

The Watcher

The mountains in the distance watched over me, as always. And soon, I will be watching with them. The horses took turns in ceasing their grazing to lift a head and look at me. Yes, I thought, I love you too. I closed my eyes slowly, deliberately, and then re opened them as I looked at Pikka, the lead horse. He returned my gesture of love with a slow closing of his eyes and a shake of his head.

It was time. My whole life had been steered towards this time, I had always known this was going to happen and I had accepted my fate without a second thought. I could have refused. But I didn't. Not even when Ukko blossomed into a man before my young woman's eyes and I felt a need for him, night after night. I wanted to ride beside him on adventures, I wanted to bear children, tend flocks, weave and trade. But that was just a childish dream; my future was of far more import than the joys of life.

I knew I should be frightened, sad, all the things that I had been warned about. "You will want to run, to hide and never return", they had told me. But I didn't feel any of that. Only a deep resounding peace. And a sadness. I knew this was what I had been born for. I had chosen this as a life path, and this life was a mere waiting until I returned to be my true self: The Watcher.

I wandered through the horses, my fingers trailing over their soft flanks. My brothers, I used to call them when I was little. I was an only child, as befitting a watcher, but the horses had taken upon themselves the roles of being my playmates and guardians. Pikka, my favorite, nuzzled against me, his nostrils blowing the lightly woven felt which hung like a curtain around me. I buried my head in his mane and breathed deeply: I loved his smell. I would always remember his scent - it would keep me going through the long years of watching. Gathering up a handful of his course mane, I rubbed his scent into my skin.

I had requested that Ukko be my preparer. It had raised a few eyebrows among the elders but then the last Watcher had been buried so long ago in the past that even our storytellers had lost the thread of how it was done. I saw his face when I made the request to the elders. Maybe it had been a mistake to ask for him. How would he cope? But I wanted to feel his touch around me, smell his scent and listen to his wordless crooning as I lay to sleep for eternity. His gaze tore through me as the request left my lips.

How many nights had he slept at the threshold of my yurt, knowing that he could never make love to me? How many nights had I laid awake, wishing that he would come to me, lie beside me, and bury himself within me? Knowing that it could not be, I would turn my face to the cold yurt wall and hope that my heart would become as stone.

But for him, there was no other woman. But for me, there was no other man. And I knew that there would never be a chance for our spirits to find each other, either in the wind of the mountains, nor in the flesh of the future tribe. My spirit was to be bound to the land for as long as the land existed. But he would heal, I told myself. He would find joy in the

body of a woman, and he would sire many great horse riders, and many great warrior women. And yet, I knew deep in my heart that he would not.

The shaman nodded his agreement, his old and twisted body struggling with the task that was before him. Ukko would be a splendid preparer, he had told the assembled elders. His love for the Watcher would be a powerful amulet and his lineage as the chieftain's son befitted the importance of the role. And so it was decided, without any input from Ukko. The decision was not his to make. The belt of the preparer was placed ceremoniously around his waist and Ukko bit his lip until it bled.

II

He sang softly to me as he rubbed oil into my limbs. His fingers traced the tattoos on my arms, back, legs and hands. Each animal was given special attention and he spoke to them, telling them to watch over the Watcher, to protect me as I slept. I felt his love being rubbed deep into my heart with each passage of his strong hands over my skin. I looked at him, my eyes roaming over his furrowed brow, his long straight hair and his proud face. How I loved this man!

His voice was steady as he sang all the ancient songs passed down from mouth to ear, songs that would guide the Watcher in her sleep. I placed my hand upon his cheek, slowly, deliberately. Although it was forbidden, I knew, within my knowing that what I was about to do was good and true and would not jeopardize my sleep. I placed my other hand upon his cheek, cupping his face in my hands. The blue of my tattoos stood out against the bronze of his skin; my hair of red mingled with the brown earth of his.

I gently, lightly, brushed his lips with mine. A touch hardly recognized, a touch hardly felt and yet a life of passion passed between us. He gathered my hair gently in his hands and pulled me to him, my head to his head, my thoughts to his thoughts. And he wept.

When he was empty and still, I began to sing. It was a song that I did not know. It was a song that came from the animals imprinted on my skin, animals who were a part of me, whose spirits mingled with my spirit. It was their song, for I was them and they were of me. I sang of the plains and the mountains. I sang of the wind and the snow, and I sang of the love between the sky and the earth. That love that was playing out between us: the love that created the universe.

