



THE DEER KING

~RETURNERS~

2

Nahoko Uehashi

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New York

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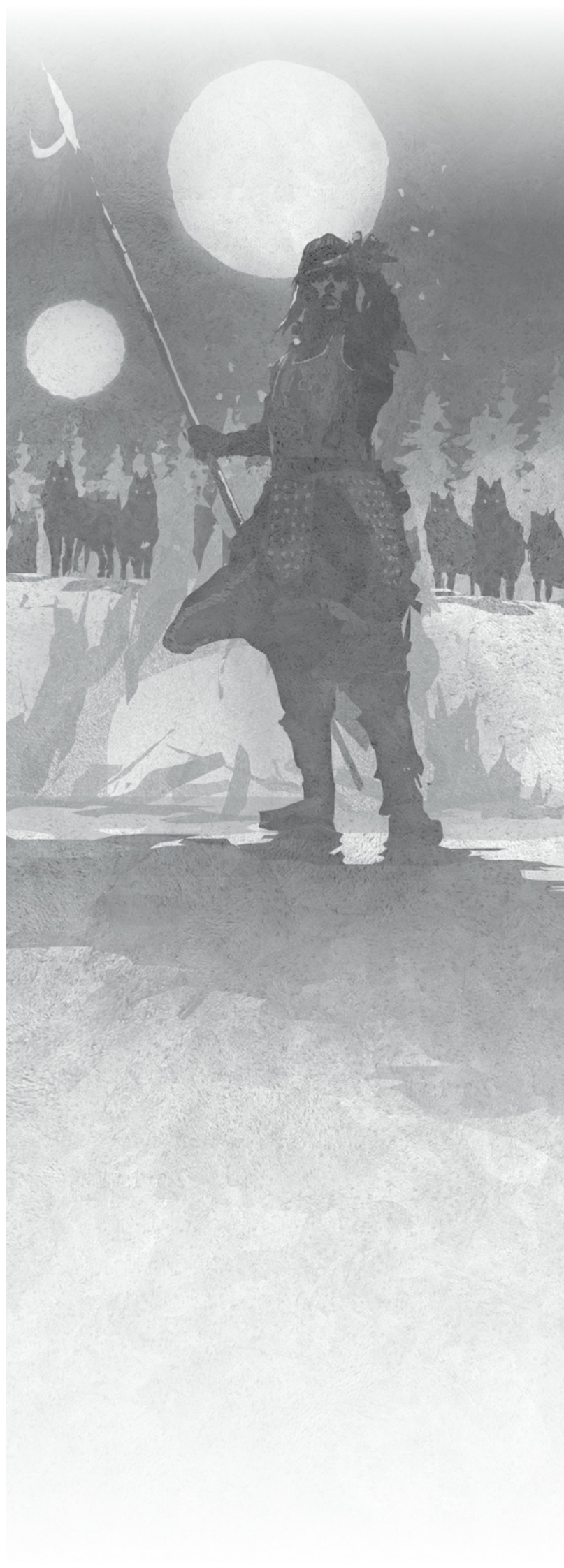
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List of Main Characters

Van

Leader and sole survivor of the Lone Antlers, a band of warriors who resisted the Zolian invasion. He was captured and enslaved in the salt mine of Aquafa.

Yuna

A little girl Van rescued from the salt mine.

Tohma

A young man from Oki who was saved by Van after being injured.

Ohma

Tohma's father.

Kiya

Tohma's mother, a Zolian who emigrated to Oki.

Hohsalle

A gifted physician and descendant of the Ancient Kingdom of Otawalle, which fell to ruin two hundred and fifty years ago.

Makokan

Hohsalle's servant.

Milalle

Hohsalle's assistant.

Limuelle

Hohsalle's grandfather. A renowned physician who cured the Zolian

emperor's wife of a fatal illness.

Tomasolle

Hohsalle's brother-in-law and head of the School of Living Creatures at the Otawalle Academy of Deeper Learning.

Shikan

Tomasolle's assistant who belongs to the Ahfal Oma, the People of the Fire Horse, on the Yukata Plains.

King of Aquafa

Ruler of Aquafa, a kingdom subjugated by Zol. He has pledged allegiance to the Zolian Empire.

Sulumina

Niece of the King of Aquafa. Wife of Yotalu, an influential Zolian.

Tohlim

The king's confidant. Known as the living encyclopedia of Aquafa.

Malji

Leader of the Aquafa Slave Trackers.

Sae

Malji's daughter and one of the best trackers.

Suohl

Also known as the Echo Master. An old shaman who lives in Yomida Forest and who can transfer his spirit to a raven.

Natalu

The Emperor of Zol. He has placed great trust in Limuelle ever since Limuelle saved his wife from a fatal illness.

Governor Ohan

A Zolian governor who rules over the former Kingdom of Aquafa, now the province of Ohan. Hohsalle saved his life.

Utalū

The governor’s arrogant and overbearing eldest son.

Yotalū

The governor’s second son. Possesses an intellectual disposition.

Lona

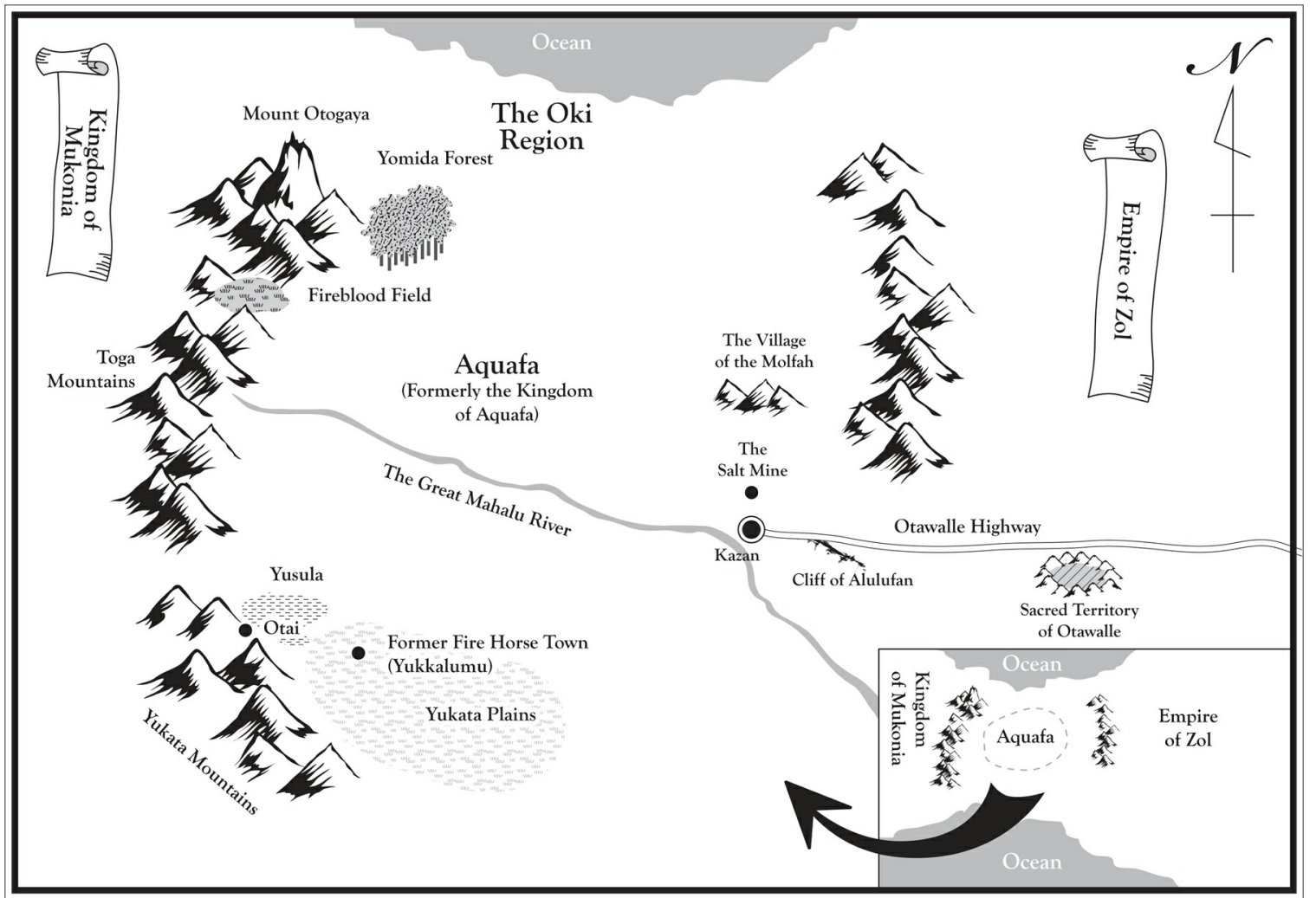
The chief priest-doctor of the provincial governor.

Kenoi

Former chief of the Ahfal Oma, the People of the Fire Horse. Now known as the Dog King.

Ohfan

Kenoi’s son and the current chief of the Ahfal Oma.



Chapter 7: The Dog King

1

In a Woman's Embrace

Blurred light touched his eyelids. Van groaned and forced his gummed lashes open. The bright flame of a campfire met his gaze.

He took a deep breath. His body felt like lead.

A voice drifted over from the other side of the fire. "How are you feeling?" A woman sat on a fallen log, staring at him. He stared back for several moments before he remembered her name.

Sae.

He tried to speak but could produce no sound.

Rising, Sae reached into a fir tree and grasped something. Then she walked around the campfire, knelt beside Van, and slipped her hand gently under his neck. She lifted his head slightly, and he felt something cold against his lips.

Snow. Virgin snow from the top of a branch. He reached out with his tongue and took a mouthful. It melted, soothing the inside of his fever-swollen mouth. His breath came more easily.

"Thank...you," he whispered hoarsely.

Sae nodded. After raising Van's torso, she rested his back against her body, exposing him to the warmth of the fire. Although slender, she seemed to feel no strain in that position. It was a bit awkward to be held by a woman Van barely knew, but the heat eased the discomfort in his body, which was stiff with cold.

The inside of his skull felt numb, and everything that had happened seemed strangely distant.

As he watched the sparks dance in the flames, he thought absently, *Just like my father's.*

Van's father had been good at lighting campfires and could even build one in deep snow where it was impossible to create a hearth. Making a campfire on top of the snow wasn't easy. Even if one succeeded at the igniting, the melting snow would drench the wood and snuff the flames.

His father had shown him how it was done many times. *"On days like this,"* he'd said, *"the first thing to do is chop down a birch tree."* He would fell a birch and split the trunk where the branches grew densest with his hatchet. *"The bark is full of oil here. If you make sure the flame takes thoroughly, the tree will act just like a firepit."*

That was easier said than done. Despite his father's instructions, Van had found it a challenging process to master. Yet this woman had accomplished it perfectly.

These thoughts sifted slowly through Van's mind while the numbness in his brain gradually dissipated, and the scattered fragments of his memory pulled themselves together from the dark.

With a jolt, he remembered what he'd been trying to do, and a needle-sharp pain ran through his chest.

"Yuna...", he gasped, then paused to gather his strength before asking, "How long was I out for?"

"Not that long," Sae replied softly from behind. "It's still the middle of the night. You've come out of it fast, so I imagine you'll regain some feeling in your shoulder where the arrow grazed you."

Van clenched his left hand and found that the numbness had lessened. However, it still felt as though he were clutching a wad of cotton. He opened and closed his fist, and a faint uneasiness wriggled in the bottom of his mind.

Who is this woman?

He recalled the figure that had stood partway up the cliff. When they met in the bath, he'd assumed she was just a nomad, but no ordinary wanderer would have known to shoot a flaming arrow into a hokuso tree. And judging by her

words, she was familiar with poisons, too.

Suspicion welled up within Van, then shot through his chest.

Sae had slipped her arms under his and held him around the waist. Van subtly moved a hand to grasp hers, but before he could, she slipped her arms up under his armpits and around the back of his neck, pinioning his arms and neck. He hadn't thought a woman could be that strong, yet she'd locked his joints like an expert.

"Don't move," she said. "There's a poisoned needle in my ring."

Something hard pressed against the nape of his neck—her ring, presumably. Van could break the hold forcibly, but it would risk being stuck by the needle.

"Who...are...you?" The pressure against his throat made speaking difficult, and he forced the words out through clenched teeth. "Why...?"

"I'm a Molfah."

Van knew that name. He'd heard it a long time ago. He dredged up what knowledge he could from the depths of his memory. His breath tensed. "The King's Net?"

From behind him, he heard a faint sigh.

"Yes."

Van's face contorted as he struggled to understand. "The king's spies? But why me?"

Her breath touched his ear. The only sound was her breathing. Just when he thought she wasn't going to answer, she said in a low voice, "I was ordered...to track the one slave who survived and escaped from the salt mines."

She can't be serious, Van thought, yet simultaneously, he realized that he'd half expected this. He gritted his teeth. Why would they spend all this time tracking one measly slave? And why was he being pursued by the Molfah, not the Zolians? It didn't make sense.

"Why is the king chasing me? To turn me over to the Zolians?"

"No," Sae muttered. "It's more complicated than that." Her voice trailed off

into silence.

In that pause, another question occurred to Van. “If you wanted to capture me, why didn’t you just tie me up when I was drugged by the arrow?”

He felt Sae jerk, and then she released him and stepped away. As the warmth of her body diminished, a wave of frigid air washed over Van’s damp neck and back, and he shivered violently.

Sae peered down at him from out of reach. Her face, lit by the fire, held a deep anguish. She stood there silently for a moment, watching Van, then her eyes slid away, and she strode into the dark forest. The sound of her footsteps crunching on the thin layer of snow that covered the undergrowth faded into the distance, and a deep silence cloaked the world.

Van stared blankly after her, at a spot where the trees sank into the darkness. A sudden sense of loss overwhelmed him, like he’d made some irreparable mistake. He longed to call her back, but he clenched his fists and kept this baffling urge in check.

Call her back? Your pursuer? What’re you thinking?

Sae might have gone to get other trackers. Van thought to escape now while he could, yet he didn’t move. If she’d intended to make him a prisoner, there had been plenty of opportunities already. Leaving Van was as good as telling him to run.

Or maybe she thinks that I can’t.

Perhaps that was it. She knew that Van was looking for Yuna. She was a Molfah with superb tracking skills. Even if she left him on his own, she would have no trouble finding him.

But still... Van’s doubts lingered. He couldn’t deduce her goal. Confused questions built up like foam on the water.

The King of Aquafa was subservient to a Zolian governor, and as the salt mines no longer belonged to Aquafa, there should have been no reason for him to pursue an escaped slave. Van had led the Lone Antlers and killed many Zolian commanders. The most logical reason to hunt him would be to make a show of the king’s loyalty by presenting Van to the Zolians. However, even that seemed

strange. Van couldn't believe he was worth enough for the King of Aquafa to keep the Molfah on his trail for this long.

Sae's voice whispering in his ear came back to him. *"It's more complicated than that."* Her words had been tinged with pain.

Van frowned. Even now he felt her gaze on him and remembered how she'd stood there, unable to speak her mind.

Why did she help me?

Hunting Van for two years must have been difficult. Yet when her prey had lay helplessly before her, she sat on that fallen log and waited for him to regain consciousness. Her fingers had placed snow in his mouth, and the way she'd held and looked at him...none of it matched her words.

Van buried his face in his hands. Something invisible had twined itself around him. Countless layers of thread bound and pulled him this way and that. But he couldn't see who held the strings.

Yuna.

Where was she? Where was she spending this cold night? The thought that, even now, she might be crying in fear made Van impatient. He wanted to get moving. Hatred kindled in his chest at the idea of Nakka's treachery. He'd pretended to be simple and honest, planning all the while to abduct Yuna.

But why?

Van recalled something—the rochai holding him at bay so that Nakka could steal away with Yuna.

The rochai...

Insight flashed through his brain like a streak of lightning.

The salt mines of Aquafa. Yuna and Van—the sole survivors. Yuna's kidnapper, Nakka. The rochai linked these together.

Van and Yuna were being tossed about like playthings—by whom or why, he didn't know. However, he felt confident the plan wasn't mere extermination. If that was the aim, the enemy could have killed them many times already.

Van paused midthought, stunned.

So it must be the opposite... Our sole value lies in the fact that we didn't die, that we survived the attack in the mine.

A bird called, shrill and short, from deep in the dark forest.

2

Following Yuna

The tree branches remained dark shadows, but the sky behind them was beginning to lighten. Dawn approached.

Van sighed and rubbed his face. His beard scratched his palm.

Time to go...

He'd slept lightly, waking frequently, and his head felt heavy, but the numbness in his body was almost gone. He wondered if he'd be able to find Nakka's tracks. It had stopped snowing sometime in the middle of the night, but any prints were likely covered by then.

Van rose, pondering how to follow the trail. As he swept some snow off a branch and put it in his mouth, he recalled the scent of Sae's fingers. Where had she spent the night? Her footsteps stood out clearly in the snow.

Should I follow them?

If she was in league with Yuna's kidnappers, then perhaps she left tracks to entice Van into a trap, not lead him to Yuna. Van strode to the other side of the campfire and picked up the hatchet. Although the thought of walking into a trap on purpose made him uneasy, he didn't hesitate. He could almost hear Yuna calling him, "Ochan, Ochan!"

Gripping the hatchet, Van examined the underbrush with a hunter's eyes, then slowly began to follow the trail.

Van quickly realized that Sae had deliberately left her tracks for him to find. They were all over the place, practically shouting that this was a ploy. She must have known that Van would recognize how unnatural her trail was. Sae seemed

to be taunting him, asking, “Do you dare follow, even though you know it’s a trap?”

But why would she do that?

Maybe she’s just guiding me, he thought. Wherever Sae had left a track, there was also the print of a boot worn by a man of Nakka’s build. Sae seemed to be following him. If so, perhaps she was using her Molfah skills to locate signs of Nakka’s passage and left an obvious route for Van to follow.

He scowled, realizing his heart still wanted to believe in her kindness. If he let such expectations blind him, he would get snared. Sae was leading him to the place where Yuna had been taken. That much was obvious. However, he had no idea why.

Nakka did not appear to be concealing himself, either. Rather, he’d walked under the trees where his tracks wouldn’t be covered by falling snow, preserving a clear trail that invited pursuers. Presumably, he’d drugged Van to put sufficient distance between them to evade capture before reaching his destination while leaving a path that was easy to track.

But why? Why would they both do this? What possible reason could they have for going to all this trouble?

For two days straight, all Van did was follow the trail. On the third, he stopped to hunt and fill his stomach with meat. Meat would warm his body. On the dawn of the fourth day, he doused his fire and set out with a renewed vigor, picking up the trail again.

As the sun climbed into the sky, its pure light fanned through the trees. Birds hopped from branch to branch, chirping as they went. Every time they landed, little clumps of snow fell to the ground. A fox slipped away through the underbrush, scattering the thin layer of snow that powdered the bamboo grass. Once the bright morning sunshine filled the whole forest, Sae’s tracks veered away from Nakka’s. The reason was soon obvious: smoke.

Sniffing the air, Van raised his eyes and peered through the trees.

Tents?

They were well camouflaged. Their colors blended with the hues of the forest,

but there was no mistake. Tents stood ahead, beyond the trees. As Van's eyes grew accustomed to the sight, he saw many.

He frowned. That must be his destination. Nakka had hoped to lure him here by kidnapping Yuna.

Van smelled dogs and heard them barking. The scent of smoke wafted to him, carrying with it the bustle of people busy with their morning chores. Approaching unnoticed was impossible. If there were no dogs, it might have been different, but there were. Should Van venture any closer, he'd be discovered even if he waited until after dark. He was on his own, and there was no time to devise a plan.

Which leaves me no choice.

After a slow, deep breath, Van strode toward the camp. He didn't get far before he sensed creatures approaching covertly. They came not from the camp but from deep in the forest. The scent of beast filled his nostrils. A familiar sensation prickled his nose.

They're coming.

The rochai. Those creatures were coming to him again. He could feel his body responding, trying to change into an animal...

Van hesitated for only a second, then gave himself up to the strange olfactory sensation that washed through him like a wave. In return for relinquishing words and human thought, he gained the eyes, ears, and nose of a beast, and a body that moved on instinct alone. Something spread from his nose through his head, and the scene before him changed abruptly. Van's eyes widened. Curling his lips, he snarled.

The rochai halted without a command. They simply froze, and their tails drooped between their hind legs. When Van stepped toward them, they edged away.

Color faded from the world, and everything stood out starkly, silhouetted against the gray. Sounds and smells rushed for Van with a peculiar intensity. And there was more. He sensed countless invisible, pulsating threads connecting all things, wrapping themselves around the earth and stretching up

into the heavens. When he walked, the mesh woven by these invisible threads pulled and warped, pushing against the rochai so that they drew back.

Tiny ripples appeared in the mesh, and Van raised his snout. Humans.

The scent of men. And of horse, although he sensed none here. Men moved toward him. They reeked of metal—a foul smell that emanated from the spears in their hands.

Someone spoke, and a voice reached him. Van stared intently at the approaching figures, raising his ears to catch the words.

“—en Antler, Van.”

The moment he heard that name, he felt his beast senses fade. As smells and sounds receded, color flooded back. The men who strode toward him, spears in their hands, wore scarlet sashes across their chests. They stopped outside the reach of Van’s hatchet but within range of their weapons, watching him. Although they exuded the cold power of skilled warriors, Van felt no fear, much to his surprise.

Bite... Want to bite... The thought came to him out of nowhere.

A pungent odor thrust up his nose to the crown of his head. Phantomlike images flickered in his mind and vanished, reappearing again and again, as though viewed through a red haze. He clenched his jaw and struggled desperately to resist that fiendish urge.

Am I going crazy?

It was as if he were two beings in one. The creature that longed to sink its fangs into these men struggled fiercely with the man who was appalled to see himself gripped by monstrous desire.

His temples pounded, and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and waited for the impulse that racked him to pass. The muscles in his shoulders, arms, and rib cage spasmed as he wrestled with the demonic strength that swelled inside him.

A faint voice, like a distant echo, reached him from the bottom of the haze.

Don’t bite, don’t bite, don’t bite... You’ll kill them if you do.

Van hung his head and focused his mind on that quiet voice. His lifeline. The only cord to which he could cling if he were to ride out the impulse that shook him like a gale. He must not kill. Once he started, he would never stop. He would kill them all.

“Broken Antler Van.”

He opened his eyes at the sound of his name. His field of vision wavered. The figures before him became clear and distinct gradually. The rochai shook themselves, as if to escape a spell, then turned on their heels and raced into the woods.

The warriors watched them depart with relief and joy plain on their faces. A man with white hair that flowed down his back like a horse’s mane took a step forward from the group. “Leader of the Lone Antlers,” he said with a husky voice. “We have been waiting for you.”

3

Ohfan

Van was led to a large tent twice the size of the others. The men took his hatchet and ushered him, unarmed, inside. While they didn't treat him roughly, neither were they gentle.

In the center was a hearth, behind which hung a large banner embroidered with a rearing horse, poised as though to charge. Its fiery red mane streamed in the wind. Three low stools were placed around the fire. The white-haired warrior walked around the hearth and sat in the center, his back to the banner. A middle-aged man and a youth were seated on either side. The clear resemblance indicated they had to be the old man's kin, either his son and grandson or a nephew and grandnephew.

After placing their spears on a rack outside the tent, the other warriors entered and stood behind Van with their hands on the hilts of their short swords. The elder looked up at Van and gestured for him to sit, but he remained standing, gazing down at him.

One of the warriors behind Van stepped up and grasped him roughly by the shoulder as if to push him down. At that moment, however, Van dropped to a crouch. Taken by surprise, the man lost his balance. Van threw him on the ground in a reverse armlock and planted his foot on his neck. The men behind reached for their swords.

"Be still!" Van shouted. "Move and I'll break his neck."

The warriors froze, but the white-haired elder watched as though unconcerned. The corner of his mouth rose in a sneer. "Go ahead and kill him," he said. "It's only right that one who blunders should die. None of us will be of

use to you as hostages.”

The cold gleam in his eyes made Van’s skin crawl. Van twisted the arm of the man beneath his foot, dislocating his shoulder. The man bellowed with pain, and his eyes rolled. While his cry still shook the air, Van leaped across the hearth and grabbed the old man’s face with one hand while twisting the man’s sword arm behind his back with the other. He then shoved the man’s face into the thin rug and pressed a knee against a vital point in his back. Van turned his attention to the warriors.

“Does the old man tell the truth? Is even he worthless as a hostage?”

The men’s expressions remained stony, but their eyes betrayed their consternation, flicking toward another part of the tent and back again. Van caught this subtle movement out of the corner of his eye and frowned.

“Kill him!” the elder croaked as he lay drooling beneath Van.

Van let the sound slide over him, keeping his eyes fixed on the men.

“You called me Broken Antler,” he said. “If you know that name, then you must know what else they called me.”

That earned a twitch from the man Van suspected was the elder’s son. Van focused his gaze on him as he continued. “I hate so-called leaders who treat the lives of their soldiers like less than dirt. They make me want to puke. If I’m going to kill you all anyway, the leader will go first.”

The elder’s son replied, “Even if you kill my father, you won’t get what you want. The child will die.”

Van’s mouth twisted in a mirthless grin. “If you kill her, you’ll have lost the bridle by which you hope to hold me. I can’t claim to know why, but you seem to have gone to a lot of trouble to get me. Are you sure that’s what you want? If so, then I’ve got nothing to lose, have I?” The grin vanished from his face.

