for the rest of the hike, reliving the frustration of not getting any real answers from the brothers. Eventually they arrived in the hamlet and word quickly spread that Keleli had been shot. Keleli made straight for Nyma. Jupa followed.

The women, of course, dropped everything at the sight of Keleli's bandaged arm. They brewed acorn shell tea for him to drink. Jupa's ma, Sawaja, stood next to Nyma when he described the herbal poultice to heal the wound. She was ready to follow Nyma's words and everyone agreed the poultice would draw out poison and keep his fever down.

Soon the men gathered around too. They couldn't take their eyes off the blood-stained upper arm of Keleli. Who would do such a violent thing? The Miwokituls were a peaceful people and got along with their neighbors. Jupa, of course, could not say anything about their suspicions of someone in the Nokotul hamlet, someone who likely also surprised his pa before murdering him.

"Why didn't you come home last night?" the headman Wota with the dark, long hair asked. Keleli ignored the question and gave Jupa a sidelong glance.

"The path to find this murderer is long, hard--" Keleli paused.
"And slow."

The headman seemed nonplussed, then smiled weakly.

After the meal and a good night's sleep, Jupa awoke and walked over to Keleli and found the elder clutching a swollen upper right arm. But any aching stiffness in his arm was not matched by the look in his eyes. If anything, he seemed well-rested and said he was ready to talk with Pajpuli, the arrowsmith. He wanted, he said, a twinkle in his eye, to find out more about the ambush arrow his arm had captured. The two crossed the commons to Pajpuli's small cave, unmistakable for all the wood shavings in front.

Pajpuli studied the arrowhead, rotating its broken shaft. "I would not make an arrow point this way. My chipping is finer. Whoever made this used a different tool than I--" Pajpuli took his eyes off the arrow and glanced up at the two.

"In my head, I see one of the Nokotuls." Keleli said.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I was shot not far from their hamlet. And the chipping and shaping of this arrowhead, this is not something you would do," he said staring at the broken arrow in Pajpuli's hands. "But something else. Perhaps, I saw their arrows many hunting seasons ago."

"Yes, you could be right." Pajpuli gave the two a wry smile, as if he came to a similar conclusion. "But of that you can be sure only by visiting their arrowsmith. And he might deny this arrow, given how it came to you."

Jupa furrowed his brow. Pajpuli was joking about an arrow that a hand's width to one side would have killed Keleli.

"If this arrow looks like what they use--I don't see how they can deny the resemblance. I only have to go look in their arrow quivers." Keleli shook his head. "But now, I must let this wound close completely."

The following day, Jupa awoke with his ropy leg muscles tight with desire to be out of the hamlet, hunting mule deer with Mojku and

Lewi. He had no qualms about leaving Keleli, who still had to lie about, nursing his wound, and probably devising new ways to find the killer. Knowing the next step in their search would take time, so Jupa knew Keleli would use well the days spent recovering from his wound.

He stood to his feet on the tule mat, crouching in the quiet coolness of the caves and knew outside, many leaves had dropped: first the black oaks, then the valley oaks, and last the blue oaks. Once these trees lost all leaves, Jupa knew the cold weather that brought frost, that brought snow, that brought ice to their hamlet was less than a moon's sky passage away. Jupa left the stillness of the cave and his lungs took a deep draught of morning air. His ribs flexed freely for this wasn't the heavy, sweat-filled air of summer nor the thin, bone-chilling air of winter. No, fresh and alive as the taste of rain water from the sky, this air made him feel he was learning to breathe all over again. Invigorated, he stooped back into the dim light of the cave to find his weapons.

He picked up his pa's bow. Not a long bow, less than his outstretched hands reached. What it might have lacked in length, it made up in toughness of the wood. Made from the choicest cedar, his father Naketi had shaved the bow the right thickness, soaked it in water seven days, then shaped its arc and finally strung it with a length of deer leather. This was Naketi's special gift to Jupa when he left for the other world. As the son of a fallen Miwokitul hunter, Jupa was obligated to pick up his pa's bow and go hunting.

The black fox-skin quiver of seven arrows lay next to the cedar bow, a number all Miwokituls agreed was enough to bring down a mule deer: If you shot more than seven arrows, then it was not your day to be out hunting and you were wasting arrows for which poor Pajpuli would have to fashion new ones.

Again, he stooped through the cave entrance and in the sunlight, stood up and tugged the quiver on his back, his arm slipping through the leather strap sling across his chest. He glanced back at the cave portal a last time, knowing, of course, the room was empty. His ma, Sawaja, already was helping the other women bring up water from Lima Creek.

Across the limestone commons, Mojku and Lewi sat taking an early morning tea. Jupa joined them and had a tea himself.

"More and more trees are bare," Mojku offered in his reedy voice. "Soon the mule deer must migrate to the warmer lands, too far away for us to hunt, much closer to the ocean." Jupa turned toward him, to be sure and catch every word. Mojku, the strategist, always had a plan for where the day's hunting would take them.

Jupa cupped his tea. Slowly, very slowly, he was catching how Mojku might plan a hunt. Although he had gone after mule deer with his pa, that was only two seasons. He had so much to learn: How to read hoof tracks, what to make of the leaves they chewed, the bark they gnawed, even scat on the ground. Mojku and Lewi knew all this, and swilling the warm tea in his mouth, Jupa knew he had no choice but to learn everything. Whatever they said, whatever they did on the hunt.

"So where today will we find deer--or more likely not find them?" Lewi laughed.

Jupa would have laughed, too, but saw Mojku give Lewi a stern look. "A longer walk than usual. Down to the south, past the Nokotuls. Then west. The mule deer are there when it gets cooler."

Try as he might, Jupa couldn't quite steady the tremor of his hands holding the tea cup when Mojku said "Nokotuls." He and Keleli had spent so much time there with those brothers who refused to talk about what they knew, the gold Katwa had, what that might have to do with Naketi's death and so on. If that wasn't defeat enough, they were ambushed after they left with Keleli nearly killed by an arrow.

"We won't see ... Nokotuls, will we?" Jupa asked, a hitch in his voice.

"No," Mojku said. "We go west to the lower lands. Nokotuls are not determined like us, they quit chasing mule deer easily."

Jupa laughed. The usual banter about their neighbors, casting aspersions on their lack of drive, their love of ease, and their general

laziness. The Miwokituls, of course, were everything the Nokotuls weren't. Hard-working and never suffering for lack of food as their neighbors would, time and time again.

The three finished the tea, spent a short while chewing on bitter fiddlehead ferns to mask their scent, and then strode over to the cistern to fill up their water skins. Sawaja and another woman were dumping a water bucket in the wooden cistern and Jupa told his ma he hoped to bring home another mule deer. He also told her Mojku said the hike would be long and depending on how things went, they might sleep out in the open and not return before nightfall, especially if they had to carry back a deer. Jupa winked and Sawaja hugged him.

Finally, with Mojku in the lead, they set down the path that seemingly ran west to where the sun would end the day. Mojku's choice of hunting grounds was distant. Still, for each, their banter back and forth was about hope this might be the day a mule deer was brought down with one of their flying arrows. They last had meat when Jupa was with them and made his second kill. Nine days had gone by and each of them missed the taste of fresh meat, a taste on the tongue that yet lingered.

Nightfall came--with the sun long escaped in the west--when Mojku, Lewi, and Jupa struggled back to the caves with nothing but bows in their hands. They had spent the day chasing sounds and flashes of fur among the trees, but, alas, nothing like a sure mule deer to raise bow and arrow and take aim. Jupa walked with tired, stumbling steps up to the commons where the customary large fire invited people to gather before they slept in the caves for the night.

"Nothing, nothing," Jupa groaned to Sawaja. "We spent all day, not one chance to shoot a single arrow. Nobody even lifted their bow. It was so hopeless."

Sawaja smiled, for she had heard the same complaints about poor hunting time and time again from Naketi, when he was alive.

"I don't know if I can go hunting again soon. Too discouraging."

"Go ahead and find some porridge to eat," she said, rubbing her hand across his tired back.

But Jupa's ma was not tired, for as the sun flew through the western sky that day, a seated Sawaja, rabbitskin poncho over her shoulders, picked and pinched madrone berries, thumb and forefinger rotating each. She might scowl: A dark pit on the red globule. Already home to a worm. She would toss it and examine another berry from the heap on the burden basket. She would study it carefully too. She only kept those that were not food for pests or seed for the soil. She worked meditatively, with no regard for time, the afternoon sun overhead shifting in the needly branches of the pines far above her bowed head of short, dark, singed hair.

Nearby, a small boy, toying with a beetle, shrieked. Sawaja paid him no notice for memories of how Naketi liked the cider she made each autumn from the madrone berries came back. The evenings he would be sitting, sipping a cup of the sweet, but astringent drink she kept cool inside the caves. The smile on his face, his tongue gliding over his lower lip in appreciation kept her now at the task of pounding the berries to a pulp.

When she had a juicy, smooth meal, she took handful by handful and lovingly mounded it on a sifting basket woven of *lima*, fine willow wands, and set that on a watertight cooking basket.

She dipped her forefinger in the meal, placed it on her tongue. Strong, sweet taste--it would take several potfuls of water.

She came back with the water off the cooking fire and slowly poured over the meal, spilling water to and fro, side to side. *Drip, drip, drip.* She set the water down, listening patiently for the water to finish draining. Only then did she pick up the pot and give the meal another soaking. The water drips starting again. Pour, wait, pour, wait. She did so until she emptied the pot.

She dipped her finger in the meal, tasting it. Sweetness. Still more cider to be made. She palmed her sweaty brow. *How Naketi would have*

liked this. She pictured him once more, back resting against the cave wall, legs outstretched on the chalky soil in front of the cavern, hand holding a cup of madrone berry cider, which all Miwokituls knew was far more refreshing than the more common manzanita berries, which were only brewed after the madrone were gone.

Another potful of water needed heating. She set a heated soapstone in it and waited, wondering when the other women on the grinding rock, sitting astride their mortars, pounding acorn meal, would start cooking porridge on the fire. The sun had gone heavy under the limbs of the pine tree and soon men would return, hungry.

She took the hot water and passed that through the berry meal and decided after tasting, the meal would take one, but no more, pot of water.

That done, she wiped her brow. The drink was ready to cool. She would leave it alone overnight, knowing in the morning, particles of berry meal that slipped through the mesh of the *lima* would have settled out at the bottom of the cooking basket.

She stepped around the boy amusing himself with an overturned black beetle and carried the cooking basket, more than half full of cider now, over to the coolness of the cave and carefully poured the cider into the wooden bowl, a large hollowed-out black oak burl. Before she covered the cider bowl with a large, flat stone, she dipped her finger in the liquid. Sweet, yet astringent--it was the best she had made from the fall of these berries. *If Naketi could sip this!* His past enjoyment was reason alone to keep making this favorite drink of his. Sawaja smiled broadly and set the stone over the top of the bowl to keep pests from spoiling her special brew.

That night Jupa slept well. He awoke in the morning feeling as if he had returned from a long journey. But where he might have gone he did not know: He had no dreams to recall. A rested feeling was all he had. Ready to start the day, he went over to check on Keleli. The elder, however, seemed even more lethargic in recovery. Jupa studied his arm

wound, saw it caked with dried yellow pus below the poultice wrap. The elder, seeing Jupa frowning at the sight of where the pus drained, nodded his head. "Part of the healing," Keleli said.

He hesitated about leaving Keleli alone to rest in the cave, feeling bad he could not do more. He next sought out Mojku to see if they would try hunting again. Mojku said no, that he and Lewi would gather firewood, which they had to do in any case, and something more appealing after a miserable day out hunting.

Jupa left Mojku, dispirited, unsure what to do next. He kept on, out to the field to the north, among the black oaks and the tall bunch grasses. A large object hunkered down near one tree. The bulky brown shape was simply deer skins sewn together and stuffed with grass. The men needed something to practice arrow shooting. This "Deer Who Lost Legs" was their favorite target.

Jupa turned around, saw how far he had wandered from the caves. He had to go back. Get his bow and arrows, practice his archery.

He came back ready to shoot. His first shots went wide. Bow and arrow hanging loosely at his sides, his shoulders sagged. What was he doing wrong? How did he kill a mule deer not that long ago?

So over and over he shot arrows, trying to figure out why the shooting was going wrong. He tried holding the bow high. He tried holding it lower. Finally, to aim properly, he decided to hold the arrow high by his face as he saw Mojku do. But that only made it hard to pull the bow string back. Nonetheless, he kept trying and finally one arrow hit the target.

Until the sun had clearly shifted in the sky, he repeatedly shot the seven arrows at the "Deer Who Lost Legs." Back and forth, he walked, retrieving, shooting each arrow, again and again. He was raising the bow quickly, sighting, and releasing with one smooth movement. He quit trying to adjust his aim once he raised the bow and surprisingly, he began hitting the target.

His left arm, however, began to tire. It didn't matter. His face

beamed. He was taking more shots than if he went deer hunting every day for one moon's passage.

He strode back to the caves, a bounce in his step. He couldn't wait to be in the hunt again for mule deer. The bow and arrows put away, he sought out Keleli.

"So you've been out practicing the fine art of archery," Keleli said. "I saw you out there in the field. Helped, didn't it?"

"Yes." Jupa beamed for he was proud of the progress he had made.

"I'm glad you came by," Keleli said, his voice suddenly turning serious. "The image of who killed your father forms more in my head."

"Yes, I'm sure. That wound must recall it for you."

"True, but I also now know why our killer attacked your father."

"You do?"

"Yes, much of the mystery seems to be about gold. Your father might've been murdered for carrying gold, but it's more--"

"I don't know why anyone would want to kill him."

"Yes, the gold was taken from his dead body. Your father didn't have gold fall into his hands out of the sky--"

"It came from somewhere?"

"Yes, your father was the sort who wouldn't steal from someone else. No, I'm convinced he found it. He found it--"

Jupa gave Keleli rapt attention.

"Your father found his gold in water, but not in the Kosomu Stream where those foolish Nokotuls looked. They just guessed he got it there."

"And so he found the gold elsewhere?"

"Yes, an old story tells where gold comes from. I told your father the story when he was as young as you--"

Jupa stepped closer.

"Mother Earth in the distant past, she got angry and exploded. All around us," he said, waving his free hand. "These mountains were red with molten stone running downhill. The volcano you and I never saw, only know in stories."

"Oh, the sight that must have been," Jupa said.

"Well, while I've been mending here," he said, patting the poultice on his wound, "I recalled your father so often liked to go walking by himself." He paused. "Well, the story tells when Mother Earth exploded, she tossed out what became valuable gold with fiery rocks. And your father liked to see for himself if something was true. The story I told when he was young could've come back--why else would anybody climb there? No trees, no animals, nothing except scattered rock. But if he went looking for the start of Kosomu Stream, higher up, he might have found gold there. That's where the mountain exploded."

"So I want to know if you'd be willing to do some investigation for me while this arm heals. You know, of course, you'll be on land of the Nokotuls and must stay respectful if you run into them. Just tell them you're lost. Say no more. And, please, nothing about gold."

"Yes, of course, I wouldn't say why I was up there--oh, maybe something, seeing the view from higher on the mountain." They both laughed.

"Good, I appreciate you doing this. If you find gold up there, please don't bring the stones back now. Just see everything well and keep the pictures in your head, and we can decide what to do later."

CHAPTER NINE: UNDERWATER TREASURE, SHINY BAIT, COUGAR MAN

Jupa left Keleli, eager for what was next. The sky was clear and a low sun shone brightly. He saw in his head a long hike to where the waters of the Kosomu Stream began crashing down, flowing toward the Nokotul hamlet. He would avoid those people because he was headed higher and far above their hamlet. He filled his deerskin water bag, started walking.

With legs as tense, as hard as the rocks he had to climb and with a grimace in his face, he pushed forward, away from the usual path trod by Miwokituls, accepting every boulder at first would be a trial. He picked his way, crouched over, hands and feet crossing one craggy obstacle, then another.

After a while, he paused, stood up, looked around. Any shade from trees was gone. He was in the clear. He had passed the timberline.

But the hiking, if anything, was harder. No soft dirt for his aching hands and feet crabbing over what was, more and more, just obstinate scree.

Keeping his balance, his eyes swept slowly right, then left. Then ahead, surprisingly, a small stand of short trees. He stopped climbing. He began to work his way sideways off the spill of scree.

Babbling water. His ears pricked at those sounds. Finally, below the tiring scree, past the stunted trees, around an outcropping of rock, he walked upon a gushing spring.

Without pause, the water burst forth from the maw in the side of

the mountain. He caught his breath and felt oddly light, having left the climb across the tortuous rocks. For the longest while, he stood stupefied, his mouth closed in a deep smile. With hands bloodied by small rock cuts, he palmed his forehead. *A secret place, pa knew about this.*

He wanted to throw himself in the waters and take on the secret for which his father was murdered. But no sooner would his legs exult and leap than they weakened, collapsed, and brought him to his knees. He had to get closer. He crawled to where the water flowed out and down the mountain. Peered hard. Were those yellow glints sparkling in the sunlight? No, nothing. He was in the wrong place to see beneath the water.

Wind whistling off the mountain kept him from seeing clearly. He glanced away from the spring to trees lower on the mountain. Out to what he knew was the west, for the morning sun cast his shadow that way. Scratched his nose. *Someone hiding in those trees might see me here. Might've seen pa here.* He couldn't be sure. He shook off the shiver from what might be other eyes and went back to searching the splashing water.

He knew the spring flowed forth underwater. On all fours, he gingerly crossed the verdigris slick, sure if he could put his arm in, he would find gold treasure.

The maw kept spewing watery violence, gushing every which way.

His brow furrowed. *What's under that? If gold stones were tossed out, they're in the water too. Unless others, many lives ago, took them.*

As Keleli said, angry Mother Earth once exploded with red-hot molten rock. Jupa studied the gushing water, now sure something even more powerful than water opened this side of the mountain. What but an explosion would toss all that scree he crawled across?

He pulled himself closer, hands, knees, feet slipping on the slick in the rushing water. Finally, with gushing water and cold spray in his face, he thrust an arm where the mouth would be. Inside, his numb

fingers felt a huge bowl of pitted, jagged rock.

His feet, slipping, wouldn't move him closer. Finally, he levered his right arm inside the maw. Then took out his right arm and thrust in his left arm.

The water, bitterly cold, numbed those fingers too. Drenched his face, his hair. His mouth sputtered. Other than some gold stones, what was he looking for? What did he need to find to tell Keleli? He wasn't sure. He pinched his nose with his right fingers, blew out the water, and kept on.

His fingertips searched deeper, below the pitted rock bowl. He reached down until his fingers felt the water gushing without bottom. Moved fingers sideways in the bowl, on the ledges. Dragged up his legs and feet. Leaned closer to the pumping gusher. Water slapping his stomach. The deer pelt soaked.

A deep breath. Plunging, searching left hand. Mouth agape at what he found. A smooth rock. More smooth rocks. Fingertips thrilling to the oddity of smooth stones beneath the gushing water, resting on pitted rock. Numb fingers pinching one stone, nabbing it, cradling it upward to break the surface of riffling water.

His eyes narrowed. Sun glints. Steadying himself at the maw of the surging water with his right forearm, he held the stone with dazzle away with his left fingers. Even if a little dull, even if not polished, yes, definitely gold. His lungs, his throat, his mouth wanted to shout. But below in the scrubby trees, if anyone was around-- He frowned. *This could have happened when pa was here. I follow his steps but I'll keep my gold stones covered.* He took a deep suck of air, his prize gold stone easily worth the meat of a mule deer or two. He wrapped his fingers tightly about it and rubbed his brow with the back of his fist. *Keleli said, Don't bring anything back. Just find out what's there. Hide the gold. Yes, hide the gold.*

He opened his palm, flung it to the side. He could bury it later.

His left hand warmed by the sun and, yes, with the novel thrill of

holding gold, plunged back for more smooth stones. Deep in the outflow, more of them. Smooth stones nestled against each other. Tipped one away with the plunging arm, hand, fingers. Yanked it up. His restless eyes snagged again by the dull glow, the sunlit golden glow.

A sideways toss for that one too.

Again, left hand inside for more. In all, after repeated icy, numbing plunges, what he could count on both hands twice. But he didn't need to count. He guessed many more rested at the bottom of the riffling water.

But his fingertips didn't feel them. His arm wasn't long enough to find more.

Reluctantly, he moved away from the mouth, sliding his legs spider-wise left. The gold stones lay scattered across the ground. What would he do with them?

If he took them back to Keleli, others might see them, begin picturing in their heads gold treasure, even if hidden. That would only make finding Naketi's killer harder. Better to bury the stones for now.

But bury them where? Jupa looked at the flowing water. No use burying near that--it was too rocky. He looked up higher, saw a huge rock outcropping with some sand at its base. That would be easy to locate. Find the spring again and climb to the big rock.

He gathered up the gold stones, taking what he could and climbed there, where he dug them into the sand. Then he went back for the rest. He stood under the bulk of the huge rock outcropping and gazed down--far below--knowing that led to where the Nokotuls lived. The Kosomu Stream started here and this was their water. If they knew, they might see the gold stones as theirs.

