

Ansa squats by the stream to wash, being careful to wet between her legs like the women told her. The fingers of Eshtu play hot on her shoulders as she walks back to the camp. Soon the tents come into view, the summer grass long since trampled down around them. Her heart drops like a stone in water when she sees wood being heaped up for the feast tonight and thinks of what must follow. In the morning, the camp will be broken up.

Garoa is by the shelter, watching. 'What took you so long?' There is no trace of softness in the voice of her father's wife. 'Get over to the fire. They're mixing the kho.'

Ansa turns obediently towards the nearest hearth, where some of the Oak women are squatting around a flat pounding stone. She is glad to see that the wrinkled one who will be her mother-in-law is among them. Koru has kind eyes and the stories she tells around the fire fill Ansa with wonder.

The women look up, excited to see the bride approaching. She kneels in the space they have made, folding her long legs beneath her like an antelope. She keeps her head down.

'You needn't look so scared,' one of the women says. 'We'll make you beautiful for him.'

'That's why she's frightened!' There is shrill laughter. 'Or maybe she knows what to expect – maybe she's done it before.'

Ansa feels the warm colour rising up and spreading over the dark skin of her face. There is no real malice in the words of the women but their curiosity is like a blade scraping her skin. Then comes an older voice and she risks a fleeting upward glance.

'Leave the child in peace,' says Koru.

The others settle down to their pounding. Closing her eyes, Ansa thinks about what is to come. Though she tries to grasp and hold them, the thought pictures pass overhead like a flock of birds, out of her reach. *Women taking down the shelters in the early morning light. Her own people with packs on their backs, turning to wave. Ita putting his hand on her head, then walking away with Garoa and the children. He does not look back.*

She tries to picture herself trekking across the plain with these Oak People to their mountain range - the Nose of the Antelope. Climbing up to their cave. What can it be like to sleep in the dark nostril of a mountain? With strangers? To gather food with those women? One by one, the thoughts dip down then race up, away from her grasp. Only one thought remains, still and glowering, like a waiting vulture. After tonight's Balqa feast and the joining, she must lie down under a skin with the gap-toothed man, Bidari.