“If I can never hold her in my arms again, I might as well die taking revenge. I was as good as dead before anyway. I’ll kill the lot of you and tell my friends in the next world all about it.”

The moment these words left Van’s mouth, he felt that wouldn’t be so bad. A

thirst for vengeance surged in his breast. He watched the blood drain from the son's face.

"Wait!" someone cried.

Van turned his head to the right. The youth who so closely resembled the elder pinned beneath Van's knee stood from his stool and spread his hands wide.

"Ohson, sit down!" the other man shouted angrily, but the youth ignored him and stared straight at Van, his face pale but determined.

"I'm likely to lose my head for this." The young man's voice trembled as he pressed on. "But even though it may cost me my life, I will speak. It's the cause that matters. I'd gladly relinquish my life for the cause. I apologize for our rudeness. Please, hold your anger and listen to what we have to say."

Van stared at him. "I'm not angry because you were rude," he said quietly. Ohson looked taken aback. His wide-eyed face still had a bit of boyishness. "You want something from me, right?" Van continued, his gaze never wavering. "Isn't that why you kidnapped the child?"

The young man blinked. "Yes, it is."

In a flat voice, Van continued, "If you want to throw away your own life for some cause, then go ahead. But my life is my own. That child's life is her own. You have no right to decide whether we live or die. You know what I'm mad at? You and this stupid old man slobbering beneath me. You seem to think it's fine to extinguish the life of a child who's done nothing to you. I'm furious because you can't see what you're doing is wrong, even when it's obvious."

The only sound in the hush that fell over the tent was the elder's strained breath. Van shifted his gaze and fastened his eyes on a warrior standing in a corner of the tent. "If you wanted something from me, you should've come and asked," he said. "You ought to have introduced yourself and told me what you wanted. Are you incapable of something so simple and ordinary?"

The warrior's eyes widened. He gazed back at Van for some time before speaking. "Why're you saying that to me?"

Ignoring his question, Van raised the elder's head and slammed it into the rug.

There was a dull *thud*, and the old man groaned. Van let him go. Dusting his hands, he rose to his feet and stretched. Turning once again to the warrior in the corner, he said calmly, “I asked first.”

A smile spread slowly across the man’s face. The passive demeanor of an ordinary soldier vanished, replaced by that of a proud and powerful man.

“I see. So the leader of the Lone Antlers is no pushover.” He cast a sardonic glance at the others. “I guess it can’t be helped. They couldn’t stop looking my way whenever you did something unexpected. Best to drop the tedious act, then.”

He jerked his head from one side to the other, cracking his neck loudly, then stepped forward to stand before Van. Stocky and powerfully built, he looked to be about twenty-seven. His large, piercing eyes carried a hard glint.

“I am Ohfan, chief of the Ahfal Oma.”

Van returned his stare silently, but Ohfan appeared unperturbed. “You have a right to be angry. Taking the child was underhanded. We had a good reason, but if we’d judged you properly, we wouldn’t have bothered with such an elaborate scheme.”

Van’s eyes narrowed. “Judged me?” Anger oozed from his voice, and Ohfan raised his hand.

“Sorry. A bad choice of words. We sought only to ascertain your measure. After all, you’d been living with a bunch of Zolian immigrants.” He opened his mouth as if to say more but appeared to reconsider and gestured instead for Van to sit down. “It’s a long story,” he said. “Have a seat. I’ll join you.”

Ohson leaped forward to offer Van his stool while his father gave his to Ohfan. Ohfan sat with a flourish and then said to the elder’s son, “Take care of Oofah.”

The man nodded but kept his eyes lowered, a show of his shame over failure. He whispered something to Ohson, and the two of them carried the elder to the back of the tent and lowered him to the ground, where he lay clutching his forehead. Some others took the man with the dislocated shoulder outside.

Once things settled down, Ohfan turned to someone behind him and made a

gesture of drinking. The man moved swiftly to bring a clay jug and two cups. Ohfan passed one cup to Van and poured a liquid into both.

“To a fresh start,” he said. “Drink up.” He drained his in one gulp.

Van brought his cup to his lips. The cloudy white liquid pricked his tongue as it slid toward his throat. It had to be fermented mare’s milk. Ohfan immediately filled his cup again, then called to one of his men near the entrance. “Bring us some food.” The man bowed and slipped outside.

Turning back to Van, Ohfan said, as if to himself, “Now, where should I begin?” He paused and gazed at Van for a long time without saying anything. Finally, the corners of his mouth lifted. “Broken Antler Van. I’ve always wondered what kind of a man you are. The phantom Pyuika Rider who used to charge out of nowhere and scatter the Zolian bastards... So, this is what someone who has seen hell looks like.” His smile broadened. “You managed to drag me out to negotiate with you even though your child’s been taken hostage and you’re on your own.” The grin vanished. “But I still hold the trump card.”

A cold flame burned in his eyes. Unlike the elder’s eyes, his were ice to their very core. “You claimed that if you couldn’t see the girl again, you’d drag us into death with you. I don’t think you were lying, either. There’s a nihilistic emptiness in your face... One step backward, and you’d plunge to the bottom of darkness. And I bet you wouldn’t utter a word as you fell. In fact, you’d probably look relieved.”

Ohfan’s lips curled. “Even so,” he whispered. “That girl’s precious to you. Perhaps you could endure if she passed quickly. But how would you fare watching her die in agony as her ears were sliced off, then her nose, or if her guts were pulled from her stomach?”

Van stared at Ohfan—at those cold, mocking eyes. “What kind of a man would even think of doing something so cruel?” he breathed hoarsely.

Ohfan blinked. His eyes narrowed slightly, and for a moment, he didn’t speak. Finally, he heaved a deep sigh and said, “I’ve got a job to do, regardless of the cruelty necessary.”

Van peered into Ohfan’s glinting eyes.

Ohfan threw his cup aside and stood. “Come. There’s something I want to show you.”

4

Fire Horses on the Snowy Plain

White light flickered through the needlelike tree leaves. Ohfan picked a path that had already been cleared of snow. People stopped their work to watch him and his men pass. The look in their eyes wasn't curiosity at the sight of a stranger. It was closer to a desperate prayer.

Van felt their unspoken plea twine itself around him. The innocence of the children was the only relief from its oppressive weight. They glanced up at their parents questioningly, then poked and shoved each other. When one of them fell, they giggled under their breath. Chickens scurried about, oblivious to everything, scratching and pecking industriously at the dirt beneath a thin mantle of snow. The delicious aroma of food bubbling over the fire mingled with the acrid smell of smoke and the pungent odors of livestock and damp earth—the scent of a village in winter.

Van recalled the village where his aunt had lived after she got married. His mother had often taken him to visit her. Snow lingered in that small settlement deep in the mountains, even in spring. It smelled much like this.

Dogs bared their fangs and barked incessantly, disturbed by Van's unfamiliar scent, but they did not leap at him.

They've been trained well, he thought. They were all handsome creatures. Their fur and muzzles, the way their ears pricked up, and the angle of their tails were enough to capture any hunter at a glance.

Ohfan reached the edge of the village and continued into the forest. Van walked behind at a leisurely pace. As the gap between him and Ohfan widened, he felt the irritation of the men bunched up behind him, but he did not quicken

his pace. He wanted to learn the terrain.

Van sensed the presence of others within the dimly lit wood of evergreens and deciduous trees, but only occasionally. Dog barks echoed in the distance. Men were out hunting, Van assumed. The forest seemed somehow familiar. Van felt as if he might come upon his own village if he kept walking.

The narrow path through the trees was more like a game trail, but judging by the well-trampled snow, it saw frequent use. It sloped up a gentle rise, then ended abruptly. Van and Ohfan stepped out under a blue sky.

The scene stole Van's breath. A broad expanse of white snow stretched into the distance. A hot lump rose in his throat at the sight of the bordering mountains. They were the peaks of his homeland, the ones he often saw in his dreams.

There's Ukahla Peak! Then this must be Fireblood Field!

To find himself here of all places! Below him stretched the plateau that lay along the eastern side of the Toga Mountains, just a day's journey from his home.

No wonder everything seems so familiar!

The hot lump in his throat heated his eyes and nose. Home—and all the word meant—stood ahead. The mountains and rivers where he had grown up, his family and friends, his wife and the life they'd shared with their son.

He could almost smell their simple home. The familiar image of its single room formed before his eyes, complete with his wife and son, firelight from the hearth playing softly over their faces as they cuddled beside it. Loss rippled through Van, crushing his chest, leaving him unable to breathe for a moment.

Even if he traveled to the other side of that mountain, his house was gone. He knew this, yet he could do nothing to quell the longing that wrenched his heart.

Van took a deep breath.

Fireblood Field, which in summer was a sea of swaying grasses, was presently cloaked in white and dotted with red-skinned creatures. They appeared to be scratching at the snow and grazing on the plants beneath.

Ohfan disappeared between two rocks. Evidently, there was a path down to the bottom of the cliff. Van glanced at the men behind him, and they gestured with their eyes for him to follow Ohfan. The brightness in their expressions surprised him. Gone were the frowns of grim irritation they'd worn moments earlier. Like boys about to set off on an expedition, their faces shone with unconcealed joy.

Van proceeded along the path down, his feet crunching occasionally on the snow that clung to the rocks. When he reached the bottom, Ohfan glanced at him over his shoulder. His face also glowed with unabashed delight. Raising his brows, he laughed out loud, then returned his eyes to the plain, cupped his mouth with his hands, and shouted, "Ho!"

Again and again, he called, his voice booming in the air. As it traveled across the plain, the scattered herd began to move; sparks streaking across a white field.

One of them pulled ahead and galloped full speed toward them, undulating with supple grace and brimming with energy.

The sight gave Van goose bumps. As his eyes adjusted to the dazzling glare of sunlight on snow, he saw that the creature drawing steadily closer had to be a horse, yet he doubted his own eyes.

It was a head smaller than ordinary steeds, yet its limbs were flawlessly muscled, and power radiated from its body. With each movement, a lustrous sheen rippled like flame across its flanks. Van stared speechlessly at the beautiful red creature that raced across the snow.

It galloped right up to Ohfan and nudged his chest with its muzzle like a happy child. "Hey there," Ohfan said with a laugh. Slipping a hand into the horse's mane, he stroked its neck, then looked back at Van. "Isn't he a beauty?" Van nodded.

"And he's not just handsome," Ohfan added, laughing again. "He's fast, too. Aren't you, Ahfa? That's right, I'm talking to you. You're the best."

The horse's nostrils flared, and he stretched his neck proudly, seemingly aware of the praise. The other warriors were calling their own horses, and the commotion made conversation impossible. Rather than scold his men, Ohfan

just listened, smiling magnanimously.

Each horse raced to its master. The expressions on the warriors' faces as they greeted their steeds reminded Van of his dead comrades, and pain stabbed his heart. They'd looked just like this when greeting their mounts.

Van recalled what it was like to call his pyuika. The joy that had swelled in his breast when it raised its head, separated itself from the herd, and came prancing over in delight. The pleasant scent of its sunbathed hide. Its limpid black eyes gazing back at him.

These warriors' laughs overlapped with the ancient echoes of his comrades. Although all of these men's steeds looked proud and powerful, none could match the brilliance of Ohfan's cherished Ahfa. When he'd claimed that his was the best, he had not been boasting but merely telling the truth.

The men talked fondly to their horses, stroking their muzzles and checking their legs. In fact, they seemed so wholly absorbed that they'd forgotten Van entirely. He could have taken a few steps backward and disappeared along the cliff path without them noticing. He smiled wryly at the thought.

Catching Van's eyes on him, Ohfan offered a sheepish grin. "The haunches of a pyuika are narrower than a horse's, aren't they?" he asked, as if to cover up his embarrassment. His tone lacked his former arrogance.

"Yes."

"I always wondered how far they could possibly run carrying a man like you."

Van smiled. "They're sturdy things. They can carry me up and down a steep cliff without any problem at all. They run all day and night without tiring. To me, your horses look more fragile."

Ohfan cocked an eyebrow. "Really? They're that strong?"

"Yes. And not just strong. They're swift. I admit they likely couldn't compete with a fire horse on an open plain, but pyuika are unmatched in the mountains."

"Fire horses can ride down cliffs, too," Ohfan said with a grin. "Although not the Cliff of Alulufan. How about pyuika?"

Van knit his brow. *The Cliff of Alulufan? The one in east Aquafa?* True, it was a precipitous bluff, but it seemed odd that Ohfan would bring up such a distant place.

“Yes, they could.”

“Really? Have you done it?”

“In the past. When we were looking for good places to ambush the Zolian army, I traveled all over. The pyuika climbed down it, but I think it’s beyond a horse. Even a fire horse.”

Ohfan’s expression clouded. Van wondered if he’d angered him by suggesting that fire horses were inferior to pyuika, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

“Pyuika in the mountains, fire horses on the plains,” Ohfan muttered. He gazed at Van, then gestured to the approaching herd. “You may not know much about horses, but what do you think? Do you notice anything when you look at them?”

Most of them appeared to be mares. There were a few geldings and some colts. At first glance, this seemed quite normal, but when Van looked closer, he saw that the colts’ hides lacked luster, and some of them stumbled in the snow. “Were those colts born last spring?” he asked. Van had heard that horses foaled in early spring. If so, then those colts were unsteady on their feet even after a year.

Rage clouded Ohfan’s face. “Yes, they’re almost yearlings. At this age, they should be kicking the earth with their hooves and running about...if we were in the plains of our homeland, that is.” His voice trembled with more than anger. A profound grief suffused his features.

5

The Voice of the God

“It’s too cold here,” Ohfan said, his eyes still on the herd. Despair colored his words.

Van furrowed his brow. “But I thought horses were hardy enough to withstand cold weather.”

Ohfan shook his head. “Other, maybe. Not fire horses. They were made to shine in the sunlight of the plains, not live in a land buried in snow. Many foals died, unable to stand in the deep drifts when they dropped from their mothers’ wombs. They froze to death.” His lips quivered, and anger smoldered in his eyes.

“Fire horses won’t foal under a roof,” he continued with a bitter smile. “We tried making a stable like they do in the north, but when it came time to birth, the pregnant mares went crazy. One of them threw herself so hard against the walls that she broke a bone. We couldn’t stand to see that happen.

“Fire horses belong on the plains where the sun burns bright. The Yukata Plains are like a mother’s generous bosom, embracing and nourishing the herd. The horses have grown weaker every year since we were forced to leave and come to these snow-laden fields. Who knows how many foals will be born next year...or how many of those will survive.”

He pressed his lips together and paused to steady his breathing. Then he looked at Van. “What about you? What if this happened to your pyuika? Could you bear to watch them suffer and die?”

Van recalled how pitiful the pyuika had looked when tied to a post, and his face clouded. The joy of watching pyuika alive in their prime and the pain of

seeing them sick. For men born to the Gansa clan, these were feelings deeply rooted in their being, transcending reason.

The same was true for these men here. The agony of watching the fire horses decline, day in and day out, ate at their souls. And there was no remedy or end in sight. With the Yukata Plains under Zolian rule, there would never come a day when they could return. Their suffering would only end when the fire horses had died off. Then, finally, despair could turn to resignation.

Ohfan's face twisted. In a low, rough voice, he said, "When we were chased from our homeland, I cried out. I climbed to the top of a rocky mountain, faced the Yukata Plains, and shouted myself hoarse. 'O Kinma!' I cried. 'What did we do that you should forsake us? Are you angry with us for our weakness? For allowing these greedy invaders to defeat us?'

"I felt so ashamed. So ashamed that my bones threatened to crumble. Yet, at the same time, it seemed so unjust. And it is, isn't it? Which is worse: To live peacefully in one's own land as we did or to terrorize and oppress, taking homes from others and calling them your own as they do? Even a baby could tell you the answer."

Ohfan's words traveled over the snowy field and faded away.

"We're a small clan. But we lived a proud and honest life. We never sought to take what belonged to others."

He looked at Van with tears in his eyes. "Have you ever wondered why fate is so unfair? That's what I really asked on that mountaintop. Is this the way the world is supposed to be? Is it truly so unjust? Are the weak just there to be eaten by the strong and become their flesh? Is that the truth? Was our little clan born into this world just to become fodder for the powerful? Why are some people fated to suffer?"

Van listened silently, but within, he heard another voice—thin and faint.

"...Why me?"

His son had whispered the words on his deathbed as he lay in agony, incapable of sleep. That voice never left Van's mind.

What determined who would live a healthy life and who would die?

“I prayed,” Ohfan continued. “I prayed for two days and nights on that rocky mountain. I told the god that we weren’t asking him for the impossible. All we wanted was justice. ‘Please,’ I begged him, ‘bring joy to those good people and punish those that cause suffering.’”

Ohfan’s face relaxed. “And what do you think happened?” Without waiting for an answer, he went on. “The god never said a word. I was devastated. I came down from that mountain feeling like I was in a gray cloud and returned to the village where we were staying for the time being. And upon my return, I learned of another calamity. A dog had bitten my father.”

The wind rustled. The noises of horses stirring and the crunching of snow under their hooves sounded sharp in the air.

“‘So that’s his answer,’ I thought. ‘The god is telling us we must bear death patiently.’ Because the dog that bit my father was a Kinma, you see.”

“A Kinma?”

Ohfan nodded. “Yes. The dogs given to us by the god Kinma. We bury horses that die of sickness in mounds. Dogs that eat their flesh and survive the illness are endowed with the power of the god. We call them Kinma dogs.

“When the Zolian bastards turned the land of the fire horses into a home for defiled sheep, their livestock began to die one after the other.” He paused and looked at his men with a crooked grin. “I must be pretty dense, huh? I should have realized that was the work of the god. Climbing the mountain and praying for an immediate solution—I was just like a child ranting at his father, unaware that his father saw so much further ahead, don’t you think?” The others smiled and nodded.

Ohfan turned back to Van. “Sorry, you wouldn’t have a clue what I mean. You see, the Zolian settlers brought their lifestyle to the Yukata Plains and tried to live just like they did at home. They didn’t just bring their sheep; they also planted their cursed grains. But those crops don’t belong on the Yukata Plains. As soon as their grain mixed with that of Yukata, it turned toxic. When the sheep ate it, they dropped dead.”

“That was the first sign, wasn’t it?” young Ohson interjected. “The god had already begun his work.”

Ohfan nodded, showing no annoyance at being interrupted. “That’s right.”

“So,” Van said, and all eyes turned to him. “Did your dogs eat the poisoned sheep, too?”

Something shone in Ohfan’s eyes. “It wasn’t just the sheep that died from eating that grain. Our fire horses died, too. We buried them as usual in the mound, but those settlers buried their sheep right next to them. They polluted the burial mound so that the sacred light no longer burned there. Our dogs dug up and ate the meat as they always did.” He grimaced. “But they died. They ate the defiled flesh and perished in agony. It was horrible. And yet...”

Once again, his eyes shone. “The god Kinma exercised his power. The sacred light of the mound was rekindled in the very place where we buried those animals that survived eating the toxic grain but died later after being infested with ticks. They must have been very strong because the bitches that ate their meat survived! They bore many clever pups that grew quickly and bred rapidly. They were smart, too, surpassing the other Kinma dogs.”

Van felt a sudden uneasiness, as if the mist covering the trail he was following had suddenly cleared before him to reveal a path he didn’t want to see. The eyes of a beast took shape in his mind—the one that had raced through the dark bowels of the salt mines and regarded him with the steady gaze of a warrior.

“So they ate the flesh of horses and sheep that survived the toxic grain,” Van muttered. “Did those dogs start nurturing the poison in their own bodies then?” he asked.

Ohfan looked at him with feverish eyes. “Yes. They have become the hands of the god. He granted those that survived the toxic grain the power to slay the men who brought it. ‘If the invaders pollute you with their poison, survive! Thus shall you become even stronger than before!’ That’s what the god was telling us. And he gave the fangs of our dogs the venom necessary to kill those who stole the Yukata Plains.”

A smile touched Ohfan’s lips and spread slowly across his face. “My father did not die, even though the settlers succumbed at the lightest graze of the dogs’ fangs. Do you understand what that means? The Kinma dogs don’t kill the

righteous. Their fangs only take the lives of sinners. Those who are barred from living in this land will die when bitten.”

Ohfan’s smile faded. After taking a deep breath, he continued. “I suppose the dogs must have seemed like messengers of death in the mine. I hear the conditions were terrible.”

Van stared at Ohfan silently. The man returned his gaze. “But think about the slaves that were in there,” he said. “Were any of them Aquafaese? Were there any from the three clans of the Yukata region or from the Toga Mountains?”

Van knit his brow as he pondered this unexpected question. The features of the men he’d worked and lived with at the bottom of that dark pit were always obscured in shadow. However, none of them spoke a language he understood.

“None, right? Those who worked in the salt mines were all war slaves from the east. You were the only exception.”

A white light gleamed in Ohfan’s eyes. “You survived. You were bitten, yet you didn’t die. When we heard that, we were shaken to the core. And we gave thanks to the god Kinma. We prayed and sang for a night and a day.” Ohfan drew a deep breath. “You proved to us that those dogs truly are servants of the god. They’ve been sent not just to save us, the Ahfal Oma, but all people of Aquafa who struggle under the yoke of the Zolian barbarians.”

As the meaning of Ohfan’s words penetrated Van’s mind and took shape, a shiver ran down his spine.

Ohfan’s eyes burned. “The god gave the land to the people and creatures that lived there. We are born, mate, and bear young on that earth, and to it we return. We are the land on which we have lived for centuries. Our parents, our grandparents, and our great-grandparents, they are all part of that land.”

He spread his hands wide. “We will return to our homeland, to the beautiful Yukata Plains where the fire horses run.”

6

Dream Visitors

People shrink when they die.

Van stared blankly at his wife's body. She seemed so much smaller than when she was alive. Now and then, he felt his son's shoulder nudge his elbow as he sat there.

He was afraid to look at him. The boy's innocent, tearstained face gazed up at him, his lips mouthing the same question, over and over. "*Why?*"

"Why, Mommy... Why..."

Why did she have to get sick? And why did she have to die, when her sister, who had come down with the same illness, recovered?

Van's son must have known there'd be no answer if he asked, so he just kept repeating, "*Why?*"

Van screwed his eyes shut and clapped his hands over his ears.

I don't want to hear. He knew what the boy would ask next. "*Why me?*"

Van ripped himself out of his dream. Gasping, he wiped a hand over his sweat-drenched brow. His heart hammered in his chest, thrashing in agony.

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, feeling the dregs of the nightmare dissipate. He'd fallen asleep at an odd hour of the day. The late afternoon light peeked through the smoke hole in the tent's ceiling. Van absently watched the lazy smoke ascend, licking the sunbeams.

A bed, hearth, water jug, and chamber pot furnished the small one-person tent. The entrance flap was closed, and a guard stood outside, but this was a far cry from a prison cell. Van could escape anytime he liked. They had left him free

because they knew full well that he wouldn't leave.

Van rolled onto his back and mulled over the dream.

It's been a while.

That nightmare had plagued his sleep constantly in the days following his son's death. Ohfan's words this morning must have brought it on.

His voice is really mine. It was Van, not his son, who always asked why.

Why did his wife and son get sick when so many others didn't? Perhaps he could have accepted it if they'd done something wrong. Yet there was no good reason, and so he kept asking.

Why? Why did some people live long, full lives when others couldn't?

If we can't live very long, then why are we born at all?

Fate is so unfair...

Van covered his face with his hands. In his mind's eye, he saw the large, dimly lit kitchen at the mine. The silent corpses of the women. The tear-drenched cheeks of the child saved by her dead mother. The girl's button eyes staring back at him.

She survived. And so did I.

Van recalled the warmth and weight of Yuna's body in his arms. When he'd picked her up, he'd taken responsibility for a child's life again.

And that child still lived. He could still save her with his own hands.

With a deep sigh, Van dropped his hands from his face and stared up at the smoke hole.

Delusion...

He thought of Ohfan, a man so young and yet clan chief already. Van understood how he and his people felt. Their desire to inflict the same suffering they experienced on those who wronged them, their longing to return to their homeland—Van knew those wishes, too, so keenly that they hurt.

Yet even so, the Ahfal Oma were deluded. They had convinced themselves that the rochai with their venomous fangs were the hands of the god, servants

of Kinma, sent to free these western lands from the Zolians. None of them realized how wrong, how unnatural it was to send infected beasts after women, children, and infants and then claim that their deaths were the will of a god.

Zolians are people, too.

Just ordinary people living ordinary lives.

Van thought of Tohma's mother, Kiya, and her gentle smile. They'd had no news of Van since the Echo Master summoned him. They were surely worried sick, and it grieved him to cause them pain.

Van missed his life with them in Oki. Were it possible, he'd like to take Yuna back to live with them again. It didn't matter where he came from there. United by chance, the days they spent together were all that mattered.

Immigrants had their own struggles. The pain of abandoning their homeland to settle here. The sweat and tears shed while setting down roots in a new land. They had experienced their own joys here, too. But it never occurred to Ohfan and his men to consider that. They'd decided their god had condemned the settlers, never pausing to wonder what lay in those people's hearts.

Gods are such a convenient excuse.

It was true that the slaves who died to the dogs in the salt mines were from the east. However, they had fought the Zolians, just like those in the west. Those men who'd slept beside Van had been driven from their native lands and endured terrible suffering.

What's the difference between them and us? Weren't they hurled into the same agony? None of them deserved to die like that.