Jupa dropped his chin. His body felt tired. What had he done but discover what Keleli said was true. *Keleli says pa was murdered because he found gold here. But pa refused to tell where this place was. For that, he was knifed.*

Jupa looked back to where he climbed from the Miwokitul hamlet.

He would retrace his steps and take the news to Keleli.

He shot a glance back at the shrubby trees straight down from where he stood. Gave them a hard study for somebody watching. He heard nothing. His teeth chattered with the cold and the soaked pelt he wore, but he had his discovery. He knew where gold came out of the mountain and rubbing those smooth stones, he realized he had a secret to share only with Keleli.

When he got to the hamlet, Jupa sought out his grizzled partner to tell about what he discovered inside the mountain spring. Unfortunately, Keleli was busy, talking with Nyma, the young shaman with long, dark hair under a tall conical hat.

He shrugged. The older men were too busy to talk with him. He didn't want Nyma to know anything about gold stones, so he backstepped and left the two to finish their tea.

A shiver then came over him. His pelt was soaking wet. He would do well to go over and stand by the cooking fire and get dry.

"Jupa, you're so wet," Sawaja, his ma, said, standing by a cooking basket and deftly guiding a sizzling soapstone through bubbling porridge with the looped end of her paddle.

"Yes, I slipped in the stream."

"You were out by yourself where? Why?" Sawaja said sharply, causing him to wonder if she were about to pull out the dogwood paddle from the cooking basket and strike him. But, no, instead she kept stirring the looped end of the *pinita* about in the large basket--it took six heated stones to cook all the porridge it held. And she kept staring at him, as if she was wondering why he was wet.

"I was out by myself. Keleli, you see, still recovers from his arm wound." Jupa said, edging in closer to the fire, wishing it would dry out his pelt faster.

"I ask because Keleli was looking for you."

"Oh," Jupa said. He bit his lower lip: *Clever Keleli goes about*

asking where I am, as if he doesn't know why I left this morning.

He arched his back, soaking in more of the fire's warmth. His open hands moved again and he was happy all the small cuts from climbing over the scree were clean of blood and now nothing more than white slits of skin.

His ma then gave her attention back to cooking porridge, guiding the soapstone around and up and down the bubbling mixture. She wouldn't ask any more about how he spent the day. He moved sideways to the fire.

But this time he had a big secret: more gold stones than any Miwokitul had ever seen. Yes, ever since he was a small boy, his ma could look him in the face and know when he had a secret and he would have to tell her.

Whether Sawaja could tell he was keeping a secret, he didn't really know. She did have to be answered. Of that, he never was in doubt.

Sweat beading on her forehead, she kept at the porridge, both hands on the long wooden paddle. "It would be good if you talk with Keleli."

"I will."

"Well, you better talk soon."

"Yes, he's over with Nyma, talking about something. I won't bother him now. Maybe at mealtime."

Sawaja beamed. "It's good to respect one's elders," she said, changing her stirring to short, choppy up-and-down motions.

He smiled right back. His ma, yes, she was his elder too.
The meal got underway.

"Let's eat now." With those same words every evening, Miwokitul headman Wota would start the meal. A meal of acorn porridge, absolutely the same fare the Miwokituls could expect for days to come, unless someone had the good fortune to kill a mule deer, which this late

in season was mostly the stuff of hunger dreams.

For his part, Jupa never ate acorn porridge as if starving. This time, however, with no reluctance Jupa finished all the porridge. Only after he emptied the porridge bowl did he go over and sit by Keleli.

"Tell me, you find anything up there?" the grizzled elder asked.

Jupa beamed for he had not only an answer but a long one. "Yes, but I don't want anyone else to hear," he said quietly.

"I see," Keleli said. He grabbed the bent handle of the walking stick that lay beside him and got to his feet. They left the others to eating and talking, and crossed the chalky commons. A stone's throw away, the limestone shelf gave way to plain dirt and weeds. They stopped. They were out of earshot of other Miwokituls.

"I found gold," Jupa said, a small frisson of excitement lifting his voice. Keleli's eyes danced and grew large, as if the reasons he gathered up for Naketi's murder were true.

"Gold! What'd it look like?"

"Yellow stones, lots of them."

"How many?"

"More than I could carry in my two hands."

"I see. The gold stones, inside the spring as we expected?"

"Yes. Deep. Deep down inside." Keleli nodded his head.

"All the water runs to the trees below," Jupa continued, "the Kosomu Stream where the Nokotuls live."

"I hiked there, I looked in the water for gold flakes, but nothing."

"So then, what'd you do then?"

"Well, I had to reach inside the gusher. Way inside the rocky mouth, where all the water was coming from--" Keleli leaned forward to catch every word.

"So I got on my hands and knees and crawled--water everywhere. Water, slime, it was hard to keep from sliding. Finally, I got an arm in like this--" Jupa hooked his left arm out sideways to show how he had reached. "And started feeling around. All pitted rock inside, but finally, I got my hand down deep and felt these smooth stones. Felt really different. Had to see them. I pulled one out and held it like this." Jupa extended his left arm and hand. "I couldn't believe it."

"Gold?"

"Yes, I rubbed it, it looked bright like the sun above."

"Then what--you got more?"

"Sure, I threw the first one off to the side, then went back and got more. I must've taken two hand counts," he said, opening both hands twice.

"Then I quit and went and buried everything higher up the mountain, above the spring."

"Good. Now we know where your father got the gold that led to his murder. That's important. Why would anyone kill him? Gold? For a few gold stones? Probably not," Keleli said. "But to know where he got the gold? Probably yes." His face beamed, as if he himself held Jupa's handfuls of gold stones. "And we probably can assume the killer is a Nokotul."

"You know that, so soon?"

The elder cleared his throat. "Other peoples don't usually go on Nokotul lands, especially up there." It was something he knew from much observation, something young Jupa had to take without argument.

"And pa went there because of the story?"

"Yes, the story I told him as a youth must have returned to his head--even I almost forgot about gold and molten stone being thrown out of the mountain long ago when Mother Earth got angry."

"So he wanted gold?"

"Yes, and that discovery must've unleashed great emotion in him." He paused. "Emotion might've caused him to tell another--"

"He never told me."

Keleli shot the young man a wry smile. "What we now have are the makings of a trap for the killer."

"A trap?" Jupa took a deep breath. He had only seen traps for small animals like opossums, not for people.

"Well, not really a trap for the killer." Keleli laughed. "No, nothing like that. It's--how should I say--like bait to lure the killer into the open. We have gold stones. You and I will go up there and get those. I have to ponder this more, but if we tell the right people, show them gold stones and say we found them up where the stream begins on the mountain--" He paused, as if considering his words. "There's a possibility we might lure the killer out to get gold."

"But couldn't a Nokotul who goes there, looking for gold, who only wants gold, have nothing to do with murdering my pa?"

"That's true. Very true. So we can't do that now."

Jupa's eyebrows rose under his forelocks of dark hair.

"First, we must figure out who Katwa protects." Keleli *harumped* as if Katwa's refusal to help was a stupid obstacle to finding Naketi's killer. "I haven't decided how yet. But once we know, we'll use the gold stones as bait."

Keleli sighed and Jupa took that to mean finding his pa's killer was taking them down an even darker path.

Jupa kicked at dirt, seemingly as stubborn as the search for his pa's killer. Until the elder came up with an approach to catch the killer, there was no next step to take. That usually meant the elder had to sleep on it and let the answer visit him in the night.

Jupa glanced overhead. The sky loomed dark as the inner reaches of a cave, the stars brighter for swimming in blackness. Jupa knew his

constellations. His favorite, overhead: The Archer. He saw him as perhaps the greatest Miwokitul archer who ever lived, having given his people the meat of the mule deer, which used to run in big herds.

Jupa cast a glance Keleli's way, saw he had taken to tapping his walking stick on the ground, as if trying to summon an answer to the problem that refused to go away: The murderer was still at large. Keleli seemed amenable to more talk. "Tell me," Jupa said, "Isn't that The Archer up there?" His hand pointed toward the starry constellation. "The Miwokitul hunter, the one who killed so many mule deer before they stopped running in herds?"

"Oh, you must've heard that when you were a kid." Keleli smiled, as if he were happy to retell the story to an older Jupa. "Yes, at one time, many, oh, great herds of mule deer ran across this mountain and they had plenty of trees to feed on. So many mule deer the Miwokituls ate meat every day if the men went out and hunted. Cougars, also in these mountains, feasted on mule deer, but still the deer managed to thrive because there were plenty of trees, and being well-fed, they were especially fertile. They always seemed to have new fawns for every one killed by the Miwokituls or the cougars. We Miwokituls always had great bounty, one hunting season to the next."

Keleli paused, as if recalling what happened next in the saga of the mule-deer decline. "But sadly, it came to an end. Why they stopped running in herds was a mystery until someone retold the story of the greatest Miwokitul archer of all time, the one called Cougar Man. They called him that because he bravely killed cougars and wore their skins for his pelt apron. He told people wearing cougar fur made him a more skillful hunter. He certainly proved that."

Jupa smiled. He had forgotten all the details about Cougar Man from hearing of him as a child. He glanced again at the constellation overhead.

"Cougar Man always brought home a deer when he went out--nearly every day. So the Miwokituls, who have lived in these caves

since the ancient ones," he said pointing across the chalky commons, "always ate meat and they grew tall, and their children kept growing tall, as you see today."

"Even if we don't eat much meat anymore?" Jupa asked.

"Yes, Miwokituls have been tall for many, many lifetimes. Everyone knows the Miwokituls are tall." Then Keleli frowned. "But we're looking for a short person who killed your father."

"Anyway, one day, a young man, but older than you," he said, "was out hunting with Cougar Man and decided to do something stupid, something all Miwokituls have had to live with ever since."

Jupa stared. "What was that?"

"Well, the hunters who went out with Cougar Man were getting tired of seeing him kill the first mule deer. Some were skillful stalkers of the mule deer, but they always ended up carrying Cougar Man's deer back to the hamlet, hunting done for the day. You see, Cougar Man's success every day discouraged the others. Especially the younger, inexperienced hunters.

"So, anyway, one in particular, whose name is lost to the story, got in his head a way to make it easier for everyone to kill a deer. He wanted to let all the hunters follow Cougar Man to the edge of the woods where they'd hunt as usual. In the meantime, this young hunter would sneak around the other side of the woods and set a fire. The fire was supposed to scare the whole herd of deer out of the forest right at the hunters."

Keleli shook his head, as if what he had to say was painful. "The fire was set and the woods caught fire easily because that season the rains hadn't come for many moons. Everything went up in flames, the dead branches popping, they were so dry. The deer herd panicked and ran. But they didn't run toward the hunters. They ran out the other side of the trees.

"Cougar Man, when the other hunters told him who had set the

fire, was furious. When that young hunter came running back, Cougar Man started after him as if he'd beat him senseless.

"The young fellow by this time had most likely gone crazy. He at first ran away. Then he turned. Then he held out his bow. Aimed an arrow at Cougar Man. People screamed for him not to shoot, but he let it fly. A single arrow into Cougar Man's heart. And that is how a good-for-nothing, who never brought down a mule deer, managed to deprive all Miwokituls of Cougar Man's many mule deer that so often fed the hamlet."

Keleli bounced his walking stick in the dirt. "Yes, a great loss to the Miwokitul people. They said Cougar Man shouldn't have died that way." Keleli glanced at Jupa. "Anyway, great hunter that Cougar Man was, he ascended to the skies above and all say that's he in those stars looking down on his people. He's probably the only Miwokitul ever to do so, to become part of the stars. But we are told he watches over us to make sure we never do anything as stupid as that young man, whose name nobody bothered to keep in the story."

"So what happened to the deer?" Jupa asked, puzzled about the story's end.

"Yes, the story is true to this day. The murder of Cougar Man took away our bountiful gift of mule deer each hunting season. The mule deer fled the woods down there and they never returned as a herd again. Never. The great mule-deer herds left us Miwokituls, never returned, not because they were killed by the cougars, not because they were killed by our people. They stopped running in great herds because that fire convinced them staying together might not be safe. That's the story of why we no longer see herds of mule deer. Only a family or two will graze at a time among the aspens that regrew where the fire blackened the old woods. And see how often we have meat to eat?"

"Once in a moon, if we're lucky," Jupa said, chuckling.

"Yes, it didn't used to be that way, just ask Cougar Man up there," Keleli said, raising his walking stick and pointing directly at the starry

constellation of The Archer high overhead.

Jupa took a deep breath. He was willing, if possible, to let the spirit of Cougar Man enter his chest and make him strong.

Keleli's story of the great hunter, Cougar Man, looking over the hamlet of the Miwokituls from his celestial realm gave Jupa another sign the murder of his father was a break in his life not easily overcome.

Certainly, his father would not become a constellation, but the day had brought many pictures of his pa into his head. The moment he took the first gold stones from the spring's roiling waters, a calm took over his whole body. Seemingly, his pa was near. The calmness stayed the whole day and finally, after talking with Keleli, dropped him gently to sleep later that evening on his deerhide bed.

The next morning, Jupa awoke with a strong spirit. With first light of dawn seeping in the cave entrance, he quickly sat up. Sawaja slept the other side of the small room, gently snoring and beside her, the pile of mule-deer skins where his pa had slept, which both he and his ma would have to burn soon. On his knees, he crawled his way into the warmer air moving outside and got to his feet on the chalky commons.

He glanced up the mountain, imagining he was by the gushing spring. His legs yearned to hike the path to where the trees didn't grow and scree was strewn everywhere. He would go there and uncover the gold stones he took from the cold waters of the bubbling gusher, and most certainly know he was sharing the great secret his pa knew, the secret not even an assassin's knife would force from his pa's lips.

But as much as he yearned to return, doing so would serve little purpose if Keleli didn't come too. They both needed to see the gold stones.

Unfortunately, the wound to Keleli's arm was taking long to heal. The rugged hike up the mountain had to wait, as Keleli joked, until his right arm was strong enough to manage a walking stick for more than a few steps outside his cave to get porridge.

CHAPTER TEN: LAST WORDS, SHAMANIC ANSWER, GOLD RUSH

While Keleli was on the mend, Jupa spent his days practicing archery, and once again hunted with Mojku and Lewi. But late in the season, not surprisingly they came back empty-handed.

Evenings--night would follow day with clear, cold blackness--Jupa studied the constellation of The Archer. He wondered what Cougar Man might say about his troubles, if anything.

Cougar Man, like Keleli, was brave and wise. Yet even after he joined the stars above, did Cougar Man know why he died senselessly at the hands of another Miwokitul? Of course not. Jupa would gape at his starry companion. Not even the skillful Cougar Man could protect himself from a stupid fool.

Days passed and Keleli at last pronounced the arm healed. He was ready to see the gold stones, hidden in the bowl of the mountain spring, the ones up to now only father and son--Naketi and Jupa--had seen. He said they had no time to waste.

"Cold morning, isn't it?" Jupa asked. The commons before them, covered with a glinty layer of frost, was footmarked by those Miwokituls up earlier. In the meadow below, tan, dry grass had turned ghostly, and steamy vapor hovered in shafts of sunlight.

"The third light of dawn is here." Keleli's gaze, often reading weather, went higher up the craggy mountain. "The shaman Nyma says a storm might move in, but not before the sun lies heavy in the west. We best hurry." He laughed. Still, the cold air was stiffening their limbs, so they pulled on fur ponchos and leggings and stuffed dry grass in their

momkos.

Once they filled their water skins, they started the climb up the mountain. Jupa led, for he knew the path, and Keleli followed, ever-present willow cane in hand.

Above, in the empty blue sky, the mountain ridge hovered like the thin edge of an obsidian arrowhead. Below, the two plodded the scree-strewn path to where evergreen trees close by began to thin out.

"We don't have far to go," he called back to Keleli. The elder stopped, leaned on his walking stick and glanced down to a stand of scruffy trees. A raven launched from one tree--*krahnk, krahnk, krahnk*--flew sideways, flared its wings, then perched on another tree limb.

"The raven is wise," Keleli said. "He stays out of the open, unless he flies. Then he seeks out the cover of tree branches."

"Unlike us," Jupa yelled back.

Then the two trudged on, calling forth signs of what they saw, what they could possibly learn about why Naketi would hike to such isolation on the mountain. Before long, however, they found themselves off the scree, approaching what Jupa knew as the familiar stand of small trees, and heard water babbling. They circled an outcropping of rock higher than their heads, then beheld the maw of a furiously gushing spring.

Jupa shivered. Colder than when he was last there.

Keleli stepped around the spring, evidently recalling it from the past, and seeing it with renewed interest. It really was out of the way and led nowhere else.

"Look here," Keleli said, kneeling on the ground.

Jupa saw he had walked to the other side of the gusher, past the mossy banks to dry dirt and gravel. He was studying something.

"Last time, I didn't even come over here," Jupa said. "I was so busy taking out gold stones back there." He jabbed his thumb outward at the gurgling, slapping waterflow.

"Of course you didn't, these aren't your feet." His finger outlined what appeared to be large footprints in the dirt, suggesting a tall person, someone like Naketi. "I can't say if these are your father's footprints, but if they are, he was alone when he came to this spring."

"What about another person with a foot as big?"

"Wait, you see these have the same mark at the top, near the big toe?" He reached down and pointed at a small dimple in the footprint. Across all the depressions in the dirt, it was the same.

"Yes," Jupa said, "I see." He knelt beside the elder, and try as he might, he could not see any other footprints. Just the same large feet.

"Let's see. If he walked here, if only he found gold, if that gold came from here, not lower on the Kosomu Stream, where the foolish Nokotuls wanted it to be--" He pointed toward the scrubby trees and beyond, much lower on the mountain. "I now see why he probably took the secret here--this gold--to his grave. Oh, someone found out he had gold, but they didn't know where he got it. So he died because he wouldn't tell."

Keleli glanced at the gushing water, evidently satisfied the footprints were of one person.

"But why did he walk here?" the elder said. "You stayed on that side of the spring. That makes sense because we are Miwokituls and we live out there," he said, pointing to the north and west. "Tell me, when you took the gold stones, did you not toss them off to your left?"

"Sure."

"And maybe he tossed them to his right. He was right-handed."

"Yes, pa was right-handed. I'm left-handed."

"I see, I should have seen that before. Yes, he tossed the gold stones over here. That's why his footprints are all over here. You took them out with your left hand and it makes sense you would throw them to your left, away from your body like so," Keleli said, thrusting his left hand away from his body, "not across your body like so."

"So you came up on the other side, went to this spring, reached in and took out stones. Those you buried up there," he said, pointing above the spring to freshly turned soil.

"Yes, that's it, two hands worth of gold, I buried that much twice," he said, recalling the excitement of having those brilliant stones weigh down his numb hands.

"We should take it today, if only for safekeeping. Leaving it up here, the gold stones might fall into the wrong hands and destroy any plan we might devise to trap the killer."

"Trap the killer?" Jupa scratched his forehead. *How can we trap the killer? We don't even know who the killer is.*

"Yes, if the killer's a Nokotul, then we'll go and tell them what your father said a few days before he was killed--" He paused. "A riddle."

"A riddle? How does that trap the killer?" Jupa's face screwed up in puzzlement.

"Well, if all Nokotuls hear us, if the killer is a Nokotul, then the killer must hear our words. You agree?"

"Sure, but what then?"

"I want all Nokotuls to know the words he said. They'll tell each other. The killer will hear these words over and over."

Jupa nodded.

"It wouldn't do to tell Kon, even though I suspect he knows the killer, or his brother Katwa. They both might tell the killer the riddle, then maybe they wouldn't." Keleli grimaced as if he knew the brothers protected the killer. "No, we must tell all Nokotuls what your father's last words about gold were--"

"Which we have to make up, don't we?" Jupa asked, desperate now to hear how Keleli would trap the killer.

"Yes." Keleli's eyes twinkled. "The thing is, I can't go to the Nokotul hamlet and say this. I'm an elder of my people, supposedly full

of wisdom. I can't stand up, say a riddle, then say I don't know what it means." Keleli smiled.

"Of course, if you'd heard your father give this riddle yourself," he continued, "you would've surely asked him what it meant, unless--"

Keleli gave Jupa the briefest glance then looked away.

"Well, what I mean," the elder said, "if he didn't want to say more, then a few days later, he was dead." Jupa turned, took a deep breath.

"Yes, the Nokotuls have to be told the riddle we make up," Keleli continued, "and only the killer will know its meaning--"

"How can you say that? Why wouldn't any other Nokotul know or even guess?"

"We know the killer must have stalked your father and sneaked up on him, knowing he had gold."

"Yes, and finally killed him."

"Well, the riddle I came up with knows this about the killer."

"I see, so what is the riddle?" Jupa stood erect and attentive, left palm to the dark locks on his forehead, ready to hear the answer.

"Easy. Before he died, your father said, I climbed to the mouth of the mountain and found gold."