As I sang, I drew his knife, unseen, and cut a lock of my hair. My fingers worked without thought, braiding that part of myself into his hair, so that a fragment of me should always remain with him. When I had finished, he reached with his knife for his own hair, but my hand stopped him. I could not carry him with me into the realms of the Watcher. In anger and pain he raised his knife towards his own heart. But my eyes stopped him. He dropped his head in shame. Silently, he resumed oiling my skin.

III

1990's

Katerina sat back on her haunches and looked up at the cold bitter sky. This was not what she had felt in her bones. When they had started the excavations, she had a funny feeling that something powerful and strange lay beneath her feet. Her excitement had reached fever pitch when they had broken through into the burial. But it was nothing out of the ordinary, a simple burial of a young male with only a few grave goods and nothing remarkable in the findings.

She couldn't understand it. Her feelings were never wrong. She hardly ever had them these days but this one had hit her strongly, almost physically. Warnings had plagued her night after night. Nightmares hounded her from the moment she had camped on the Altai: Such powers that had gathered to drive her away! Surely, something of great import was within her reach.

But as she looked into the burial pit beneath her, there was nothing to justify such a reaction from the spirits. The wind blew around her. Still that feeling was there. They were watching her. Instinct was laughed at by her colleagues, but her grandmother knew better. Baba had told her.....*don't mess with those bodies, leave them to sleep, they will kill you.* Katerina had laughed at her Baba, but she wasn't laughing now. She could feel them all around her, waiting. But for what?

Her knees were going dead as she squatted, her lips draining the metal cup of probably the worst coffee she had ever drunk. Visiting the USA had given her a taste for good coffee - the sunshine and good food of Florida diverted her attention for a moment. But only for a moment.

The barely audible sound of water dripping onto ice or something – it was almost not a sound, but a feeling echoing in her mind, prodding her - that was enough. Nothing could be seen but the alarm bells rang in her thoughts. Voices whispered all around her, threatening her. The intellectual mind of a scientist cut in loud and confident above all other noise. The burial pit has a false bottom!

Katerina almost screamed with excitement. She called in every direction for tools, helpers and eyes. The volunteers groaned; they were cold, tired and fulfilled. The burial was excavated and now they could start to wrap up to go home over the next few days. Only Alexi came to life. He recognized that tone in Katerina's voice. He had heard that tone before, and he knew what it meant.

“It's a false bottom, there is something underneath”, was all that she could get out, her voice almost strangled with an excitement that took away her words, replacing them only with a look of fear and joy. The voices were screaming all around her, and she ignored them.

In one lithe move, she jumped down into the pit. Yes, there as a false bottom to the chamber. Something lay beneath; another burial. The light was running away from them and within an hour it would be dark. Tears of frustration and tiredness fought their way

out as Katrina struggled to contain herself. Tomorrow, they would have to start tomorrow. Alexi put his hand to her shoulder and handed her yet another cup of revolting coffee.

That night she dreamed. Horses galloped towards her at high speed, anger in their eyes and the scent of death on their breath. They were not going to stop; they were going to kill her. A young man ran alongside the horses, his long hair streaming behind him and a weapon in his hands. His face, a contorted mixture of pain, anger and loss shocked Katerina more than the imminent death from trampling. His eyes locked on to her eyes.

Sitting bolt upright in bed, her body struggled to breathe. The scream of terror was trapped in her chest, it never even made it to her throat to form a sound. It was a scream of the heart, a scream of the deepest pain, a scream that could pass through time and space, to be heard by listeners of the future. Her body glistening with sweat and ridged from fear, she lay awake, vigilant for the sunrise. Her spirit wept for the pain in the warrior's eyes. And her mind told her to run, and never, ever return.

Alexi whistled as he began to unearth the horses. One after another they emerged, laid out in a row, appearing to be suspended on a platform, with their beautiful manes plaited and still intact. The ice had done its job in holding them still in time. Each horse was catalogued, its wooden harness noted with its beautiful ornaments and the felt saddles carefully touched by the workers.

Katerina drank more coffee; it would shut out the fear that was rising in her. The science side of her, her most dominant side, wished to carefully list and map out everything that was unfolding before her. The older side of her, her grandmother's voice was telling her to leave, now.

Day three into the dig and they were confronted with a large larch coffin. It was the hollowed-out trunk of a tree; such was its length. What on earth, who on earth, could be tall enough to warrant such a length? The two archeologists looked to each other. Each of the large copper headed nails had been carefully removed and tagged. Who was going to open it? Together, with the help of the others, they slowly and delicately raised the lid. Katerina forced herself not to look until the lid was carefully placed on solid ground.