Unfortunately, Van knew he would never shake Ohfan's conviction. All those deaths could be justified by claiming that Kinma had freed them from the suffering of slavery. The Ahfal Oma would never see that a god who let them believe what they liked was too convenient an excuse to be true. In fact, they'd be shocked to learn that's how Van saw it. They'd wonder how someone like Van could think differently from them after he fought so desperately to defend his home from the Zolian invaders, lost so many comrades at the hands of Zolian soldiers, and endured the humiliation of slavery.

Zolian officers and soldiers—I hate them.

Their arrogant belief that the lands of others were theirs by right filled him with icy indignation that froze his blood. Van could never forgive them for the bitter hell he'd experienced as a slave. But when he searched deep in his heart, he found nothing like the loathing that made Ohfan and his men wish to exterminate every Zolian down to the last woman and child.

Maybe because the Zolians weren't the ones who took what I cherished most.

The sweet aroma of fruit wine from a small jug near Van's pillow tickled his nostrils, and he closed his eyes. If the emptiness that had nested in his heart all these years had been caused by another people or country, would that have made a difference? Could Van have kindled the flame of vengeance to blind himself to the darkness inside him, like Ohfan and his men?

Van let out a small sigh. No. That would've been impossible. Even if the Zolians were responsible for snuffing the lives of his wife and son, Van would still have seen the same thing beyond them—the deep emptiness that never vanished.

Such thoughts couldn't be conveyed through words, though. And if he tried, Ohfan would never comprehend.

What do they want from me?

True, the dogs inspired fear, but they were still only dogs. Even with a hundred, they couldn't possibly wipe out the entire Zolian army.

Zol was a huge empire. Disease-ridden beasts weren't enough to drive it from this land. Surely the Ahfal Oma, deluded though they were, realized this. Was their faith in the god Kinma so fanatical that they were blind to that, too?

Or did they have something up their sleeve that they hadn't revealed to Van yet?

Maybe that was it. Ohfan had yet to tell Van what he desired from him. He'd only said, *"You'll know tonight."*

It was what he'd mentioned after that stuck in Van's throat like a foreign object he couldn't swallow. *"You'll know tonight... You who've returned from*

the death of the Kinma dogs.”

The death of the Kinma dogs.

A nightmare had gripped Van after he was bitten by one of those beasts. That Ohfan called this “death” made Van strangely uneasy.

After I was bitten...

Van had changed. That was certain. He didn’t know what in him was altered or how, but some other creature, one different from the man he used to be, resided within him. It had shown its face now several times, taking over his mind and body.

So far, I’ve been able to bring myself back. But...

Van had a hunch that it might take control one day and he would disappear forever.

He placed his hands gently over his face.

What I really fear...

What frightened him most of all was that this possibility didn’t scare him.

He couldn’t remember when he first noticed it, but the emptiness inside vanished when he became that other creature. He was no longer alone. Although still an individual, Van felt at peace and connected, as though he’d melted into a great river.

Does Ohfan know? Does he know what’s inside me?

Probably. After all, his father had survived a bite, too. Maybe this was what happened to everyone who was bitten and lived. Van remembered Yuna. When the dogs attacked them that night, she’d burrowed under his stomach, crying. Her voice came back to him vividly.

“Ochan, Ochan...black...black...things...”

Yuna, too?

Did people who survived Kinma dog bites harbor something within them like those who shunned water and suffered delirium after being bitten by mad dogs?

The shining world. That heightened sense of vision where everything seemed bright even in the darkness. That sensation of everything transforming...

A ray of sunset pierced the smoke hole. As Van stared at it, something like ice water seeped through his body. He didn't know what the Ahfal Oma hoped he would do to help them regain their homeland, but whatever the answer, it was far from simple vengeance. Van sensed that he was embroiled in something more complex and elusive.

He remembered the words the woman whispered in his ear.

"It's more complicated than that."

Van's forehead creased. The Molfah and the King of Aquafa. What linked them to the Ahfal Oma?

The golden light that painted the edges of the smoke hole faded gradually. Just as the world started to sink into blue darkness, something changed.

7

The Dog King

The first thing Van noticed was the smell—a green, earthy aroma, like that emitted by a moss-covered log in the rain.

Someone was inside his tent. The flap remained shut, and he had heard no footsteps, yet he knew someone was there in the shadows.

Van sat up and stared into the corner where he sensed the person standing. He heard the faint sound of breathing in the darkness but saw no one. There was no discernible shape there at all.

As the blue twilight faded and the hush of darkness stole into the tent, Van's eyes began to adjust. Countless little lights, will-o'-the-wisps shimmering like a summer haze, gathered and flickered, forming the shape of a man.

“...”

The grassy smell enveloped Van's body, seeping through his pores. A voice sounded in his head.

“Co...me...”

The shimmering pale, luminous form beckoned Van. A hand reached toward him. Before he could move, it softly touched the point between his eyes. Instantly, his body fell away.

The air was sweet. Everything around him glowed, and his body felt so light that it almost floated.

Suddenly, Van was walking outside. Ahead of him strode the figure of a man, short and thickset, an elder, but not too old. His back was slightly stooped.

The world seemed curiously bright, like the night of a full moon. Although Van

saw the man clearly, the tents they passed were blurred and phantomlike.

The man entered the forest. It was filled with pinpricks of light, flickering eerily. Many rose and fell like smoke dancing in the air.

Countless smells surged at Van. A familiar scent drew near, and, with a light pattering of paws, beasts came loping from every direction in packs of about fifteen each.

Rochai, thought Van. The voice spoke to him again.

“Do not call them by that crude name.”

The man had stopped and turned to face Van. The rochai had gathered around him in a ring and sank to the ground, as though prostrating before him.

“These are Kinma dogs. The hounds of the god, born from hunting dogs that received the blood of Kinma when bred with black wolves.”

It was an awe-inspiring sight. The man stood godlike in the center of fifty or sixty beasts, like a pinnacle towering above spreading foothills.

“Who are you?”

“The Dog King.”

He seemed to be laughing.

“When I am human, I am called Kenoi. I was once the chief of the Ahfal Oma, but the god Kinma summoned me, and I was reborn.”

He pointed.

“My body is over there. When I am in my body, I’m a sick old man. I don’t have long to live.”

Following the man’s finger, Van spied a body propped limply against a tree trunk with his head lolling forward.

“When I become the Dog King, I shed my body. Without it, I become strong.”

The Dog King raised his head. Van sensed he was looking straight at him.

“You’re strong, too. Can you feel it? The Kinma dogs fear you.”

Van did feel it. Their fear and adoration rolled over him in waves. *If I*

commanded them, they would obey, he thought.

“Many brave men have attempted to become the Dog King by letting the Kinma dogs bite them. But even though the blood of Kinma resided in their veins and they bonded with the pack, none of them could become king. There are many males in the pack, but only one leader. I suppose some special quality is necessary to become king.”

The Dog King seemed to smile faintly.

“You’re the only exception I have found. Our sole hope.”

He approached Van slowly. Although his feet trod upon the grass, they made no sound. When he came close, he reached out and grasped Van’s hand. Instantly, multiple voices flowed through Van, circulating like warm liquid. He groaned. Words resonated in his head—the man’s and his own.

“O brother, who has received the blood of the Kinma dogs, hear me...”

A high-pitched hum like a swarm of mosquitos filled Van, and the dream began.

The inside of the tent grew bright. The soft glow of early morning rested, quivering, on his eyelashes. Van opened his eyes slowly. His lids were heavy, and his cheeks were wet. He must have wept while in the dream.

He covered his face with his frozen hands and smelled a familiar scent on his palms. Fresh tears filled his eyes and then slid down his cheeks.

What was that...? It had been such a long dream, filled with sorrow, pain, and joy.

When he’d left his body to merge with the one who called himself the Dog King, he glimpsed the old man’s memories of his life on the plains with the People of the Fire Horse and how all that was broken and obliterated by the invaders.

Grief and rage had flayed his soul and torn him in two as he watched the Zolians wrest the land away and drive the Ahfal Oma from their homeland. Then suddenly, a ray of hope had pierced the depths of that despair.

In that fused dream state, everything Van saw permeated him, becoming his

own memory, powerful and vivid. But the image that had seared itself indelibly on his mind was not the dream memory but the expression on Kenoi's face when he'd returned to his body.

It had been pitiful—a far cry from the shining countenance of the Dog King. Diseased and tormented by physical and mental anguish, his face was that of a shriveled old man.

Van supposed that much was natural. The weight of remorse he bore was far too heavy. The attack on the settlers, for which the Ahfal Oma were expelled from the plains, had been instigated by Kenoi's brother, enraged by the death of his beloved steed from toxic grain. Despite knowing what his younger brother planned to do, Kenoi hadn't stopped him. He'd warned him, of course, explaining that only harm could come of such a scheme. Still, he hadn't truly attempted to dissuade him. Kenoi was the chief, yet he'd failed to quell the wrath of his people. He'd even shied away from confronting it. His own weakness had invited the final, crushing blow.

With their land seized, Kenoi's people had been forced to leave, banished forever from their homeland. They had gone weeping, looking back, again and again, for one last glimpse. And it was Kenoi who bore, body and soul, their anger, grief, and silent reproach.

Van slid his hands from his face and gazed up at the smoke hole. The morning sky framed through the opening should have been a familiar sight, yet he felt as though he were seeing it for the first time.

He grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut. Desolation overwhelmed him. The loneliness that he'd carried for so long now. The homeland he'd never know again. The time he'd never relive. His beloved Aleesa and their son Moshilu. Their smiling faces, the warmth of their bodies, their scents. His elderly parents laughing at the pure joy on their grandson's face when he took his first steps. Holding Aleesa in his arms, feeling her smooth skin against his, inhaling her fragrance, pressing his cheek against her nape...

No matter how hard Van pleaded, those days would never return.

They were fallen leaves swept away by the rushing stream.

Flashing swords. The stench of blood and entrails. Sweat. His friends, their

faces buried in their hands as their shoulders heaved with sobs.

Van heard again the whispered words of his friend Vasal the night before their last battle. *“I want to go home...to where my wife and daughter used to sit by the hearth making boar and mushroom stew. Where my mother shucked beans, her legs stretched out in the sun.”*

That longing to go home, to return to a family and a place long gone. Just one more time...

Van wept, letting the tears run down his face. He'd wanted to weep for so long.

He felt as if he'd been walking through this loneliness forever with no one to turn to. Even when far away, that yearning for where he'd lived with his family never left. He was just a leaf that had dropped from its branch long ago, fated to be swept along until swallowed by the sea. Even though he knew this, the aching loneliness would never end.

The Ahfal Oma are leaves torn from their homeland, too—just lonely leaves desperate to go home.

Now Van understood what they wanted. After living in Kenoi's memories, as though one with him, this desire seemed as natural as if it were his own.

Van heard a commotion outside his tent. He had been aware of people moving about for some time now, but this was different. The voices heading this way seemed to have business with him.

He sat up just as the tent flap rose. A man ducked his head and entered. When Van saw his face, his brows arched in surprise.

The man smiled, and in that moment, his resemblance to Van's wife was so strong that Van's heart nearly stopped.

“Brother,” he whispered. With hands trembling, he grasped that of his brother-in-law and childhood friend. The man's lips trembled, and tears fell from his eyes as he pulled Van into a rough embrace.

Chapter 8:

People of the Frontier

1

Those Who Pull the Strings

The glow of sunset faded, and the woodshed sank into blue darkness. Ilia bent over Makokan and peered into his face, looking slightly amused. “Well. You’ve certainly aged, haven’t you?” she said.

“Ilia.” Makokan mouthed his sister’s name, but his voice came out as a croak. She cut the ropes binding his wrists with her dagger and thrust a small flask at him.

“Here, drink this. The drug should have worn off by now, but your throat’s probably still raw. Take it easy, though, or you’ll choke.”

He took a swig. Cool liquid filled his mouth, but it was hard to swallow. Makokan took little sips yet still gagged.

Ilia clicked her tongue and thumped him on the back. “Trust you to choke even though I warned you.”

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Makokan looked up at her and rasped, “What is going on?”

She dropped to one knee beside Makokan and gave him a sour look. “Honestly. Why did you go into service with a son of the House of Yuguraul? You went to all that trouble to escape this pointless system, then roped yourself right back into it of your own accord. That’s taking stupidity to a new level.”

Makokan stared at her blankly.

“I’d really like to help, but there’s nothing I can do about it now,” she said. “You’ll just have to see how far you can get.”

Makokan frowned. “Ilia, would you talk to me in words I can understand?”

She sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “You’ve walked smack into a quagmire and waded until it was up to your neck. Is that any clearer? Still, they didn’t have to use blow darts. I told them to leave it to us, but they wouldn’t listen.”

“They?” he whispered. “You mean the Ahfal Oma?”

Ilia snorted. “There’s no need to whisper. You’re in the woodshed at our house. They’re not allowed into the yard.”

Makokan looked around. “I don’t remember a woodshed like this.”

Ilia sighed again. “How many years do you think it’s been since you left?”

Makokan glared at her. “What is this? You knew it was me, but you still tied me to a post in a shed in our yard! Knock it off, will you?”

A cold light kindled in Ilia’s eyes. “I’m not kidding around. If you weren’t my brother, I would’ve let them kill you. Keeping that guy’s bodyguard around would’ve complicated things needlessly.”

Makokan’s forehead grew cold. He looked into his sister’s eyes, but they showed no trace of feeling.

“Shows you how worthless your life is, doesn’t it? If you can make others think you might be of use, they’ll let you live. But if they think for a moment that you’ll get in the way, you’re done for.”

She brought her face close to his. “I don’t want to kill you. That’s why I came here to talk. So listen and think about what you must do to stay alive.”

This was the sister who killed Makokan’s older brother. He felt his pulse quicken, and numbness spread up his neck and across his chin.

“We were sent here by the Inner Circle, you know,” he said.

“So? Our clan has given you a nice warm reception. What could be wrong with that?” Her eyes gleamed softly in the dim light. “I’m still following Cheehana’s orders and carrying out the work she gives me. However, we have other business, too. Very important business.”

She pulled her face away and continued with a frigid tone. “Otwalle is like the moon reflected on the water. It can’t shine of its own accord. In the past, it

glowed with the light of Aquafa, and now with the light of Zol. It has always let the rulers of each era shine, taking its light from them.”

Makokan stared at her silently.

Ilia served the Inner Circle of Otawalle, carrying on the work that the Shinock family had done for generations. He’d never had an opportunity to know what she thought of that.

“Did Cheehana order you to investigate the Ahfal Oma?”

“Yes,” she replied bluntly. “It’s easy for us to get information because we accepted them into our midst and let them live here when they were exiled. But we have deep ties with the Ahfal Oma, and the Inner Circle is probably uneasy relying on us alone for information. Sometimes, it sends others to check things out.”

Ilia laughed through her nose. “It doesn’t really matter. We know the hand of the Inner Circle inside out. If an outsider contacted any member of the clan, we’d learn of it right away. They could bribe one of the clan, and I’d still know.” Her expression turned serious. “But we can’t be so laid-back anymore. We’ll be in trouble if the Sacred Territory starts meddling.”

Makokan felt as though he almost understood what she was saying but not quite, like trying to guess an object’s identity by feeling through a thick blanket. Still, one thing was clear: His sister had betrayed the Inner Circle. She’d sided with those who masterminded the attack by those infected beasts. And if that was the case, then the people of Makokan’s homeland, the Yukata Mountains, were surely on the same side.

The Ahfal Oma and the Ofal Oma. The peoples of the Yukata region, bound by ties that stretched back through the ages, had joined forces in a conspiracy. *Which means my own clan orchestrated mittsual’s revival.* Makokan felt his innards shrivel. *She’s right. I’m up to my neck in quicksand.*

He looked at Ilia. “Where’s Hohsalle?”

“No need to fret. We’re taking good care of him. He’s an important hostage, after all—someone we can use.”

“Hostage?”

Ilia shrugged. “Of course. Don’t you get it yet? After all I told you? We don’t want the Sacred Territory to interfere. We can use him like a weight to counterbalance the Otawalle.”

She stood and motioned for Makokan to rise. When he did, she told him to turn around and then bound his wrists so deftly that although the rope was slack enough for him to move his wrists, he’d never work them free.

“Just pretend you’re a wooden doll,” Ilia said from behind. “Don’t react to anything you might hear. And do as we tell you. In the end, that’s what will save you and Hohsalle. Don’t bother thinking or acting for yourself. There’s far too much you don’t know.”

Makokan glanced over his shoulder. She laid a hand on his back and gave him a gentle shove. “Move. I’ll take you to Hohsalle.”

Ilia had been telling the truth—Hohsalle was indeed being given a warm reception.

Makokan had been led through dark alleyways to the hall of Ukani Okusa, a cousin of the clan chief. While the Okusa were a prominent family, their hall stood alone on the west side of the capital partway up the mountain, which was probably why it had been chosen to house the hostage.

Ilia led Makokan through the back door. The servants bowed slightly, then showed them into a corridor and withdrew.

“He’s in this room,” Ilia said. “Go on in.” She removed the rope from Makokan’s wrists, coiled it up, then turned on her heel and strode away.

Makokan sighed and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a voice said. When Makokan opened the door, he was enveloped by a heavenly aroma that he knew well: roast duck, a delicacy in this region served from fall through winter. The bird had been hung and aged, then basted with a honeyed sauce and roasted until its skin was crisp and glossy. Its cavity was stuffed with things like walnuts and chestnuts, giving the meat a rich flavor.

Hohsalle sat alone at the table, carving the duck with a dagger and shoving chunks of meat into his mouth. When Makokan entered, he merely glanced up at him, not bothering to stop eating.

“Good to see you’re safe, sir,” Makokan said.

Hohsalle chewed a mouthful of meat and swallowed audibly, then chased it down with a swig of wine. Only then did he stop and look at Makokan. “It’s good,” he said. “Have some.”

Makokan took a chair and sat, but he found that he had no appetite. “I’m amazed you can eat at a time like this,” he whispered.

Hohsalle snorted. “I’m furious. And when I’m mad, I get hungry.” He hacked off another chunk of meat and shoved it into his mouth.

“You’re angry? Don’t you mean ‘worried’?”

“Worried? What should I be worried about?”

“What should you be worried about?! You’ve been knocked out with a blow dart, abducted, and imprisoned!”

“That’s precisely why I’m so mad! And to use blow darts! Damn it! The nerve of them. Depending on a victim’s metabolism, even a small amount of poison could have serious consequences!”

Hohsalle gulped down his wine. “Cheehana! Curse that old hag! She sent us here knowing this might happen. Cunning old witch!”

“You really think she would do that?”

“Of course she did!” Hohsalle practically spat the words. “She couldn’t trust the Servants of the Inner Circle living in the Yukata Mountains to keep an eye on the Ahfal Oma, so she sent us to see how they’d respond. And we’d be able to check on the disease while we were at it, too. That scheming old bag used me like a pawn in her game! Chucked me like a pebble into a pond to watch the ripples.”

Makokan stared open-mouthed at his furious young master. “Um, there’s something I need to tell you,” he began hesitantly. Hohsalle waved a hand at him, urging him to continue. Makokan repeated what his sister had said.

Hohsalle listened silently, although he continued eating. When Makokan finished, he heaved a sigh. “Your sister’s a servant of the Inner Circle through and through. I can see why you ran away from home.” He turned his cup in his

hand and watched the wine swirl. “You think the Yukata clans are behind the mittsual affair, but I doubt it.”

Makokan’s eyes grew round. “Why?”

“If it were only the Yukata clans, the Sacred Territory would have spurred the King of Aquafa into action long ago and put out the fire while it was still little. There’s no way the Sacred Territory would’ve stood by and let the Yukata clans attack the Zolian governor’s son during the falcon hunt.”

Makokan frowned. “You mean...”

“That’s right, damn it. What a pain...”

His words coincided with a knock on the door. It opened, and Makokan’s eyes widened in disbelief. The figure that strode into the room was none other than Milalle, who should have been at the clinic in Kazan. She was draped in a thick fur cloak, and her cheeks shone red from the cold.

“Ah! That’s better!” she exclaimed brightly. “Thank goodness it’s warm inside the hall. I came ahead. The microscope and other equipment should arrive tomorrow.”

Noticing Hohsalle and Makokan gaping at her in evident surprise, she stopped and blinked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“What’re *you* doing here?” Hohsalle asked.

The smile vanished from her face. “You told me to come...”

Hohsalle frowned. “Told you to come? Me?”

“Yes... Didn’t you? But—”

The door opened again, and a man carrying a bottle of wine in one hand entered. It was Tohlim, the King of Aquafa’s right-hand man.

2

Garrison Fires

“Ah! Roast duck, I see.” Tohlim smiled and raised the bottle. “Then it is fortunate I brought this. It goes very well with duck. But I’m afraid it is wholly inadequate to apologize for the blow darts.”

Hohsalle stared at Tohlim silently, his face void of expression.

Tohlim bowed low. “We did not intend to use blow darts. But some of the men panicked when they saw you questioning the Zolian official, and they took things into their own hands. That I was unable to stop them, however, is entirely my fault. I hope you will forgive me.”

Ting!

Hohsalle rapped the wine bottle with his dagger. As the high-pitched sound rang through the air, he placed the dagger on the table and glared at Tohlim.

Tohlim took a deep breath. After putting the bottle down, he turned to Milalle. “I know you just arrived, but please don’t take off your cloak.”

“Excuse me?”

Tohlim shot a glance at Hohsalle and Makokan. “You will be unable to enjoy your meal until you’ve learned what you want to know,” he said. “There’s something I would like to show you. Please follow me.”

With Tohlim in the lead, the group climbed a narrow spiral staircase and then stepped outside beneath the night sky. An icy wind stung their faces. It smelled of snow.

The hall was built in the slope midway up the mountain, and the flat roof offered one of the highest vantage points in Otai, the clan capital. When they

stood at the railing, they saw rooftops stretching into the distance.

“You see the fires burning?” Tohlim pointed at the central plaza in front of the clan meeting hall. Numerous bonfires had been lit, and the illuminated space floated like an island of light in the darkness. Steam gathered above, perhaps from cooking pots, and as their eyes grew accustomed to the dark, they could make out the shapes of tents clustered around the edges of the plaza. There had to be many congregating there.

“Zolian soldiers,” Tohlim said flatly. “Camped here on their way to relieve the garrison stationed at the fort on the western frontier. They arrived this evening and are having supper. Tomorrow morning, they’ll break camp, and the night after tomorrow, another troop will arrive. At this time of year, border guards descend upon us in wave after wave.”

The night wind tugged at Tohlim’s white locks, and he reached up a hand to tame them. “The Kingdom of Mukonia has been trying to invade Aquafa every winter for the past few years. It would take too long to explain the reason, but that’s why the Zolians keep sending troops to the western border.”

He waved a hand toward the square. “For every troop that passes through here, the peoples of the Yukata Mountains must provide food and supplies. Each time the Zolians come, those who live along their route must offer food on top of what they’ve already paid in taxes.”

Gazing at the bonfires, Tohlim added, “Please do not misunderstand me. I am not criticizing the Zolians. Before they came, Aquafa often had to battle the Mukonians. The warriors of the western clans served as a shield. Thanks to the Zolian army, far fewer people from this region need to shed their blood.”

Tohlim turned away from the square to look at Hohsalle. “But ever since Aquafa was absorbed into Zolian territory, the Mukonian attacks have increased in intensity. They keep trying to find ways to invade.”

“Because they’re afraid,” Hohsalle said, and Tohlim nodded.

“Yes,” he agreed. “The Mukonians are afraid. This huge empire from the east that keeps extending its influence is now at their back door. It has carved out a stable foothold from which to keep its armies permanently supplied with food, water, and weapons. They fear that, at some point, the Zolians are going to pass

over the Toga Mountains and march on their land.”

Milalle was shivering. Tohlim gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “My apologies. It’s too cold here. Let’s go inside.”

When they returned to the room, they found that food had been set out for three more people, and wood had been added to the fireplace. The fire blazed brightly, and the warmth was a welcome relief.

Hohsalle sat in front of a plate of steaming roast duck. After urging Milalle and Makokan to eat, he fixed his gaze on Tohlim. “That was a rather roundabout explanation, wasn’t it? All you’re really saying is that the increased pressure from Mukonia is impoverishing Aquafa’s border region.”

Tohlim nodded. “Yes, that’s true. But it’s not the whole story. It’s not just the Zolian army’s presence. Those Zolian immigrants in Aquafa compound the problem. To outsiders, Aquafa must appear to have plenty of land, enough to support an influx of settlers. But the amount of land suited to farming crops and livestock is limited, and if the newcomers seize that land, then naturally, someone will go short come harvest time. To make things worse, the Zolian settlers receive a tax break, whereas the Aquafaese do not.”

Tohlim smiled grimly. “To be frank, from a military and economic perspective, we are grateful to be part of the Zolian Empire. We have no intention of revolting. But the immigrants are a heavy burden. The Mukonians are the worse threat, of course, but the settlers still represent a problem to our people.”

Hohsalle’s eyes narrowed. “So?”

Without responding, Tohlim popped the cork from the bottle and poured the pale red wine into cups for Hohsalle and Milalle. After filling his own cup, he passed the bottle to Makokan and told him to help himself.

“It all began,” he said, “with a certain incident. It happened by chance—it wasn’t intentional, you see...” He looked at Hohsalle. “I’m referring to the toxic grain you were investigating. When that happened, I sent people here to look into it. At that point, I was already aware of a possible mittsual resurgence. However, I didn’t tell the Inner Circle of Otawalle.”

He ran a finger along the rim of his cup, and his lips quirked upward. “Perhaps

you are already aware, but when we hear the name *mittsual*, we feel that we have been blessed by the gods.”