"What? How does that trap the killer?" A look of consternation crossed Jupa's face. *How will this work?*

Keleli lifted his walking stick, aiming at the mountain summit. "As you see, this mountain is big. Many paths cross it, but only the killer knows some of the paths your father walked those last days when he found gold here. So what I'm saying, the killer is the only Nokotul--the only one--who doesn't have to search the whole mountain to solve the riddle. He knows the paths your father walked before he killed him. The killer will easily find that path and go back and find the spring here, which, of course, he quickly will know as the mouth of the mountain." Keleli smiled broadly, as if he had constructed a splendid word trap for

Naketi's killer.

"You put it that way--" Jupa paused, as if unsure the plan would mislead everyone else. "So the killer is to see the meaning of the words before anyone else."

"But as I said, being old and supposedly wise to riddles, I can't stand before the Nokotuls and say I don't know what this means."

"So who does?"

"Who other than you?" Keleli's eyes twinkled.

"You want me to say this?"

"Who better? You are the son and you might have been around him to hear what were to be his last words."

"Yes, that's true. So we--I mean I--speak to the Nokotuls very soon."

Jupa was ready. He would stand before them, say clearly the riddle of Naketi's last words so even the heartless killer among them would hear. He stared at the unruly waters coursing down, out of the mouth of the mountain, and quickly forming an erosive channel--Kosomu Stream--that flowed straightaway to the Nokotul hamlet.

If they simply followed the water, before long they would be talking to the Nokotuls after their evening meal. Yes, he would tell them what his murdered father said. He would bait the trap. His jaws clenched. He wanted badly to trick the killer into giving himself away.

"Why not go there now?" Jupa said.

"Other things come first," Keleli said, appearing to be distracted. The elder kept poking around the gushing spring. Jupa furrowed his brow. *Is he looking for other signs?*

Jupa let go wanting to do something right away. Keleli stood up straight, evidently satisfied he wasn't about to find more signs for what Naketi did in those last days, when the killer might have been stalking him. Other than the footprints, and the gold stones, Jupa gathered

nothing was left to discover.

Next, with Keleli's walking stick helping him up the steep climb, they got to the stone outcropping. Jupa's chest swelled with pride. Finally--why they climbed the mountain. He shoved his hands into the loose soil with abandon. The handfuls of dirt tossed forward, the yellow stones came to life in their uncovered brilliance. He picked them out singly, handing each to Keleli, who then slid them inside the pouch of his mule-deer pelt, under his fur poncho.

While the gold was more than two handfuls--probably four handfuls--it easily fit inside Keleli's large pouch. But as he said, it was weighty.

With the cache of gold stones gathered, they carefully stepped down to the spring again and paused. "We're leaving gold in those waters," Keleli said, pointing at the watery maw.

Jupa clasped his arms across his poncho, as if shivering. He glanced at the spring, the stream, the mossy banks. For now, he would not take any more gold. Reaching in those surging waters, wet and cold, could wait. Keleli's smile suggested he knew what Jupa decided. He said nothing.

Before long, they were picking their steps across the dark gray scree, descending northwest toward their hamlet. Suddenly Keleli, who at first seemed fine, paused and said: "If I didn't have this walking stick, I might walk in circles or fall down. These stones are heavy." He chuckled.

"Do you want me to carry half?" Jupa asked.

He said yes, so Jupa put half in his pouch. "Much better," Keleli said as they resumed the trek back to the hamlet.

The walking was slow and they had plenty of time to talk. Mostly plans about what the youth might say to the Nokotuls before he told them what the last words of Naketi were.

"But if we go to the Nokotuls and see them as a group, we'll share

the meal, and afterward, I'll tell them the riddle, what my pa said," Jupa said.

"No, as I said before, It can't be that way. I cannot go with you."

"Why not?" Jupa scratched his left temple. *He said I had to talk to the Nokotuls, he didn't say I had to go there alone.*

"If the killer sees me, he knows I'm still after him. He'll see the ambush failed and he'll try killing me again. He'll do that before he goes looking for the gold stones."

"But what if they ask for you?"

"Say anything. Say I am deathly ill from my wound."

"And how will the killer see me?" Jupa said, a quaver in his voice.

"You, the killer knows, are there to repeat your father's words. You don't appear to be one to track down the killer by yourself."

"All right. I'll go there myself."

"The sooner the better," Keleli said.

The next afternoon, Jupa--alone--set out for the Nokotuls by Kosomu Stream. He would ask Hajapo, their headman, about staying over. That way he would not, in the dark, have to make the long trek home.

The day was even colder than hiking to the spring the day before. He wore the same warm fur poncho, leggings, and heavy sandals and sustained his spirits with a picture in his head of the warm fire he would share with the Nokotuls once he reached their hamlet.

Over and over, out loud, as he ambled the chalky path, he tried out what he might tell them. But he knew once there, he would say what was in his heart, taking care, of course, to repeat the riddle of Naketi's words, just as Keleli said.

Earlier that morning, Keleli and Jupa agreed they wouldn't know when the killer might try to take the gold stones from the spring. All

they knew was he would try--and probably return again and again for more gold.

Once the killer heard Naketi's riddle, he might reveal himself, but that was far from certain. Jupa would wait in hiding near the spring the next day, then the next--every day until he had something to report. But if the killer never showed, he couldn't spend endless days atop the mountain. Jupa might never see the killer and the trap, tricky at best, might not succeed.

Before he could see any way *then* to pursue the killer, Jupa made it to the hamlet. The bark huts clustered as tipped shadows in the night. A few with flickers of fire within, but most were dark. He squinted. *The murderer might be in one of those huts.* The biggest orangy glow, however, came from the communal fire, where many of the Nokotuls he must have last seen wading in Kosomu Stream now milled around. He walked hesitantly, his eyes searching for Kon whom he knew from the last visit with Keleli, but all he saw were unfamiliar faces.

Finally, he recognized Hajapo, the headman with skimpy white hair, and feeling his legs as shaky--for he truly was doing this for his murdered pa and, of course, Keleli--asked if he might speak to everyone after they ate. He had brought news. He smiled weakly.

Leaning on his walking stick, Hajapo quickly agreed. Jupa was to join everyone in sharing the acorn porridge, the same fare he would have eaten in his own hamlet.

Once the meal was over, stoop-shouldered Hajapo rose. "We have a guest here. Jupa from the Miwokituls, higher up the mountain. He is the son of Naketi, who, some have heard, was murdered close by the Miwokitul caves less than a moon ago. Jupa comes to speak about his father."

The Nokotuls--men, women, children--sat reverently silent, no doubt out of respect for the son's recent loss. Jupa got to his feet, a wary look in his face. "I thank all of you for sharing food with me tonight. I also thank you for hearing the words I must say about my father."

He looked around, then plunged ahead. "My father--" He paused, finding the picture of his dear pa in his head. "He was murdered the start of this moon. I don't know who did this."

Jupa glanced about, keenly aware one pair of eyes on him might be the murderer's. Certainly, even standing before all Nokotuls, he had but one person in his audience. He was really talking to Naketi's killer. What could he tell him?

"The person who killed my father could be one of my people, someone here, or someone from elsewhere. I hurt--as does my ma--not knowing who it is."

Jupa again looked around his audience, not to suggest a suspect among them, but also not to discourage that possibility either. "I also ask, Why would anybody kill my father? I don't know. But I know one thing. Sometime during the last moons my pa was alive, he discovered gold--" The murmurs in the crowd suddenly stopped.

"Where I don't know." He shook his head, as if that secret only made his pa's death more of a puzzle.

"He even showed one gold stone to our shaman, but he never told anyone where he found gold. He was close-mouthed."

The murmurs came back, spreading from one to another through the crowd. Jupa saw the eyes fix on him, the heads lean forward.

"When he was murdered, the gold he had with him was, of course, taken by the murderer, of that I'm fairly sure, and days later, I saw all of you out there in the stream searching for gold."

"You didn't find gold in the Kosomu." He looked right, toward the water burbling in the darkness. "So where's the gold? I'll tell you what my pa said."

A hush like the first fall of snow came over the crowd. "What he said was a riddle, but in time it might make sense. He said--" Jupa paused for suspense. "I climbed to the mouth of the mountain and found gold." More murmurs in the crowd.

The murmurs grew louder.

"Now you've heard his secret--" Jupa shouted above the hubbub. "But what is it? The mouth of the mountain?" He again peered at the darkness hiding the flowing splashes and slaps, below the bank. "How big is this mountain? The mouth could be anywhere. So I ask you, forget about the gold my father found. Yes, forget about it. Please, instead, help me find the killer who might be among us. This is what I came to ask you."

Jupa took a deep breath, having finally got it out.

He hung his head at the possible futility of this tricky trap for the killer. He did what Keleli said to do. He bit his lip. *What if it doesn't work?*

Just then, a deep voice came up inside the crowd. Alini, the Nokotul elderly shaman, who like Nyma, the Mikokitul, was a seer, knew things of the other world. "The mountain in anger opens its mouth and spits red-hot rock," the shaman said without any introduction. Jupa peered at the faces. The speaker Alini sat next to Kon. Had Kon told Alini anything? But the feeling in the shaman's voice was that he had his own sense of the riddle. Surely he was not the one who killed Naketi.

"Your riddle, short and simple, Jupa. From the mouth of the mountain now flows the Kosomu Stream by us," he said, stiffly raising his arm to point toward the waters burbling past the hamlet in the dark. "The gold stones, of course, remain inside the mouth of the mountain. They have been inside the mouth that feeds our Kosomu, waiting for moons long lost from our heads and the heads of those who came before us. Just waiting for the taking--if one is foolish enough. Yes, all those gold stones. See what happened to this one named Naketi."

All of a sudden, more than murmurs spread through the crowd. People got up. Men stood up. Women too. Children. Bumping, running to their huts for more clothes, warm clothes, ready to hike up the dark mountain, knowing they, too, could grab gold stones, once they got to

the mouth of the mountain.

Jupa spat. *So much for this difficult riddle. The riddle only the killer can guess, only the killer knows which of many paths on the mountain Naketi walked. How would we know the wise, old shaman Alini would answer the riddle as soon as it was uttered?* He spat again.

Now, half the hamlet's denizens had pulled on warmer clothes and were marching alongside the banks of the Kosomu Stream, heading for the mouth of the mountain where riches awaited them. These Nokotuls were not to be denied their share.

Jupa turned away from the sight of the stampede for gold stones, unsure what to do. The killer probably was one of many scampering up the mountain. How would he now know which one? And sleep the night in the Nokotul hamlet? No. He needed to run home, tell Keleli what had gone wrong, terribly wrong.

He had no choice. He found white-haired Hajapo and quickly told him he had to leave. Then he set off in the dark for home.

He left the hamlet, now mostly vacant huts beside the burbling stream and glanced up the path lit by the waxing crescent moon. The cold of the open spaces swept in and chilled his bones.

The path he knew well. Normally the hike would not take long, but this time, the path pitching and rolling about the contours of the mountain seemed especially daunting. He didn't need a fall or any more surprises.

He sighed, as his grass-stuffed *momkos* thudded along the well-packed dirt. What would he tell Keleli? The plan they carefully devised to trap the killer had failed. He said the riddle true to what Keleli wanted: "I climbed to the mouth of the mountain and found gold." Supposed last words of Naketi. Maybe he shouldn't have uttered the riddle with the all-knowing shaman Alini present. If Alini weren't there, the trap might have worked.

What was wrong with how he gave the Nokotuls the riddle that

allowed Alini to guess it correctly, so quickly? He frowned about nervously standing before the Nokotuls, confessing he didn't know who killed his pa, but glanced at the stream burbling past the hamlet. Were those nervous, wayward glances toward Kosomu Stream not lost on Alini? Why did Alini so easily guess the Kosomu pointed back to the mouth of the mountain?

Jupa bit his lip in disgust. He could not get out of his head those gold-crazy Nokotuls. Earlier, he and Keleli laughed at them for wading in the rushing waters, bug-eyed, trying to see gold stones against the sandy bottom. Tonight, however, was different.

By now, someone was surely putting an arm all the way in the maw of the spring and taking a real gold stone in their hand. Then another. With that many Nokotuls swarming to the gushing waters, they must be sure Mother Earth would offer up gold for everybody. Jupa recalled reaching in those cold surging waters. He smiled. Possibly some Nokotuls might come back empty-handed.

But certainly many Nokotuls would return with gold. What difference would it make in their life? The Nokotuls barely had enough to eat each day. But gold, even one stone, could be traded for anything. Jupa knew if he traded his gold for a new warm bearskin, or anything else, it would make him happy--as it would any Nokotul--and the daily struggle of finding enough to eat would be easier.

He stopped, stared at the ground. Though the Nokotuls surely would soon know the joy of gold stones; he had to tell Keleli the best chance to catch the killer had slipped through their fingers.

The killer blended in with all the gold seekers. He looked across the mountain, the distance home mocking him. He had to keep walking. When he saw Keleli again, the wise man might have another plan to catch the killer. But for now, Jupa had to accept the reason for his pa's death--the gold stones--was now in the hands of everyone, and looking like everyone else, with gold stones, was the killer. Finding him was even more hopeless.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ANGER, LEVITY, APATHY

Much later, Jupa made it to the hamlet. At the center of the commons, weak flames sputtered off a dying fire and lit faces of several men gathered there in the dark. The long-haired Wota faced his way. "Jupa, you look tired. Go get sleep."

Jupa nodded at the headman who went back to talking with the others, showing no interest in asking where he had been. His body ached with fatigue from walking and he wanted to sleep, as everyone besides the late-night talkers was doing. He left them talking. What he had to say was for Keleli in the morning, so he went straight to his cave.

Crouching in the unlit space, he moved slowly a few steps, the still air cooling his brow. Across the way, his mom, Sawaja, slept and snored. He collapsed on his bed of furs, just inside the entrance. The pictures in his head would not stop, even though he was exhausted.

He saw white-haired Keleli standing, hard look of disgust on his face, scolding him. He let everyone down, especially his father by not telling the riddle the way it was to be told. Why did he keep looking toward the stream so smart Alini could guess the answer to the riddle? Jupa's pleas were no use: Keleli kept scolding him and all the words tumbled about in Jupa's head, as if from the spring at the mouth of the mountain itself.

This went on and on, Jupa feeling worse and worse, knowing he ruined everything Keleli did to find his pa's killer. What could they do now? His head would not stop. The images of what he did wrong in the Nokotul hamlet kept coming, one after another. Finally, the images got

dimmer and dimmer and he fell asleep and he slept long.

The next morning, Jupa rubbed his eyes awake. Shafts of light leaked through the darkness. The sun was up and bright and though the stillness and darkness of the cave lulled him to more sleep, he needed to get out and find Keleli. He slid his legs off the bed, pulled on *momkos* and went out and found Keleli.

The grizzled elder, at rest on a boulder, walking stick angling out, evidently wanted to talk. "So last night why did you come back? Didn't Hajapo have you stay overnight?"

"I talked to the Nokotuls, told the riddle. Then the worst happened--"

"Yes, you told them your father went to the mouth of the mountain and found gold, what happened then?"

"Alini, you know the shaman there," Jupa paused, as if catching his breath. "He then yelled out the answer, said the mountain mouth was the head of Kosomu Stream and that was where the gold was--"

The walking stick fell out of Keleli's hand and hit the ground.

"Oh, no, did he?"

"Yes," Jupa said, bending down to retrieve and hand back the willow cane. "Everyone jumped up, went to putting on extra clothes and marched up the mountain to get gold. Like ants, one after another. Even women, even children!"

Keleli chuckled. "Those crazy Nokotuls. First they wade in the stream looking for gold and now they fight each other reaching into the gushing spring--"

"But what can we do?"

"Actually, this makes our job easier."

Jupa gaped at the elder's apparent confidence.

"You see, your father was killed for knowing where gold was. Now

every Nokotul knows the secret. So we must go back to Katwa in the forest and ask again whom he protects."

"Why would he talk to us?"

"Simple. He was thrown out of the hamlet for protecting whoever gave him gold. Now that everyone is getting gold, suffering for his silence is even stupider. It's not easy living in the forest with this weather." Keleli smiled broadly.

Later that morning, once they hiked over to the lands of the Nokotuls, they found rufous-haired Katwa in the forest clearing by his lean-to, scuttling about with firewood he always seemed to be gathering. He had worsened since they last saw him. Jupa felt sick in his stomach. Filthy, tangle-haired, bloody scabs on his hands, the outcast reeked and probably had not bathed for a long while.

"Hello," Keleli said, his voice echoing from surrounding trees.

Katwa stopped briefly, then rushed forward, dropping the branches atop a pile he was building. "Why are you here again?" His face screwed up in distaste.

"We came to give you news."

"What news?"

"You see your brother today?" Keleli asked.

"No."

"Well, Kon might not be here today."

Katwa's eyes widened. He took a step closer. "Why?"

"Gold," Keleli said, drawing out the one awe-inspiring syllable.

Katwa's mouth opened, but said nothing.

"Haven't you heard?" he continued, "all those Nokotuls back in the hamlet are looking for gold again."

"They're crazy. They were in Kosomu Stream--" He paused. "Came to nothing. Nothing."

"But you thought they'd find gold--" Jupa said, breaking in.

"No, those people stupidly believed what I made up. Only one person ever knew where to find gold."

Jupa looked puzzled.

"Your dead father," Katwa added.

Jupa gave back a hard stare.

"Well, you might as well know what everyone else knows," Keleli said, eyeing the two who seemed in a standoff.

"Go ahead."

"Last night, Jupa here spoke to all the Nokotuls after their meal--" He turned to Jupa, who in turn glanced at Katwa. "Anyway, he gave them a riddle his father said days before he was killed. The riddle was, I went to the mouth of the mountain and found gold." Keleli paused for effect.

Katwa's face registered nothing.

"And then Alini went ahead," Jupa interjected, "and guessed what the riddle really meant. The gold stones are actually in the mouth of the spring atop the mountain that feeds Kosomu Stream going right past your people."

"And Alini was right," Keleli said.

"How do you know?"

"Simple, we both saw for ourselves gold stones there a few days ago." The elder glanced sideways at smiling Jupa.

"You did?"

"Yes, and now the place is swarming with Nokotuls, every one of them crazed about gold. That gold they can trade for anything they want."

"So they'll be rich, all of them," Katwa said in a weak voice.

"I wanted you to know this. Why do you keep protecting a murderer, living here?" Keleli waved his walking stick at the trees. "Everyone in your hamlet now has the gold the person you protect killed for in the first place."

"I'm not protecting anybody," Katwa said. "I don't know who killed your Naketi. I've nothing to say. Keep your suspicions to yourself--" Katwa looked defiantly at Jupa.

Jupa's heart quickened. How could this repulsive man stand there, knowing who killed his father?

He lunged. Jumped on filthy Katwa. Shoved him backwards into the pile of sticks. Punched the forehead of the grimy face with the left fist. Paused to catch his breath, then the right fist to the ear of the grimy face turning away. Katwa didn't lift his arms to defend himself.

But before he could smash the mouth unwilling to talk, a commanding voice from behind: "Jupa, get up."

Jupa froze with fear. He could not disobey his elder, especially after telling the riddle to the Nokotuls so unskillfully.

"If I knew the name of the killer, I'd never say," Katwa said. "That's why I live out here in the forest."

"But why hide a killer among your own people?" Keleli leaned forward.

"You want to know who I protect?" he asked. "Well, everyone else in the hamlet must, too, see? If you knew this person, you would know it's impossible for him to kill anyone, even an insect." Katwa laughed, now rising to his feet. "Never in my whole life have I seen this person kill so much as an insect."

"That might be so. But this person, he ever have a wooden knife?" Keleli asked.

"Yes, of course, this person might have a wooden knife--or a twig," Katwa said, reaching over to the branch pile to snap one off, his face gone smirky.

"Is this person short?"

"Why, of course, this person is shorter than you, wise man."

"This person a man or a woman?"

"No." He laughed, tossing back his head. "No more to say."

Keleli said they had to leave, and Katwa went back to gathering wood.

They walked for a while, then Keleli broke what Jupa felt was a moody silence. "Did you expect us to get any new words from Katwa jumping on him like that?"

"He wasn't about to give us anything," Jupa said. "He's full of false words, just like what he told his people about gold in the stream."

"Yes, he misleads with words, but hitting him won't make him speak true."

"He hides who killed my pa. My anger is for my pa."

"You're still young." With his walking stick, Keleli knocked stones in the path off to the side, as if distracted by a private amusement. "You're angry, of course. But it does no good to pummel Katwa like that. He would say nothing. You see, I was just trying to make sure he knew we're still looking for the killer. If he knows we won't stop looking, he might say something or do something to give us an opening we so badly need."

"Yes, I know we can't appear to give up." Jupa nodded, "but we're no closer to finding out who it is and that makes me impatient."

"Well, if you jump and beat Katwa, what do we get if your anger takes over your body and you strangle him to death?" Keleli spit. "If you killed him, how does that avenge your father, if Katwa was not the killer?"

"You're right. My anger grows too strong at times."

"As I said, you're young. But you must learn how to keep your

anger inside or one day it'll destroy you."