Disappointment crept upon her when she looked into the coffin only to be greeted by a layer of solid milky ice that hid whoever was beneath. "Damn", she whispered under her breath. Orders came thick and fast. Get water, get the blow torch, and heat the water. NOW!!

IV

Ukko didn't look at me as we left the Yurt for my last walk to the mound. His footfall matched mine, his breathing, barely audible, also paced my own as I tried to be calm.

My mother watched as we passed, her face saying nothing. That was as it should be. My eyes thanked her, for everything, not just for her strength today.

The rest of the tribe who had made the journey to this place of death and life stood by and watched in silence as I walked past each one of them, touching each in turn so that I should remember their line, their feel. Three of our fiercest warriors fell in step behind me, giving me a ceremonial guard as I walked to my death. Each one of them, all women, their hair long and wild, strode in slow unison as I snaked my way across the plateau. They would stand guard until my spirit left me and then, with their strong arms they would ceremoniously carry me to the Shamans hut by the prepared burial chamber where my body will be prepared for eternal sleep.

At the foot of the mound of earth and rocks dug out of the summer earth to make my chamber, they stopped along with the gathered tribe and waited while Ukko and I stood on the threshold of the chamber that would soon hold my flesh and spirit. His breathing fell away from my mind and was replaced by the whispering of the ancestors all around me. Hands reached out me in greeting, their touch adding balm to my fears.

I turned to the rising sun as did the flowers that were scattered through the summer grass. I sang out the song of the east, spreading my spirit across the land, allowing myself to extend in all directions. I felt the deer stop their frenzied eating of the grasses before the winter came. I felt the horses pause in their wanderings. I felt the birds silence their calls. All waited as I passed through them and within them. I was throughout the land. I was the land.

Ukko placed a finger to my lips and I licked without thought. The ancestors, all around me, began to sing the song of the seasons, of the years and of the ages of the mountains. I felt my body fall and yet it was only a small part of me, as though a flake had dropped from my surface. I heard the deep throated cry of a man in pain. I tasted a bitter herb upon my tongue and smiled.

V

Placing the poison on the lips of my love was something that summoned all the power and strength I had left in me. Her eyes looked past mine as she licked. I had already lost her to the land. The draft of poison was a mere formality. Now I understood. This was where she belonged, but my body demanded her here with me, now. I wanted to catch her as she fell, but I just let her collapse at my feet, my arms unable to comprehend what was happening. Somewhere, I could hear a man screaming, it was the sound of a trapped animal. Was that me?

I was still holding her the following morning when the sun rose. And yet I could feel that she was not there, in my arms. She was already deep within the earth, all around me. I handed her body to the warriors. The shaman would, with his helpers, prepare the body

for interment. It was my place to dress her and lay her to rest, once they had done their work to ensure that her body slept long and hard against the ravages of time.

Her naked body lay silent, only she and I under the light of the oil. She was glorious, even in death. Once more I oiled her tattoos, remembering how as a young girl she had not made a sound through the hours and hours of pain as they had been imprinted on her skin. It had taken two days to complete the patterns of the Watcher. I loved her then, as I love her now.

It is strange. For so long I have ached to take this woman to my bed, to make love to her and to bury my face in her warmth. Now, as she lay naked, dead, there is nothing of her here. Her body, in all its beauty holds nothing. She is gone.

I began to sing as I dressed her, remembering how she laughed when I sang. Was I that bad? I stopped singing though, when I reached for her necklace. I had made it specially for this day. A string of wooden camels. I had been carving them once I was chosen as the Preparer, to give my hands something to do, so that I would not snatch her and gallop off with her on the back of Pikka, her favorite horse. She would have never forgiven me, and she would have been forced to kill herself.

I wanted to find more things to do, to keep her with me longer. Even though I knew she was not here in this shell, I wanted to tend her shell a little longer. But I could hear the shaman at the door, waiting. Walking out, I nodded my head to signal that she was ready.

Her favourite Dhanias seeds were placed near her, so that she could always reach them if she needed their taste. I could feel her all around me, already in the land, watching. Her mother climbed into the chamber beside me holding a cover that she had made for her only daughter. It was a rich counterpane of furs that had been decorated with appliqué. Gold leaf plants decorated the surface and they glittered as the cover was laid over her. I had to look away. She did not look dead. Resting on her side, with her hair falling around her face, I could have kissed her lightly, and I know she would have woken immediately, drowning me in her large green eyes. I climbed out, so that the lid could be closed and the platform for the horses put in place.

Chanting filled my head as the shaman called to the four winds. I started to walk across the land, feeling her beneath my feet, feeling her blowing through my hair, smelling her scent as it lingered among the flowers. I walked to the hills and then back to the chamber which was now covered in rock and earth. There I lay, watching the sky as it changed from late day, to dusk and finally, to night.