Hohsalle blinked. For the first time, he looked taken aback.

“To a noble of Otawalle such as yourself, it must seem a curse. But for the Aquafaese, it was a wonderful gift that freed our homeland. We have always viewed the handsome black wolves of the northwestern mountains as messengers of the gods, and they brought the disease that spared us but slew the Otawalle.”

Tohlim’s mouth curled in a quiet smile, and raising his glass, he took a sip of wine.

“So when that incident occurred, it did not trouble us. The settlers died, but the Ahfal Oma who raised the infected dogs survived. It even seemed like a favorable sign. At the same time, however...” He put his cup down and gazed at Hohsalle. “We did not expect much.”

A log gave a muted *pop* as it crumbled in the fire.

“When the Ahfal Oma were exiled from the Yukata Plains, I worked hard to ensure clans in other areas would take them in. To drive the Ahfal Oma from their homeland was appalling. They were a pitiful sight and wept bitterly as they left. It reminded me of my agony when the Zolians seized the salt mine. I thought I might be torn in two. Only those who have tasted such anguish can know how it feels.”

Hohsalle scowled. “And? Surely, you’re not going to tell me some foolish tale about how you went along with their scheme because you felt sorry for them.”

Tohlim smiled wryly. “Of course not. As I said, we did not expect much. The Ahfal Oma chief visited me in secret. When he told me his people could use the Kinma dogs to chase the Zolians from this land and asked if we would let them return home when the Zolians were gone, I sympathized. However, I made no promises.

“Even if the dogs carried *mittsual*, they only numbered a few score. What could be achieved with so few? That’s how I thought until the incident at the salt mine.”

Tohlim's expression turned serious. "'We'll show you what a few Kinma dogs can do,' they said. I doubted it would be much because I know the layout of the mine better than anyone. You have seen the structure for yourself. There's no way to reach the lower levels except through the vertical shaft that runs through the center, and dogs can't climb ladders. But..."

Dread seized Makokan as he recalled the gaping shaft that plunged to the bottom of the mine. If Kinma dogs had really caused that catastrophe, they must have run straight down the sheer drop.

"The handlers who set them on the mine casually told me that their dogs descended the shaft. Apparently, they leaped back and forth from the wall to the ladder all the way to the bottom."

Even Hohsalle seemed to hang on Tohlim's words.

"That day, when I took you into the mine," Tohlim continued, "I feared that you would notice the shock on my face. I was absolutely stunned. Five dogs. That's all they used. Just five. But they killed everyone. Everyone except—"

"The man from the Toga Mountains," Hohsalle concluded.

Tohlim nodded. "Yes. The Toga Mountains, where black wolves once abounded. Only Broken Antler Van, a warrior from that remote corner of Aquafa, was bitten and lived."

Tohlim went silent. The only sound in the room was the faint crackling of the fire.

"We don't know for sure that he survived," Hohsalle muttered, breaking the silence. "Sulumina showed resistance to the disease, but it's not clear if the symptoms would have worsened without the new drug we administered. It's possible that it could have lain dormant for longer, only to break out later and follow the same pattern."

Tohlim smiled. "Oh, Broken Antler Van is alive."

Makokan leaned forward in surprise. "Did you find him, then?" he asked.

Tohlim glanced at the man, but he didn't answer. With a sigh, he returned his gaze to Hohsalle. "I have gone on enough. My point is, after that incident in the

mine, we began treating the Kinma dogs seriously. We realized that there was a slightly different possibility from the scenario the Ahfal Oma envisioned.”

“A different possibility?” Hohsalle frowned.

“Yes. That this land might know freedom from both Mukonia and Zol without a war,” Tohlim stated quietly.

Hohsalle’s eyebrows rose. He stared at Tohlim with lips parted slightly.

“Mukonians die when bitten, too,” Tohlim explained. “We slipped a few dogs in during an ambush to be certain. And if that disease results in a gruesome death for both Mukonians and Zolians, then...”

Hohsalle’s face twisted. “You believe you can convince them this land is cursed with some fearsome sickness, and they’ll leave of their own accord? Of all the stupid ideas!” He glared at Tohlim with fists clenched. “You can’t control disease! It could change its nature without any warning. If you go through with this—”

Tohlim cut him off. “I know. We were foolish. We have already realized our mistake. That’s why I brought you here and explained how this came about.” A wry expression formed on his face. “We are in a rather delicate position with Zol and Otawalle.”

Hohsalle snorted. “You bet you are. But you walked into this trap by choice.” His eyes narrowed. “So you want me to keep my mouth shut, is that it? You’re afraid the Otawalle will wait and see how the wind blows—that if you Aquafaese make a mess of things, they might abandon you and curry favor with the Zolians.”

Tohlim shook his head. “If you wish to tell the noblemen of Otawalle, you are welcome to do so. I merely ask that you consider our position when you explain it to them.” He smiled. “We know the Otawalle very well. If you explain the situation thoroughly, I’m sure they will realize that it is best to keep this matter confidential until spring is safely past.”

“Spring?” Hohsalle repeated. Understanding dawned on his face. “The Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes. I see.”

To monitor every corner of his realm, the Emperor of Zol regularly dispatched

a representative to serve as his eyes. His nephew was scheduled to visit Aquafa on his behalf next spring. This time, he would be accompanied by Governor Oah, a prince elector who wielded great influence. Yotalu was undoubtedly busy preparing to offer a befitting welcome. Should any glaring fault in the administration of the border region come to light, Governor Oah, Yotalu's father, would be stripped of his rank and fall from power. This triennial visit was a pivotal event that would determine his family's future.

Hohsalle sighed. "So the Ahfal Oma plan to take advantage of that event?"

"Yes. It's the perfect opportunity for their scheme."

"Of all the times for such a fearsome weapon to fall into the hands of those lunatics."

Tohlim nodded. "The king has resolved that they must be stopped. And that it is we who must stop them." He leaned forward slightly, his eyes fixed on Hohsalle. "But when it comes to disease, there is no predicting what might happen."

Hohsalle's mouth lifted in a bitter smile. He shook his head. "You want us to make a cure for mittsual by next spring? Impossible! We can't develop medicine that quickly."

"We know that," Tohlim said in a low voice. "We're not asking that you have one ready by next spring. But if such a remedy can indeed be made, you, Milalle, and the Otawalle are the only ones who can manage it."

"We unleashed this disease upon the world while momentarily caught up in a foolish dream. We could never forgive ourselves were it to torment people for years to come. Please, I beg you to help. Not for the sake of us fools, but for all those who live in this land."

3

Home of the Yusula Oma

A fire had been lit, and the bedroom was already warm. Milalle folded her clothes loosely, placed them beside Hohsalle's neatly arranged ones, and faced the bed.

Hohsalle lay face up, staring at the ceiling, but when Milalle raised the covers and slid in beside him, he gently slipped an arm through hers and pulled her close. Feeling the warmth of his body against hers, she sighed.

She liked the smell of his skin. Wrapped in his embrace with her nose pressed into the crook of his neck, she felt a sense of security that took her back to childhood.

A muffled whisper sounded in her ear. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

After a short pause, Hohsalle said, "I underestimated Tohlim. I knew he was shrewd and calculating, but I never dreamed he would be so cold-blooded as to get you involved."

Milalle pressed her lips against Hohsalle's neck. His skin was slightly moist with sweat. She stayed like that for a moment until the vague feelings in her heart took shape. "I'm actually quite glad."

Hohsalle pulled back to peer into her face. He was frowning. Milalle smiled teasingly. "Didn't you hear what Tohlim said? He wants me to investigate something. In other words, I was brought here for my knowledge, not as a weight to keep you in check. It's a great opportunity to search for ways to treat mittsual. Besides..."

She paused and pressed her forehead against his. “It means I can be with you... I’m sure you never gave a thought to how hard it is being the one left behind waiting.”

Hohsalle said nothing. It was always like this with him. Whenever Milalle tried to test his feelings, he went silent. That’s just who he was. Plus, the gulf between their social ranks was too great. They’d never be allowed to have children together. How many years had it been since Milalle entered this relationship, fully aware of the challenges?

She sighed. *It can’t be helped.* This was the man she’d fallen in love with. There was no point in complaining about it.

She placed her lips against his, and after a brief pause, he returned her kiss.

There was a soft, moist pattering on the roof. It had started to rain.

The rain that began in the middle of the night stopped come morning, and by the time the Zolian soldiers marched off, the clouds had broken and bright sunlight enveloped the capital.

Tohlim led Hohsalle, Milalle, and Makokan out through the city’s rear gate. As they headed down the mountain path, he looked back at Milalle. “Please watch your footing. The road is slippery after last night’s rain and will worsen farther on.”

Glancing up at Makokan, Hohsalle gestured with his jaw. “Stay beside Milalle and catch her if she slips.”

Makokan frowned. “Perhaps it would be best if you did that, sir,” he said.

Hohsalle snorted. “You think I could catch her? She’s quite heavy, you know.”

Milalle glared at him. “I heard that.”

“I intended you to,” Hohsalle retorted.

While listening to this exchange, Makokan reflected on how his young master always behaved like a child around Milalle. In contrast, despite her petite build and childlike face, Milalle was never like that. Rather, she often showed a startling maturity for her age.

Although she kept her feelings well hidden beneath a cheerful demeanor,

Makokan could tell by the look in her eyes whenever they rested on Hohsalle that she dearly loved this ornery, eccentric man who was far too high above her in station.

I suppose that's why it hurts to look at her sometimes, he thought.

Tohlim set a brisk pace as he led them down the mountain trail.

He's taking us to Yusula, the marshland, Makokan thought.

As a child, he'd taken this road only rarely. The marshes scattered along the edges of the Yukata Mountains were dangerous and belonged to the Yusula Oma, the People of the Marsh. They were members of the lowest social class, treated like servants by the Ahfal Oma.

Did they remain after the toxic grain incident? Makokan supposed that they had. They'd never really attracted much attention, so they'd probably continued living quietly in the swamps.

A flock of birds crossed the sky, squawking. The noise brought back a memory of hunting in the bogs with his father and grandfather. If Makokan remembered correctly, their guide had been a young man from the Yusula Oma. Maybe that's how they made a little income on the side.

The dank smell of mud and water grew stronger, and soon, a large swamp came into view. On a windy day, the water appeared almost black, but today was fair, and the sun sparkled on the water's surface.

Tohlim seemed familiar with the place, leading the group unerringly along a narrow trail through the bog and into a village. Barking dogs came dashing for them, and Makokan's hand went to his sword hilt instinctively, but a man stepped from the nearest house and called out before he could act. Instantly, the dogs halted, and although they growled menacingly, they remained put.

When he saw Tohlim, the man bowed low and made a gesture of welcome. Women and children came out after him and stared quietly. Not even the children uttered a sound.

Tohlim headed for a little hut that stood at the far edge of the village. After opening the crude wooden door, he walked into the dimly lit interior. Makokan followed, and his face froze when he stepped inside. On a thin, dirty mattress

lay a woman who was clearly ill. Past her, beneath a straw mat, was something that looked like a corpse.

Hohsalle and Milalle paused in the doorway, consternation clouding their expressions. Rounding on Tohlim, Hohsalle whispered fiercely, "Fool! Why didn't you warn us that she was sick?"

"I beg your pardon," Tohlim said, his face grim.

Milalle pulled out some cloths from inside her robe and passed one to Hohsalle, who tied it over his mouth and nose. She passed another to Makokan. He frowned. "But I thought mittsual wasn't passed from person-to-person?"

Milalle shook her head. "We don't know anything for certain, and it's possible that it's mutated. Also, you have to remember that people who are sick are more vulnerable to illnesses and might catch something from us."

"Stop dithering and put it on," Hohsalle ordered irritably. Kicking off his boots, he stepped into the house, and he and Milalle set to examining the patient.

The woman was unresponsive when he took her pulse. A purple rash, the hallmark of mittsual, covered her skin. Hohsalle remained kneeling beside her as he looked up at Tohlim. "When did the dog bite her?"

"She wasn't bitten by a dog."

Hohsalle's eyes widened. "Then by some other beast? A wolf or an ossam?"

"No. They told me no animal bit her."

Hohsalle and Milalle paled visibly. Glancing at each other, they hastily moved away from the patient.

"If you're worried about insects, there is no need," Tohlim said. "I ordered them to sprinkle this hut thoroughly with pesticide."

Hohsalle's eyebrows drew together. He gestured to Milalle to check the woman while he approached the corpse. After carefully pulling back the straw mat, he undressed the body and examined it carefully.

A short while later, Milalle said, "I found one." She pointed to the patient's side. At first glance, it looked like a mole, but closer inspection revealed that it was a tick swollen with blood. Once ticks attached themselves to the skin and

began sucking, they remained there for a week to ten days. They released naturally once gorged with blood. However, if they were pulled off forcefully, their jaws could remain under the skin, causing an infection. This particular tick had apparently died from the pesticide while still sucking blood.

Milalle rose to her feet, her face ashen. She strode quickly out of the hut without a word.

Makokan followed after her. She stood in a pool of sunlight with her back to the hut, trembling all over. Makokan opened his mouth to speak when Hohsalle came stomping from the hut. She looked up at him, her lips quivering, and asked, "Which do you think it is?"

Hohsalle shook his head. "I can't tell from just looking at the patient. Let's hear what the villagers have to say."

Milalle blinked and took a deep breath. The blood slowly returned to her cheeks. "You're right. This is no time to be afraid. It might even be an important clue."

She must have noticed Makokan struggling to bite back his questions, because she added, "I mean a clue to what caused the disease. That woman was bitten by a tick, not a dog, yet she's showing symptoms similar to mittsual. If so, then the cause of the disease may actually be found in ticks, which then infect the dogs they bite."

Tohlim had joined the others outside and listened intently.

"But there are two other questions we must also consider," Milalle continued. "Was the disease transmitted directly to the human from the tick without going through a dog? Or did a tick bite a dog infected with it first and then transmit it to the human?"

Hohsalle added, "If it's the former, a lot of people ought to have been infected by now. If there were no cases before, and it just appeared recently, then what's the reason for the resurgence, and why didn't it appear before? If we can find the answers to these questions, we may be able to discover a way to treat the disease." Excitement tinged his voice.

Turning to Tohlim, Hohsalle said, "We'll help the woman in there first, but

after that, may we interview the villagers about this case?"

Tohlim nodded. "Yes. That's why I brought you here." He lowered his voice. "To be honest, getting anything out of them may be challenging. Like the Ahfal Oma, they believe in Kinma, and this illness is considered a punishment from the god. That's why they abandoned these patients in this hut without treating them.

"But they also live in fear. If we tell them that you are searching for a way of treating the sickness, they might answer your questions."

Hohsalle and Milalle went back inside, followed by Tohlim, but Makokan could not bring himself to join them yet. He stood silently in the sunlight. Being around sick people always depressed him, but this was no time to give in to such feelings. With a sigh, he turned to go back into the hut when a flash of movement caught his eye.

A large water urn stood beside the hut, and a little face peered from behind it. When their eyes met, the child ducked out of sight. Makokan tiptoed up to the urn and looked over the top. A little girl sat hunched down behind it. She must have sensed him, because she turned and looked up, then made a sour face. "Don' look!" Although she had an odd manner of speech, she was clearly giving him a good scolding.

"What're you doing there?" he asked, but she frowned and put a finger to her lips. "Shhh. I'm hidin'! Stop lookin'!"

Makokan couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing.

"Don' laugh!" she exclaimed. She looked adorable with her shiny red cheeks puffed out in defiance.

Recollecting himself, Makokan wiped the smile from his face. "Is your mother in there?" he asked gently.

She shook her head vigorously. He breathed a sigh of relief and stroked his jaw. "No? Then where are your parents?"

She gazed up at him as if puzzled. He tried again. "What's your name?" he asked.

Her face crumpled as though she was about to burst into tears. After a brief pause, she said in a small voice, “Yunacha.”

4

Olaha, the Pyuika

Snow thumped as it hit the ground. The day was quite warm for this time of year, and here and there, snow slipped from sun-warmed branches in the forest.

Light shone through the trees and shimmered across the backs of Van's brother-in-law, Zakka, and Ohfan, chief of the Ahfal Oma, as they strode ahead. Ohfan's voice carried back to Van. "...the Zakato Ravine, then?"

Zakka nodded. "Yeah. Definitely. The Zakato clan sent a runner to tell us they found sled tracks. They should be able to figure out how far they've gotten sometime today. The tracks were well hidden, but they're unlike anything found on the trails through the other two ravines—undoubtedly left by sleds bearing heavy loads."

Ohfan smacked his fist into his palm, clearly incapable of containing his excitement. "Finally! They've finally come to Zakato!"

The warriors of the Ahfal Oma followed the two men silently. Van watched Zakka with mixed feelings. Half a month had passed since he'd been reunited with his brother-in-law. During that time, he'd discovered that his people had surprisingly deep ties with the Ahfal Oma.

Van knew that after the Ahfal Oma's exile from the Yukata Plains, the People of the Fire Horse had split into groups of about fifteen families and been sent to different areas by order of the King of Aquafa. However, when Zakka told Van that the Gansa took in Ohfan's people after they eventually made their way to the Toga Mountains, he couldn't help but be startled by the strange, convoluted web of fate.

“We lost so many seasoned warriors like you during that long fight against Zol,” Zakka had told Van as they breakfasted together on the morning after their reunion. “With our best men gone, the Mukonians stepped up their attacks, affording us no time to rest. We were exhausted.

“We always warn the Zolian garrison when the Mukonians come, but they never budge until the last minute. They use us as a shield, wearing down our strength to spare their troops for other conflicts.”

A bitter smile had formed on Zakka’s lips. “So you see, welcoming the Ahfal Oma into our midst was actually to our advantage. They’re valiant warriors and risk their lives to fight with us. We’re like brothers now. I know they’ve got their own motives, but in the end, what they want leads to what we want.”

Ohfan and his people were originally taken in by mountain people farther south, but they had gotten into a dispute with the locals over some trivial matter. The Ahfal Oma came to the Gansa shortly after the latter group swore allegiance to Zol. Ever since, the two peoples had collaborated closely to repel the Mukonians. It was only natural for the Ahfal Oma to fight alongside the Gansa in return for being allowed to live with them. And that, Zakka had said, made it easy to plot together without the Zolians knowing. “It’s been very useful,” he’d admitted with a laugh.

Which means...

It was quite possible that Van’s clansmen had known about the plan to attack the salt mine. Zakka never spoke on it, but if he and the other Gansa clan members had known of Van’s fate, they undoubtedly would have assumed that death from the bite of a Kinma dog was preferable to being captured and enslaved.

While Van thought on this, something else occurred to him, and his expression clouded.

Could it have been Zakka, my own kinsman, who suggested abducting Yuna? Zakka would have known how much Van hated disease. He might have warned Ohfan that Van was likely to refuse to cooperate if he knew the strategy involved using a sickness as a weapon, even if it was to regain lost homelands. Try as he did, Van couldn’t dismiss the possibility.

When they reached the foot of a large hoki tree, Zakka halted. Ohfan and the rest followed suit and watched Zakka silently. He put his hands to his mouth and, after turning toward a deeper part of the forest, produced a perfect imitation of a pyuika call.

“Puohhh.”

Soon after, there was a rustling in the bushes, and a pyuika bounded out of the trees. It ran straight for Zakka and nuzzled his side.

Van’s eyes narrowed as he beheld a familiar face. “Muffu is looking well,” he said.

Zakka grinned. “Why don’t you try calling, too?” he said.

Van regarded his brother-in-law with surprise. “Really?”

Zakka nodded. “Yes, really. I had them bring Olaha today. Go ahead. Call him. He’s not used to the Ahfal Oma, so he’s probably anxious, wondering if it’s safe to come out.”

Van’s jaw clenched. He closed his eyes for a moment. Upon opening them, he put his hands to his mouth and called. The bushes shook, and a superb rack of antlers appeared above them. A fine buck ran toward him, sunlight dappling the creature’s back.

Van felt his nose grow hot inside, and tears gathered in his eyes, blurring the pyuika’s familiar figure. Olaha’s father, Liafu, whose name meant “thunder cloud,” was Van’s mount for so many years until he was slain in battle along the Kashuna River. Olaha meant “dawn,” and he’d been born at daybreak. Van had first stroked him when he was still wet from his mother’s womb. When Van left his homeland, Olaha had been a gangly foal. Now he was a proud and sturdy buck.

He trotted toward Van, only to come hesitantly to a stop, black eyes gleaming as he regarded Van steadily.

Van clicked his tongue. “Olaha,” he called, and the buck’s ears straightened up. Mewling, he approached and butted Van with his nose, seemingly chiding him for being gone so long, before rubbing his neck against Van’s chest. Breathing in his scent, Van stroked Olaha’s flank, then wrapped his arms around

his neck. His throat shook, and tears poured down his cheeks.

“You’ve grown, Olaha. You look just like your father.”

Zakka, Ohfan, and the others smiled as they watched.

“Go on. Ride him,” Zakka said. Van laughed and swung himself onto the buck’s back. He felt his legs and arms respond instinctively, and he pressed his thighs against Olaha’s flanks, urging him forward. The pyuika leaped into the forest, quickly gaining speed as he wove through the trees.

Thanks to their wide-splayed hooves, pyuika could traverse snowy terrain much more nimbly than deer, which struggled in the snow. However, they still floundered in heavy drifts, and it took considerable skill to ride them across snow-covered ground. Those old techniques came back to Van without thinking. His eyes sought out the best footing, and he automatically shifted his weight ever so slightly from one side to the other to steer Olaha where the snow was lightest.

The speed. The rush of wind in my ears. The pounding hooves. This is what I loved.

Olaha’s antlers had been trimmed to prevent them from catching on branches, and when Van aligned his chin with the space between them, his view fused with that of his mount. They ran together as one body, seeing the same scenery, smelling the same scents, feeling the same wind. Together, they flew over thickets and darted through the trees until they returned to where Zakka and the others waited, watching agape.

“Amazing,” Ohfan whispered, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed like a young boy’s. “Zakka, I only believed half of what you said, but...that was incredible.”

“Pretty fast, aren’t they?”

“Incredibly fast,” Ohfan agreed. “And so nimble.” He turned his shining eyes to Zakka. “I’ve seen many people ride pyuika, but never anything like this. Can every pyuika run like that?”

“No. Van’s exceptional. Unfortunately, there are none left in our clan who ride like him.” Zakka sighed. “It makes my blood boil to know that the

Mukonians have found our weakness. They would never have dared to invade in winter when we had plenty of riders like Van who could race their mounts freely across the snow.”

“To be honest, Zakka,” Ohfan began, “when you told me that the Lone Antlers could charge through drifts straight down a frozen cliff, I thought you were exaggerating. But after seeing this, I believe you.”

From their words, Van pieced together what was happening in his homeland. In the past, Mukonian soldiers never dared to attempt crossing the Toga Mountains in winter. The passes froze over, becoming impenetrable, and if they had tried taking the valley trails instead, the Pyuika Riders would have greeted them with a hail of arrows. Historically, advances into the Toga region had always been made via the grassy plain that ran along the great river in the south. However, the Zolian army had since hemmed it with a long stone wall and placed forts strategically. The Mukonian army traveled on horseback in summer and by dog sled in winter. Thus, even a waist-high barricade was enough to deter them.

So now they must be searching for a new route into the mountain regions.

In spring and summer, when vegetation grew lush, they couldn’t see where the Pyuika Riders waited in ambush. During autumn, when the ground was covered in leaves, the Mukonians could not pass through silently, and there was no foliage to hide them.

But the Lone Antlers, the finest of the Pyuika Riders, had been wiped out, and according to Zakka, of those who remained, few were capable of charging their mounts down the snowy cliffs. They couldn’t hope to protect all of this vast mountain region. The Mukonians must have realized this and were trying to invade during winter. Their sled dogs, big as calves, pulled substantial loads, and their soldiers moved swiftly on sleds or skis. As long as the snow was well packed, the Mukonian army could advance rapidly over the wider valley roads. While an uphill climb would slow them down, with no enemy archers on the cliff tops, they could advance at quite a pace, even pulling the supplies and equipment they would need to lay siege to a Zolian fortress.

So that’s it.

Ohfan had been excited to learn that the Mukonians were advancing along the road through the Zakato Ravine. That road crested behind a Zolian border fort. If Mukonian troops attacked from that vantage point, they stood to inflict considerable damage. Even if they didn't overrun it on the first attempt, the fort would need repairs. By sending waves of reinforcements to repeatedly assault the disabled garrison, they just might succeed in taking it.

Moreover, much of the valley road was lined with steep cliffs on both sides, making it difficult to ambush a force marching along that route without skilled pyuika riders.

The key, then, is the timing. If the Mukonians attack at the right moment, they could capture that fortress.

Pyuika couldn't move as swiftly over level ground covered in snow. While the Mukonians ran the risk of being caught between the Zolian army and the Gansa warriors, if they chose their timing carefully, they could deploy reinforcements to trap and annihilate any Gansa that tried to attack the first wave of Mukonians.

The Mukonians preferred to keep their main army hidden while sending in multiple contingents to confuse their enemies. The Gansa must have pretended to fall for this ruse, tricking the main army into choosing the road through the Zakato Ravine.

But why?

Were they hoping to make the Zolians regret a slow response with reinforcements? The Gansa had so little to gain by letting the Mukonians damage the Zolian fort. It would just increase the risk of a Mukonian invasion.