"So what do we do now? The path goes nowhere we have not been. What is left to find out?" Jupa tossed out these words in disgust, even if Keleli didn't want to hear them.

"I can see you're discouraged. But don't worry, something will turn up. In the meantime, let's head over to the Nokotuls, as long as we're close by."

"You mean go there now?" Jupa stopped, not sure what Keleli wanted with an unplanned visit.

"Yes, it's a good idea to see how the Nokotuls are doing. They've had all night and much of the day to get rich finding gold stones. Let's see what they make of it."

The hike to the Nokotul hamlet was only a matter of going right on the path where it forked just outside the woods. Soon, Keleli and Jupa found themselves again in the cluster of conical huts, built from slabs of cedar bark tied with grape vines. Laughter and yelling spilled out, wherever Jupa turned. The earlier visits to the hamlet, full of quiet, somber daily routines contrasted with what they saw now. It must have all changed the night before.

Keleli, who had not see the upheaval Jupa witnessed, stared in disbelief. "What do these people want? They quit everything. Do they now chew hard gold pebbles?" He laughed and said they needed to ask the Nokotul leader Hajapo why his people were such fools. They sought him out.

Fortunately, Hajapo was not one of those racing back and forth up the mountain. They found him on a boulder, hunched over and sipping acorn shell tea, ready to dispense wise decisions. He had no audience, of course--everyone was busy, bringing home treasure.

"They're all rich now," Hajapo, with the stringy white hair, said. "Thanks to Jupa here, who pointed them toward the gold stones, they're taking out all the wealth they can reach in the spring, or so they tell

me." Hajapo's face had an odd, detached joy. He might be too old to be up there, scrambling for gold stones, but if other Nokotuls came home happy, he wasn't above sharing good feelings.

"So your people's lives will be easier now?" Keleli asked.

"For a while, yes. Of that I'm sure. Temali, the trader, came by earlier this morning. I don't know how he learned so quickly we had gold stones--" Hajapo's eyes twinkled.

"Ah, Temali, the man smells gold to take in trade from a day's walk away." Keleli slapped his thigh in recognition of the plucky, resourceful trader.

Jupa knew the gold would probably be traded many times after Temali took it. But in any case the gold would eventually reach the hands of southern peoples, especially the Wotoki who most treasured gold. They would melt the gold with fire into small disks they wore as amulets about their necks. Supposedly a gold amulet insured a good death and safe passage to the afterlife. So strongly did the Wotoki believe in their gold amulets, they would seemingly trade anything for gold and Jupa knew that made trader Temali happy.

"Yes, this is true, he was here before the sun set on the first gold stones my people brought back from up there--" Hajapo set down his tea cup, slowly raising his hand as a salutation to the greatest gift giver he had seen in his lifetime: the special place high on the mountain, where the trees stopped growing, and where his people kept trudging back and forth like busy ants.

"With Temali about, your people might let the gold slip away as easily as it came into their hands." Keleli chuckled, knowing stories of gold coming and going quickly among other peoples.

"Gold is not like the harvest of acorns," Hajapo said. "The acorns we share among all Nokotuls. Gold we cannot easily divide, so everyone wants it for themselves."

"So what will they do with the gold?" Keleli asked.

Jupa's brow furrowed. With all the gold they were taking from the spring, the Nokotuls could use it for anything Temali had. He rubbed his right temple. *Why does Keleli ask such a question? Gold can be exchanged for anything. Gold is always best to trade.*

"Oh, after talking with Temali, many of those with new gold have already decided they will share with everyone after all--" Hajapo said with a chuckle.

"How is that?" Keleli asked.

"They gave Temali orders for the rice brew of happiness the Petaluma make to the west of us. Soon, they will bring so much rice brew here, it will flow on everyone's lips like water. And so the riches of this gold shall be shared."

Keleli gave Jupa a dubious glance. "How will they get it here?"

"Easy. For the right amount of gold stones, Temali has people carrying bottles of rice brew on their backs. It's two days walking. But those people want the gold."

"So the Nokotuls take gold out of that gushing spring up there, and before the full moon arrives--" He paused. "They will have pissed it all away, back into the stream here. From gold stones for silver water to gold water for fishes." Keleli chuckled.

Hajapo's face scowled. He wasn't amused. "Maybe so, maybe so. But for a long time, they will recall and say this was so much better than the drudgery of finding food, cooking food, and gathering firewood." He picked up his cup of tea and sipped the last of it.

Jupa had to keep from shaking his head at the foolishness of gold being given away and for what? But looking up and down the cluster of cedar bark huts, seeing it as ready for a party soon, all possible because Naketi's secret gold in the mountain's mouth was every Nokotul's for the taking, seemed the most unlikely way for things to turn out. None of this joyful craziness, obviously, could lead to Naketi's killer. Jupa bit his lip, realizing that. But if death led to an orgy of rice brew, then Jupa

smiled, his pa might be having one small laugh from his grave.

Jupa noticed Keleli glancing away from Hajapo, toward the center of the hamlet, his eyes evidently tracking the other Nokotuls moving about. "Good to talk, but now we'll be on our way," Keleli said. "I don't expect anything like this will happen in our hamlet for some time." Hajapo tugged at his wispy beard and smiled.

"Let's just walk around some more," the elder told his young companion. Jupa was only too happy to do so. The Nokotuls had changed so completely overnight, the sight was something he wanted to take in completely. "These Nokotuls will never again be this wealthy," Keleli said, pausing on his walking stick, nodding his head at the commotion before them. "Once the gold is taken from that spring, no more will be found for many, many lifetimes."

They resumed walking slowly, as if nothing should escape their attention. Life in the hamlet seemed familiar, yet everything ripe with new quickness. People went about doing many routine things anyone in a hamlet does, but their life seemed curiously easier. The women, for example, were still hauling water and preparing food, but they did so seemingly with a song at their lips, a dance in their step. Jupa didn't understand how this would happen. How could discovering an untarnishable metal, whose gift was only to capture the light of the sun--not something they could eat--bring such happiness to everyday life?

For their part, the men hurried back and forth from the mountain spring, not much more than a brisk walk that only began to tire their legs. But when they, too, came into the hamlet, more often than not, Jupa observed, they were whistling and gaily rushing about as they took their new found wealth and stashed it away in their huts. Yes, they were like so many ants bringing the food of gold back to the mound of dirt where they lived.

Jupa and Keleli kept taking it all in, image after image of close observation and oddly felt neither the need nor compulsion to talk to

anyone. From Hajapo, they learned what happened, what would happen. But from the working women, the gold-grabbing men, they got all the words, shared stories, and welcome feelings rolled into the simple act of a smile flung their way out of sheer joy.

In the proper center of hamlet activity, the cooking area, the women prepared the evening's porridge. More smiles. After all the times of hard survival, Jupa guessed the people knew it could not last, but would recall these days in a long-lived Nokotul story of when the mountain gave them the gift of gold stones.

No fire blazed for it was too early to cook. Women at their mortar and pestles worked away, pounding dried acorns into flour for later soaking to leach out bitterness. All had joy in their faces, none of the grimness Jupa knew so well from watching his ma, Sawaja, and other Miwokitul women when they stood by the face-sweating heat of their cooking fire.

Past the commons cooking area, toward a scattering of huts, they strolled. Stopping in front of one hut, where on the ground, slumped against a boulder, the only man, apparently, who was not at the mountain spring plunging for gold, idly nudged a brown cockroach on the ground with a river mussel shell. A small man with dark, stringy hair, he was a sorry figure for fixed to his right forearm was a leather sling, cradling his lame limb against his chest by means of several straps that went up and around his neck.

The few times he was in the Nokotul hamlet, Jupa quickly learned this was the cripple Wyla. He did everything one-handed: Though his right arm was lame, his left was just fine. Jupa had no idea how Wyla lost use of one arm. He saw Wyla as a person for pity.

But Keleli, walking stick planted in the dirt, stared down at the small cripple. Finally, Wyla relented, abandoning the play with the cockroach, looking up to acknowledge the senior Miwokitul's presence.

"So will you join the rice brew party you Nokotuls will have soon?" the elder asked.

Wyla scowled, evidently rejecting the idea he had anything to celebrate. "Why? I'm not getting my fair share."

"You only have to go to the gusher. You still can go get your share."

"With this?" Wyla said, pushing his lame right arm in the sling up with his left hand. "The others don't respect I have a bad arm. I'm used to their shoving me aside. I get leftovers, if anything."

Jupa studied Wyla intently, seeing the point he made about having a bad arm. Even if he knew where the gold was, as everyone else did, he was not going to get his share, not if he had to compete with the others.

Jupa had no words of consolation for Wyla and really wanted to leave and get back on the journey home. But Keleli wasn't ready to leave. As if he failed to understand something about the cripple. "Tell me, Wyla, if you had all the gold stones for yourself, what would you do?"

"You ask such a question I know because you don't know what it feels like to have a lame arm," he said, shrugging his right shoulder as if to emphasize the arm in the sling was as useless as a broken tree limb. Good for nothing. Just weight to carry around. Jupa heard Keleli's question as hard-hearted for the cripple seated on the ground. Wyla appeared to be saying all the gold in the world wouldn't make his lame arm good, so why the question?

Keleli cleared his throat. "No, I certainly can't know what it's like not to have two good arms, as I do, as Jupa does--" He glanced at his young companion. "Still I must sympathize. So my question--What would you do with all the gold stones the Nokotuls find?--if they were yours."

Wyla cast his head down and toyed with the mussel shell again. "My life would be less difficult," he said softly.

"But you've accepted your lot in life--"

"How can I accept this?" He swiveled the right shoulder of his

lame arm forward. "I can't hunt deer. I can't prepare food. I do nothing more than eat with my left hand and a few small things to keep me busy, like paint figures."

"But for this once." Keleli glanced again at Jupa. "We are two Miwokituls passing through your hamlet and what you say won't reach the ears of anyone else. If you had the gold, what could you do?" Keleli said this with a hint of generosity only a respected elder can convey, as if he could personally intervene with Hajapo, headman of the Nokotuls, and make sure Wyla got a reasonable share of whatever gold was brought back. At least that was what Jupa sensed Keleli's question was trying to imply.

Wyla looked up, as if Keleli's questions had interest in his plight. "I'd stop begging and get respect."

"You'd stop having to accept what others don't want," Keleli said.

"With gold, I could buy the best meat, have the best hut--everything."

Keleli nodded his head in agreement.

"Perhaps if you join in the rice brew drinking, a happy, drunk fellow will slip you some of his gold stones because he understands your difficult life here," Keleli said, trying to sound upbeat.

"I doubt that."

After a few more soft parting words from Keleli, they left Wyla slumped against the boulder.

They took the path straightaway for home, satisfied they had seen for themselves the havoc wreaked on the Nokotuls with the discovery of gold.

When they were well out of earshot of any Nokotuls, Keleli stopped, planting his walking stick on the ground, and muttered, "I'm not sure about Wyla."

"How so?" Jupa's eyes widened beneath the dark forelocks on his

brow.

"Not sure. He wants more, but won't try."

"Oh." Jupa shrugged.

That, Jupa decided, was something to mull over later. For now, he quickly fell in step with the elder as they resumed walking.

CHAPTER TWELVE:
DREAM KILLER, BREW CARRIAGE, SPILLED SECRET

The next day, Jupa found Keleli seated at his favorite boulder, a cup of tea in hand. Although he noticed Jupa, he really seemed to be concentrating on some image or story in his head.

"I had an unusual dream, Jupa," he said, glancing sideways as if he might still lay asleep in the hold of the dream.

"I forget my dreams quickly." Jupa dropped down beside the elder, his feet sliding out on the chalky soil.

"I won't forget this dream. Perhaps--" He paused, his eyes narrowing, his voice rich with caution. "Perhaps, never."

"Oh, this must be--the dream that frightens you awake!"

"Yes, the dream gripped my body strongly. But I'm more interested in what came back to my eyes in the dream."

"Oh, what?"

"Wyla. The Nokotul cripple we talked to yesterday. That's who I saw in the dream."

"Yes, you asked him many questions."

"That's true. But in the dream, I realized yesterday he didn't once stand. Just slumped against that boulder."

Jupa nodded, but he saw nothing unusual about a man, arm in sling, not wanting to get to his feet.

"Even seeing him slumped down in my dream, I knew he was

short. You agree?"

Jupa closed his eyes, the picture in his head showing a seated figure holding up his free arm, his other, useless arm clasped to his chest. "Yes, the left arm he raised, I see now if his other arm were the same length, he must be short."

"Very good," Keleli said, nodding in agreement. "You, too, have heard the span of a man's arms from fingertips to fingertips is his height."

"Pa told me that." Jupa's brow furrowed. "Wyla's definitely short."

"Well, Wyla was the short man in my dream with bitter words." Keleli shook his head, as if the pictures from his sleep were too strong. "I knew yesterday Wyla wanted gold, but only my dream gave me his anger."

"But even Wyla said, all the gold stones wouldn't replace his useless arm, didn't he?"

"He said that. He also said he didn't want to beg."

"You guess Wyla might lie?" Jupa asked.

"He's short, isn't he?" The elder took a last sip of tea from his cup.

Jupa's eyes widened.

"It would be so unlikely for a one-armed man to murder--" Keleli set the empty cup down on the boulder. "But it could've happened."

Jupa gasped. *A pitiful man like Wyla killed my pa?* He summoned a picture in his head: A one-armed man, smaller and shorter than his father fatally plunges a wooden knife into the heart--no second chance. Jupa shook his head not believing it possible. "Well, who shot the arrow at you?" Jupa studied Keleli's eyes for a reaction.

"That's a good point. The person who shot me most likely murdered your father. One hand can hold a wooden knife, but a bow and arrow?" He tugged at his beard as if his suspicion of Wyla might lead nowhere.

Jupa raised his head, saying nothing, as if Keleli had conceded his point.

"But he *is* short," Jupa said, his voice rising.

"Yes, from here the steps we take are difficult, but we must look at Wyla more. I don't know what's next. I need to be about walking, taking in this fresh air, so I can better recall the signs of that troubling dream." Keleli seemed ready to set down his cup and walk away.

With that, Jupa left the elder, content to go practice archery. No one was out mule-deer hunting. The day before, Mojku and Lewi brought home a big deer and so the need to hunt again could wait.

Jupa went to the meadow below the caves, where the bunch grass grew tall. He took a deep breath. What Keleli told him about Wyla gave him a lot to ponder. But for now, he only wanted to practice arrow shooting. So he went to the lone oak where he had left the stuffed Mule Deer With No Legs and set it up, off to one side, as a target. He then walked back about fifty paces, pulled an arrow across the bow and began shooting.

The next day, a commotion overtook the hamlet when the stout trader Temali arrived, surrounded by a party of a dozen men--all taller than he--carrying bottles of rice brew, the twined, waterproof bottles evidently being fashioned and traded from the Chumash of the South Country. The men walked in groups of four, each shouldering the end of one of the two branches, between which large hide slings were suspended, bearing the upright, narrow-necked bottles of rice brew. At least eight, or more, on each sling. Jupa gaped in disbelief at all these bottles of rice brew--a drink he had yet to try--though he knew the rice brew was going elsewhere.

Headman Wota, his long dark hair spilling about his shoulders, immediately walked up to the trader.

"We're on our way south," Temali announced to the arms-crossed Wota who stood before him. "We wanted to trouble you for some water. Our load is heavy and the men sweat so freely. Even in this cool

weather, we ran out of water to drink many look-ahead's back."

"Look-ahead's?" Wota appeared confused and glanced at Jupa, who already knew what a look-ahead was.

The trader Temali laughed. The hearty laugh of a successful trader, whose livelihood flourished because he liked talking to everyone, visiting with peoples everywhere. "You know, you're out walking a path and you look up ahead to see how far you have to go. Then when you get to that place, a tree, whatever it might be, you've walked one look-ahead." He held up one finger.

"Well, that's good to know. So, Temali, you're always welcome to our water," Wota said, for all Miwokituls welcomed the plucky trader as their contact with other peoples, bringing news from his travels.

Temali motioned his men, who had rested their loads, to the water cistern to fill their drinking skins. "Thanks," he said.

Other Miwokituls, Keleli, Lewi, a few women, several children approached the trader, probably wondering why he didn't appear to have anything else for trade. The Miwokituls never had him bring such rice brew from the Petaluma peoples before, so that alone got their curiosity aroused.

"Have you ever sold this much rice brew?" Keleli asked.

"No, never, might never again. But those Nokotuls, they have the gold for now." He chuckled as only one who trades the silver water of happiness for gold stones can.

"I'd watch my back, you toting all that gold," the elder said.

Temali chuckled again. "These men with me are for more than carrying weight--they're all great fighters."

The rice-brew bearers were tall and husky. Jupa could picture them holding an attacking cougar at bay.

"Say, Temali," Lewi said. "Leave a bottle here. Those Nokotuls will never know the difference--they'll be so drunk." He laughed,

holding out a hand, as if ready to take one.

"No, Lewi, the Nokotuls, they count the bottles before they start drinking, not afterwards." The trader grinned as if restraining a chuckle. "I short them and my name as a trader is worthless. No, not even for more gold stones will I leave one of those bottles here. Perhaps, you'd like to give me an order?"

Lewi shuffled on his feet. Then his flat, round face went into the biggest of apologetic smiles. "Oh, when I see you again, if I get my gold stones, I'll give you an order."

"Soon, I hope--for both of us," Temali said, chuckling softly.

After filling the skins, stout Temali and his taller compatriots took turns going up to the water cistern, dipping the cup into the water and drinking long swallows. Jupa could see the bottle bearers, red in the face, rivulets of sweat on their foreheads, were grateful for the rest and the water.

But Temali had business to do. He had gold stones to pick up, so once the last man took his fill of water, they were off, again marching down the path toward the Nokotul hamlet, the three hide slings piled with rice brew bottles, suspended on the shoulders of each of the three foursomes, their sandals kicking up dirt puffs as they disappeared into the distance.

The sight of all that rice brew being taken down the path spilled forth pictures in Jupa's head. It would lead to one of the biggest parties ever in the land of the Nokotuls or the Miwokituls, for that matter. All of the Nokotuls would be drinking soon after Temali arrived in the hamlet and set the bottles out to be counted and probably poured into a large cistern for endless dipping and drinking. They would, of course, drink away all their gold stones as if there was no tomorrow. But before they fell asleep, Jupa pictured all of them yelling, shouting, cursing, and laughing. The drink of silver happiness--he understood--was like that.

Jupa bit his lower lip. He couldn't resist the idea of drunk Nokotuls. He took a deep, contemplative breath. If he and Keleli were

among them, wouldn't they find out what Nokotuls really knew about his pa's murder?

Who was covering up? Was Kon keeping something secret about Wyla? Or was it only Katwa acting secretive? Would Wyla get as drunk as everyone else, even without gold stones to pay for rice brew? Wasn't that part of taking care of Wyla--he shared, even if he didn't contribute?

Jupa's legs tensed, as if he were ready to walk over to Keleli. But the elder was busy talking with the arrowsmith Pajpuli. Anyway, Jupa already knew what the elder would say: *By the time we get there, they'll surely be drunk. If we're unexpected guests, invading their party, they'll also be drunkenly unpredictable. Possibly violent if we ask questions about Naketi's death. Some other day, but not the day of their party.*

His elder knew with wisdom how people would act, but-- Jupa kicked the ground with his sandals, again biting his lower lip. When the rice brew flowed freely, when the tongues moved freely too, they would tell all.

Jupa shrugged: He had to stop his head from picturing all those Nokotuls with loose lips drinking the silver water of happiness. Instead, he strolled over to his ma, Sawaja, to talk about the hide from the mule deer he had killed earlier. They both needed new *momkos*.

He didn't talk with Sawaja long. She was filling the water cistern, walking back and forth to the stream with other women. Jupa accepted what she said: The hide needed a few months of drying. She said with the meat from his second kill gone too, he would want the rest of his kill put to use too.

He smiled, then turned and walked back toward Keleli and Pajpuli.

Up scampered Pajpuli's puppy, Cuku, with a dead rabbit in his jaws, whose glassed-over lapine eyes must have last known nothing but a moment of terror. The wolf puppy stood right before Pajpuli, who reached over to pat his head. Cuku accepted the touch of approval, tossing his head extravagantly, his jaws releasing the rabbit's neck, the small carcass falling before Pajpuli's feet. Jupa nodded for Cuku was an

enthusiastic provider of meat.

"He does this almost every day, then goes about eating all of it, when I don't join in." Pajpuli laughed at the wolf puppy, who was losing no time at the feast.

Jupa knew one day Cuku would make a great hunting dog.

A few days passed.

Jupa looked twice, but who was trudging up the path from the south, but Hajapo, the Nokotul headman, taking labored steps with his walking stick, accompanied by the trusted advisor, shaman Alini. The headman Wota was not around to greet them. Jupa rushed to get Keleli. Surely, the two white-haired Nokotuls would want instead to talk with the Miwokitul elder.