Was this how it felt to be her? Feeling the earth beneath you, seeing the stars parade above you, listening to the wind tell of the future and of the animals who sought sanctuary in your never-ending presence? How could I live with this knowledge? How could I go back to my people, sire babies, fight wars, slay enemies and grow old? No, I could not do that.

The night was moonless as I returned and lay flat on the freshly turned earth of the mound. She was beside me; I could feel her. How could she bare to be out here, alone, for ever? I could not leave her to such a fate, I could not leave me to such a fate either. My hand brushed the shamans pouch attached to my Preparers belt. I had forgotten to return it. Should I use it? The herbs were magically prepared for the Watcher only. But then, I was going to watch over her, so I was a watcher too. It was only a finger full. I remembered his words. Only a finger full and no more. What could more do? Kill you more??

Its taste was strange, it seemed to catch your throat and hold it so that nothing could get in or out. The earth was warm against my cold body, the cold night was warm against my heart, and all was silent except for the sound of the flowers weeping.

VI

Katerina gasped as the first glimpse of preserved skin emerged out from the permafrost. A beautiful woman was surfacing from the ice, her shoulder perfectly preserved after what must have been at least 2000 years. Intricate tattoos adorned her skin from her shoulder to her fingers.

Her headdress was tall and splendid, a felt crown covered with little wooden birds and golden griffins. Remnants of her abundant red hair still clung around her face. Still she was beautiful. Alexi stopped his work and gently stroked her cheek. Something emerged within him, a deep feeling of love and protectiveness. The camp chatter diminished to reverent whispers as more detail of this mysterious and glorious woman emerged.

Alexi whistled through his broken tooth as they stood around to observe her. She had been removed from her larch trunk and was now resting in a tent specially rigged for her. The team stood in awe as they gazed on the remains of a beautiful young woman dressed like a queen. Katerina had measured her; 5ft 7 inches. Very tall for a woman of that race and time. Her tattoos were astounding; deer with griffin beaks and Capricorn horns that became flowers, rearing rams, snow leopards. But it was her silk shirt that puzzled them all. It was a fine weave of yellow silk edged with red ribbon, a very rare fabric for that time and place, surely?

A breath passed across Katerina's face; she recognized the feel. That feeling, that instinctive recognition had plagued her night after night in her sleep: the warrior with the long hair. She could feel him all around her, threatening her, squeezing her heart until it hurt. More coffee was handed to her and she slipped a quick shot of vodka in it from her flask.

Orders from Moscow came through. A helicopter was on its way to take the maiden, and her artifacts back to the city. The rest could follow on later. She was to be prepared for flight immediately.

The problem was the size. Katerina measured the ice maiden for the fourth time. She was not going to fit in the holder of the helicopter. But she had to fit, they had direct orders

from the top: the body must be in Moscow by tonight. This was to be her crowning glory as an archaeologist; nothing must interfere or mar this in any way. There was no other way. Katerina got on the satellite phone. Could they have an embalmer ready? Only the best would do. With that knowledge, Katerina expelled everyone from the tent and set about the grisly task herself. She knew he was there, watching, helpless and raging. She could smell him.

The struggle to decapitate the sleeping woman was a lot easier than she thought it would be. The head came away easily, noiselessly. And that would give just enough difference to be able to fit the body in the holder. The head could be re attached later. What was, only seconds ago, a beautiful ancient woman of obvious power, now became a tagged and bagged collection of body parts.

A strange cry came from outside and Katerina, wiping her hands, looked out of the tent. A bird, quite large, sat outside the tent and stared at her. On the horizon, the outline of a man with long hair stood with his arms outstretched, a pony at his side. Damn and shit....the tribal people had heard about the dig, probably from the volunteers. She would have to get things out fast before a confrontation started.

The land cried out as the Watcher was torn from her sleep. The cry echoed around the mountains and across the plains, awakening the dreams of shamans, seers and old women. Only a lone man with shocked eyes and long wild hair, aimlessly wandering in grief, could be seen.

She had gone. She who watched the land, she who tempered the seasons, she who brought the rains, she who breathed the wind as it carried seed, she who rejoiced in the snow, basked in the sun and held the balance of the land in her two hands. She who guarded the underworld and cared for the most ancient ancestors, she who watched and warned. She was gone. And now that land would begin to die. The people would grow sick, the land would shake in anger, and the horses would no longer recognize the ancient trails that led the people in their summer migrations. She was gone, and the ancient power of the tribe was gone with her.

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