Van slid off Olaha to stand beside Ohfan. The chief of the Ahfal Oma glanced up at him and grinned. "Wait until tomorrow night," he said. "Then it'll be our turn to show off."

5

The Attack on Zakato

The best place for the Gansa to ambush the Mukonians was on the slope leading to the road's highest point behind the fortress. The Mukonian soldiers were well aware of this and halted their march some distance before it to rest and prepare for the uphill spurt. They deployed scouts ahead, too—mountain men from the west side of the Toga range. Accustomed to this type of terrain, they moved swiftly, with no wasted motion.

Van and the Ahfal Oma watched them go while hidden in the woods and far enough to remain undetected. Zakka and the other Gansa warriors had already circled round behind the Mukonian forces.

"We'll send a messenger to the Zolian fort when the Mukonians begin climbing the slope," Ohfan had told him. "The hard part is the timing. If we let them know too soon, the Zolians will have time to defend themselves."

They don't quite trust me yet, Van thought.

He'd only been fed tidbits of information, making it hard to grasp the overall plan. Still, by watching Ohfan and his men, Van now had a reasonably good idea of their intentions.

They're going to let the Mukonians attack the fort.

Ohfan's people would demonstrate their loyalty by sending a messenger to warn the Zolians, telling them they planned to attack the invaders from the rear, while simultaneously enacting some other scheme.

But what?

Van had his suspicions, and he was probably right.

Ohfan raised two fingers. Two scouts were returning to the Mukonian troops, checking their surroundings as they went. Ohfan watched them until they disappeared toward the bottom of the hill, then nodded at a warrior behind him. The man vanished deep into the forest, crouching low as he ran. Presumably, he was heading to the fort to warn the Zolians.

Ohfan glanced at Van and flashed him a devil-may-care smile.

The angle and hue of the sunlight on the tree trunks had begun to change. The Mukonians undoubtedly hoped to reach the top of the rise before sunset, meaning they would mobilize soon. Van closed his eyes and listened intently. In the distance, he caught faint sounds that would have been inaudible to him before. The Mukonian soldiers must have set out.

Ohfan rose without a sound and gestured for his men to move.

The road's highest point overlooking the fort from the rear was more a hill than a mountain. Ohfan headed for a spot in the forest that offered a good view of the fort yet kept a distance from where the Mukonians were expected to set up camp.

Building a fort within easy range of archers was poor military strategy; however, a river once flowed through this area, and no other spot offered a sufficiently firm foundation. From a distance, the Toga Mountains looked deceptively gentle, but steep ravines plunged between the peaks, and the rugged terrain meant that few routes were broad enough to accommodate large numbers. Like a cork in a bottle, the Zolian fortress plugged the entrance, preventing armies from crossing to the plains of Aquafa.

Zolian garrisons were extremely sturdy. Without large-scale siege engines, the walls would not be breached, and carrying that type of equipment slowed an army tremendously. When this region had teemed with skilled pyuika riders, a sluggish force would have made the perfect target. However, that was no longer the case. The Zolian army had failed to realize the decisive role pyuika riders played during the winter. Ironically, by wiping out the Lone Antlers, the Zolians left a hole in their own border defenses.

Red torches burned in the fort, and soldiers rushed about. The garrison must have been informed of the impending attack.

The structure was of typical Zolian design with two gates, one in the front and one in the rear. Both were guarded by semicircular half-moon ramparts that made it impossible to tell from above whether the portcullises were open or closed. They also prevented the use of battering rams. Archers on the ramparts would pick off any soldiers rushing a gate.

When Van led the Lone Antlers, they'd had difficulty capturing such fortresses.

How will the Mukonians attack?

As Van gazed down at the fort, his instincts as a leader came alive.

With fire.

Although sturdily built, the Zolian stronghold was not a closed box. There was an open square near the soldiers' barracks to move various supplies. Shooting a flaming arrow that far was impossible, but if that section of the fort caught on fire, it would do considerable damage.

As Van mused on this, he sensed someone approaching. He turned and gasped. A soldier had come up beside him bearing someone on his back, someone Van recognized.

Ah, so that's it.

Van's expression clouded. His dream journey into the old man's memories came rushing back.

The warrior gently lowered his burden to the ground. Kenoi looked up at Van and smiled. "It's a pity," he rasped. "When I'm in my body, I'm a sick, old man."

Ohfan approached and dropped to one knee before Kenoi. "Father."

The old man nodded, then shifted his gaze to the fort. "Any moment now," he whispered. He looked to Van with narrowed eyes. "Can you smell them?" he asked.

Van had just caught the scent—saltpeter and charcoal mixed with sulfur. "Firebombs," he said. The hairs on his nape rose instinctively. The stench resembled that of the Zolian army's firebombs. Many of Van's friends had perished to such explosives. When the bombs hit their target, they blew the

victim's body apart. It was a gruesome way to die.

The scent did not waft from the fort, however. The wind carried the odor from a different direction. "Have the Mukonians learned to use firebombs?" Van questioned.

Ohfan nodded. "They're crude and unreliable compared to those of Zolian make, though. I've seen men handling them get blasted apart by accident... Look. Over there. They're about to start."

The Mukonian camp past the trees brightened. To Van, whose sight in the dark and distance perception were acutely heightened, the soldiers' movements were quite plain. A group among the Mukonian forces stood and spread out to the sides of the greater force. When Van noticed their posture, his eyes narrowed.

Lafan?

The Lafan were mountain dwellers from Mukonian territory. Van had fought them several times and knew them to be excellent with slings. An experienced slinger could hurl a projectile a long way and strike a distant target with considerable accuracy and no less effectiveness than an arrow. However, once the Lafan slingers took up their hurling stances, they couldn't change directions. This made them little threat to a pyuika rider who knew where they were.

Oh...

Their figures cut stark images against their surroundings. Firebombs rested in their slings. With a whirring sound, the Lafan swung the projectiles with their whole bodies, then released. Luminous specs whistled through the night sky in wide arcs, falling, one by one, onto the fort. On impact, bursts of light split the darkness, followed by dull explosions. The archers poised on the roof were flung backward. Wooden timbers shattered, scattering shards into the air.

A clamor rose from the fort. Van saw soldiers running to and fro, shouting. The Lafan sent one volley after another, each followed by repeated blasts. Under the cover of the chaos, the Mukonian army moved in. Their sleds, drawn by huge dogs, raced up the slope, gliding swiftly over the frozen road.

Van turned to Ohfan. If this went on, the fort would fall. Although the Ahfal

Oma might delight in watching the hated Zolians suffer, if the Mukonians took this bastion, the people of the Toga Mountains would be swept up in the vortex of a new war.

Ohfan read Van's expression and said, "It's all right. We'll defeat the Mukonians." His eyes flicked to his father.

The old man who'd called himself the Dog King in that strange dream the other night stared fixedly at the battle below. He smiled and, reaching out with his hand, grasped Van by the wrist. Once again, Van heard his voice in his head.

"It's time."

A sensation ran through Van, making his skin crawl, and he groaned. His head seemed to swell from the inside. His body peeled away...

When Van came to his senses, he found himself embraced within the old man, as if their bodies had fused together. They were tearing down the mountain trail at breakneck speed. Before he knew it, they'd become a huge dog, radiating light. He was overcome with a powerful urge to bite—someone, anyone. All he wanted to do was bite.

The old man threw back his head and howled. His silent voice trailed on the air, summoning his children, the Kinma dogs. Responding to that soundless call, dogs leaped, one after the other, from the darkness and fell in beside them as they darted down the snowy trail. A one-eyed black beast ran at the head. Its eye flashed as it sped along.

The Mukonian sled dogs were the first to notice the approaching threat, growling and barking, lunging and twisting in their harnesses. Their startled drivers brandished whips in desperate bids to control the animals.

The fort loomed close. The burning roof illuminated the surroundings as brightly as daylight. Zolian horsemen, armed with spears and shields and controlling their mounts with their legs alone, charged from the gate to intercept the Mukonian invaders. The sweat of man and horse, the scent of snow, the reek of burning roof timbers, the stench of blasted flesh and blood—through this whirlwind of smells, Van and the old man ran and fell upon the flank of the Mukonian troops. As they jumped through the air, so did the Kinma dogs, cutting the necks of the startled soldiers with their fangs and springing

past them. The soldiers toppled over, bouncing and rolling as they hit the snow.

Even as he ran, the old man seemed to direct the dogs, gripping their leads in multiple unseen hands. He didn't target the mountain people, only the Mukonians. Helmets rolled from heads, revealing golden hair that reflected the light of the flames.

Van and the old man lunged at a soldier's neck. As the fangs pierced soft flesh, a thrill of pleasure coursed through Van's body. Blood, metallic and salty, filled his mouth, and a thin thread of light passed with his saliva into the soldier's throat.

The Mukonians fell into disarray. They slashed with their swords at the fierce dogs that had appeared out of nowhere, but the beasts slipped under their blades and vaulted onto the sleds. Then, as if mocking the great lumbering sled dogs, the Kinma dogs jumped onto their backs, using them as springboards to fly at the throats of more victims. If the Mukonians could have paused to assess the situation objectively, they would have realized that the attacking beasts numbered no more than twenty. However, the creatures moved so swiftly that it was impossible to keep track of them, and the dancing shadows cast by the fire made twenty seem like a hundred.

As the Zolian horsemen drew near and saw the beasts attacking the Mukonians, they reined in their mounts hastily. Fear showed on their faces. The routed Mukonians began to scatter. Unable to retreat to the top of the hill, some drove their sleds in different directions, desperately seeking an escape route. Others abandoned their sleds altogether. They disappeared into the dark forest, clutching the bites on their arms or dragging their bitten legs.

The old man laughed out loud. He didn't bother sending dogs after them. Gently flicking countless invisible hands, he turned the pack toward the Zolian horsemen.

Van found himself staring up into the face of a frightened young man who reminded him of Tohma. The instant their gazes met, Van shivered as though touched by a cold wind and returned to his senses abruptly.

Realizing what the Dog King was about to do, Van yanked himself away. The old man fought to subdue him, yet Van resisted, and they vied for control. Van

felt his forehead burst apart.

6

Rescuing a Woman

The ground beneath seemed to undulate like the surface of a lake. Taking a ragged breath, Van gripped his knees and fought down nausea. The sensation of hard bone beneath his hands brought with it the relief of knowing that he'd returned to his body.

Van pressed a shaking hand to his forehead and raised his face to see Ohfan, drenched in sweat, bent over his father and frantically shouting as he pressed his hands against the old man's arm.

"Father! Please! Come back! Father!"

The smell of blood filled Van's nostrils. It poured from Kenoi's arm.

One of the warriors ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt, slipped it under the Dog King's arm and around his shoulder, and then tied it tightly.

An arrow was stuck in the ground beside them. Someone must have shot him. Assuming it was a Mukonian, Van peered through the trees toward the Mukonian forces and their Lafan allies. A fierce battle was underway. The torches borne by the Lafan lay scattered on the snow, and swords flashed in their weak light. A scream accompanied each flash.

Some of the Lafan archers must have escaped into the woods because arrows flew from the trees occasionally. Still, it was a losing battle for them. The Ahfal Oma warriors cut them down one by one.

Kenoi opened his eyes. Pushing Ohfan's hand away, he struggled up to a sitting position and stared at Van. His eyes glittered beneath his disheveled white hair.

“Why?” he gasped, forcing the word from his throat.

Van stared back at him without answering. His mouth tasted bitter—a hideous aftertaste. While one with the beast, he’d been drunk on the ecstasy of biting, but now he was filled with self-loathing. A deep remorse scorched his breast. Van had let that thing nesting within him take control.

What will become of the young man I bit when my soul was fused with that dog?

He was surely infected with mitsual. No one could save him now.

Because of me...

Van groaned. However, it was too late for regret. Van had done the last thing he ever wished to.

That creature inside me is a monster. It clings to me and wears my face, but the words it mutters in my ear are not my thoughts. It summons the darkest urges that lurk in my heart, driving me insane.

Yet for all that, it filled him with relief—the reassurance that to merge with that rushing torrent was just fine. It convinced Van that relinquishing himself to the flow was natural.

Madness and grief filled the old man’s eyes. They demanded answers.

“I thought you understood,” they said wordlessly. “I thought you realized that all I want is to make amends; to give my people a future and let them return to the plains; to slake their burning thirst to see their homeland. That disease only kills Mukonians and Zolians. Isn’t it a fitting punishment for the greedy ones who took land that isn’t theirs and claimed it as their own?”

“I thought you would replace this sick old man as the leader of the pack and guide us down the road to eternal peace, so that we could regain our homeland without even having to fight for it.

“Surely you, too, must long to reclaim the peaceful life wrenched from your grasp. So why?”

Van forced his breath out between clenched teeth.

He didn’t know how to voice the thoughts building within him. He recalled the

face of the young Zolian warrior and the fear rising in his eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his voice came out like a hoarse whisper. “To fight means to dirty your own hands. You should pick a battle that suits your size. One within reach of your own hands.”

The old man shook his head violently. Gripping his son’s arm, he yelled, “Stop —”

But he was interrupted by stocky warriors who burst into view, dragging a slim figure between them. As they came closer, Van saw that their captive was a woman.

They threw her at Ohfan’s feet. “We found her up a tree. She’s the one who shot Kenoi.”

She was barely conscious. Her eyelids fluttered, but all strength seemed to have fled her body, and she lay helpless on the ground. An ermine wrap like the sort worn by the Lafan as prayers for protection was around her neck.

Ohfan stared down at her, frowning. “So even the Lafan women are archers.”

One of his men stepped forward and bowed. He placed the tip of a blood-soaked blade against the woman’s throat. Before he could do any more, however, he cried out and clapped a hand to his eye.

Van, still crouched from slinging the stone, dashed forward, slipped an arm under the woman, and swung her across his shoulders. After that, only Kenoi was able to follow his movements.

With the woman still draped over his shoulders, Van kicked the warrior’s sword arm. It flew wide, and the blade came for Ohfan, who jumped back. The point still managed to graze his thigh, though.

“You!!” he shouted, but by then, Van had already disappeared into the woods. Van drew a deep breath and issued a shrill summons without slowing. Before the sound had faded into the darkness, Olaha bounded up in front of him.

“Kill him!” Ohfan roared. “Don’t let him get away!”

Bows twanged, and arrows whistled through the air, but they could not stop

Van.

He threw the woman onto the pyuika's back and swung himself up behind her. Hunching himself over her body, he pressed his thighs into Olaha's flanks and urged him forward. The pyuika shot through the forest like the arrows lancing after them, flying over the ground, weaving among trees, and sailing through tangled shrubs and thickets.

The wind lashed Van's cheeks. Sadness oozed from the pit of his stomach. He felt the despair in Kenoï's eyes clinging to his back. He hadn't wished to betray him like this. He would've preferred to talk more and seek a path toward mutual understanding.

Unfortunately, it was too late. He'd acted without thinking, and the dice had been cast. Van couldn't suffer to watch them kill this woman. He'd decided that of his own accord.

Shoving down the thoughts that shook his being, Van shouted, "Run, Olaha!"



The warriors from the Gansa clan joined Ohfan's men around daybreak. Catching sight of Zakka, Ohfan silently pulled him aside.

Zakka listened, his face grim, while Ohfan explained what had happened the night before. Then he sighed and bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

Ohfan stared at Zakka for a moment and ultimately shook his head. "There's no reason for you to apologize. Still, considering what's happened, I can no longer treat him as your kin."

Zakka gazed back at Ohfan and nodded, then rubbed a hand over his face. "From the time he joined the Broken Antlers, he was no longer my kin." He fixed his eyes vacantly on the snow-covered trees. "All to rescue a woman, huh?" he said. His gaze returned to Ohfan.

The white glow of morning gradually suffused the blue-shrouded forest.

"He lost his wife and child. I suppose he couldn't bear to see a woman killed like that."

Ohfan's eyes were cold. "If so, then he's merely a fool, but I'm not sure that's

all it was.”

Zakka looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

With a dire expression, Ohfan explained. “When we took the weapons off the corpses of the Lafan warriors, we discovered something odd. One of the bodies wasn’t a Lafan.”

Zakka’s brows rose. “What?”

“He wore white ermine at his throat to appear like one, but he had no calluses.”

The Lafan used slings from childhood. Their archers sported thick calluses on their hands.

“If not a Lafan, then who?” Zakka muttered. Ohfan gazed at him silently, and Zakka understood. “Ah. I see.” He rubbed a hand over his chin stubble absently. “So the king has decided to protect himself.” Zakka stared ahead.

Ohfan clenched his jaw, seemingly aware of what the other man thought. “We will take back our homeland,” he declared, forcing the words out. “No matter what.”

Zakka knit his brow. “I know how you feel, but wouldn’t it be better to go into hiding and wait for the right time? The King of Aquafa is only worried about how the Zolians will respond. Why not continue using the Kinma dogs against the Mukonians and bide your time until the situation changes.”

Ohfan shook his head. “I have no intention of keeping idle.”

“I see. And there’s your father to think of. How is he, by the way?”

“Not good. He’s got a high fever. The arrow only grazed him, but the disappointment of Van’s betrayal was too great a blow on top of the exhaustion of leading the Kinma dogs. We already knew that he might not last the year. He’s been surviving on willpower alone.”

Ohfan glanced back at the camp. “But he hasn’t given up.” He gave Zakka a shallow grin. “And I won’t, either. I’m done with waiting to see what the king decides. Justice is on our side. The gods know that.”

He fell silent for a moment, his gaze intense, but then his expression relaxed.

“Our alliance with your people ends here.” Zakka listened in silence. “My father and I will take our finest warriors and leave our clan.”

Zakka was astonished. “You mean...”

Ohfan nodded and bowed his head low. “We shall never forget the generosity your people showed by accepting us into your midst and fighting alongside us, even when we cross the river to the Land of the Dead.”

He lifted his head and smiled. “If I could ask of you one final thing, it would be that you hide our people deep in the Toga Mountains. It would never do for this conflict between us and the king to garner attention from the Zolians. Surely, those who betrayed us won’t go so far as to chase our defenseless families into the peaks.”

Zakka regarded Ohfan wordlessly. The current situation and the future of the people living on Aquafa’s border made his task clear. Still, the wave of sorrow that crashed through him drowned out those pressing concerns.

Zakka was overcome with pity for the man before him. Although obstinate and arrogant, Ohfan loved his people dearly. He was the chief of a small clan tossed about by the brutal winds of fate. Each time he’d struggled to resist, he was driven into greater isolation.

The game has ended.

If the King of Aquafa had decided to back out, then no matter what they did, fortune would never favor them. It was time to pull out. If they did so now, the Gansa clan could still escape unharmed.

But...

Quitting wasn’t an option for Ohfan. To give up now would be to accept the crushing injustice of fate, and how could the Ahfal Oma ever accept that?

Ohfan clung to the belief that his people were right and that, because they were right, the gods would aid them. He would undoubtedly press on, even if the route before him were a fragile thread suspended over the depths of hell.

Yet even now...

As he walked that deadly path, Ohfan took care not to involve the people of

the Toga Mountains. Such was his nature.

Zakka silently touched his palms to his stomach, chest, and forehead. Then he nodded.



Half a month later, a band of warriors under orders from the King of Aquafa attacked Ohfan's settlement in the Toga Mountains. A fierce wind blew all day, but it died out at night. They struck in that still darkness that was so cold that it froze the trees, taking care not to draw the attention of the Zolians.

Most of Ohfan's clan had already been taken deep into the mountains by the Gansa, but Kenoi and about twenty men had stayed behind. Although the band of elite warriors led by Ohfan was nowhere to be found, the remaining men fought ferociously. The Aquafaese, who outnumbered them by far, lost over half their force, and of those who survived, some were bitten by Kinma dogs and died on their way home.

The battle was silent, short, and savage. Of the twenty Ahfal Oma, ten were shot with arrows. Kenoi, the Dog King, was one of a handful who escaped under cover of darkness through the freshly falling snow. The Aquafaese set out after them at daybreak, only to find their tracks buried by wind and snow. Similarly, there was no trace of Ohfan and his men.

However, the Aquafaese's search did yield one result. They found a body lying behind a fallen log, half-buried in the snow: Ohfan's father, Kenoi, the Dog King.

7

Crescent Moon Over Antlers

It smelled of smoke.

Even with her eyes shut, Sae felt dizzy. She kept them closed and waited for the vertigo to pass.

Her left thigh throbbed. The spot where the dart had punctured her skin beat in time to her pulse. Although she'd yanked out the dart as soon as it hit, the whole area was now stiff.

She recalled most of what happened last night. The poison on the blow dart had paralyzed her, but she never lost consciousness. While immobilized, she'd been aware of them treating her like a limp rag and listened to them talk as they prepared to kill her.

Sae had loosed that arrow knowing she would die. It was strange to find herself alive.

Dawn approached. The air was brutally cold, yet Sae's body felt warm. A wall of snow packed up behind her blocked out the wind, and in front of her, a small fire burned. It was mostly ashes now, but it still emitted a faint warmth.

The breath of the sleeping man who held her in his arms caressed the back of her neck. She opened her eyes gently.

A crescent moon hung in the dawn sky. Everything in that frozen forest was dyed a single shade of blue—the snow, the trees, the sky behind them. And within that blue darkness, something gleamed. A pair of eyes. A large pyuika, antlers held high, sat in the snow looking this way. Its figure was barely distinguishable against the snow, but its eyes glowed with a strong light. It gazed at her unblinking.

A voice sounded quietly in her ear. “He doesn’t sleep much.”

Sae nodded slightly.

She’d barely spoken to him before, yet she felt safe and secure lying here in his arms.

This compact world formed of snow and trees, the pyuika, her, and Van. If only it would freeze like this, beneath that sliver of moon.

Sae had watched this man for such a long time. His intuition was as sharp as a wild creature’s, so she’d been forced to keep her distance, but she was used to watching her targets from far away. Even when hidden deep behind the trees, she saw his movements and expressions clearly and heard his voice.

The first time she saw him, he’d reminded her of a wolf—a lone wolf separated from its pack.

But lone wolves were usually a pitiful sight, whereas this man betrayed no misery. He had a quiet strength, like a wolf that had run far ahead of the pack into the wilderness. He seemed aloof, yet his expression softened when he was with the young reindeer herders. At those times, he exuded a quiet brightness, similar to a forest on a sunny winter’s day. Perhaps Van himself was ignorant of how the young man he led through the woods and fields looked totally at ease.

And then there was his little daughter. That mischievous girl who always ran to him and jumped into his arms. When he held her, she looked secure as a contented baby, and Van’s face, too, seemed peaceful and relaxed.

He was a quiet man who didn’t show his emotions. But at times, when he was on his own, something about him changed. The first time Sae had noticed, she felt her chest grow cold. Longing seemed to emanate from his back—as though he yearned to vanish into the darkness. Watching him stride deeper and deeper into the forest, Sae had feared that he wouldn’t return to the camp that evening.

She sensed a danger in him. It wouldn’t surprise her if, one day, he stepped over a line that must never be crossed and lost himself forever.

A faint rustling disturbed the bushes, and the pyuika’s ears straightened up. Van gently removed his arms from Sae and drew away. Instantly, the frigid air

stung her back, and she shivered.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a low voice. She nodded. He peered into her face, perhaps trying to make it out in the dim light. “I’m going to check the traps. If you’re feeling well enough, please get a fire going.”

Sae looked troubled, and Van smiled faintly. “No horses will catch up with Olaha in this season.”

She relaxed. He was right. Sae had heard the stories, but until she witnessed it for herself, she never believed how swiftly a pyuika could run. The word *pyuika* meant “flying deer,” but the animals differed greatly from their deer cousins. Sturdy yet amazingly nimble, they bounded so swiftly across the ground that they appeared to soar. That’s why a rider’s skill was far more crucial with pyuika than horses.

Van was an astounding rider. He’d guided Olaha unerringly through the jet-black forest, making split-second decisions that kept Olaha from tripping on tree roots, scraping on branches, or floundering in the snow.

Last night, they’d raced up one cliff and down another and leaped over two streams. Even the finest fire horse had no hope of catching a pyuika in winter, especially through the mountains at night. The Ahfal Oma would have difficulty following any tracks left in the snow until daybreak. The men from the Gansa clan must have spent the night pursuing the Mukonians, so even if they pursued Van on their pyuika, they were still considerably distant.

Olaha brushed his nose against Van’s thigh when he passed. As if in answer, Van touched his antlers and then vanished into the brush.

Sae rose with a sigh and set to work laying a fire. Her left thigh ached, and she had difficulty moving, but she had managed to get wood burning by the time Van returned with two rabbit carcasses, neatly skinned and gutted, dangling from his hand. She handed him some nearby sticks, and he whittled the tips into points to make skewers.

Once the meat roasting over the fire was nicely browned, Sae pulled a small leather pouch from her belt, took out some salt wrapped in oiled paper, and sprinkled it over them. Then she handed a skewer to Van.

As she did so, Olaha stood and trotted over to her.

“Look out,” Van said. “He’s after the salt.”

Olaha swung his head down to her lap and nuzzled her hand. Smiling, Sae let him lick a pinch of salt while folding the paper shut with the fingers of her other hand and slipping it back into her pouch.

A single pinch must not have been enough, because the pyuika butted his nose against her chest.

“Hey there! Stop that!” Van said.

Olaha snorted and wandered away. In the mountains, salt was more precious than gold. Sae had given the pyuika quite a large pinch, but considering that he’d saved her life, she didn’t mind. She bit into the roasted meat. Rabbits were lean, but the hot flesh seasoned with salt tasted heavenly.