Keleli seemed startled the stoop-shouldered and seemingly fragile Hajapo had come so far. "Why he hasn't been here in more than six moons, what a surprise!" he said, walking out past women working by the fire, preparing dinner, to where Hajapo and the shorter Alini waited. Jupa was but a few steps back.

Framed by his stringy white hair, Hajapo's face was drawn, as if containing great sorrow. "I come in sadness," Hajapo said, his words both soft and slow. "One of our men, Kon, was killed after the party a few days ago--" Jupa stared in disbelief, hearing the name of the brother he and Keleli had questioned so closely.

"How did this happen?" Keleli said..

"We're not sure, but Kon was asleep in his hut, his small son and wife nearby. Someone came in, it appears, and put a leather strap about his neck and choked him to death."

Jupa's eyes widened and he gasped. *What a horrible way to die.*

Asleep, drunk from celebrating. What coward would do that?

"We have seen no one come by here who might do that. Only the trader Temali and his men came through days ago. As you know, they were on their way to drop off the bottles of rice brew for your celebration." Keleli leaned on his walking stick.

"We know you've sought out the signs for why your Naketi was murdered. We know you look hard for them. I want you to also look at Kon's body before we bury him. You might see something to help us discover who murdered him."

"Of course, I'm happy to help," Keleli said. "Is the body where you found it?"

"Yes, we moved nothing. We wanted you to see it first."

"Let me get my water skin." He looked back at Jupa, who still seemed at a loss for words. Another death seemed to make their search even more difficult. "My helper and I can leave at once."

The four--Keleli, Hajapo, Alini, and Jupa--got to the Nokotul hamlet before the sun had moved far in the afternoon sky. What they found were confused, sorrowful Nokotuls, some wailing keenly, others mute with incomprehension. More than a dozen stood by Kon's hut, having an impromptu wake--one person at a time would go inside to see and touch what Jupa guessed was now no more than a lifeless body.

When the four walked up, people moved aside. Hajapo motioned for Keleli to enter. Jupa glanced at the shaman Alini, who evidently was going to stay outside the small hut, while the two elders entered. A deer-hide flap hung over the opening to the cedar-bark hut. Jupa wondered what Keleli was discovering inside.

Keleli looked about the tight quarters. He felt constrained in a room so much smaller than his own cave.

In the dim light, Keleli got to his knees to examine Kon's corpse. To look closely at the neck upon which Kon's long, dark hair fell in disarray. Meditatively, he traced his fingers at the bruised skin where

the leather strap choked.

"This is easy. See how he was killed? The stick there," Keleli said, picking up the murderer's implement lying beside the victim. "If you twist this inside the knotted strap, the tightening on the neck is far more than one can do with bare hands."

"How did the murderer get the leather strap about his neck?" Hajapo, wispy white hair askew about his head, asked.

"Ah, that is tricky. He slipped the strap under Kon's neck as he slept, he pulled the loose end through the slip knot he tied earlier. Then he tied a knot and even though the strap loop was loose, the stick tightened everything up with only a few fast turns."

"Kon didn't have a chance," Hajapo said. He whistled a keen note of loss.

"No, Kon couldn't awake, couldn't reach up his hands, and free himself from the choking strap. He died quickly. See the blue face? His heart quit. His blood lost its redness."

Keleli glanced away from Kon's face, noted Hajapo's sad, dark eyes studying him.

"I'm done here and sorry to say I see no more signs," he said, his left palm resting on the lifeless corpse of Kon. "We must keep this strap and stick. They might be needed if anything later turns up."

Keleli got back to his feet, took up his willow cane, and stooping, prepared to step outside the low hut. Hajapo followed.

The two elders came out of Kon's hut and Jupa saw that Keleli's face was drawn and his lips sealed, as if not ready to say anything. The two elders stood facing the others, seemingly not able to go anywhere too.

Finally, standing next to Jupa, the shaman Alini spoke: "So the body's ready for the funeral pyre?"

"I don't see why not," Keleli said, looking over at Hajapo for the

assurance they agreed.

"Yes, Alini takes care of that now. Whatever we can do to help, Keleli, let me know," Hajapo said. "I want your help finding this killer. The murderer might be a Nokotul, so it's best if we have an outsider looking around, someone with experience and wisdom. Of course, if a Nokotul is guilty, I must decide punishment."

"Tomorrow, we start talking with people here in the hamlet," Keleli said in a forceful voice, before turning to talk to Jupa alone.

Keleli handed Jupa the leather strap and stick. "Keep these, we have much to do tomorrow. We must talk to anyone who was near Kon the night they drank rice brew. We need to find any crosswords Kon might have said to cause someone to want to kill him."

Jupa's eyes widened. "He must be a Nokotul?"

"Who else could it be?" The elder stamped his walking stick in the dirt.

"Kon might have enemies from elsewhere--" Jupa frowned. *After all, nothing suggests pa was murdered by a Miwokitul, one of his own people--*

"Yes, but who sneaks about to strangle you in your sleep if not someone who lives close by?"

That night, Jupa fell asleep with difficulty. He and Keleli had the roof of a guest hut over their heads. But the feeling a killer was sleeping nearby made Jupa uneasy, even more so than when he decided not to stay over after telling the Nokotuls his pa's riddle.

Next morning, Keleli and Jupa arose with the birds. Even with the light of dawn, though, they were not the first up. Hairy-backed Kulutu with a tattered fur-pelt apron stood over by the main fire, boiling water for some acorn shell tea. Keleli and Jupa came up behind him.

"Hajapo asked me to talk with anyone around Kon the night he was killed," Keleli said. Jupa stared at Kulutu. Besides a hairy back, Kulutu had dark locks falling to his shoulders and thick body hair--his chest,

too--blending perfectly with his fur apron. Heavy eyebrows hooded a pair of beady eyes. Jupa saw Kulutu as the hairiest man ever and tried to put that distraction aside from the words Kulutu was about to say.

"I sat and drank with Kon, yes, I did so the last night he was alive. Everyone was having a good time drinking rice brew--"

"You must've been happy. What did you talk about?" Keleli said.

"Oh, many things, but as we all said, it was time for silver water happiness." He paused. "At first, we talked about how we found the gold stones, once Jupa gave us the riddle where to look--"

Jupa's throat tightened.

"Once Alini solved it," Kulutu added.

"Did anything else stand out?" The elder tilted his head to one side, as if wanting more.

Kulutu momentarily shut his eyes, as if trying hard to bring back the story of the joyful night. "No, we had good feelings drinking rice brew. I see that well. Oh, we then drank without stopping. I'm sorry the happiness led to Kon's death, if that's what happened."

Keleli asked several more questions, trying to draw from Kulutu something in the way of crosswords that might have led to violence later. But for Kulutu, it was simply the glow in the night of good, pleasant feelings and nothing specific anybody said. Keleli evidently decided Kulutu had forgotten most everything said that night.

Others were out of their huts before long, getting ready for the day, and Keleli and Jupa went over to talk with Sesi, a tall, stringy fellow with thin lips, who was getting ready to hunt mule deer, arrow quiver on his back and bow in hand.

"So you were with Kon the night you all had rice brew. What do you remember?" Keleli said.

"Oh, we had not drunk rice brew like that in so many moons to count. It was a good time."

"And do you recall anything, anything Kon said?"

"No, just the good feelings, plenty of rice brew. We laughed, then eventually I fell asleep." Sesi gave Keleli and Jupa a quizzical look, as if they should understand one drinks rice brew with abandon and especially to forget.

Keleli turned his walking stick in the dirt. "But before you fell asleep, did you notice, say, who sat next to Kon?"

"No, I don't know who sat where, just everyone there had a good time--"

Jupa saw Keleli's gaze sharpen. "Everyone who was there? Was any Nokotul man not there?"

"I don't know. We were too busy gulping down the rice brew--" Sesi looked at them with empty eyes, as if he had nothing more to say.

The rest of the talk with Sesi went nowhere.

Keleli thanked Sesi and they soon found Luk, a rotund, cheery-faced fellow, willing to talk. He held in his hand a flint saw of the type used for cutting tree limbs. After explaining why they were asking about Kon on Hajapo's behalf, Keleli got right to the big question: "You drank rice brew with Kon the last night he was alive. Was there anything about the talk that you easily recall?"

Luk slowly rubbed his bearded face. "Yes, we all said many wild things. All my fingers and then again--that's how many of us were sitting about the fire, keeping warm, everyone of us drinking rice brew freely."

"Kon then seemed in good spirits?"

"Oh, yes, very much so. He was most talkative."

"What did he talk about?"

"Oh, this and that. The gold stones and how we could trade for bear skins--anything we needed. But, of course, we didn't do that. We didn't care."

"Why not?"

"It was not like every day. No, the circle of what we must do was broken. We drank as much as we wanted."

"But did Kon say anything while you were drinking?"

"Yes, he did say something odd. Something which made us all look around."

Jupa's eyes went wide. "Which was?" Keleli stepped closer.

"He said the cripple Wyla was not as helpless as he wanted everyone to see him. You know Wyla? He has the lame arm--"

Keleli nodded.

"So why did Kon mention this?" The elder dropped his head, as if waiting on the answer.

"Well, someone asked why Wyla wasn't drinking the rice brew. Why was he off in his hut? Someone said Wyla wanted gold for himself. Then Kon said the cripple should go to the gusher and get his share. Yes, that was when Kon said Wyla wasn't as helpless as he wanted the rest of us to believe." Luk chuckled, then abruptly stopped, Jupa sensing Luk knew well the prohibition against laughing at the dead.

"Really?"

"Yes, it was so odd to hear that--" Luk said in an unsure voice. "All my life I knew Wyla as a hopeless cripple."

"You never once saw Wyla use that arm in the sling?"

"Never. But that night Kon said Katwa once caught Wyla using his lame arm. Many moons ago. The cripple made him promise not to tell anyone. He said if he used it much, it always went lame again. Kon said that's why Katwa kept quiet. I remember Kon put his hand over his mouth after he said that."

"Could Wyla have heard what Kon said?"

"Why not, we were loud, yelling our heads off, laughing and Wyla's hut is there, not far from the fire," Luk said, pointing back to a hut. Jupa looked toward the hut he knew from the earlier visit.

Keleli thanked Luk then turned to Jupa.

"We need to go there now."

They quickly walked over to Wyla's hut.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
BLUE LIPS, BROTHERLY FATE, FLOATING SNAIL

No one was inside.

That they knew as soon as Jupa lifted the hide flap covering the hut entrance. Keleli stooped, entered, and looked for signs Wyla had been there recently.

He came back out, brow furrowed, and said nothing.

"Possibly Wyla, like the other men, left early," Jupa said, guessing even the cripple had things to do that might take him outside the hamlet during the day. He stepped back and let Keleli walk by. Then Jupa reached over to pull the hide flap up again and look in, but stopped. The elder's voice had turned somber.

"I'm afraid of what he might've done." Keleli's brow was still furrowed, his fingers tugged at his beard. "We must see Katwa immediately."

"Katwa--" The mention of the name brought back into Jupa's head the picture of the sorry, bedraggled face he pummeled with his fists. "Katwa doesn't want to talk with us again, ever."

"Then he should refuse us while he can," the elder said, his words spilling forth with urgency.

Jupa's back went fitfully tight and he squinted at Keleli, who had started walking away. He caught up, but couldn't ask questions, for they

walked quickly, Keleli determinedly flung his walking stick forward and set a brisk pace.

Soon, they were in the forest, hurrying down a path that seemed even darker than the last time they sought out Katwa. Moreover, the sky was overcast, and no sunlight seeped below the forest canopy. Such dim light let Jupa see the path but little else.

The clearing with Katwa's lean-to came into view. Silence. No shuffling noises from the outcast feeding a fire with wood. Jupa's eyes widened.

A rufous-haired figure slumped before the ashes in the fire ring.

"This is what I feared," Keleli said, following Jupa, who rushed to Katwa. Jupa knelt and pulled Katwa's body back. A bowl of partly eaten porridge fell from his rigid hands.

Jupa gulped, but his throat felt dry. He put his ear on Katwa's chest. No heart beat *ga-lump, ga-lump*. Jupa took the wrist. No blood pulsed beneath his thumb.

Katwa's face, dirty with grime, reddish hair tangled with knots, was even more sorrier in death. "See the lips, they're blue," Keleli said, putting aside his walking stick and kneeling. "That porridge might have poison."

"But Kon didn't bring Katwa this food--he's dead," Jupa said, wondering who had brought Katwa the porridge.

"We could go back, we could ask Hajapo if he knows." Keleli pursed his lips and blew. "But most likely he doesn't."

Jupa could see in Keleli's face frustration as they looked about Katwa's lean-to for any sign of a struggle. There was none and why would he struggle when offered food, his stomach sure to be growling with hunger?

"All we have are these," Keleli said, pointing to the ash-laden soil about the fire pit where small footprints were visible. "Those feet are not Katwa's. His feet are large. Here, let's take the length."

Keleli knelt beside the footprint, taking a small twig, neatly laying it out in the dirt and then snapping off one end. He held up the twig. "Good, see, smaller than Katwa's foot, smaller than my foot, smaller than your foot. Could be a woman's foot, but I'd like to see how it compares with the foot of Wyla."

"How do you know the porridge is poisoned?" Jupa asked, picking the bowl off the ground, cradling it carefully by its sides.

"I don't. But blue lips suggest sudden death. He shouldn't have died quickly. He hasn't lived long enough."

"So what do we do with the body?"

"Oh, that's for Hajapo, as Nokotul headman, to decide."

"Well, Katwa might be allowed back in his hamlet now," Jupa said.

"That's true. He'll be cremated like all Nokotuls. But we must try and find Wyla. I want to see if his feet are small."

Jupa let Katwa's body slump forward again. The Nokotuls would need at least two strong men to carry the corpse back to the hamlet, but best would be four carrying the body on a hide suspended between long poles.

Leaving the forest seemed even quicker. Jupa and Keleli walked briskly in silence: They were intent on telling Hajapo the bad news.

Soon, they arrived at the Nokotul hamlet. Many men were away, hunting, gathering wood, digging roots, but stoop-shouldered Hajapo sat in front of his hut, fixing a pair of *momkos*, one of which had evidently broken a strap.

"We have bad news for you," Keleli said, his voice gone soft.

Hajapo pulled his shoulders up, putting the *momko* on his knee. "You do? What is it?"

"Katwa, Kon's brother, the banished one, just now we found him dead. Found him slumped over, no life in him, before the fire ring in the forest clearing where he lives."

"No, that can't be--" The shock in Hajapo's face was as obvious as if he were being chased by a blood-thirsty bear.

"I'm sorry to tell you this." Keleli reached out and put his hand on the headman's shoulder.

Hajapo lowered his gaze. "Alini, our shaman," he said softly, "this evening was to oversee the cremation of his brother Kon on the funeral pyre."

"Oh, we couldn't believe both brothers murdered." Keleli sighed. "We must now stop whoever does this."

"Yes, I must help, but first, please tell me what you saw." Hajapo lifted his head and appeared to regain his composure.

Keleli turned back to Jupa. "Tell him what we saw. You actually discovered Katwa dead."

Jupa cleared his throat. He had to choose his words with care. "I went with Keleli and in the forest clearing we saw the lean-to of Katwa," he said.

"We looked around. We didn't see him walking about gathering firewood as before. So we went closer, walked over to the fire ring and I saw him. He was hunched over like this--" Jupa folded his arms across and bent forward. "In front of the fire, which was still smoking. I stepped quietly, hoping he'd do something, like jerk upwards out of a dream--something like that I hoped for--but I got very close, I could see he was, he wasn't sleeping at all."

Jupa took the back of his hand to his face to wipe a tear rolling down his cheek. The image of Katwa slumped forward, stiff hands clutching the bowl of porridge, would not leave his head.

Keleli glanced back. Jupa was having trouble finishing.

"So Jupa knelt beside Katwa," the elder continued, "and pulled him up and the bowl of porridge he'd been clutching fell from his hands. His lips, they were blue--he must've died suddenly." Keleli tugged his wispy beard. "I'm fairly sure he ate poison in that porridge. Not that we

know yet, but Katwa was young and not likely to die from natural causes."

"Keleli checked for any wounds," Jupa added. "No blood, nothing. Just the blue lips. And he was as stiff as wood in my arms." Jupa again wiped a tear from his cheek.

"First Kon, now Katwa." Hajapo shook his head in disbelief. "Do you have any idea who might've done this? Who might've killed both brothers?" Hajapo studied Keleli carefully for a reaction.

"With these murders, there were no witnesses, so finding the killer is hard." Keleli said this, as if--Jupa sensed to his horror--the killer could get away with it. "But for now, Katwa needs to be cremated."

"Yes, of course. One brother will be burned this evening, the other soon follows." Hajapo put down the *momko*, abandoning its repair, pulled his walking stick close, and got to his feet, looking Keleli in the eye. "Yes, even Katwa whom we banished from living in this hamlet is still a Nokotul. In death he remains a Nokotul. He deserves our respect."

"And we need men to get the body," Keleli said.

"Well, I must find them--" Hajapo surveyed the hamlet, shaking his head. "It seems most are away, but they will certainly return in time for Kon's ceremony. If he stays where he is, the poor fellow, he is only meat for the vultures and other scavengers."

The picture in his head of what poor Katwa might look like if he were left by his hut for more than a day made Jupa nauseous.

"You must have more people to talk to, don't you?"

"Yes, I wanted to talk with Wyla, but earlier he was gone."

"Oh, he's back. Over there," Hajapo said, holding out the awl he was using to repair his *momko*. "See by his hut?"

Jupa's heart stumbled. His head turned. Sure enough, Wyla sat by the hut with a small pile of river mussel shells, drying in the sun, to one side. His right arm was slung across his chest, as they always saw him.

His left hand appeared to be wielding a small brush on a bark painting. Jupa and Keleli exchanged glances, left Hajapo without a word, and walked straight toward the cripple Wyla.

"Well, Wyla, you're here. Weren't you gone earlier?" Keleli said in a firm voice, plunging ahead, without so much as a courteous greeting.

Wyla looked up from his small brush, dipped in red pigment, and gave Keleli a cold stare. "I was--" He paused as if trying to find words. "Down at the stream washing some things." The words spilled out and then he looked away, as if indifferent to Keleli's presence.

"So you didn't leave the hamlet today?"

"What's it to you? You're no Nokotul, you don't live here," the cripple said.

"You don't want questions, do you?"

"Your questions have no point and annoy me--"

"Does it annoy you that your headman, Hajapo, asked me to try and figure out how Kon came to be strangled in his sleep?" Keleli stared Wyla down, the cripple refusing to turn away.

Jupa took a deep breath: *Keleli failed to mention Katwa's death on purpose.*

"I don't have to answer your silly questions." Slowly with the brush, he daubed in the green of leaves on the oak across the bark painting.

"What about an easy one?"

Wyla glowered, but seemed to offer grudging consent.

"You've been wearing those sandals for some time haven't you?"

"Yes, what of it?" He twitched one sandal sideways.

"I'd like Jupa to take the length of one."

"Why?" He put his brush, painting off to the side, as if he couldn't concentrate.

"I'll explain. So can Jupa see your sandal?"

"Doesn't matter to me, you're looking at how big my feet are right now." He waggled his toes back and forth.

Keleli took out the short length of stick from his pouch and gave it to Jupa, who then knelt down beside Wyla. He held the stick vertical to the bottom of Wyla's sandal. Jupa's left hand trembled. For the same stick that first measured the footprint by Katwa's dead corpse matched Wyla's sandal. The lengths were the same.

Keleli stamped his walking stick, as if the point was made. Jupa expected Keleli to say something about the footprint by Katwa's body, but he didn't.

"Your sandals will leave a footprint the length of that stick," Keleli said, sounding satisfied with the observation.

Jupa saw in Wyla's eyes fear, and he also saw in Keleli's firm gaze on the cripple that Keleli was willing to let the fear stay and build inside Wyla.

After saying little more, they left Wyla and went back to Hajapo, who by now was standing near the covered woodpile, where he talked with Borri, one of the men who had returned from collecting firewood and had expected to soon attend Kon's funeral.

The cremation, overseen by Alini, was now put off until four men could go with Hajapo and get Katwa's body from the forest. "Two murders, days apart. Brothers too." As more men returned to the hamlet, Hajapo seemed more vocal about the murders. Jupa guessed much of this commotion had to do with Hajapo's unavoidable suspicion the killer was a Nokotul.

The men drifted in from firewood collecting, hunting small game, gathering plants, and whatever else they had done during the day in the field. Quickly, Hajapo found three more men to help Borri bring back Katwa's corpse. He then turned to Keleli and asked if he would stay longer and help find the killer.

"Yes, we definitely want to," Keleli said. "I have a few things I must do, a few more things to look at."

Jupa was puzzled as to what Keleli meant by such cryptic comments. But he shrugged his shoulders and tagged along behind the party led by Keleli.

Before too long, they reached Katwa's hut. Hajapo made a sucking sound of surprise when he saw Katwa's unmoving corpse. "It is so much harder to see this for myself. When you told me the other brother had been killed, I was shocked, but to see this for myself saddens me."

For Jupa, seeing Katwa was hard too. They had to take the corpse away so Katwa would not suffer the final indignity of being food for scavenging animals.

Keleli walked over and knelt beside the corpse of Katwa, upright in its seated posture, as if he wanted to inspect something he might have overlooked. Jupa wasn't sure what they missed before.

"The bowl of porridge I'm sure has poison in it," Keleli said. "We haven't touched it and I suggest we remove it from his hands with care and wash our hands afterwards."

Jupa looked down at his hands, realized he might have touched the porridge in the bowl earlier in the day and had not washed his hands. Still, his hands seemed clean. He had touched Katwa's dead body, but once Keleli mentioned poisoning, Jupa found himself obsessively rubbing his hands on his hide apron. He would now wash his hands in the stream the first chance he got.

Kulutu, Sesi, Luk, and Borri stopped murmuring among themselves. How they would carry the body was talk that could wait: They needed to hear what Keleli decided about how to carry the bowl of supposedly poisoned porridge.

"We can wrap the bowl in one of his deerskin blankets," he said, pointing to Katwa's lean-to. The wooden burl bowl lay on the ground in front of Katwa's stiff figure, partly filled with porridge. Keleli slipped it

on a blanket he got and placed flat on the ground. Pulling up the sides of the skin, he safely wrapped the bowl. He looked at the others and said, "There, you are free now to take care of the body. I see no signs of violence, no puncture of the skin, nothing like that. But this--" he said, holding forward the skin wrapping the porridge bowl, "is something I'd like to take back with us and see if it indeed contains poison."

Jupa smiled. Did Keleli have yet another trick to find out how Katwa met death? Jupa knew the elder would have some unexpected way of figuring out why the porridge killed Katwa. What would it be? As ever, the surprise of learning something new kept him close to Keleli's side.

With the porridge bowl removed, the four men were free to take Katwa away from what was not meant to be his last resting place, alone in the forest, his own people having banished him. They each took a limb, setting Katwa's body on the stitched-together hides stretched between the two poles of the carrier. Then a quick hoist up, they set forth--Hajapo, Keleli, and Jupa following--and went back to the hamlet, ready to see what the shaman Alini felt should be next for the body.

"Though he was banished, it's better to see Katwa back among the Nokotuls," Hajapo said, evidently seeing in death a time to utter the last good words about a person who wouldn't return to the world of the living.

Jupa felt a tear well in his eye. *How can Hajapo banish Katwa then forgive him? Is it just to keep the vultures away from his corpse? Hajapo needs to know Katwa protected his own murderer, his poisoner, and that's why he was first banished from the Nokotuls. This makes no sense.*

The trek back to the hamlet went slower, with the weight the four men carried. When they got home, Hajapo got busy with Alini, deciding when Katwa would be cremated. They talked of a funeral pyre for both brothers.

Keleli, however, was not interested in such plans and drifted away

from Hajapo and Alini. Jupa followed.

"But how do we prove this porridge killed Katwa?," Jupa asked, pointing to the porridge bowl Keleli carried, wrapped in a skin. How can we do that and not harm anybody?" Jupa's face went long with skepticism.

"It's not easy, but after we came back, I knew I just saw the blue lips and guessed that, though blue lips are a very good sign of sudden death. Let's go to the stream now, but first let me see if there's any porridge left from last night."

The Kosomu Stream rippled past, a gentle burble, slow enough for easy wading. Near its banks, Jupa saw the water had clarified, revealing a bed covered with tan pebbles. Keleli took the deer skin wrapped around the porridge bowl and pointed to a flat rock shelf on the sandy banks where water pooled in pocky depressions. "Here's how we prove there's poison in this porridge."

Jupa held a second, uncovered bowl of porridge the Nokotul women had given him, saying it was from the night before. "What you have is porridge Katwa expected he was getting, before poison was added."

He set the bowl wrapped in deer skin down and went over to a bush growing near the stream and broke off a stick. "These hollows on the rock. Each has water left over from the rain. What we do is take this stick," he said, dipping it into the bowl wrapped in the deer skin, "and take out a bit of the porridge Katwa ate, then dissolve it in water. See."

Jupa looked closer, putting porridge in the water the rock depression held. Stirring made it murky.

"Now I get another stick and do the same for the bowl you've got."

Once they put porridge in both depressions, Jupa saw water in each turned cloudy.

"What's next is simple. Snails live in the stream bed. I need two of them."

Jupa knew immediately what Keleli wanted, having picked water snails from the stream since he was young. He went over to the rushing water and quickly found a pair, which he brought back, one in each palm.

"One snail for each mixture," he said, dropping a small brown-shelled slider in each depression, "and we come back when the sun's below the tops of those trees. We should see a difference."

Jupa rubbed his forehead with his palm. *Simple. One snail must die if it's in poison.*

Sure enough, later when the two came back ready to inspect the rock depressions, one held a snail very much alive, seemingly enjoying the porridge as food. The other, a snail curled up, dead and floating in the depression with the suspected porridge mix.

Keleli took the deer skin-wrapped porridge bowl and tossed everything into the stream. "We need the waters to wash away all that poison. It's very strong. Can't be left around."

They went to tell Hajapo what they found. He was busy with Alini, the shaman. With all the commotion of Katwa's sudden death, the two had decided to wait on cremating Kon until the next day. Kon and Katwa would be burned, side-by-side, at the same time, to honor, Hajapo said, the lives of both.

"Any new signs of the killer?" the Nokotul headman asked.

"Yes, one. Only just now, we proved the porridge was poisoned," Keleli said.

"How'd you do that?" Hajapo raised his shoulders, as if puzzled.

"Simple, we mixed water with two porridges in separate rock depressions. One from the porridge Katwa ate and one from the porridge everyone else in the hamlet ate. We put a snail in each mixture and waited. The porridge Katwa ate killed the snail."

Hajapo's jaw sagged, as if he now knew for sure they were after a poisoner. "Again, I ask you, please catch this killer." His gaze went

from Keleli to Alini beside him, but the shaman added nothing. "If anyone else hears how Katwa died, we'd have chaos, not knowing who might poison--" Hajapo's words quit--he was agitated.

"You know," Keleli said, "We're really here for the killer of Jupa's father. This is where the signs led."

"But please reconsider if you can stay." Hajapo said, the demand sounding like he was otherwise without hope.

Keleli glanced at Jupa, then quickly said, "I'm sorry. We must go home. We've so many other things to do."

Jupa didn't know what Keleli meant. They were finding out new things. Did Keleli have a new plan? Jupa smiled weakly. Apparently he did.

"But you leave, I worry the killer might kill again. With you and Jupa here, the killer must feel you've an eye on him."

"We didn't stop him from killing Katwa." The elder tugged at his beard contemplatively.

"That's true. But you must have some idea who it is." Hajapo's eyes pleaded, as if Keleli and Jupa were all that kept away another death."

"The person who killed Jupa's father most likely also killed Kon and Katwa." Keleli pushed on his walking stick in the ground. Jupa bit his lower lip, knowing the elder wisely didn't mention the arrow wound he suffered.

"Well, who?" Hajapo asked loudly.

"I can't say. I need more signs of what took that person into the anger of murder with those weapons in his hands."

"What? Tell us who. We'll find the signs--" the wizened Nokotul elder said.

Keleli rolled his eyes. "That's the problem: What if the person you suspect didn't do it. What if several Nokotuls take it upon themselves to force that person to admit guilt or tell lies about that person. There's no

end to it." Keleli stamped his walking stick, then leaned on it, as if challenging Hajapo to say more.

"Keleli's right," Alini said, suddenly speaking up. "You must not make false accusations. In some ways, that's worse than the original crime." A surprised look in his face, Hajapo looked back at Alini, as if he hadn't expected another Nokotul to support Keleli.

Keleli's head of white hair nodded at Alini's point. "We're done here today. But possibly next time, we'll name a suspect."

"I see the point, though it's not easy knowing a killer might be among us," Hajapo said, his drawn face full of resignation.

Keleli and Jupa left Hajapo and Alini, who presumably had the funeral to discuss.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: SUSPECT, INQUISITOR, BODYGUARD

The next day, Jupa awoke on his bedroll of mule-deer fur, convinced he and Keleli would never discover who killed his pa. The murder would go unpunished. Jupa knew that could only lead to more suspicion between the two peoples: the Miwokituls and the Nokotuls.

Queasiness came over him. Getting up and drinking acorn shell tea seemed out of the question. Still he had to get up.

He did. He went outside. Above, a gray light seeped down through fog hiding the mountain peak he was used to seeing behind him. Moreover, on the downslope, out to the west, nothing but vaporous gray spilled across what were usually open expanses of wild rye.

About him in the hamlet, others kept busy with the everyday routines. Despite a fickle mix of sun, rain, fog, and sleet the colder weather brought, the work of getting food, firewood, and water would never stop. Jupa had never known differently and accepted many rose earlier than him and were already at their chores. This include arrow-toting men entering the fog banks, looking for the last mule deer of the season.

Closer to him, across the commons, the familiar sight of the Miwokitul women, his ma Sawaja included, getting ready to grind acorns through the day would greet him upon awakening as surely as the sun would take away the darkness of the night every morning.

No one, except for Keleli, really had the time to seek out and ponder the signs that would lead to the killer of Naketi. The others were simply too busy. Moreover, Keleli's many years gave him a special skill

at reading the signs they had been able to find.

Of course, as the son of the slain Naketi, Jupa was understandably freed from his usual tasks like gathering firewood so he might help Keleli as best as he could. And he had. While Keleli was on the mend, he discovered on his own how his father had taken gold stones from the gusher atop the mountain.

Despite knowing he helped Keleli, he still felt queasy.

Jupa walked over to the water cistern and took a drink, hoping it might quell his jumpy stomach. He felt worse.

More signs pointed to Wyla, and if the lame arm had really healed, Wyla might have committed murder, now three times.

Even so, Wyla had escaped detection and that made Jupa queasy.

He looked over and saw Keleli was out, drinking acorn shell tea. He went over to talk.

"Good morning," Jupa said, his face long, knowing they could not quit. "We have to get Wyla once and for all."

"Certainly. I've been devising a trap for Wyla all night, but can't quite get it right. What have you pictured we might do?" The elder set down his cup, ready to listen.

"Nothing yet, I was only seeing in my head all the gold stones we brought down from the spring. How we might still use them as bait to draw Wyla out. The Nokotuls took all the rest of the stones in the gusher, so we only have our own gold stones." Jupa scratched his head, unsure what to do next. He knew, however, Wyla wanted more than anything to get his hands on gold.

"That's true. Wyla will be taken by gold stones." He studiously tugged at his beard. "Unfortunately, I've also come to the conclusion little, short of torture, will make Wyla confess anything."

A puzzled look snuck across Jupa's face. Yes, Wyla would never confess. He scratched his forehead. "What's torture?" he asked.

"Torture. Oh, yes. I've only heard of it: You take the person who won't talk, tie their arms behind their back and hoist them up until they're sure their arms will break off. Usually, they say anything to get you to stop the pain."

"But they might say something even if it's not true."

"Yes. That's why torture fails. You never know if they're lying to make you quit the torture."

"Well, we know if Wyla committed murder, he did so without witnesses," Keleli continued. "Yes, the killing of Kon was done beside his wife, Potali, but I talked to her and she recalls nothing from that night except waking in the morning to find Kon dead. Obviously, the baby child is of no use. The two others died alone."

"So as long as Wyla keeps his lips tight, we can't get anybody to say he murdered any of the three," Jupa said.

"Yes, nor can we say he shot that arrow at me. What did you see?" He reached over and rubbed his upper right arm, as if the pain returned.

"Nothing. Just this short figure running away in the grasses."

"Aha. You saw a short figure. That comes up over and over. The small footprint is only one more sign of the short person as the killer."

"So what must we do?"

"I want to lure Wyla into the open and get him to try and steal gold stones I'll carry."

"What? How would you ever do that?"

"I'll figure it out. But I need you to protect me. Carry your bow and arrow. I'll go again and question Wyla. I'll deliberately, but it'll seem accidental, let him see the gold stones. Then, once I leave the hamlet, he'll likely follow and try to rob me."

Jupa gasped at how brave the elder was.

"So if Wyla does that, tries to rob me, I'll take my stick and strike

him and see if I can get him to use his lame hand, which will go a long way to showing he's not as helpless as he appears, which would also explain the remarks Kon made."

"Then what do I do?"

"Jupa, you'll guard my life with your bow and arrow. My life will be in your hands, especially if Wyla turns violent. But we must not be seen together. When I set off down the path to the Nokotul hamlet, you will follow in the distance. Might be better to stay off the path. I don't want anyone to know we're together, especially Wyla. See, once I leave the Nokotul hamlet and return here, I want to draw Wyla out--"

"You know, it might work." Jupa smiled at how the plan took everything they knew about Wyla and made a trap.

"One thing is certain," Keleli said.

"What is that?"

"This is not the day to do it. The fog lifts, but see the storm clouds to the north? The shaman Nyma says rain will soon come this way. We must wait for dry weather if we're to catch Wyla in the open."

"I agree."

Several days later, once a storm bringing a full day of rain with lingering showers had passed through, sunny blue skies came back. The day seemed to Jupa especially right for their hike south. Waiting for Keleli, Jupa took a deep breath, felt the pure, chilly air as nothing short of invigorating.

The morning, of course, promised more than good weather. For when Keleli first pictured how to catch Wyla, they had sat by the elder's cave, drinking tea, and agreed on a hike, separately, down to the Nokotul hamlet. This would be the best way to get Wyla, at his evil best, out in the open. Let Wyla fall for the trap and try to rob Keleli. Wanting the gold so badly would make him reveal he was both violent and, importantly, had the use of both arms.

If the trap worked, Keleli would be able to go to Hajapo and tell

what they knew about the murders and the signs pointing to Wyla. For his part, Hajapo would be only too happy to have the name of the Nokotul among them who might be a murderer. After begging them for a suspect, he was sure to call a meeting in the Bowl of the Spirits to decide, with Keleli's testimony, if Wyla was guilty of one or more of the murders.

What would be Wyla's punishment? Jupa had earlier asked. "Banishment, certainly banishment," Keleli said. "That might be the same as death, for how will that lazy Wyla survive on his own? His only path then would be to go elsewhere and ask other people to take him in."

Jupa mused that even if they found Wyla guilty of murdering three people, Wyla would keep his life. For that was the way of the peaceful Nokotuls and Miwokituls. Their shamans, Alini and Nyma, respectively would never allow punishment by death, even for murder. Why? Jupa had asked. Nyma said simply, "That person is you, you are that person. You can no more end that person's life than end your own and not trouble the Spirits. All life comes from them and the Way of the Spirits must be followed." Jupa spat on the ground. Wyla at least had to be banished.

Finally, Keleli was ready, walking toward him, staff in hand. Wearing the mule-deer hide apron, a fur poncho, and fur leggings above his *momkos*, he would not be slowed by the chilly weather. He, like Jupa, had finished filling his water skin at the wooden cistern and jokingly patted the inside, bulging pouch of gold stones under his apron. He laughed at the trap he had readied for Wyla.

Jupa dressed warmly, too, but also had the black fox-skin quiver of seven arrows slung across his back and in his hand, the cedar bow.

Together, they took off, talking over one more time how Jupa was to keep Keleli in sight, but not draw attention to himself. After they walked about halfway to the Nokotul hamlet, they separated, with Jupa dropping back. Keleli would first see the Nokotul headman Hajapo,

then Wyla.

Before too long, Keleli found himself sitting, outside a conical cedar-bark hut, across from the measly and despicable cripple. He, of course, had nothing to fear from Wyla, the possible murderer of three people: They were out in the open. Others in the hamlet, walking about, would immediately know of any struggle, shouting or worse.

Keleli didn't waste words softening up the tight-lipped cripple. As in the past, the mere sight of Keleli appeared to irk Wyla, who knew, of course, his visitor was tracking down whomever had committed the recent murders. So Keleli simply said he was there because several signs about the murders suggested a Nokotul might be the killer.

"When Jupa and I discovered Katwa's dead body--" Keleli said, eyeing Wyla, who sat with his inert right arm in the hide sling across his waist, his eyes darting back and forth as if he wanted to ignore Keleli's words.

"But where's your helper now--the boy called Jupa?" Wyla said, a smirk growing in his face.

"Oh, he's off mule-deer hunting." Keleli knew Wyla's question was not diversionary. He wasn't asking about Jupa to avoid Keleli's questions. No, Wyla first had to establish if Keleli was really alone, if the old man with the walking stick was really defenseless.

Wyla would probably have more to worry about if Jupa were elsewhere in the hamlet, talking with someone like Alini and might soon join them. That surprise of a witness could only make him doubly guarded.

Wyla's reaction seemed, however, to settle down, knowing his visitor was alone. His eyes less fidgety. "I was saying we discovered Katwa dead and found footprints before the fire ring where he sat--"

Once more he studied Wyla's face for reaction. Anything, even a bite of the lip to show fear about the questions. Nothing. Remarkably, Wyla kept his right arm in the sling dead-still, though Keleli knew that

skill must have been well-practiced.

Keleli stared at the sandalled feet of Wyla stretched out on the ground. If he could nudge the cripple into just one involuntary movement from that right arm held tight, then he might get Wyla closer to revealing something. But so far, nothing.

"And we took the length of those footprints," he continued, noting his crippled antagonist seemed unfazed by Keleli's rapt attention to his feet in their *momkos*. "We placed the same marked stick against your foot later. I doubt many people here have a foot that matches the length of the footprints found around the dead man."

The smirk in Wyla's face came back as a challenge for Keleli to prove him guilty of murder. A smirk that seemed to say, The only person who could prove I killed Katwa is dead. In a few moments of breathless terror, Katwa might have realized the porridge I brought was poisoned. But with no witness, with Katwa dead, who can say I murdered him?

Wyla's logic was as closed, as self-contained, as the smirk itself.

Keleli glanced away, then went ahead: "Did you see Katwa the day he died. Yes or no?"

"No." Wyla gave him a fearless stare.

"But did you take him the porridge that morning?"

"No." Wyla's eyes expressed nothing, as if he were safe behind a lie of his own making.

"The porridge was poisoned. We know Katwa died from poisoned porridge. Is that why you won't admit you took him the porridge?"

"I didn't take any porridge." Wyla clenched his jaw.

"Well, Kon didn't take the porridge. He died days before. I've asked many others in the hamlet if they took Katwa porridge. They all said no."

Of course, he had asked no such questions and had no qualms about letting Wyla guess he knew more than he really did.

"You're the one with the matching foot and you say you didn't take the porridge to Katwa--" Keleli stared at Wyla, seeing the evasive cripple act as he expected him to: Say nothing, deny everything.

"You'll have to find someone else to blame." Wyla said, as if he knew he had survived the toughest questions Keleli could throw his way. This elder of the Miwokituls would be forced, so Wyla appeared to believe, to leave empty-handed, with no admission whatsoever from the cripple he had harrassed. The cripple's smirk seemed to say: *Your coming here is for nothing. It could've been a Miwokitul, not a Nokotul.* Wyla chuckled, which Keleli felt odd because anything more than a scowl or smirk seemed foreign to the cripple's face.

"We'll come back to the porridge questions soon, but now there's the murder weapon. Murdered by a wooden knife, a special knife carved from yew, a wood from the North Country. I have the knife used for that murder right here in my pouch." He brought his hand to his chest.

He reached inside his cape, inside his mule-deer hide apron, but had no intention of pulling out the knife alone.

His fingers down to the pouch filled with the gold stones, feeling where they were, opening the pouch. Then carefully his fingers at the pocket with the yew knife. Bringing it up, moving it over against the open pouch of gold stones and in one artful motion lifting the knife out of the apron with a deliberate clumsiness, joining it to the open pouch so everything spilling out on the dirt between them, off to the side of Wyla's lame right arm, the gold stones shining brilliantly in the day's heavy sun.

At least two handfuls of gold stones scattered in the dirt. With a spasm, Wyla's immobile right elbow jiggled in its sling.

Keleli's face glowing happiness, but his mouth saying, "Oh, how my hands tangle."

Wyla's face: frozen, shocked.

The right elbow, the smallest tremor.

Then the stiffening of the back.

Keleli took it all in. He knew Wyla didn't want to admit wanting the gold stones for himself. But his lame arm did so. Gold would give him the respect of other Nokotuls. Gold would mean he would spend less time in Kosomu Stream collecting mussel shells to trade as spoons. So his body betrayed him, giving away the secret his right arm was not as lame as he pretended.

At one time, Wyla might have had an injured and lame arm. But eventually, the arm must have begun healing, gaining strength, enough so he could use his two arms together, even shoot a bow and arrow. But all in secret. For long enough, he had become lazy and enjoyed having others take care of him, a helpless cripple. Like a bent tree limb, he grew wrong for so long, he couldn't go back to any trueness.

Keleli reached down and began to gather the gold stones. All fifteen. But he didn't return them to the pouch. Instead, he stacked them in a small pile between them. A smile opened on his face, a smile he hadn't planned to share with Wyla, but it was a personal pleasure to watch the fellow he was questioning unable to reach and even touch one gold stone. Lame arm. Forced to obey, keep dead-still.