The two chewed away greedily for a while, licking the fat from their fingers. Sae felt the heat and strength returning to her body already, even with just one rabbit in her stomach. She turned to Van, who was busy wiping the grease from his knife in the snow, and bowed her head deeply.

“Thank you for saving my life,” she said.

Van looked up and nodded in acknowledgment.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

He slipped the knife into its sheath but, instead of answering her question, replied, “Why did you shoot the Dog King?”

Sae thought for a moment, but after all that had happened, she didn’t see any point in hiding the truth. “To save Aquafa.”

Van frowned. “I thought he had the king’s approval.”

Sae blinked. “Did he tell you that?”

“...He showed me a dream. A dream about using the Kinma dogs to spread disease and take Aquafa back from Zol and Mukonia.”

Sae nodded. “Did he tell you that the disease kills outsiders but not those born in this land?”

“Yes.”

Sae sighed. “He was wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes. That disease—black wolf fever—it can harm Aquafaese. Some have already died of it.” Sae explained how the King of Aquafa had approved the scheme at first because he believed that Aquafaese were immune. If things went well, it would prove that this opportunity was a gift from the gods. However, the black wolf fever carried by the Kinma dogs differed from the illness of several centuries ago.

“Did you hear about the falcon hunt?”

“The one where Utalu died after being bitten?”

“Yes. Izam, the king’s own kin, was also stricken and nearly perished. He survived, but he was left partially paralyzed. That was a great shock for us. We began investigating and discovered that some other Aquafaese had died from similar symptoms.

“Besides, the attack was too transparent. The Zolians began to suspect the king’s involvement. It’s remained mere suspicion for the time being, but if the king doesn’t stop this scheme soon, and the Ahfal Oma go too far, the Zolians will take action.”

Something shone in Van’s eyes. “Is that why you shot the Dog King when he set his dogs on the Zolian soldiers?”

Sae nodded again. Van gazed at her steadily. “Did you think you could get away with it?”

She didn’t answer.

“So you knew and did it anyway.”

Sae turned her attention to the fire. She felt Van’s gaze on her and whispered, “Because we’d finally achieved a balance. After a very long fight and so much blood.”

Van sighed and placed a hand over his mouth in contemplation. He stayed that way for some time but then lowered his hand and asked, “Why were you

spying on me? You've been following me since I was in Oki, right?"

Sae regarded him with surprise. "You knew?"

Van gave a wry laugh. "I admit I didn't notice at the time, which was pretty stupid of me. I only realized it when you held me in the forest the other night. I remembered catching your scent in the forests of Oki."

Sae raised her eyebrows. "My...scent?"

Van sighed, looking embarrassed. "Ever since that dog bit me, my sensitivity to smell has heightened."

I see, Sae thought, and then she blushed. She began speaking quickly to hide her confusion. "I was under orders to keep an eye on you. You've survived this new strain of black wolf fever, and my father told me that Kenoi, the man you call the Dog King, was looking for you."

As Sae spoke, the thundering of her heart gradually subsided. She continued while stoking the fire with a stick. "We learned quite early on that Kenoi was ill and looking for a man who'd survived a bite, like him. He wanted a successor."

Van frowned. "If so, then they waited a long time before making contact."

"I can only assume that they weren't ready. We don't know everything, either."

Van's frown deepened. "Is the Echo Master in league with the Ahfal Oma?"

Sae shook her head. "No, of course not! The master of Yomida Forest has no connection whatsoever to Kenoi and the others. I know he was concerned about the Kinma dogs. That must be why he summoned you."

"But you were there, too. And Nakka as well."

Sae opened her mouth but quickly shut it. Hesitantly, as though searching for the words, she answered, "It's hard to explain, but it seems several throwing rings were cast at you from different directions at the same time. When we met in the baths, I told you that I had been injured, remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was true. I was badly wounded while pursuing your trail after you

escaped the salt mine. Some of the locals rescued me and took me to the Echo Master. After that, I often went to the baths. They're a great place to hear all the gossip and learn what's happening in Oki."

"So you were there by coincidence?"

Sae shook her head. "No. I saw Assenomi go to your camp, so I went ahead. I knew that Kenoi had made his first serious attempt to contact you, so I had to stay close."

Still frowning, Van scratched his chin. "There's something I still don't understand. It seemed like Nakka had worked there for quite a while."

"Yes, he'd been there for a long time."

"But—"

"I know. He's the one who abducted Yuna. My guess is that he was forced to take on that role unexpectedly, precisely because he happened to work there. He's a Yusula Oma."

"Yusula Oma...the People of the Marsh?" Van repeated, and then his eyes widened. "Oh, I see. He's from Yukata."

"That's right. He told me as much during a chat. He clearly wasn't trying to hide it, either. He said he was involved in the incident that led to the Ahfal Oma's expulsion from the Yukata Plains. That's how he ended up at the northernmost end of the country. The Ahfal Oma have always treated the Yusula Oma like their servants, and if they ask them to do something, the Yusula Oma must obey."

The two fell silent for some time, staring at the fire.

"Why?" Van asked suddenly. "Why did you lead me to the Ahfal Oma? Considering your mission, wouldn't it have been better to stop me?"

A pain stabbed at Sae's chest, and she looked down. *He's smart*. If she tried to gloss over things, he was sure to notice. If he felt the slightest trace of doubt, the delicate trust between them would crumble. Sae paused for only a moment. After making up her mind, she lifted her head. "We used you."

Van's expression turned stern. "Used me?"

“Yes. We’d reached a dead end.” Sae took a shallow breath. “The Ahfal Oma feared that the king might change his mind, so they kept their hand cleverly hidden. They had informed the king that they intended to work with the Gansa to trap the Mukonians, but we couldn’t learn anything about what they intended to do afterward.”

Van’s eyes narrowed. “So you harried your prey into the pack of hounds. You wanted to see what they would do once they had me?”

Sae nodded. However, that wasn’t the only thing on her mind when enacting this plan. She’d also worried for this man and for Yuna, too. The Ahfal Oma tended to be hasty. If Van hadn’t pursued Yuna, they might have decided she was a worthless hostage. The notion that a child might be killed had proved to be more than Sae could bear. She’d desperately wanted to save her somehow.

If I could have... Sae would have told Van everything that night in the forest. She’d longed to do so. To sit down with Van and plan how to save the child and him as well.

Regrettably, that had been impossible. Sae’s father and the others had been hiding close by. They only saw this man as a tool. The moment he stopped being useful, they’d kill him without hesitation. Some time ago, they’d confessed to Sae that when the time was right, they would kill Van to prevent him from becoming Kenoi’s tool.

“And what did you learn?”

“Hmm?” Sae blinked, confused by the question. Upon realizing what Van was talking about, she shook her head. “Nothing yet.”

A smile touched her lips. “If not for this, perhaps we would have by now.”

A birdcall sounded from a distant place. The buzz of morning was beginning to fill the forest. Van watched the treetops where the birds hopped from branch to branch, then returned his gaze to Sae. “What are you going to do now?” he asked quietly.

What was she going to do? Sae didn’t even need to ask herself. She had to rejoin her father and the others who were tracking Kenoi. Yet the mere thought of that made her chest grow tight. This brief time away from her father and his

men seemed so achingly precious.

“What are *you* going to do?” she countered.

Van stroked his chin. “I’m going to look for Yuna. I’ve been thinking about where to start. She wasn’t in the village of the Ahfal Oma as far as I could tell.”

He laughed. “She’s quite something when she cries, and stubborn, too. If she were surrounded by strangers, she would cause a ruckus, shouting for all to hear. I suppose they might have given her something to induce sleep, but still, I would have known if she were there.”

Sae nodded. “I don’t think she was there, either. The other Molfah told me that Nakka went into the village but left again quite quickly with Yuna on his back. I tried to follow his tracks, but they stopped me.”

“I see.” Van nodded. “In that case, where did he take her?”

As long as Van walked free, Yuna still had some value as a hostage, so they wouldn’t hurt her. Even so, impatience flared in his chest when he thought of her being all alone and afraid. “I suppose this must seem like a strange request, but...” Van trailed off, hesitating. “Would you help me find my daughter? If your circumstances allow it, of course.”

Sae stared at him in surprise.

With a slightly embarrassed frown, Van added, “I don’t know the Yukata Plains at all. It would be helpful if you came with me.”

Instinctively, Sae wondered if her father and his men would let her, then she laughed at herself internally. She didn’t care what they thought.

She looked at Van and nodded.

8

The Lightning Squad

A sharp crack boomed from somewhere distant. A tree had split, unable to withstand the brutal cold.

Van recalled images from the past, his eyes shut.

Whenever his grandmother heard that sound, she would say, “*Ah, the white spirits are kicking the trees again.*” People of her generation believed that pyuika spirits romped through the winter forests and split the trees when they kicked them with their hind legs. On days when the sound cut clearly through the air, it certainly felt as though winter demons had been set loose. The temperature would plummet, and fierce snowstorms were sure to follow.

Van had heard the first tree break late in the afternoon of the previous day and called an early halt.

Normally, when he traveled in winter, he brought along a stick shaped for digging snow, but as he’d fled with almost nothing, his only tool was a knife. Fortunately, it was a useful piece. Before they set off together, Van and Sae had taken a day to prepare what they would need to survive a trek through the mountains. Van had foraged for food, and Sae had made digging sticks, snowshoes, and other essentials. Thus, when the weather changed, they weren’t too worried.

They set about digging a cave in the snow at the foot of a large tree. Unlike rocks, tree roots remained surprisingly warm. After scooping out a large hollow, the two carpeted the floor with thick evergreen branches and used some to cover the hole at the top as well. With Olaha sitting in the center and their bodies pressed against his, there was no danger of freezing to death, even in

the most intense cold.

Pyuika weathered blizzards by huddling patiently behind a large tree or in the bushes. Olaha remained motionless in the cramped and stifling interior of their snow cave, sharing his warmth as they waited for the blizzard to pass. They slept fitfully, waking occasionally to move the branches on the ceiling to keep the air from growing foul and suffocating them.

The raging blizzard began to abate during the night, and in time, a weak light permeated the walls. However, the cold persisted, and here and there, Van and Sae heard the cracks of splitting trees.

Van laughed as he listened to the sound echo. Sae looked at him with a raised brow.

“Yuna,” he said. “Whenever she heard that sound, she’d jump.”

Everyone in the camp burst out laughing the first time she did so. Delighted by this reaction, she took to jumping like a rabbit whenever a tree broke, pretending to be surprised. Each time, she came up with something new, keeping everyone amused and wondering what she would come up with next.

Sae chuckled when Van shared the story. To make someone so reserved laugh seemed like a special treat.

What an odd situation, Van thought.

For many nights now, he’d been sleeping with a woman who spied on him. Yet it felt perfectly natural to be with her, despite her not being his wife. Whenever Van considered this, it seemed bizarre. But so long as he didn’t think about it, there was nothing odd at all.

Sae didn’t seem uncomfortable in such close quarters with a man she barely knew, either. Something stirred in Van’s chest when her body grew warm and the feminine scent of her skin reached him. At those times, he felt her feelings moving toward him, too, like waves overlapping. Both of them pretended not to notice.

“I wonder if she’ll pout when she sees me,” Sae said, a smile in her voice. “It’s hard to guess what children will do when they’re three or younger, isn’t it? By the time they’re four or five, they become quite predictable.”

The remark prompted Van to ask something that had been on his mind. “Do you have children of your own?”

Sae hesitated but gave a lonely smile. “No. I was never blessed with children.”

Van rubbed his chin. “I see. Sorry to pry.”

Sae shook her head. “It can’t be helped. I was probably born that way. That’s why I left my husband and returned to my village. I was the one who suggested it. When I reached thirty.”

She looked Van in the face, still smiling. “When I first returned, I thought about him constantly, but gradually, he faded from my mind. Forgetting someone you love is sad, yet it can help.”

She went silent, and the sound of the wind enveloped her.

Van thought she was right. To let time close the wounds in one’s heart and help one forget could make it easier to go on living.

But...

In his case, life had not become easier when the memories of his wife and child faded. When Van first realized that he was beginning to forget their faces, he’d felt as if he was fading away. As his memory of their existences waned, so did the meaning of living.

Sae closed her eyes. Van gazed at her face, thinking about the life she’d lived, until sleep overtook him.

The blizzard continued for a day and a night before it finally stopped. As soon as they left the cave, Olaha stretched, straightening the kinks in his muscles. With a shake of his head, he pranced into the trees to pee noisily.

The wind had swept the sky clean, and the forest was blanketed in snow and filled with dazzling light.

When Olaha returned, Van helped Sae up, then pulled himself up behind her and clicked his tongue, urging Olaha northwest.

Sae looked over her shoulder at Van, startled. “I thought you wanted to go to the Yukata Plains.”

Van shook his head. "Not yet. I want to check out another place first, although it may be a bit of a gamble."

The Takula Forest Road was to the northwest. Not much snow covered the trail, whether because the mountains blocked the snow-laden winds or because of the thick evergreen trees that ran along the route. In winter, it offered the shortest journey from the Toga Mountains to the eastern part of the country.

"If the Dog King still wants me, he'll send messengers to wherever Yuna is. He'll use her as bait to draw me to him."

Sae frowned. "If that's the case, then that road could be an invitation into a trap."

Van smiled. "Do you think we should abandon this idea, then?"

Sae thought for a moment and smiled back at him. "Let's go."

To Van, this area was practically home. He knew every corner. If Ohfan or the Dog King sent messengers, they'd need to come down from the fort and find a road without much snow, no matter their destination. That gave Van a good idea of where they might be.

His plan was to reach the forest road ahead of any messengers, hide somewhere, and see where they traveled. Sae, however, advised against that.

"They'll have dogs with them. Maybe not Kinma dogs, but even their hunting dogs are far from ordinary. Not even hiding downwind will keep you safe from them."

Van frowned. "In which case, perhaps it's better to let them go ahead of us."

Sae nodded. "Yes, it would be less risky to give the messengers a head start and follow after."

Van grinned.

"What?" Sae asked suspiciously, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing. I just realized they aren't the only ones with excellent hounds."

Sae still looked surprised, but she smiled wryly.

Winter weather was fickle, and by late morning, snow began falling again.

Snow could erase everything. Too much of it, and Van and Sae would miss hoofprints left on the Takula Forest Road. While looking up at the falling snow, which seemed to be getting thicker, Van cursed silently. He and Sae had hoped to reach the forest after any Ahfal Oma messengers had passed, but if they arrived too late, there would be nothing to follow.

However, when he voiced this concern to Sae, she shook her head. "It's not a problem," she said confidently. "I'll be able to track them even after two or three days. Our priority should be avoiding their hounds."

"If you're that sure, then let's spend today hunting so that we'll have some food in reserve," Van suggested.

Sae smiled and nodded.

They split up to hunt, then made camp early and rested. Having spent the day filling his belly, Olaha also looked content. Pyuika survived on very little during winter, but they couldn't do so indefinitely when they carried riders. A good pyuika rider knew when to give their mount time to forage, regardless of any need to hurry.

With night came heavier snowfall, and a true blizzard soon after. Fortunately, the storm abated by morning, but although the sun shone brightly, the fresh snow lay so thickly over the ground that progress was slow. By the time Van and Sae reached the edge of the Takula Forest Road, the sun was already sinking into the horizon, and the shadows cast by the trees were tinged blue.

Van brought Olaha to a stop at the peak of a slope overlooking the path and closed his eyes to listen. A hush had fallen over everything, and he sensed no humans. The only sounds to be heard were the hushed scurries of little creatures and the *thud* of snow falling from branches. The wind carried no scent of horses.

Were the messengers already so far ahead? Or perhaps they'd opted for a different route? Or perhaps... Different possibilities ran through his mind.

Sae slipped from Olaha's back and strapped on her snowshoes. With one hand resting against a tree, she peered down at the road. Her head moved ever so slightly, almost as if she were reading something. She stood like this for a while, then made her way down to the road, plowing through the drifts. Had

she spotted something?

She stopped and sank gently to her knees, bringing her face close to the snow. Then she stood and turned to look at Van. Her expression was dire.

“What is it?” Van asked, walking over.

“Horse tracks. And not just a few. I’d say at least twenty or thirty horses passed through,” Sae answered.

“Tracks? Really?”

Sae pointed here and there at the soft curtain of snow that had covered the road overnight. “There and there. Those are the easiest ones to make out. Do you see them?”

Now that she’d pointed the spots out, Van noticed that the surface of the snow reflected the light somewhat differently in those places. He’d spotted tracks like these while out hunting bears in winter—depressions made when prints were covered by fresh snow.

Still, the difference was so minute that Van would never have recognized it without Sae. Now that he had, the other tracks stood out. As Sae had said, hoofprints covered the entire road.

“These weren’t made by messengers,” Van muttered, and Sae nodded. Her face was pale.

“No,” she said. “Judging by the shape and number, they’re probably from the Lightning Squad, the elite horse riders of the Ahfal Oma. They swoop down on their enemies in bands of ten.”

Chapter 9: Ikimi's Light

1

The Fire Horse Mound

“Hey! Don’t touch that!”

Milalle reached out to stop the little girl grasping for a basket of precious lichens that Milalle had collected.

“Why?” the girl asked, thrusting out her lower lip.

Whenever they came to the village in the marsh, this little one who called herself Yunacha appeared out of nowhere and tagged along. She seemed particularly attached to Milalle and Makokan. On one occasion, Hohsalle had shooed her away, and now she kept her distance whenever he was around. However, she never went far, watching them with her eager dark eyes.

She was a cute little thing. Her quick, nimble movements and the way she puffed out her cheeks when angry reminded Milalle of a baby squirrel. Evidently, she was an expert escape artist, too. A man who had to be her father or her uncle often came running over, searching for her in a panic. Milalle would look to where the girl had been just moments ago, only to discover that she’d vanished.

Hohsalle and Milalle had been visiting the run-down shack every day to nurse the woman ailing from what appeared to be mitsual. Thankfully, she’d responded well to the new medicine and was already up and about. The villagers seemed to respect Hohsalle and Milalle’s work. Where once they eyed the outsiders warily, now they bowed in greeting. They even invited them into their homes for a meal on occasion.

The villagers’ willingness to talk proved to be an unexpected boon for Hohsalle and Milalle, who sensed that the disease had a strong connection with

this region's environment. If they could identify the link between it and ticks, there was a chance they might discover a major clue leading to a remedy. They borrowed a hut to store medicines and equipment to make their work easier. Humidity was a problem, but the hut was far enough from the marsh that the temperature was sufficiently low, offering good conditions for experiments.

Tohlim forbade them from staying in the village overnight. Although commuting from Otai was a bother, they could work the whole day if they left early enough in the morning. Hohsalle spent most of his time questioning the villagers about the disease while Milalle studied the local vegetation. For someone who specialized in making medicines from lichens as she did, the marshland was fascinating. Hohsalle, worried about her jaunting into the marshes on her own, insisted that Makokan accompany her, but she was so engrossed in collecting lichens that she often forgot he was there.

The wind that whipped up little waves on the gray waters of the marsh brought a cold bite, but the sun's rays were gradually warming, carrying a faint promise of spring. Many fallen trees lay along the edge of the large marsh, all of them covered thickly in moss. Much of the moss remained a vibrant green even on the withered winter ground.

Although moss and lichens looked similar, they were different plants. Those educated in the unique qualities of both could tell them apart easily. Many varieties grew here: flat gray patches plastered against the tree trunks like scar tissue, clusters of vivid yellow dots flecked with red, and white wispy beards trailing from the branches like algae drifting in a pond.

Since the era when their kingdom had flourished, the physicians of Otawalle had devoted themselves to curing a broad spectrum of diseases. But of all their inventions during their long academic history, none surpassed the microscope. It enabled them to observe the agents that caused sicknesses for the first time. Visible proof that there were myriad living creatures unseeable to the naked eye changed their worldview drastically.

Revolutionary inventions and discoveries were like waves. When the first one surged forward, it generated successive ripples in its wake. The year after the Otawalle created the microscope, there was a dramatic breakthrough in drug research—the discovery of a fungus that effectively killed the agents behind

certain afflictions. New medicines derived from the fungus demonstrated such promising results that the Academy of Deeper Learning buzzed with excitement. At the same time, however, the new drugs occasionally caused powerful allergic reactions. The deaths of a few patients sparked a brief uproar. But medical practitioners knew full well the fine line that existed between remedy and poison, and this incident alone was not enough for them to abandon the fungus-derived drugs. Persistent efforts to treat allergic reactions and improve the medicines resulted in the creation of many effective cures.

Antibacterial drugs also caused severe diarrhea, and in the search to understand why, the Otawalle discovered the existence of “good” agents that lived in human bodies and aided digestion. For the Otawalle, a people whose identity was defined by the motto “Live by helping other nations live,” it was truly gratifying to learn that the human body was populated by countless invisible organisms that similarly helped sustain human life. To be without a nation was equivalent to lacking a body. Yet, like these microorganisms, the Otawalle had spread to other countries, contributing to the well-being and prosperity of each.

About ten years ago, the Otawalle made yet another startling discovery: Evidence suggested the existence of disease agents far smaller than bacteria, unseeable even under a microscope. These minute agents, so tiny that they slipped through bacteria filters, were impervious to antibacterial drugs. However, through continued research, the Otawalle found that their virulence could be suppressed by substances in such lichens as ashimi.

When this knowledge was first being tested, Milalle was a new apprentice just beginning her studies. She’d continued this line of study ever since, captivated by the power concealed within such humble plants.

When mittsual reappeared, and it was confirmed that the disease agents extracted from the cadavers collected at the salt mine were too small to be seen under a microscope, the news caused quite a stir at the Academy of Deeper Learning. Different lichen strains that had proved effective in combatting other diseases were immediately tried, and it was found that drugs formed with a substance derived from the secondary metabolites produced by two types of lichen—ashimi and ikimi—were particularly effective at

suppressing mittsual disease agents. It was this substance that Hohsalle dubbed the anti-mittsual drug.

Once it became clear that medicines produced from lichens might be effective at combating mittsual, Milalle was reminded of a question that had long been dormant in a corner of her mind: Why did the Aquafaese survive the disease when it wiped out the Kingdom of Otawalle? And why hadn't any of the people of the Toga Mountains and the Oki region contracted the illness when that's where the black wolves lived?

Milalle's senior colleagues told her that fatal incidences had likely gone unreported because those regions were so remote and sparsely populated. However, Milalle questioned this excuse because of the lichens. The Toga Mountain people bred pyuika, while those of the Oki region bred reindeer. Although she knew little about pyuika, she'd heard that during winter, when there was no foliage to be found, reindeer foraged for lichens. Horses and sheep, on the other hand, lacked the stomach bacteria required to digest them. For years, Milalle had wished to study the relationship between lichens and the milks of pyuika and reindeer, which the peoples of western Aquafa consumed daily in some form or other. Although there were no pyuika or reindeer on the Yukata Plains, she'd heard that fire horses, unlike their cousins in other regions, ate lichens as well.

If the people who raised fire horses and lived with dogs that harbored mittsual disease agents did not contract the illness, then that suggested a connection. After consulting with Hohsalle, Milalle devoted herself to researching that very subject.

Perhaps she'd been pushing herself a little too hard, though, for she felt like she was coming down with a cold. Her throat was raw and sore, prompting her to keep her water flask close at hand, and she was more tired than usual. However, the vegetation and lichens grew thicker and more plentiful here than where she'd investigated yesterday, and soon she was so absorbed in collecting samples that her fatigue was a distant memory.

Milalle had just crouched over a fallen log to peel off some lichen with a trowel when she heard a voice. Turning, she saw a young man of the Yusula Oma striding over.

He waved. "Sir Makokan," he called. "Lord Hohsalle bids you to come."

Makokan nodded. After telling the young man he would be right with him, he looked down at Milalle. "Milady?"

Still crouched on the ground, Milalle shook her head. "I want to stay a little longer. You go on ahead."

Makokan frowned. "But—"

"I'll be fine," Milalle said with a laugh. "I'm not a child. On your way! You know how impatient Hohsalle gets. If you don't go right away, you'll get a scolding."

There was no sign of anyone else in the marsh. Tiny insects danced in the air on flickering wings. Everything seemed calm and peaceful. Makokan nodded and, with a quick bow to Milalle, hurried after the young man.

As their figures receded into the forest, the stillness increased. Milalle's trowel scraped loud against the bark. She lifted a clump of lichen off the log.

"Wha' dat?" Yuna asked. She'd crouched beside Milalle as if mesmerized by what she was doing.

"This? It's called *mohhalu*. Pretty, isn't it?"

The bridge of Yuna's nose wrinkled a little. "Pwetty. But it don't shine."

Milalle smiled. "You're right. It doesn't shine. But look here. These drops of water caught in it sort of sparkle, don't they?"

Yuna peered inside the clump, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"Uh-huh! Sparkly."

She reached out to touch a drop. When it ran down her finger, she laughed out loud. "Ooh, cold!"

Yuna jumped up. "Dats pwetty, but Yunacha like dis one betta." She pointed to the basket that Milalle had told her not to touch.

Milalle stood and placed the freshly gathered mohhalu in a basket. "Why?"

Yuna grinned. "'Cuz it shines!"

Milalle knit her brow and stared at the ashimi that would be used in the new remedy for mittsual. It was a lush dark green, and it certainly didn't shine.

"No, it doesn't," she replied quietly.

Yuna looked surprised. "Does too! Can't you see?" She went over to the row of small baskets and pointed to one on the far left and then one in the middle. "Dis one an' dis one, too. Dey shine. See? Pwetty, like dat one."