"This, you see is the knife," he said, holding forth the wooden instrument in its sinister, blood-drawing glory. "Carved of tough yew wood not found anywhere near here."

Keleli studied Wyla's eyes. A deathly gaze. "The only way anybody could get this wood to carve a knife is from a trader like Temali, who often visits our hamlets. He told me he traded one length of yew here in this hamlet. Traded it for some of those mussel shell spoons," he said pointing to the small pile from Wyla's stream collecting nearby. "You said the yew stick was for your arm sling."

Keleli stared at Wyla, looking for a sign, anything that might lead to admission. But in those dead eyes, nothing.

"I'm sure with that wood, you carved this knife here in my hands," the elder said, giving the knife in his hand a wag.

"Carve wood? How?" Wyla made a show of trying to move his lame right arm by ineffectually shifting his right shoulder about.

Just then, Keleli wanted to say Kon had announced to everyone enjoying the silver liquid of happiness Wyla wasn't as helpless as he claimed and Kon didn't live another day after those words, but he bit his tongue. "I'm not sure." He left it at that, wanting Wyla to keep focussed on that big cluster of gold stones stacked in the dirt between them. The gold stones his greedy hands yearned to grab, but which his deception forced him to resist in what must have been aching frustration.

He hoped Wyla was now baited by what he began to slowly put back in the pouch--under the apron and poncho--one stone at a time. He also hoped when he left, Wyla would follow stealthily, stalking, ready to spring an attack Jupa would help him survive.

Wyla glowered. He had fended off the accusation of Keleli and said nothing when the elder stood. "I have no more questions today, but want you to know we will find who murdered at least one person and possibly as many as three since the first quarter of the eleventh moon. I assure you, and Hajapo does, too, this will not go unpunished." He bit his lower lip in resolve.

Wyla spat. The spittle fell in the dirt between them.

"I must now go talk with Hajapo and tell him about a few more signs I have about the deaths of the brothers Kon and Katwa," Keleli said, merely to plant in Wyla's head the seed of new, unknown accusations.

He went over to talk with Hajapo, well out of earshot of Wyla and just told him he would be going back to the Mikokitul hamlet immediately and that he hadn't learned anything new from the cripple about what he knew of Naketi's murder.

Keleli set off down the path to the caves of the Miwokituls,

resisting the temptation to look back, to see if Wyla were following at a distance, or even look off to the side, to see if Jupa was properly shadowing him with a ready bow and arrow.

Jupa, off in the tall bunch grass, was happy to see Keleli leave the hamlet, coming up the path, his walking stick swinging out ahead with each step. Keeping his cover in the grassy blind, Jupa didn't try to match the elder step for step, but cautiously allowed Keleli to get ahead and then made a circle forward, dodging behind oaks, so Wyla, if he were following, wouldn't see him. He did this for a little while, well past the midway point between the two hamlets, until Jupa sensed Wyla would not rush up and try to rob Keleli.

Jupa rested beside a black oak, catching his breath from the quick dash across some trampled grass. Behind him, from where he came, a stirring. The tops of grass stalks waved but not as if the breeze had moved them. As if a person in the grass followed. The back of his head tightened with fear. Was Wyla there?

The motion in the bunch grass stopped and ahead was Keleli on the path, but too far away to protect him with his bow and arrow. What was he to do? Back in the tall grasses, no motion, no noise. Ahead, the small figure of Keleli. No choice, really. He slumped down and ran. Running through the tall grasses, whether to get away from the Wyla he feared or to catch up with Keleli.

Beside another black oak, he rested, caught his breath. Another look back. Again, the grasses seemed to move, but not by the wind. A dark shape that could be a head in the grass. But far away.

Only when the Miwokitul hamlet was in sight, did Jupa finally catch up with the elder.

"He didn't take the bait of the gold stones as much as I would have liked," Keleli said, a look of annoyance on his face.

"Oh, I'm not sure. Several times I sensed someone was moving in the grasses behind me," Jupa said sheepishly.

"You saw someone?" Keleli's eyes tightened with skepticism.

"No, but the grasses moved suddenly when the wind was calm." Jupa raised his hands, feeling apologetic he had seen no more.

"It could've been Wyla decided to follow you, not me."

"Well, at least he knows you've gold stones," Jupa said, a quick smile on his lips.

"Yes, and he must want badly to get them."

Finally they got back to the hamlet. The familiar sight of the women preparing food made Keleli happy. He said he was hungry and tired.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:
NIGHT WATCHMAN, "DEER WHO LOST LEGS,"
PICTURE POUCH

Even though he had returned from the day's tiring walk south, and should have been hungry, Jupa dragged his spoon, a river mussel shell, through the acorn porridge. The porridge and his stomach were at odds. The images in his head kept taking him back to odd movements in the tall bunch grass after they left the Nokotul hamlet. Did Wyla follow them? Even now, as darkness fell, he couldn't be sure. Just outside the hamlet, possibly in the tall grasses, or behind a tree, if not on a craggy overlook, Wyla might lurk.

He frowned at the half-eaten porridge. When they got back, Keleli went to share the meal with the arrowsmith Pajpuli and find out how the lessons with puppy Cuku were going. Jupa took his porridge and settled for his own company to recall what he really couldn't talk about it with anyone else.

Then he did what was always forbidden, especially considering the work of his ma and other women every day. He spooned his porridge to one side of the bowl and walked over by a bush. When nobody was looking, he began flinging it away by the shellful. He had never wasted food like that. But the fear Wyla might be slinking nearby through tall grasses took away any hunger to eat what was now no more than bland porridge.

Jupa flung it all away. This was better, he knew, than taking back a half-full bowl and hearing he had no appetite. He couldn't say he wasn't eating because he felt Keleli's life might be in danger. The suspicions

about Wyla were not to be shared. But certainly Wyla must have had it in his head to rob the elder of his gold stones. He did the same with his father. Wyla had not hesitated, as he and Keleli suspected, to kill for gold after Naketi refused to tell where the gold stones came from.

Jupa looked around, not sure what to do the rest of the night, before he went to sleep. He was faltering, not knowing whether he could sleep or not. Did he have to stay up through the night because Wyla might have followed them? What was he going to do? Go over and talk with Keleli and Pajpuli? They were busy.

Suddenly, Jupa's ears pricked up. Was it movement off in the tall grasses? He peered into the dark, raw emptiness.

If anything, the moving stopped. Perhaps a small animal was returning to its burrow beneath the grasses. Or was Wyla really stalking Keleli?

The sky had gone black as darkness in the caves. What Jupa's eyes could discern was confused by the bright fire across the commons and the darkness. Was what he saw real or only pictures in his head? A bit like looking overhead and seeing Cougar Man among the stars. Was that really Cougar Man? No, it was stars. Separate stars, but they arranged themselves to picture the great Cougar Man. Anybody could see that. But out there in the grasses? Jupa didn't know what it was he heard.

The grasses moved again. His ears were not fooling him. If his hearing were only keener, he knew he might hear the breaths of a wary human crouching among the grass stalks.

His pulse raced. He looked back at the other Miwokituls, eating, talking, no fears about the night before they went to sleep. Jupa didn't know what to do. He could not shout and ask everyone to follow him into the brush because he heard the grasses move. They would laugh.

Jupa sat on a boulder and stared. He was to be the night watchman. He had no choice. He owed it to Keleli, whose gold Wyla was ready to steal, whether by stealth or by violence. The cripple had shown no reluctance to do either.

The night grew darker. People went to the dark of their cave rooms and slept. Sawaja came over, asked why he was staying up. He said he had too many pictures in his head and couldn't sleep and wanted to look at stars. She gave him a hug, told him not to worry so much.

Jupa rubbed his temple. *So little she knows.* He studied the mountain ridge above the hamlet. The bright, pocky half-moon climbed, but it was a night the moon was not to climb high, but instead sink soon, leaving only stars for company. He must wait this out until--yes--*until the first morning light.*

He sat, wrapped in warm clothes, fending off the cold. He stared into the dark, a monotony he might let go if he were getting his bow and arrows, but he wasn't sure about leaving.

A noise stirred in the grasses. A continuous, moving noise.

Jupa's breaths hesitated. Whoever was moving in the grasses might be ready to kill. Who cared about Wyla stealing Keleli's gold? Whoever was moving out there could be drawing an arrow across his bow, aiming at him. He had to go back to the cave and get his.

Whoever was moving in the grass seemed to pause. Stopped. He looked back at the fire on the commons, now only embers. And beyond, to the cave where he should have been sleeping. Where he kept his bow and arrows. He walked there at once, but slowly, stealthily.

Inside the cool cave, his ma snored in sleep, and he picked up his bow and took the quiver of seven arrows. Hunched over, he snuck back outside and across the commons to keep watch.

He studied the bunch grass in the darkness, his eyes and ears ready. Nothing. It was as if what he heard earlier was only in his head, and the silence now mocked his fear about a killer nearby.

Then more silence. Jupa found his hand holding the bow had dropped and rested by his side. The danger was gone. He turned and slowly scanned the dark portals of the caves for any surprise movement. Dark and still. Whatever he heard had not gone that way.

He took a deep breath of the night air and kept searching the darkness. But before long, his gazing drifted off. The dim bunches of grass below lulled him into feeling nothing would happen. Had he protected Keleli all the way from the Nokotul hamlet? He hoped so, and went back to idly gazing at the stars.

The constellation named for Cougar Man shone brightly above in the cold, clear air. He wondered what Cougar Man would say about the frustrating search for his father's killer. Wouldn't he have bow and arrow ready to make the killer's death sure and swift, once he knew whom to shoot? That was Cougar Man, master of the bow and arrow, not one to be gentle with those who broke the great ties that bind a people like the Miwokitul community together.

Jupa stared at the stars swimming in the constellation overhead. For there, the eternal reminder of Cougar Man, where his gaze always returned, was a man who had lived among the Miwokituls very much as Jupa yearned to do.

He let go the company of Cougar Man overhead gave and again he peered out at the bunch grass. Beyond, a lone oak tree stood, bare of leaf, branches swaying in a breeze Jupa did not feel. His spine shivered.

Next, *momkos* scurried across dirt behind him. He turned. Nothing. His legs, muscles tight, were ready to run at--or away from--the someone in the dark, hiding. Not that this would ever stop. All night. Hearing noises, then out in the dark there, his squinting eyes would see nothing. He was hearing dream things in his waking.

He was tired. He needed sleep and wanted to lie on his bedroll and close his eyes, but he had to protect Keleli this one night.

Another scurry of feet. This time he didn't turn his head. Why turn around if nobody was there?

Then again. He counted his breath. Once, twice, thrice. Then he turned suddenly, his neck wrenching backward and he discerned a shape in the darkness beyond one cave entrance. But it was only a shape and gone.

What could he do? Walk over there? The noises would only move elsewhere.

His pa's cedar bow dangled at his side. A watchman? He had never done this before. He took the dark emptiness out there into his head, and he couldn't see anything, anywhere, anymore. He had to stay awake, though, until the first morning light. Then he could quit and go to the sleep for which his body now begged.

His eyes searched the grasses for anything. Or the oak branches swaying in a breeze Jupa did not feel. Anything.

Then from behind him, a growl. Was wolf puppy Cuku, asleep in front of Pajpuli's cave, bothered or just chasing rabbits through his dreams?

Nothing more happened. Moments passed.

Then again, from behind, a scream, a man's cry.

Jupa's head snapped around. Coming away from the caves, a short figure, out past the ember-calm fire, a pouch in one hand, both hands swinging free, his sandalled feet pumping furiously across the commons, seemingly headed out of the hamlet, and yet closer to where Jupa stood in the dark.

Like archery practice with the stuffed hide bag, Jupa's arm with the bow came up.

Wyla lay stone-dead in the dirt.

Jupa could see it was Wyla, even without the arm sling. The eyes, open, were lifeless and spent. Jupa looked up, across the commons.

"No!". *What happened to Keleli?* His bow dropped in the dirt. His legs stumbled, ran. The shadowy, unlit opening to Keleli's cave. *What happened?*

The soft scuffle of other *momkos* came near. Out of breath, a torch held high, he followed, stooped, went inside.

Everyone talked at once, voices echoing off the rusty limestone walls. Relieved, he saw Keleli safe, sitting up on his bed. His grizzled hair stuck out sideways.

Breathless, the elder tried to talk. "I was having trouble sleeping--" A pause. "Kept waking up from the strong dreams--" Another pause. "I looked and saw this dark figure come in the cave. Said nothing--" Yet another pause. "Had this axe at his side. I could not get up to fight with my walking stick, so I just lay there, pretending to be asleep."

Keleli paused to take several breaths, as if trying to recall all he had to say.

Jupa turned back to the entrance to see the headman Wota enter, his eyes blinking with sleepiness.

"He snuck forward," the elder continued, "trying to be quiet and was crouching down as if he were looking for something." Keleli seemed calmer. "I had left a pouch beside me. Nothing but acorns from the black oak I keep as a decoy for the few valuables I have," he said, not about to admit he was safekeeping gold stones. "But he wasn't satisfied with taking the pouch and crept closer and raised the axe." Keleli shook his head as if what happened was still unbelievable. "He was ready to bring it down on me. I held my breath, waited long as I could, then at last rolled over on my side, and he missed. That's when I screamed, and you must have all woke up."

The elder dropped his head forward, shaking it side-to-side in disbelief. "He ran out with the pouch in one hand, the axe in the other," he said pointing, "and I guess escaped in the night." He looked up, as if to ask if anybody knew otherwise.

"Keleli, no, Jupa shot him," an excited voice said. "He's out in the yard dead. Arrow right through the heart."

Keleli's eyes widened. "You did? You shot him? Let me go look."

The elder's face beamed, smiling for the first time since they had come into his cave room. He got to his feet, unsteady at first, but ready to leave.

"Keleli, I must tell you," Jupa said, pointing outside the cavern. "The intruder was Wyla. He wasn't wearing his arm sling, but it was Wyla. I saw his face. Come look."

Nobody, other than Keleli and Jupa, really knew the name Wyla, who he was, or why they suspected him of three murders. But wanting to hear the story sure to be told, they all, now six or more, followed Keleli and Jupa, all tramping across the commons until they stopped by the fallen body, an arrow in the chest jutting straight up.

Keleli knelt and turned the face toward him. "This is Wyla, I've no doubt." He gingerly lifted the right arm of Wyla, the one normally in a sling, but still clutching the pouch of black oak acorns. "See, Jupa, this arm--much thinner than the left, so much time in a sling. But this crippled arm, it worked well enough to grab my pouch." Keleli released the leather pouch from Wyla's fingers, turned it upside down, spilling out the acorns. "What was he expecting to get?" Keleli laughed, but Jupa noticed he said nothing about gold stones.

The elder pushed on his walking stick and stood up. "After we get some sleep, Jupa and I'll go to the Nokotuls, for surely they'll want one of their own back."

Wyla's life ended in neglect, his corpse lying in the dirt, while everyone went back to sleep for the rest of the night.

In first light, flies buzzed at Wyla's parted lips. Keleli returned with Jupa and studied the body. He told Jupa they must tell the Nokotuls they had yet another death among their people.

When they got to the Nokotuls, Keleli and Jupa immediately sought out Hajapo. "Yes, he held the axe high like so and was swinging it down at me, when I rolled out of his way," Keleli said, once again getting breathless about his brush with death.

The stoop-shouldered Hajapo tugged on a lock of his stringy white hair, as if he were skeptical this was truly the cripple Wyla. "So you say his arm was not in a sling?"

"Not at all, the right arm we were supposed to believe was lame," Keleli said, his eyes wide at the retelling, "grabbed the pouch and the other struck at me with an axe."

"You sure you didn't mistake Wyla for someone else?"

"I sat with Wyla no more than yesterday, close as your face, Hajapo." Keleli held out his palm facing himself. "I know Wyla's features very well, even with his arm out of the sling."

The Nokotul headman kept stroking his beard, saying nothing.

"Besides," added Keleli, "Jupa also knew Wyla from seeing him close and once he killed Wyla, he had plenty of time to study the face of his corpse." He paused. "As I did."

"So you shot him dead, one arrow to the heart?" Hajapo asked, turning toward Jupa.

"Yes, I had no time to hesitate. This awful cry from Keleli's cave, this man came running out with an axe he dropped some place in the yard and I was sure he'd killed Keleli dead with a blow to the head. That's why I shot him. I didn't know it was Wyla at first, he had two good arms. But when I looked closely, it was Wyla." Jupa's face went heavy. "He killed my father."

"But why would Wyla do this?" Hajapo asked.

"For gold stones. You know, the pouch Wyla took didn't have gold stones. He only got acorns I kept there to fool any thief in the night." Keleli laughed, as did Jupa.

"So if you want us to bury him, please say so," Keleli said.

"Otherwise, I'm sure you and the Nokotuls must want the funeral here."

"Oh, certainly it'll be that way. I'll send men to get Wyla's body. He is a Nokotul, after all."

"Before we return, we'd like to ask a favor. Would it be possible to look inside Wyla's hut one more time to make sure we missed no signs about all these murders?"

Hajapo gave a questioning look. Wyla was still a Nokotul and anything in his hut evidently had to go to other Nokotuls. "Yes, I'll go with you and you may briefly visit Wyla's hut." Jupa took Hajapo's small reluctance as surely the last niggling frustration before they finished.

The three went over to Wyla's small cedar bark hut. While Hajapo and Jupa stood outside, Keleli stooped with his walking stick and entered. He scanned the dark interior, taking note of the leather sling Wyla must have left behind. It was barren, save scattered sheets of painted birch bark on the ground. He grimaced at the disorder and picked up one painting. It showed a bowl of porridge and a mussel shell spoon. "You always got fed, Wyla," he muttered.

And then the bedroll of furs, obviously Wyla's bed. He leaned on his walking stick, looking closer. He took a breath sharply, and a flush came to his face, something that never happened to him in his old age, but it did then. For on the ground, beside the messy bedroll was a deerskin pouch. An empty pouch. Of course, Nokotuls and Miwokituls had always made pouches, but this flat, empty pouch spoke to him. A thrill jumped between Keleli's shoulder blades as he knelt to pick up the pouch. The front flap of the pouch had an elaborate drawing of a mule deer, burned into the hide.

Naketi had worked on that pouch for days. Using a fine pointed flint he heated in the fire, he burned dot after dot on the leather in the shape of a mule deer. Keleli never forgot how with an admirable patience Naketi wanted to make something special.

He was speechless.

He turned, and he stepped outside the hut.

Jupa eyes immediately fastened on what Keleli held in his hand.

"This proves Wyla killed your father," Keleli said. Hajapo's surprise was obvious. Jupa's eyes welled up. Jupa didn't have to be told whose pouch it was, for he had seen the mule-deer design his father worked on so hard many, many times. It was as if, for a moment, the spirit of his father again joined them.

Tears flowed down Jupa's face, and Hajapo's face went long at the sight of the young man, standing beside him, who had lost a father.

"I don't have to tell you, Hajapo, if you haven't already guessed, this pouch, which I saw being decorated, was taken by Wyla off the dead body. Jupa's father would never let go this pouch from his own hands. No doubt, the pouch held gold stones discovered up on the mountain."

With the back of his hand, Jupa wiped tears from his face.

"Of course, Naketi's son must keep this pouch, for it belongs to his great father. And if there is anything else stolen from a Mikokitul in this hut of Wyla, please take it with my permission," he said softly.

"I looked around quickly," Keleli said. "This is really all we need to take. This, the last thing Jupa's father held in his hands, also proves by where it was found, who his killer was. Our work here is finished and we're ready to take your men back to our hamlet, if they are ready to get Wyla's body."

"Now I know," Jupa said, his voice trailing off.

After they got back home and after the Nokotuls Kulutu and Luk unceremoniously took away Wyla's body, Keleli decided he had to call a meeting for everyone after dinner to announce the killings, at last, were over.

"We've been through so much, but I believe the violence has ended. I hope we can now go back to living without the suspicions and fears that came with the murder of one of our own," Keleli said, glancing over at Jupa and beside him, Sawaja. "The killer was crafty. No one saw him kill. The killer used a wooden knife." Keleli held the carved yew

knife up high for all to see. "And after stabbing our poor brother in the heart, leaving him to die, the killer ran away, tossing the knife in Tototo Stream. Jupa, Mojku, and Lewi helped find that knife.

"We kept looking for signs that would tell us who the killer was. But those signs were hard to come by. Jupa and I suffered great frustration.

"There were two brothers among the Nokotuls who might have known who the killer was, but they wouldn't talk. Katwa and Kon, two brothers whose names I say now with respect. You see, they can't talk because they are both dead. Killed. And so our neighbors the Nokotuls also suffered from this murderer."

A collective gasp from the crowd answered Keleli's revelation.

"As you know, last night a Nokotul, Wyla, snuck into our hamlet in the dead of night, entered my cave, and with an axe tried to kill me. I got out of his way and yelled as loud as I could--what these old lungs could manage anyway--"

A chuckle or two came from his listeners.