Puzzled, Milalle approached the baskets. She'd put each species of lichen collected that morning into its own container, and although she'd sprinkled them with water occasionally to keep them fresh, none of them shone.

Yuna stared at the leftmost basket as if captivated by its beauty. Milalle looked at the other two Yuna had shown her and gasped.

Wait a minute. It can't be...

The basket on the left contained takki while the one in the middle contained ikimi. Lime green takki hung down in hairlike tendrils from the branches of old trees. The verdant ikimi, on the other hand, grew along the marshy shoreline and was very rare and hard to find. Neither of them looked anything like the dark green ashimi. However, these three distinct species did have one thing in common: The secondary metabolites they produced contained a component with the same qualities. And it was this component that had proved so effective against the submicroscopic disease agents.

Milalle knew that some fungi glowed, and she'd seen a few bioluminescent mushrooms and algae.

But...

No matter how closely Milalle looked at them, she spotted no sign of phosphorescence. She'd never heard of any reports of them glowing, either. Lichens produced over a thousand types of secondary metabolites that could only be identified through laboratory analysis. It was impossible to identify them by sight. Milalle smiled and relaxed. This was surely a coincidence. The child was probably playing make-believe.

"They're that pretty, are they?" Milalle asked.

Yuna looked up, beaming. She nodded vigorously and jumped to her feet. “Yunacha knows a place wif lots of pwetty ones like deeze.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “Uh-hunh! Dis way!”

Grabbing Milalle’s hand in her pudgy little one, Yuna set off at a run, pulling Milalle behind her. She moved with astonishing speed and agility. Far from picking the easy route, she plowed straight ahead, unfazed by any obstacles. Milalle followed, jumping over logs and weaving through the forested marshland where snow still dotted patches on the ground.

What am I doing?

At last, they stumbled out of the forest, and her jaw dropped in surprise. Before them lay an enormous swamp. The shore on which they were standing was sheltered from the wind by a dense growth of trees. Emerald-green lichens, dappled with sunlight filtering through the canopy, carpeted the fallen logs and rocks along the water’s edge. Waterweeds grew abundantly, dark and verdant. Great moss-covered trees and stones lined the shore as though hugging the marsh. Their vigor was so intense as to almost stifle Milalle.

On the other side of the marsh, a sunbathed grassy plain stretched as far as she could see. In the distance was a flock of sheep.

Ah...

Settlers must have cut down the trees on the other side to expand their pastureland and make it easier to reach the water. Now that the trees were gone, the shore was exposed to strong winds, and the rocks along that side of the marsh were a dull, dry brown. The mosses and lichens that grew there would be completely different from those on this side.

“Look! Deah.”

Yuna tugged on Milalle’s hand, pulling the woman from her thoughts, and led her to a shoal. She pointed into the water.

“See! Shiny ones! Lots ’n’ lots o’ dem.”

Milalle peered into the water and gasped. In the shallows grew the largest

colony of ikimi she had ever seen.

“Incredible.”

She drew in a sharp breath. Something white gleamed beneath the vivid green at the bottom of the marsh.

Bones—white bones of some large animal lying on its side.

Milalle jumped to her feet and took a step back without thinking. Glancing down, she noticed white things beneath the lichens that covered the ground underfoot.

Her skin crawled.

“What’s wong?” Yuna asked. When Milalle didn’t answer, she pointed to the bones buried beneath the lichen. “You ’fwaid of weindeer bones?”

Milalle furrowed her brow as she stared. Among the bones in the water, she noticed a skull. It wasn’t a reindeer’s.

“They’re not reindeer bones,” she whispered. “They’re horse bones.”

Yuna’s eyes widened. “Weally? Hohse bones?”

“Yes. Horse.”

Milalle, who’d studied the skeletons of many creatures, recognized the skull at a glance.

Is this a tomb for horses?

She glanced around and noticed wilted flowers poking through the snow here and there. They weren’t a sort that would grow here naturally. Perhaps they’d been brought for the dead animals.

Milalle heard a noise behind her. Turning, she froze. Men stood between the trees, swords at their hips and spears in hand. They stared at her, their expressions livid.

2

The Yusula Oma Elder

Makokan's guide led him to the home of the elder, the leader of the Yusula Oma, but the only difference between his house and those of the other villagers was that it had been raised a little higher to avoid dampness. Makokan climbed the five steps of the wooden ladder into the house. Hohsalle sat with his back to the door, facing the elder across the hearth, but he turned when Makokan entered.

"Ah, there you are. Where's Milalle?"

"She said she wanted to stay and work a little longer."

Hohsalle scowled. "Idiot. You should've brought her with you. I told you not to leave her on her own."

Makokan's lips twitched. "Do you really think that Lady Milalle would listen to me when she's focused on her work?"

Hohsalle snorted. "I suppose you're right." He waved Makokan over and gestured for him to sit. "The elder's been sharing some interesting information, but I'm having a little trouble understanding. Help me out a bit, would you?"

In other words, Makokan thought, the young master can't understand a word he's saying. The elder's accent must be pretty thick.

He turned to the old man.

"May I speeg noo?" the elder asked.

Makokan fought down the laughter that bubbled up inside him. No wonder his young master had struggled. The man spoke with a heavy Yukata accent. The words he used and his intonation stirred up memories of the past.

Makokan had often heard people speaking like this when he was a boy.

“He’s asking if it’s all right to speak now,” he translated, and Hohsalle nodded.

“Diz plaze more mij bide ’n’ many git zign die.”

“He says that many more people here are getting sick and dying of tick bites.”

The elder explained that the tick population exploded every year when the weather began to warm. From spring to fall, tick bites were unavoidable, and the marsh people just accepted them as a fact of life. Sometimes, a rabbit that had been bitten would leap about as if it had gone mad. The Yusula Oma believed that the creature was trying to exorcise the tick’s spirit, which had burrowed inside it, but in the end, it was doomed to go stiff as a pole and die.

As he translated, Makokan recalled hearing similar stories in his youth, probably from his grandmother. He shuddered, remembering how they had frightened him.

Small animals like rabbits weren’t the only ones that got sick from tick bites, the elder explained. Even the marsh people occasionally came down with fevers and went into convulsions. But in the past, such symptoms had never killed them. Only some years after the Ahfal Oma had been driven from the land did children begin dying gruesome deaths after suffering tick bites. And recently, adults who were old or weak, such as the woman Hohsalle and Milalle treated, had also been stricken.

The elder scowled and cursed the Zolian immigrants.

When the Ahfal Oma had lived on the plains, they gave the marsh people mare’s milk in return for their work. It was a miraculous cure-all, and no one had died from tick bites in those days. The god Kinma loved the fire horses, and the animals brought bounty to the people, not just while they were living, but even after they died.

Sometimes, fire horses were bitten by ticks, but they never went crazy like the rabbits. Occasionally, the fire horses succumbed to disease if they were old. In such cases, the spirit of the tick was exorcised, and the horse was buried in the sacred mound at the edge of the marsh to send its soul to the god. Bordered by rocks and trees, the mound grew thick with the lichens that the

fire horses favored, and it glowed dimly with the light of Kinma.

The Ahfal Oma dog handlers waited until the horse grave glowed before leading their pregnant bitches there to eat the decaying flesh. Blessed by that sacred light, their pups became strong and clever.

When he reached this point in his explanation, the elder paused, his face troubled, and looked down at his hands. Eventually, he raised his eyes and continued, although haltingly.

The coming of the settlers had changed everything, he explained. They cut down part of the forest to create a watering hole for their sheep. This was a great sin, but the Ahfal Oma had reined in their fury because the settlers hadn't touched the trees on the side by the burial mound. However, cutting the forest had changed the mound nonetheless. It had failed to glow with Kinma's light when horses poisoned by toxic grain were buried there to purify them, and the dogs who ate those carcasses died in agony.

Many of the sheep raised by the settlers also perished from the toxic grain, and the settlers buried them at the edge of the forest. However, it was too close to Kinma's mound, and many times, the hounds of the Ahfal Oma dug them up and ate them. The dogs that ate the tainted sheep flesh died just like those that consumed fire horses killed by toxic grain. A rumor spread that the god Kinma was angry, and the Ahfal Oma began to show their wrath to the settlers.

Some of the sheep and horses that consumed the wheat survived, but they were weakened for it because many later succumbed to tick bites. They were buried in separate mounds, which were soon thickly covered in lichens. Noticing that these mounds had begun to glow, just like Kinma's mound once had, the dog handlers brought their pregnant bitches to eat the flesh. Far from dying, they survived and birthed pups that grew unusually fast. And they reproduced prolifically, bearing young that became even smarter and more fearsome than the Kinma dogs of the past.

As he reached the end of his tale, the elder sighed heavily. The Ahfal Oma had exacted vengeance on the settlers, but it wasn't enough to appease the god. In his anger, Kinma had brought this illness upon the land. As for the new breed of

Kinma dogs, there was something uncanny about them. As sacred beasts and servants of the god, they would never bite the righteous, yet the elder confessed to feeling immensely relieved when Kenoi had taken them off to the Toga Mountains.

By the time Hohsalle and Makokan left the elder's house, the sun was beginning to sink in the sky. Its slanting rays fell on Hohsalle's face. He let out a long, slow breath. "Finally, we've got something to go on!" He couldn't suppress the ring of excitement in his voice. "Milalle's going to jump for joy when she hears this."

Smiling, he set off toward the marsh where Milalle was collecting lichen. Makokan grinned as he watched his young master break into a trot on the path ahead. No matter what he might say, he clearly adored Milalle. And he was right. She would certainly be delighted to hear the news.

However, when they reached the marsh's edge, there was no sign of her. Spark ducks flew across the dusk-colored sky and glided one after another onto the water, quacking noisily, but there were no humans in sight. All that they found was Milalle's collection—a neat row of baskets filled with lichens.

Makokan frowned, uneasiness stirring in his breast. "She might have gone into the forest. Let's take a look."

Hohsalle gazed down at the baskets with a wooden expression. His skin was waxen, and he looked surprisingly vulnerable.

Makokan crouched to search for Milalle's footprints, and suddenly he sensed something. Lifting his head, he saw a man standing at the edge of the forest in the dark shadows cast by the trees.

That looks like...

He was pretty sure it was the little girl's uncle. Small and stocky, he stared at them as though trying to convey something. His fretful eyes made it clear that some danger was imminent.

Makokan rose and brought a hand to the hilt of his sword, but at that moment, warriors leaped from the trees to his right, brandishing spears. They were garbed in strange clothing, and their breastplates were emblazoned with

the symbol of a horse.

Ahfal Oma.

There were eight of them—too many to cut his way through. But Makokan might be able to buy Hohsalle enough time to escape. He braced himself.

“Don’t,” Hohsalle said.

The warriors tightened the circle around them silently. They smelled faintly of horses.



A delicious aroma drifted through the air. Preparations for supper must have been well underway. Although this room was a considerable distance from the kitchens, the scents of cooking sometimes wafted this far depending on the wind direction.

With a sigh, Tohlim put down the document he was reading. Yotalu had handed it to him when he left Kazan, instructing him to deliver it to Hohsalle. It contained a detailed record of infections among the settlers in every part of the country. Whenever he read things like this, Tohlim was forced to acknowledge the superiority of Zolian administration. They didn’t shirk their duties, even when it came to settlers in the remotest corners of their empire, recording in precise detail a diverse range of matters.

The Kingdom of Aquafa had never been governed like this. The frontier peoples had been given autonomy over their own affairs, and reporting was left to their discretion. Of course, the king used the Molfah to gather knowledge secretly and also received reports from the Otawalle, so he probably knew everything he required, but the reports were gathered from a very loose network of sources and could never have been summarized in concrete figures.

His eyes ached, and he pressed his fingertips against his lids.

I’m getting old.

Tohlim never used to get tired when he traveled. Now, however, he found journeying back and forth from the capital to various parts of the kingdom exhausting. He missed the days when he’d managed the salt mines. Everything

had been so much simpler then. He knew that job had built the foundation for his current work, though. Salt was a precious asset comparable to gold. Tohlim carried the authority to distribute it throughout Aquafa, and he'd nurtured strong bonds with clans in every region, and those connections were still useful.

He raised his head and gazed out the window. Outside, the world was cloaked in blue dusk.

I should get changed.

He was to have dinner with Hohsalle and Milalle tonight for the first time in a while. They'd been visiting the village of the Yusula Oma every day. Perhaps they'd made some progress.

When Tohlim had put out feelers at the Academy of Deeper Learning, he learned that Hohsalle and Milalle led the development of a new medicine for treating mittsual. Everyone he'd asked spoke highly of those two, and many harbored hopes that they would discover a cure. Unfortunately, Tohlim had also learned that no matter how skilled the physician, it was impossible to produce a new medicine quickly, especially one to combat such a fearsome sickness.

But we've run out of time. Even if they can develop a remedy with incredible speed, it won't be soon enough to save us from the fix we're in.

About two weeks ago, the Mukonians attacked a fort in the Toga Mountains. According to the information Tohlim had received, the fort was badly damaged before a pack of dogs routed the Mukonians.

The report, which had arrived by courier pigeon, lacked detail, but despite its brevity, it was obvious that this development heralded a new phase. The king had also realized that he could no longer wait and see what happened. Governor Ohan and his son Yotalu had guessed some time ago who was behind the attacks. They knew, yet they feigned ignorance so as not to make things worse. The king had to get rid of Kenoi before everything collapsed. If he failed to prove his loyalty in this discrete way, the Zolians would take action and crush any opposition.

The band of warriors entrusted with the king's mission should have reached the Toga Mountains by now. If they had managed to stop Kenoi, the news was

bound to reach Tohlim eventually. When it did, he would have to convince the Ahfal Oma who lived near here not to do anything rash.

Tohlim covered his eyes with a hand and sighed. The faces of the Ahfal Oma when they learned they were to be exiled from their land remained seared into his memory. Old women had stared blankly at homes they'd never see again; young women had crumpled to their knees, weeping.

They should never have been given hope...

When Kenoï had come to negotiate, claiming that he could reclaim Aquafa with the Kinma dogs, the king should have told him point blank that Aquafa could no longer survive without Zol. If only he'd explained that the Zolians were not the parasites the Ahfal Oma made them out to be, that they were like gardeners who fertilized the tree of Aquafa. They trimmed its branches and watched over its growth. The tree those gardeners had pruned was no longer its old shape, and they took much of its fruit. Still, if a storm came, they would protect it and keep it watered so that it grew strong and healthy.

Many years had passed since Aquafa's annexation. During that time, the tiny kingdom had been transformed. Zol now shouldered its economy and its defense. Should the empire decide to abandon Aquafa, it would lose its gardener, its water source, and its sheltering walls. Exposed to wind and storm, it would wither and die.

Admittedly, there were numerous problems. Aquafa groaned under the costs of military defense, unjust taxes, and the influx of settlers. But these issues could be resolved through political negotiation. Insurrection and conspiracy would solve nothing. Tohlim had told Hohsalle that the settlers were a burden, but if they left now, the marketplace would be thrown into chaos.

The king knew this all too well.

Yet he still lost himself to that dream briefly. The wholly unrealistic notion of an Aquafa ruled once again by the Aquafaese, of taking the reins of authority back into his hands. He'd probably thought that Kenoï's goal was impossible, that he couldn't achieve much. However, the king should never have given Kenoï such an ambiguous response. It left Kenoï with a sliver of hope. The king's vague sense of pity had sentenced the Ahfal Oma to a hideously cruel future.

Tohlim sighed again. There was a knock on the door, accompanied by a voice that requested permission to enter.

“Come in,” he bade. The door opened, and one of his men walked into the room.

“Pardon me for interrupting you, sir. One of the Yusula Oma is here with what he says is an urgent message. He wants to talk with you privately where the Ofal Oma, the People of the Mountains, cannot overhear.”

“A Yusula Oma? Who?”

The man looked uncomfortable. “I asked, but he would not give me his name. Shall I bring him to you?”

Tohlim was about to nod but then thought better of it. He shook his head. It wouldn’t do for a stranger to see the hall’s interior or to learn the location of this room.

“I will go to him.”

As the man led the way to the stairs, Tohlim heard a rumble of footsteps below. This hall had been set aside by the clan chief for Tohlim’s use during visits to Otai, and it was always manned by thirty Aquafaese soldiers. As Tohlim had brought along two more squads of ten each, fifty soldiers were now stationed here. It was getting close to dinnertime, and the men were surely on their way to the dining hall.

As Tohlim walked down the stairs, some soldiers caught sight of him and snapped to attention. He waved his hand, gesturing for them to carry on to the dining room, then headed for the back door.

The cold wind greeted Tohlim when he stepped outside, rustling the dark forest covering the hill beyond the wall. A guardsman raised his spear in salute. Tohlim nodded in acknowledgment and approached the small figure who stood beside the guard. Light seeping from the back door shone dimly on the man’s face. He was middle-aged with plain features and seemed familiar, but Tohlim couldn’t recall where they’d met. His face was like so many of those who lived in the marshes. Perhaps Tohlim had seen him in the village.

“Are you the one who wished to see me?”

The man bowed low. “That is correct, sir. I beg your pardon for disturbing you in this way.”

“You claimed it was urgent.”

The man lifted his head and replied in a low voice. “I bring a message from Sir Hohsalle. He asks that you come quickly and bring as few men with you as quickly as possible so that the Ofal Oma do not see you leave.”

Tohlim scowled. Why would Hohsalle wish to avoid being noticed by the People of the Mountains? The Ofal Oma maintained close ties with the Otawalle’s Servants of the Inner Circle. Hohsalle was an Otawalle himself. Why would he worry about being seen?

“Where is Sir Hohsalle?”

“He is with us.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“No, sir. I have told you all he conveyed.”

Tohlim turned to his subordinate to confirm these claims. “Sir Hohsalle hasn’t returned yet?”

The man shook his head. “No, not yet. He’s never been away this late, and we were just discussing whether or not we should send some men to find him.”

“I see. In that case, gather three men from the dining hall, but don’t tell them why.”

The man nodded and disappeared inside.

Tohlim followed the man from the Yusula Oma through the forest. To avoid running into any Ofal Oma, they had left by the back gate of the capital and taken a path that led to the marshes through the wooded hill behind the hall.

Dusk had left the forest pitch-dark. The lanterns carried by the Aquafaese soldiers only illuminated their feet. None among them could see very far ahead. Thankfully, their guide seemed to know his way and led them unerringly.

As he watched the man bob in and out of the lantern light, Tohlim felt his flesh prickle. The sensation always spoke to approaching danger when he’d

worked in the mines, as though his subconscious picked up on something his waking mind had not yet registered.

Why?

Why did something feel wrong? Was it just a general fear of the dark?

The man leading Tohlim's group had a distinctive gait. Whenever he stepped forward, his left shoulder dipped. Tohlim gasped as he watched him.

I remember. He...

Just as he opened his mouth to speak, an owl hooted. Nakka stopped and pointed to Tohlim, then jumped into the shadow of a tree off the path. The soldier walking beside Tohlim cried out and dropped his lantern. He groaned, clapped a hand to his neck, fell to his knees, and crumpled forward.

"Ambush!" Tohlim shouted.

The bushes along the path swayed, and dark figures emerged, white blades flashing in the lantern light.

3

Nakka

The trip south from the Toga Mountains to Yukata had also been a journey from winter to early spring. In fair weather, it would have taken well-provisioned horsemen only about ten days, but it took much longer for Van and Sae, who had to wait out blizzards and forage for food. Even so, they managed to arrive not far behind the Lightning Squad.

This was partly because the Ahfal Oma had not brought their hounds, which meant that Van and Sae could keep pretty close without being detected. It also helped that the Ahfal Oma were forced to follow narrow game trails to avoid encountering Zolian guards on the main roads. This slowed them considerably.

When they reached Yukata territory, the Lightning Squad split into two groups. Van and Sae debated whether they should separate and follow both, but ultimately, they elected to stick together as they had no way of keeping in contact. Besides, two would stand a better chance than one if they were discovered.

They followed the tracks of the larger group, which led toward the capital of the Yukata mountain clan.

An owl hooted.

Van looked at Sae, and she nodded. With her face smeared in mud and her eyes narrowed, she was barely visible in the darkness. Van also lay concealed by the night, his face covered with mud. He kept his eyes trained on the bushes the Lightning Squad had vanished into, leaving silence in their wake.

The owl call had come from that thicket. Only moments before, several lanterns had appeared on the path ahead, their faint glow catching on metal.

Soldiers were trudging down that narrow trail through the forest toward Van and Sae.

Seconds after the owl's cry, the Ahfal Oma burst from their hiding place. Someone shouted that it was an ambush, and the lanterns waved wildly. White swords flashed, and voices cried out. Metal clashed against metal, sending sparks into the air. There was a dull sound, like a sandbag being cut. Van caught the reek of sweat and blood.

The fight ended swiftly. In the light of a lantern lying on the ground, Van saw several warriors grab one of the collapsed men, bind his hands behind his back, and haul him to his feet. He walked off surrounded by Ahfal Oma. A warrior picked up one of the lanterns, and the light revealed the prisoner's face.

Sae gasped. She clearly knew him. He was about to ask her who the prisoner was when something else seized his attention. A familiar scent rode the night wind as it ascended the slope.

And with that smell, the image of a man entered his mind. Van's pulse began to race.

Nakka.

There was no mistake. It was the scent of the little man, the Yusula Oma, who'd kidnapped Yuna. Heat rushed through Van's body, and he closed his eyes. As he did so, everything changed. A world in which smells and sounds formed shapes wrapped itself around him and spread outward. Odors that didn't belong to the forest stung his nostrils—candle wax, metal, human blood, and sweat. Everything that moved left tracks of scent trailing on the air.

Van opened his eyes to the barest slits and began to run. He slipped through the thickets like a wild beast, following the trail of Nakka's scent. Close behind him came Sae's smell. He knew she was there but didn't look back, focusing instead on Nakka's trail.

Nakka tagged along behind the warriors with his head lowered. They walked for a long time until they emerged at the bottom of a cliff. The moon, half-full, had already risen. Its hazy light revealed black holes here and there in the gray stone—caves.

As the warriors approached with their prisoner, shadows stirred. A flurry of motion erupted at the foot of the cliff. The two bands of fighters were reuniting. Several men led the prisoner into one of the caves while the rest stayed outside, gathering around a bonfire.

Nakka joined the latter group and seemed to talk to them. Van crept to the edge of the forest with Sae beside him. Keeping his eyes fixed on Nakka, he whispered in her ear, "You see that man? The short one on the right side of the fire?"

"Yes."

"That's Nakka."

Sae gasped. "Really?" Van nodded, and Sae frowned. "You can see his face from here?"

"No," Van answered in a low voice, his eyes never leaving the man. "I can tell by his scent. That's him for sure."

The man turned and walked a short distance. "You're right," Sae breathed. "It's Nakka."

They looked at each other, and Van grinned. It had taken them long enough, but they'd found him at last. Their key to Yuna was only a short distance away.

How Van longed to hold her in his arms, to see her eyes light up and hear her cry "Ochan!" However, he forced down the feelings that rushed up inside him. It would not do to hurry. First, they had to find out what was going on. If all his attention was focused on Yuna, he might make a mistake.

"Do you know the man they took prisoner?" he asked.

Sae nodded. "That's Master Tohlim."

Van's eyes widened. "Tohlim Sufolsam? The king's right-hand man?"

He was the most influential man in Aquafa. Once entrusted with distributing salt, even after Zol took over the mines, he was still the kingdom's linchpin, with ties to all the frontier clans.

Staring at the bonfire flames in the distance, Sae muttered, "He commands the Molfah."

With those words, all the pieces fell into place. Van's face tightened. "So Kenoi knows."

Sae nodded, her expression grim.

Perhaps they'd realized when they caught Sae. Or maybe a Molfah had surrendered the truth under torture. Either way, the Ahfal Oma knew that the king had abandoned them.

Van shuddered.

Ohfan and his men would be consumed with rage and despair. They would never stand by and let the king squash their rebellion before it began.

So they struck first.

The Ahfal Oma had sent out their Lightning Squad and taken the king's right-hand man hostage. By doing so, they'd declared their intent. Their next move was obvious.



After trekking through the dark forest, the warmth of the fire was a welcome relief. Out of deference to the Ahfal Oma, Nakka kept his head lowered and kept a respectable distance from the flames. He was still shaken inside. It was his clan's duty to obey the Ahfal Oma, but deceiving Master Tohlim had filled him with dismay.

He's a good man.

Tohlim had helped them after the toxic grain incident when the Ahfal Oma rose up against the settlers. Nakka's cousin had been sentenced to death for aiding the uprising, but Master Tohlim had gone out of his way to meet with the Zolian officials and explain the ties of obligation that bound the Yusula Oma to the People of the Fire Horse. Thanks to him, Nakka's cousin escaped execution and was sent to the salt mine as a kitchen slave instead. And that wasn't all. Tohlim had arranged permission for Nakka's uncle to take food and clothing to his daughter. The Yusula Oma were astonished and deeply grateful that a man of such high station as Tohlim would aid members of a humble frontier clan.

Nakka remembered the days that had followed well. His uncle had been sick

with grief after learning that a slave driver raped his daughter. After the child was born, he'd traveled to the salt mine whenever he could, taking lapateh made with fire horse milk and Oki laputa that he bought in Kazan to his daughter, hoping the foods might restore her health after it declined from childbirth.