"And this person, who I couldn't see in the dark, ran out. He didn't get far because last night Jupa--" Keleli looked approvingly toward the young man. "Was on watch. After our last trip to the Nokotul hamlet, we both feared the killer might be coming after me. So when Jupa heard my scream, he was ready and drew his arrow and shot dead the Nokotul who ran out of my cave, and Jupa was right to guess I might have been killed or badly injured."

Jupa beamed. He knew he had acted confidently, without hesitation.

"So we know the person Jupa shot was none other than the person we suspected. Wyla, the Nokotul cripple. We always saw him wearing a sling for his right arm, but last night when he went to kill me there was no sling on his arm. Later, we saw he'd left it in his hut.

"You see Wyla had been deceiving everyone, wearing a sling for

his bad arm, which according to the elder Hajapo went bad long ago after he fell into a ravine. Wyla claimed the arm never got better. We will never know how strong Wyla's right arm really was.

"What we do know is he kept his arm's recovery secret from other Nokotuls for a long time. But Kon, one of the two murdered Nokotul brothers did know and happy with rice brew, he yelled out Wyla was not as helpless as he appeared. Kon, of course, was strangled that night. His brother Katwa was poisoned only days later.

"But all this killing has come to an end, I'm sure. How can I be so sure Wyla was the killer?" Keleli held up high the pouch with the mule-deer decoration burned on its flap. "I found this pouch, this pouch I saw Jupa's father make. Where? Inside Wyla's hut, right beside his bed. This was a pouch our slain brother would never, never give up unless it was taken from him by violent means. Do you understand?"

"Now we know who killed my pa," Jupa yelled, his face streaked with tears, but still beaming at his elder.

"Yes, Wyla, the Nokotul, was the killer and now his people will burn his body," Keleli continued.

"We must now celebrate how Jupa brought this all to an end. Soon, we'll have a special celebration. I'll arrange with Temali, the trader, for him to bring some of his finest rice brew for this occasion."

Cheers went up from the men, who always looked forward to the rare times, usually after many moons passed, when they could indulge in drinking rice brew. It made them forget all the troubles of their hard life.

For his part, Keleli decided not to tell people how he would pay for the rice brew.

"Let's cheer Jupa," the headman Wota said, getting to his feet.

They all began clapping wildly and Jupa fought back tears. Keleli put his arm on his shoulder, while Sawaja came forward and did the same.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:
SILVER LIQUID OF HAPPINESS, GOLD OFFERING,
BEAR GRASS GIFT

Not too many days later, the Mikokitul hamlet was atwitter and agog about the festivity coming up that evening. Every Miwokitul man stood ready to step up, quaff, and make short work of the rice brew Keleli had promised. They talked of little else.

For his part, Jupa was glad the search for Naketi's killer was over. While he would never forget his pa's dead body by the black oak tree, that moment in the failing, slantwise afternoon light would haunt him less and less.

His ma had fetched water and Jupa went over to talk. "You know, I've never drunk rice brew. Tonight the men want me to." He looked at her, his mouth gaping. Was he asking her to tell him what Naketi might say?

"Oh, we women don't drink rice brew. Children don't drink rice brew. But you're a young man, you killed your first deer. The men invited you." She winked, as if she had talked with such men as Mojku.

"They expect this of me. But I don't want to get sick." Jupa frowned at what he already imagined might happen.

"Don't drink too much. Just enough to celebrate. This is for you and Keleli." She splashed the rest of the wooden bucket into the cistern and smiled. The ends of her singed, dark hair were in stringy disarray, which is how they got when she worked hard. "Everyone is happy for you."

Jupa tried smiling, but failed, as he was unsure about what might happen. Something kept him from wanting to celebrate. He didn't know what, but as he left his ma, he knew he was no longer *little Jupa*.

He wanted to talk with the arrowsmith Pajpuli, so he walked over and told him the dog Cuku had growled once, only once, when Wyla was sneaking into Keleli's cave. "A hunting dog, of course. But a watch dog, I'm not sure." He laughed. "One growl, then his head goes down and he sleeps."

Pajpuli agreed: Cuku might never be a watch dog, but they both knew the puppy in spring season would be trailing mule deer.

"Ah, we have visitors coming--" Pajpuli said, pointing behind Jupa's shoulder at dust from the path north of the hamlet.

"It has to be Temali and his men." It was a wait before they arrived, but Jupa's heart beat faster knowing the whole hamlet soon would gather to celebrate the end of the Wyla's killing spree.

Jupa dropped down to sit beside Cuku the wolf puppy, who--red tongue now hanging out--had given him just enough warning when he watched over the hamlet.

That evening under a waning half-moon and after the porridge was eaten, the long-haired headman Wota stood and announced, "Let the silver liquid of happiness wash your throats!" He uncovered the cistern of rice brew. The Miwokitul men began to drink in earnest.

"Here, you're going to need one of these," Mojku said from behind. He held out a cup of rice brew for Jupa. The young man eyed the silver liquid of happiness in the black oak cup and knew the cup was an invitation not to be refused. Drinking rice brew would mark him as a man, and he would join a great Miwokitul brotherhood, past and present. Its members included, among others, his pa. He just didn't want to be sick.

"Drink up, man, you earned your rice brew." Mojku arched his back, as if showing pride in Jupa's latest exploit with bow and arrow,

and his eyes danced because he was doubtless ready for a second cup.

Jupa glanced at Mojku's dark eyes--beady hunter eyes that would pick out a mule-deer's flash of fur amid forest trees--and wondered why he had to drink to be a man. Was this the last step toward replacing his father Naketi as the man in his family?

He sipped the rice brew and scowled. His tongue recoiled from the bitter taste. If he swallowed and drank more, would his stomach dislike it as his tongue? Would he get sick? He frowned.

"Won't I get sick, throw up, if I drink this?" Jupa turned to Mojku, who though ready to fill up the cup again, hesitated, seeing Jupa had not taken well to the first taste.

"You only get sick if you drink too fast. Just sip. Even if it takes the night to drink this cup. Just sip and celebrate the murderer is dead--"

Then from behind Jupa: "Hoo, hoo!" Lewi yelled amid what was a gaggle of drinkers around the communal fire, who kept talking louder and louder at each other, even with faces but a hand or so apart. And through it all, Jupa saw one man after another slip away to the cistern, bend over and refill his cup. The drinking would not stop. Their rice brew cups, for now, were bottomless.

Jupa stared in disbelief: If he drank like these men, if he drank that much, would he be like them? The rice brew loosened their tongues as he saw in the past. But this time was different. He was drinking. Surely, Jupa wasn't now about to yell and shout--the death of his father was still with him. But if he drank all the rice brew his stomach could hold, he might get boisterous in his drunkenness--like the others around him--and forget the pa he had lost.

"Keep sipping, don't rush. You'll be all right." Mojku left Jupa for the cistern of rice brew.

Jupa took another sip. Keleli stepped over. "I see your rice brew. Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure why so many tongues find this enjoyable. Tastes

bitter to me," Jupa said after taking another sip.

Keleli laughed, leaning on his walking stick, holding his cup of rice brew in the other hand. "Just keep drinking. After a while, your head feels empty and you'll be happy. Then you'll know why men like this brew. It's special. Drink this and the hardness of daily life leaves you. You become happy--"

"Except the hardness comes back the next day, no?" Jupa said.

"Yes. But for you, losing your father and not knowing who killed him. All this has been hard."

Jupa let his head sag forward.

"But now your father's killer is in the ground too," Keleli continued. "You can decide what you'll do on your own. All of us here will, of course, try to help you on your way."

They talked of how life would be different with Wyla gone and the search for his pa's killer over. Before long, Jupa found he enjoyed talking with Keleli in a new way. An odd sensation came between his shoulders, a quivering, as if he might stand taller before Keleli.

Jupa took another sip and noticed, to his surprise, his cup was half empty. "I've been drinking very slowly, but I'm starting to feel a dull happiness." His forehead squinched in puzzlement. *What is this?* Was it the respect Keleli showed him or the silver liquid of happiness in his head? He didn't know. He was forgetting how hard life was without his pa.

"So your stomach still feels fine?" Keleli asked.

Jupa gazed in his wooden cup, the silvery liquid. A silly grin crossed his face. "Yes, fine."

"Just keep sipping. No need to rush. You look around, see Lewi, the others drinking, one big swallow. Don't try that. They've drunk rice brew many times before. They're used to it."

"I know. I'm drinking slowly, but so far I like it." Jupa nodded his

contentment at entering the special world of men, where rice brew was drunk as a privilege not shared with women or children.

"Well, you don't have to drink more than one cup tonight. You've nothing to prove by drinking a lot. You proved you're a man when you stood guard over our hamlet and killed that murderer after he swung at me with an axe. Yes, you've nothing to prove."

Leaving those encouraging words for Jupa, Keleli took his walking stick and shuffled off to the shaman Nyma. Jupa stood alone with his cup of half-finished rice brew. His chest puffed up despite himself, a prideful posture, one new to him, but then he never had such compliments from Keleli before.

He took another sip of the rice brew, letting its bitterness tease his taste buds, the livening taste reaching the recesses of his mouth. He was content with a sip. He really did not need to finish the rest of the cup to feel more pleasantness. What Keleli had said, how Mojku had welcomed him as a Miwokitul man--this made him happy. At the same time, the rice brew seemed to make that picture in his head of his pa lying dead by the black oak no longer hurt so keenly.

He stared at how the pale liquid in his cup reflected the light of the roaring communal fire. He sipped more rice brew. Just then Mojku returned to talk with him.

The next morning, Jupa awoke feeling lightly rested and quite relaxed. He had slept well. He squinted, his eyes blinking at the shafts of light blazing their way toward his cavern bedroll.

His ma, Sawaja, was gone and probably out in the field gathering plants. He heard no man's voice outside, not surprising because drinking the night before must have left many no choice but to sleep it off. Especially when the drinking only stopped at rice brew on the bottom of the cistern. He drank one cup and quit. He chuckled at his caution and knew both Mojku and Keleli gave good advice.

He sat up, stretched--arms out, hands clinched--ready to stroll outside. But first, he checked under his bedroll, his fingers probing

about for the leather pouch. The pouch with the mule-deer design his father had made and which Wyla had taken earlier. The furry hide, the palpably hard stones were still there. His exploring hand relaxed, knowing now Wyla would never steal any of it, pouch or gold.

Jupa left the cave and his shoulders rose to the morning sunlight falling across the chalky commons. His tongue pushed at his lower lip, his mouth opening slightly in surprise for the gold Keleli spent on rice brew really was being enjoyed still--as a soporific, if nothing else. From not only cave rooms, but propped up against boulders, Jupa smiled at the snorers--Lewi seemed the loudest--noisily letting forth with labored breathing.

Although the sun would move overhead, these men probably would stay closed-eyed for among them no drop of the silver liquid of happiness was left undrunk. Few, if any, would gather firewood. Jupa was ready to go after firewood, but he needed some hot acorn shell tea first.

Across the chalky commons, Lupu tended a fire, heating soapstones to boil water for tea. The fire would burn all day for it was the hamlet's source of heat against the winter cold. She already had a trough of water bubbling away.

Clean black oak cups sat on a nearby plank. He took one, dropped in a handful of broken acorn shells from a basket on the planking. "Lupu, do you have some hot water for me?" he asked, noting even early in the morning, perspiration beaded on her forehead from working by the fire.

Lupu dipped the cup in the trough of bubbling water and gave it back. "Thanks." He made straight away for a boulder to sit on. Holding the cup warmed his hand, as he surveyed one Miwokitul woman after another getting on about the morning tasks. He was sure his ma Sawaja had already left to gather plants in the field.

He blew across the top of his cup and let the tea steep. He didn't know what--other than gathering firewood--to do next. The long chase

after his pa's killer was over. He stared at the broken shells floating in the water of his cup. One by one, they sank. The tea was ready.

He sipped, appreciating the tingle the acorn shell tea brought his sleepy mouth. Certainly, he could not go back to how things were before he found his father under the black oak, dead.

He sighed, but knew after what he had been through, he would not fail.

His brow, under the lock of thick, dark hair, furrowed. The leather pouch of gold stones remained under his bedroll. Gold--so highly prized by everyone in the hamlet, for it had brought them countless bottles of the silver water of happiness, if only for one night--was also a curse. His pa and others had died for those same gold stones. He peered across the chalky commons, looking for the answer he didn't know. What was the gold for? Perhaps he was too young to know. Spend it on rice brew? Keep it under the bedroll? Or make a small sun disk to wear on a leather string about his neck? He shook his head. He didn't know.

He smiled.

He looked back at the dark entrance to his cave and drank the last of the tea, then stood.

Quick steps, then he slipped inside, the cool, quiet air calming his brow, his face easing into a smile. He squatted by the bedroll, lifted the thickness of dried-fern stuffing and his knowing fingers slid over the cold, dry rocks and found the furred leather pouch. His left hand grabbed at the heft of the pouch and he quickly made his way out to the light.

Across the yard, he stopped briefly to tell Keleli he was going for firewood. He smiled: He could always go about doing that later.

He kept on the path going northwest and his legs stepped off a steady descent toward a meadow in the distance. The path, well-trod, wove in and out of oak trees among the wild rye now all dead brown and pitched over from storms sweeping through.

Then at last he came upon the lone black oak on a small hummock at a sharp turn of the path: The Murder Tree.

He left the path and trampled the lank rye grass, and then gingerly stepped to the precise spot where he found his father's body. He dropped to his knees, knowing there Naketi took his last breath, there his heartbeat stopped, and there his eyes saw a last time the same beautiful earth as Jupa.

He set the leather pouch down. The soft earth beneath the tree he knew had special power. It had borne the weight of his father's dead body, a distinction that spot of earth shared only with the grave outside the Miwokitul hamlet.

The ground, covered with stubbly brown grass, was moist from the recent rain storm. He began digging with bare hands, taking out heaps of dirt, and after a while, after his fingertips ached with the hard scraping at the surprisingly firm soil, he had a hole not much deeper than his palm. He glanced around. Several broken branches, dead wood, probably snaps in recent storms. He grabbed a stick.

He tried that stick, then another. As he dug deeper, the earth seemed to grow softer. He kept at it until, tears welling in his eyes, the hollow he made went down more than an arm's length. He could no longer touch bottom with his hand and bring out handfuls of dirt.

A tear from his eye dropped into the excavation.

He had no more to dig. He paused and tears slid off his cheeks. He recalled in his head the picture of how he came to find what he had in the gold pouch. The gushing mouth on the mountain. He could only reach deep into those roiling waters so far before the gold stones were out of his reach. The extended arm, the fingers grasping as he reached now into the earth pit for some dirt he would come to revere because his pa had left life at that very spot.

Convinced he was not to dig any more, he rose, and with the bare-branched black oak his sole witness, he went to retrieve the pouch of gold stones. His *momkos* taking slow, deliberate steps, he once again

knelt by the hole, reached into the pouch and took out one gold stone. The gold stone, pinched between his thumb and fingers shone with a brilliant waver in the sunlight.

He stared at the gold stone, seeing it again, as if he had just taken it from it the spring. It was watery, for he was crying freely.

Then he let go the gold stone.

One by one, he took out each of the remaining eight gold stones, taking care to polish each on his pelt before releasing them back to where, of course, they originally came.

Once all nine gold stones were dropped, Jupa again looked back at the crown of the black oak and vowed to keep those pictures in his head of when his pa and he walked about for all days to come.

He then pushed the dirt back into the hole and tamped it down until at last, free of any grassy stubble, it was bare, fresh, and smooth.

That done, he stood, and rubbed the weightless, empty pouch across his teary cheeks. It was over: The loss was not to happen again. He looked southeast, up the mountain, where the Mikokitul hamlet sat in caves, just out of sight. He reached down, pinched some dirt and slipped it in the pouch, a pouch he would never again clean. As long as it held one grain of dirt, he knew his pa's spirit, which he honored with a gift of immutable stones, was with him.

The brilliant sunshine above urged him home. He walked off the hummock to the path and began the trek back.

In the hamlet, more Miwokitul men were out of the caves, though they moved sluggishly, if at all. Jupa eyed knowingly the headman Wota, his long, dark hair spilling chaotically about his shoulders, who sat in a stupor by his cave, seemingly unsure of when to start moving and what to do with himself. Across the chalky commons, grizzled Keleli, walking stick in hand, shuffled his way.

"Hello, Jupa, how goes it with you this fine morning after we celebrated your bravery?" He had a twinkle in his eye, and though he

might have drunk more rice brew than Jupa, Keleli seemed none the worse for the previous night's indulgence.

"I'm fine. I drank little last night and got up early," Jupa said, the excitement of what he did back at the Murder Tree telling in his voice.

"Oh, that's good. Enough to celebrate, but not so much you're useless to the morning," he said, swinging his thumb out in the direction of Lewi.

"I was already out for a walk." He beamed as if withholding a secret.

"Really, gathering firewood?" Keleli's eyes widened.

He turned sideways, held out his left arm, his hand tipping toward where he had hiked. "No, down to the black oak, the Murder Tree, where I found pa." Jupa looked Keleli in the eye, confident he did so now without the chance of a wet tear tracking his dust-covered face. He had his father's spirit, in a way, with him: the dirt in the empty pouch.

"Yes, the story of the past is important to gaining wisdom. So what did you bring back from your walk?" He leaned on his walking stick, eager for every word from Jupa.

"Nothing, except a pinch of dirt in my empty pouch," Jupa said, swinging it in his left hand.

"Ah, but earlier you possibly had something else in that pouch of yours," Keleli said.

"Yes. But the more my fingers felt what was in the pouch, the more I wanted to give it back to the ground on which pa took his last breath."

Keleli gave a nod of understanding. A smile crossed his face. "Yes, you did so respectfully and wisely."

"Only this morning, when I drank acorn shell tea, I knew I won't be like others who put too much store by certain things."

"It is so. Too often, people mistake it for theirs." he said, again nodding his head.

"I dug this hole, as deep as my arm would reach," he said, holding out his left arm with the pouch.

"And?" Keleli tilted his head slightly, awaiting the answer.

"I emptied all of it, covered it up."

Keleli's smile broadened. "You have my word, Jupa, I'll not tell anyone."

Keleli leaned on his walking stick. Jupa turned and walked back to his cave to leave the empty pouch and get on about gathering firewood. He might see his ma out in the fields.

One moon before, Sawaja had walked the same open field below the hamlet, and checked how a patch of bear grass was coming along.

That bear grass, reaching waist-high, had now stiffened in this twelfth moon. She knelt and her thumb and index finger pinched a bone-dry stalk of the bear grass. She felt resistance. The bear grass had gone white from summer heat. Sawaja stared at the ghostly stalks. The globes of white flower clusters from late summer were no more.

Wearing her customary rabbitskin poncho and slit-fringed buckskin skirt, she returned to the same patch of bear grass every twelfth moon to gather the two armfuls of stalks she knew would be enough for weaving a winnowing basket. Each time the bear grass that had grown waist-high and ghostly dry would be ready for the obsidian knife that lay beside her on the ground, a knife whose sharpness was respected: The accidental flesh cut was always unfelt and always bled fast.

She lowered her head, took a long breath. Her eyelids sealed. Once more, she felt those mornings she had knelt before the same white bear grass stalks, thankful she would have enough for a winnowing basket to replace the one frayed and worn. She closed her eyes and in her head came back pictures of the past stalks she had gathered from this place when they stood as ghostly as those before her.

"Oh, generous Puma Spirit," she said to the animal ancestor of the Miwokituls. "The bear grass grows tall once more and the rains in the

early moons nourished these plants. For this, we are thankful."

She opened her eyes, peeked at the ghostly stalks, each seemingly ready to be cut. Would it be different next time? Less plants, shorter stalks? Again, her eyes closed. "Puma Spirit, the bear grass grows well and each twelfth moon, I come here, always good, it is always good. Next time, it might be too. For the stalk gatherings to come, with your generous help, we offer the thankfulness that never ends."

Again, she opened her eyes. She began cutting, the bear grass stalks fell. The stubble of white ends would stay for moons. She would be back, after the new rains in spring, to look for the pale green seedlings. Then she would know Puma Spirit took the gratitude of the Miwokituls as heartfelt and was giving new life back to them. Bear grass for baskets.

She reached low in the white stalks and finished cutting handfuls of stalks she stacked to the side. That done, she tied off the stalk assembly with a mule-deer string and started carrying it back toward the hamlet and then ahead, by a solitary black oak, recognized a lone figure bent over, gathering firewood.

"Jupa!" she called out.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlie Dickinson had his first encounter with the land of the Miwoks, the setting for *The Thieves of Shiny Things*, on a Highway 49 road trip.

Research for the writing of *The Thieves of Shiny Things* would require subsequent trips to Highway 49 country. Volcano in Amador County offers caves to explore that have sheltered indigenous people through the millennia. In particular, the Grinding Rock State Park offers a wealth of information about these oak-eating people and how they made acorns edible, oak porridge being the dominant food source.

Dickinson lives and writes in Portland, Oregon, and maintains a blog at *cosmicplodding.net*.