Lapateh, cheese mixed with chopped dried fruit, was common, but not often made with fire horse milk. Since the settlers moved in, the mares bred by the Ahfal Oma produced less milk, and now the Ahfal Oma rarely shared it with Nakka's people. His uncle could only have obtained some at great sacrifice, but in the end, his daughter had given it all to her baby. *"If only she would eat a little herself,"* Nakka's uncle had said. Nakka still recalled the sadness in his eyes. He'd passed away last year, and, in a strange twist of fate, Nakka brought the child back to her mother's village.

When the Ahfal Oma attacked the settlers' community, they forced Nakka to serve as a lookout. Fortunately, the Zolian officials never found out, but there were some in his village who knew. Torn by guilt at being the only one to have escaped punishment, Nakka found it increasingly hard to remain in the settlement and moved to Oki after his parents passed away.

It gave him a strange feeling to know that choice brought him and Yuna together. He'd been stunned when the Ahfal Oma ordered him to kidnap the little girl. He'd refused at first, but the Ahfal Oma had sneered and told him, *"She's your cousin's daughter from the salt mine. Wouldn't you rather take care of her yourself than leave her to us? You should be grateful that we're giving you the opportunity."*

That was how the god Kinma worked.

And now Yuna was inside that cave. When he learned that she'd been taken with the female doctor from Otawalle, he'd rushed over to retrieve her from the prison. But the warriors claimed she was a valuable hostage and refused to let him take her home.

What should I do?

Yuna's grandparents had died last year, so Nakka had asked their daughter, Yuna's aunt, to take care of her. Unfortunately, Yuna was exceptionally

stubborn, even for a child her age, and she made no attempt to fit in with the family. She slipped away every chance she got and would disappear for the whole day. She returned when it got dark, but after finishing dinner, she curled up in a corner and fell asleep. Her aunt complained that it was like taking care of a stray kitten. She had lots of kids of her own and no need for another. When she found out what had happened to Yuna, she'd likely be relieved. However, Nakka didn't have the heart to abandon the child in a cave and leave without her.

Maybe I'll just say good-bye before I go. Timidly, Nakka asked the warriors around the bonfire if he could see Yuna. After conferring among themselves, they gave him permission to look in on her, but only after she was asleep.

4

Milalle Falls III

There was a muffled commotion somewhere outside their cell.

Hohsalle raised his head and looked at Makokan. "What's that?"

Makokan stood and pressed his ear against the stone wall.

"Sounds like they've brought in another prisoner." The voices were indistinct, but someone must have been thrown into the neighboring cell, judging from the footfalls and clang of a closing door.

The prison had been made by sealing natural rock chambers with iron bars, and the wall between this chamber and the next was thicker than those of a castle dungeon. Even with his ear pressed against the stone, Makokan heard nothing from beyond.

Pulling away from the frigid surface, he turned to Hohsalle. "What's going on?"

Hohsalle scowled. "Don't ask me," he snapped. "No point in trying to guess, either. We'll just have to take things as they come."

Makokan sighed. "I suppose so. The fact that they didn't kill us outright suggests that we have some value at least."

Makokan recalled his sister's words. Presumably, only Hohsalle and Milalle were worth keeping alive. He shoved the depressing thought from his mind. Worrying about it wouldn't change anything.

As a boy, Makokan had heard rumors about caves where the Ahfal Oma imprisoned people for serious crimes, but he'd never dreamed he'd end up there himself.

If I continue serving the young master, it'll be a miracle if I survive.

A little grunt interrupted his thoughts. The girl, who'd been chattering away to Milalle until a short while ago, had wrapped herself in a fur and fallen asleep, curled up between Milalle and the rock. She mumbled something now as she pulled the fur close and rolled toward the wall. Makokan thought she was a brave thing to fall asleep without so much as a whimper of complaint in these circumstances.

Hohsalle wrapped an arm around Milalle's shoulder. She was shivering. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, it's nothing. I'm fine." Despite her words, her voice was trembling.

"Stop trying to act tough. Are you cold?"

She nodded. One of the guards had brought them each a fur blanket, but even when wrapped in those, the stone floor felt like ice. The only fire was that of a single candle.

Hohsalle bullied Milalle into taking his fur. After wrapping her in both, he put his arms around the woman and held her tight. She continued shivering regardless.

Hohsalle placed a hand on her forehead and frowned. Her skin was burning.

"How long have you had a fever?"

Milalle swallowed. "It's recent." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I noticed that my throat was sore this morning, but..."

Hohsalle felt the glands behind Milalle's ears, then ordered Makokan to bring him the candle. The flickering light hardly made it easy to see, but Hohsalle raised the candle high and peered in Milalle's throat.

"It's swollen. I hope it's just a cold," he said.

She stared up at him with listless eyes.

"You weren't bitten by a tick, were you?"

"I tried to be careful." Milalle had worn long sleeves, men's trousers, and boots, and she had tied a scarf around her neck and head. Even so, ticks were

tiny enough to slip through undetected, and their bites were painless. People rarely noticed when one crawled into their hair. Milalle washed her hair often, but that wasn't enough to dislodge a tick once it fastened its jaws under her scalp.

Hohsalle handed the candle back to Makokan and removed Milalle's scarf. After checking her neck, he combed through her locks with his fingers, peering at her scalp. His hands paused.

"Shine the light here," he said.

Beneath Milalle's hair, behind her left ear, was a small black dot. A tick, its body already partially gorged with blood.

Hohsalle bit his lip. Judging by the size of the parasite, it had been there for at least a day. It didn't guarantee she would get sick. Most tick bites were harmless, in fact. But if a tick was infected, the danger of it transmitting the disease increased if it remained attached for more than a day.

Hohsalle's pulse quickened and fear swept through him, squeezing his chest.

Get a grip on yourself. It might not be mitsual at all. In fact, there's a high chance this tick doesn't carry the disease. Perhaps it's just a cold.

Logic was a poor comfort for his racing heart. A chill crept from his forehead and across his scalp, numbing his head. Staring at his quivering fingers, he took a ragged inhale and released it.

"Did you find a tick?" Milalle asked.

Hohsalle nodded. "Yeah."

Milalle shivered and closed her eyes.

"Should I take it off?" Makokan asked, bringing the candle near, but Hohsalle stopped him.

"Idiot! If you bring that flame any closer, it'll start squirming and burrow even deeper."

"But—"

"If it dies with its jaws still inside her, they'll stay there, increasing the risk of

contamination! How can you not know something so obvious?"

Milalle reached out and pulled Hohsalle's head down against her breast. Hugging him to her, she whispered, "Hohsalle, Hohsalle. Calm down. Please."

He took an unsteady breath while wrapped in her familiar scent and closed his eyes, but he couldn't keep the fear from crawling up from the pit of his stomach. Just the thought that she might have mitted was unbearable.

I should have sent her back to Kazan.

Waves of remorse crashed through Hohsalle, and he clenched his teeth.

This is no time to wallow in guilt. Come on. Think. What should I do?

A tick had bitten Milalle, and her throat showed signs of infection. She had a fever, too. The first thing to do was inject her with the new medicine. Immediately.

Footsteps sounded outside the cell. Startled, Makokan peered through the iron bars. A torch had been thrust into a hole in the rock wall opposite their cell. By its light, he saw a short figure approaching, one of the Yusula Oma. His face seemed familiar. Makokan was pretty sure it was the little girl's uncle.

"Young Master," Makokan whispered.

Hohsalle looked up, and Makokan gestured to the iron grating with his eyes. A short man stared through the bars with clear uneasiness.

"You there!" Hohsalle called. The little man jumped, but rather than run away, he pressed his face against the bars and peered inside.

"Is my niece all right?" he asked.

Hohsalle's eyebrows drew together. "You're the girl's uncle? Have you come to take her home?"

Makokan reached out to wake her.

"No, please don't," the man said. "They ordered me to leave her here."

Hohsalle took that response with surprise. "Why? Do they plan to lock her up in here, too?"

The short man nodded. After a quick look behind to ensure the guards'

attention was focused on the neighboring cell, he whispered, “Her situation is rather complicated. I’m not permitted to tell you anything, sir, but I beg of you, please, take pity on her.”

Hohsalle, still holding Milalle in his arms, stared at the man for a moment. “All right,” he said finally. “We’ll look after her. But in return, please do something for me.”

The little man’s expression clouded. “But—”

Hohsalle cut him off. “It’s not difficult. You know the hut we borrowed in the village, don’t you? All of our effects are there. I want you to fetch me some medicine. Be careful not to break anything. Milalle’s feverish. A tick bit her, and I think she might have black wolf fever.”

The little man’s eyes grew round.

“I’ve got to treat her. If we’re of any value to the Ahfal Oma as hostages, then they don’t want her to die on them, right?”

Hohsalle’s voice shook, and there was a desperate gleam in his eyes. “And if she dies, I die. I guarantee that I’ll find a way to kill myself. So please. Go out there and convince them to let you bring me the medicine!”

5

The Stranger

Nakka hurried through the forest toward the village. When he told the guards that one of the hostages had come down with a fever, they gave him permission almost instantly. The young nobleman must have been right—they didn't want to lose their hostages.

But will I be able to bring back the right stuff?

Hohsalle had explained where the medicines were kept and described the bottles he needed, but Nakka couldn't read. If there were only a couple of bottles in the hut, he'd be fine, but if there were many that looked similar, he doubted his ability to pick the right ones.

It would be better to just bring the whole lot so that he didn't have to make multiple trips.

Maybe I'll wake someone and ask them to help.

The woman physician was kind and had worked hard to heal one of the villagers. Nakka really hoped to save her.

The forest was dark, and Nakka could barely see past his feet in the lantern light. For some time, he'd had a nagging feeling that he was being followed. He stopped and looked around, but he saw nothing.

Just my imagination, I guess.

He was almost at the village.

Who should I go to for help?

Something rapped his knuckles, and pain shot through his fingers. He dropped the lantern with a groan, clutching his hand. Someone stepped out of the

darkness and closed a hand around his neck from behind. One twist would end his life.

“Please!” he begged. “Don’t kill me!”

“Then don’t move,” a voice commanded. Nakka began to quake as soon as he heard it. “You know who I am, don’t you?”

Nakka nodded with difficulty.

“Where’s the child?”

Still shaking, Nakka croaked out, “In the s-stone p-prison.” Terror coursed through him. With his eyes squeezed shut and his teeth chattering, he blubbered, “Please. Have mercy! I didn’t want to do it! Honestly! I had no choice.”

If he kept talking, perhaps the man wouldn’t break his neck. Words spilled from his mouth as he rushed to explain everything that had happened so far—how he was related to Yuna, his trip to get the medicine, and that people would get suspicious if he didn’t return to the prison.

And as Nakka spoke, he began to sob. He’d been forced to do things against his will for so long. And now he was going to die for it. The realization brought tears to his eyes.

The man kept a firm grip, but Nakka sensed his life was no longer in imminent danger. He opened his damp eyes to find the man staring down at him.

“You’re going to get some medicine and return to the prison. Is that right?” Van asked.

Nakka blinked and nodded.

“Take me with you. If you tell them you asked me to help, you should be able to fool them.”

Nakka’s eyes widened. “F-fool them?”

Van’s eyes went to Nakka’s hooded cloak. “Just get me one of those. You can tell whoever you borrow it from that it’s for one of the prisoners, to keep them warm.” His eyes gleamed with a hard light. “I’m trusting you this one final time. If you really meant what you said, then now’s your chance to make up for your

actions.”

Van didn’t mention what he would do if Nakka betrayed him again. His eyes made it clear for him.

After a pause, Nakka replied, “All right. What are you planning to do once you get there, though? That place is full of warriors.”

He received no answer.



The night crawled along. One of the guards had brought another fur, and Hohsalle had laid Milalle on it and then blanketed her with the other two. Her fever seemed to have fallen from its peak. Milalle’s shivers had stopped, and she’d dozed off, but Hohsalle remained wide awake, occasionally wiping beads of sweat from her brow while he waited for the medicine to arrive.

Will he bring me the right ones?

Why hadn’t he told him to simply bring everything? And he’d forgotten to instruct him to wrap the bottles in cloth to keep them from striking each other and breaking. Despite Hohsalle’s best efforts to remain calm, all he could think of were things he ought to have done differently.

He guessed it was close to midnight when the guard outside their cell was relieved, replaced by someone much younger. Although of sturdy build, this new guard had no beard yet. At least, not from what Hohsalle could glean in the dim torchlight.

No sooner did the watch rotate than voices echoed down from near the mouth of the cave.

He’s back!

Hohsalle stood and went over to the bars. The man from the Yusula Oma approached with a companion. Both carried big sacks. A warrior who’d followed them in signaled the young guard with his eyes. The young guard stopped the two arrivals and peered inside their sacks, looking nervous all the while.

Hohsalle struggled to curb his impatience.

Hurry up! Hurry up! Come on! Surely, they already checked them outside!

At last, the young guard raised his head and nodded. The warrior drew his sword and stood at the ready. "Open the door," he barked.

The guard turned the key in the lock and pulled the cell door open. The two men ducked inside, and the guard locked the door again and hung the key on his belt.

"You made it!" Hohsalle said. "Thank you!"

Suppressing his urge to hurry, he opened the sacks with care. To his surprise, they contained all the medicines and equipment he'd left in the hut.

"Is this what you wanted, sir?"

"It certainly is. Thank you."

The little girl behind Hohsalle stirred. Nothing roused her before, but the sudden commotion must have penetrated her slumber.

The little man's companion walked over and crouched beside the child. Her eyes popped open. "Ochan!" she cried. Bursting into loud sobs, she flung herself into his arms and clung to him, weeping and repeating "Ochan" over and over.

He hugged her tight. "It's all right now," he whispered. "It's all right. That's a good girl."

"What's the matter?" the guard asked.

"She's just glad to see him," the short man explained, looking uncomfortable. "He's the uncle who's been taking care of her."

The guard nodded, apparently satisfied.

Yuna was wailing loud enough to blast everyone's ears off. Rising, the stranger ducked his head as if in apology, then he carried Yuna into a corner of the cave to comfort her.

Hohsalle, who had no thought to spare for anyone but Milalle, was already focusing on her treatment. Makokan, however, kept his eyes on the man and the girl.

He's Yuna's uncle? Really?

She had called him “Ochan,” a word rarely used in the Yukata dialect. If he was her uncle, she should have said “Oja.” It was hard to tell because of her lisp, but *ochan* sounded much closer to *onchan*, the word for “father” in the Oki dialect. Makokan’s eyes met those of the Yusula Oma. The little man blinked and looked away.

Hohsalle shouted, “Makokan! Stop standing there like an imbecile and give me a hand.”

Makokan hurried over and began arranging the medicines. Then he carefully removed a needle from its case and opened a bottle of disinfectant. A sharp, acrid odor filled the cave.

Hohsalle prepared everything he might need if Milalle had an allergic reaction, then he wiped her arm with disinfectant and injected the new medicine.

The young guard outside the cell watched closely. At the sight of the needle, his eyes bulged, and he winced when it pierced the skin. Once Hohsalle finished, he asked, “Will that fix it?”

Hohsalle turned to the guard. “If she doesn’t have an allergic reaction, probably.”

The young man blinked and looked at Milalle. “I bet that hurt, being stuck with a needle like that.”

A weak smile formed on her face, which was still flushed with fever. “I’m fine. It doesn’t feel as bad as it looks. Thank you for your concern, though.”

The guard blushed and quietly assured her it was nothing. Perhaps realizing his behavior was inappropriate for a jailor, he snapped to attention and strode off to the other cell.

Hohsalle sighed once he was gone. “It’s a good thing I was able to give you the injection. You don’t have a rash yet, and the symptoms shouldn’t get much worse since you weren’t bitten by a dog. You should be better in no time.”

Makokan raised an eyebrow. “Does it make that much difference, being

bitten by a tick instead of one of the Kinma dogs?”

Hohsalle nodded as he wrapped up the used needle and laid out a new one beside him. “Yes, it seems so. The woman we treated in that hut already had a rash and was delirious when we found her, but she still responded to the treatment, right?”

“Yes, that’s true. Not like the falcon master.”

Relief at giving Milalle the medicine seemed to have restored Hohsalle’s composure. “The potency of a disease,” he explained, “is often weakened when it changes hosts, but sometimes the opposite is true. Illnesses that pass through ticks to some other beast before being transmitted to humans are often far worse. Mittsual may be that type of affliction. Of course, we still don’t know for certain.”

Hohsalle raised the bottle containing the new remedy and peered at it. “I’m just glad we know this medicine works for contamination from tick bites.”

A high-pitched voice came from the corner of the cell.

“Look! Shiny!”

All heads turned. Yuna leaned out of the stranger’s arms, pointing to the bottle. “Ochan, look! Bwight and shiny!”

Milalle turned her head toward Yuna with a startled expression on her face. “Does that medicine glow, too?”

Yuna nodded.

“Like the ikimi lichens in the marsh?”

Yuna nodded again. “Uh-hunh. Same. It glows. Looks yummy.”

Frowning, Hohsalle cast Milalle a confused look. “What’s all this about?”

“The child sees light shining from ikimi and ashimi,” she said.

Hohsalle cast her a puzzled look, but then understanding dawned on him. “Wait a minute. Are you saying that she thinks the new medicine glows, too?”

“That’s right.”

“But that’s crazy. Impossible.”

Milalle stared at him with a feverish gaze, then closed her eyes wearily and whispered, “I know. But I think it’s probably true. She told me the other lichens don’t glow.”

Hohsalle remained silent for a while—eyebrows bunched up in thought. When at last he came out of contemplation, he made sure the guard was still standing in front of the neighboring cell. Fixing his gaze on the short man, he said, “You told me that this child’s background is complicated. Can you tell me why?”

The man’s face froze, but his eyes shifted to the stranger holding Yuna.

6

Wolf's Eyes

Hohsalle followed the little man's gaze to the companion who had arrived with him, the one cradling the girl in a corner of the cell. He wasn't particularly tall, but there was a fierceness to him. His eyes gleamed from deep within the shadow of his hood. Hohsalle nearly stood, overcome by the strange sensation that he was looking into the eyes of a wolf.

"Does that medicine cure black wolf fever?" the man asked. He wasn't a Yusula Oma. His accent belonged to those who lived farther north. And he lacked any trace of the marsh people's subservience. His was an intimidating presence.

Who is he?

Hohsalle took a deep breath and let the tension drain from his body, lamenting over his momentary fear. He was eager to learn more about the man and the child, but he sensed that rushing things risked losing his chance. Something about this man reminded him of a wild creature. He watched Hohsalle now, curious, but one whiff of danger and he would surely back away.

Hohsalle decided to start by answering his question. "This medicine didn't have much effect on people bitten by Kinma dogs. However, it did work quite well on one of the village women who developed symptoms like black wolf fever after being bitten by a tick."

The movement was nearly imperceptible, but Hohsalle was sure that the man's eyes had wavered when he heard the medicine didn't work.

Is he looking for a cure for mittsual?

The man put Yuna down. "So there's still no way to save those bitten by a

Kinma dog?”

Hohsalle gazed back at him. “No. We haven’t managed to create a completely reliable medicine. But we may be able to soon.”

Something like hope crossed the man’s expression.

“You seem interested in a cure for black wolf fever,” Hohsalle remarked. “Why?”

The man watched him silently for a bit before replying. “I hate to see people die of disease,” he said at last.

Hohsalle blinked. He felt thwarted somehow, as though the hand he’d offered had been brushed aside.

“Ochan, Ochan!”

Yuna tugged on the man’s cloak, trying to get his attention, and he bent down to soothe her. Then he straightened and looked to Hohsalle once again. “I was told you’re a very knowledgeable man. Do you know why some people bitten by the Kinma dogs live while others don’t?”

Hohsalle’s eyes widened. “Hah. That’s a big question. You expect me to have a quick and easy answer, do you?” This elicited no response, which annoyed Hohsalle further. “Well, what do you think, then?” he asked. “Everyone else claims it’s the will of the god Kinma. Do you agree?”

A sad smile touched the man’s face. “Sometimes I think it would be so much easier if the explanation were that simple.”

Hohsalle cast a hard gaze at the man. He felt as if he’d been hit in the chest. Blood rose in his cheeks, and he pursed his lips. He knew he ought to say something, but the words wouldn’t come—an unusual experience for him.

Just as he found his tongue and opened his mouth to speak, shouts sounded from near the cave entrance. Hohsalle spun around and saw the guard face the noise with spear readied. Someone laid a hand on Hohsalle’s shoulder, and he was startled to find the stranger standing beside him.

Pressing the girl into Hohsalle’s arms, he said, “Gather all your things in the sacks and take this child and the woman close to the wall.” Then his attention

went to the little man he'd arrived with. "Do nothing. Just stay here. If you do as I say, I'll make sure they don't accuse you of anything."

Turning last to Makokan, he said, "You. Come here where you can see outside the cell."

Makokan frowned. "Why?"

Without answering, the man approached the bars. Multiple figures came tumbling into view, roaring and fighting. Makokan gasped. "Ilia?!"

Hohsalle looked shocked. "That's your sister?"

Makokan nodded. "The one on the left. She's brought the Dancing Bees!"

Each house that served the Inner Circle specialized in a specific martial art. Dagger fighting was passed down on the maternal side of Makokan's family, and the warriors wielded their rapier-thin blades with such deadly swiftness that they had been nicknamed the Dancing Bees. Makokan's sister had taught him how to fight with a dagger when he was a boy, and her prowess hadn't dulled in the years since.

While the Ahfal Oma struggled to swing their long blades in the narrow confines of the cave, the Dancing Bees slipped through the guards to slice through the tendons in their sword arms. Blood spurted, and Ahfal Oma shrieks and the clatter of dropped swords echoed through the prison.

The young guard in front of the cell had backed against the bars. Although he held his blade at the ready, the tip shook violently. Makokan turned in surprise as the stranger reached a hand through the bars to steal the key from the young man's belt and shove it into the lock. When he twisted it, there came a loud *click*, and the door opened. The guard turned with a panicked expression, searching his belt for the key. Ilia bore down on him from behind.

Makokan opened his mouth, but before he could shout, the stranger reached through the open door, grasped the guard by the collar, and dragged him inside. Ilia's blade caught empty air. The guard rolled across the floor unscathed. The stranger wrenched the sword from the guard and held the blade at his throat to keep him still. Then he looked up at Makokan's sister.

"Surely there's no need to kill him. He's just a boy."

Ilia's eyes wavered for a moment. She twirled her dagger in her hand, turning the point toward the floor. Her gaze went to Makokan. She removed another short sword from her belt and handed it to him.

"I'm going to check on things outside. In the meantime, make sure nothing happens to the hostages, will you?" Following a curt bow to Hohsalle, she turned on her heel and ran to rejoin her companions, who were opening the neighboring cell.

Chapter 10:

The Forest Inside

1

Van and Hohsalle

A hand touched Hohsalle's shoulder, stirring him from a deep sleep. His eyes flew open, and his heart thudded painfully.

Dawn was yet to come, and the room was still dark. Within that darkness stood a woman, her face floating in the dim light of the candle she held. She pressed a finger to her lips. Hohsalle frowned. He was sure he'd seen her somewhere before, but where? A memory bobbed up through the groggy haze in his mind.

"You... You're one of the Molfah," he whispered.

She bowed deeply. "Yes, my lord. I am Sae. Please forgive me for intruding in this way. I would rather that Master Tohlim did not know of this visit."

Hohsalle sat up and glanced at the bed beside him. The medicine he'd given Milalle after supper had to be working. She was sound asleep and showed no sign of waking. When Hohsalle looked back at Sae, he froze. A man loomed a few steps behind her, his figure surrounded by shadow.

"There is nothing to fear," Sae said. "He will not harm you."

Hohsalle glared at her. "What'd you do to Makokan?"

His bodyguard slept in the adjoining room. Undoubtedly, these two had passed him on their way here. Makokan was a warrior. No matter how stealthily they moved, they could not have gone by without waking him.

Sae looked apologetic. "He sleeps, sir. I added a little tattsuru to the wine he drank at dinner."

Hohsalle sighed with relief. The drug would put him into a deep sleep but was

otherwise harmless.

The man emerged from the shadows and approached his bed. As Hohsalle had guessed, it was the stranger from their prison cell, the one who'd comforted the child. He stood beside Sae and gave a short bow.

"I'm sorry to barge in like this," he said. "I asked Sae to help me meet with you privately." His voice was calm and quiet.

Hohsalle gazed up at him. *Ah, yes. That's how this man talks.* "So," he began. "You know who I am, yet you deliberately neglect the deference due to the nobility?" As the words left his mouth, he couldn't help but smile ruefully. *Surely you have more important things to ask him than that!* This man threw him off balance.

The intruder's face relaxed. "Not deliberately, no. It's just a habit. Where I come from, we only use honorifics for someone older than us."

"Really? So if the clan chief happens to be younger than you, you wouldn't speak to him as though he were of higher rank?"

"That's right."

Hohsalle grinned. This was getting interesting. "Why?"

The man opened his mouth but hesitated. Hohsalle couldn't guess at what the man was thinking, but a shadow crossed his face. Hesitantly, he answered, "I guess we most respect those who rise above every difficulty to live long, full lives. Unlike the Aquafaese, the Zolians, or Otawalle like yourself, none among my people are born into nobility."

Hohsalle cocked an eyebrow. "But aren't your clan chiefs determined by bloodline?"

"They are, but the chief is merely a mediator. He doesn't have the authority of your kings." The man paused, as if searching for words. "For my people, a man is worthy of respect if he's been loved by his woman and blessed with many children, if he's cared for and raised those children well. Such a man is called the Deer Chief."

Hohsalle's mouth crooked. "Surely he's strong, too, right? I've heard that only

the strongest buck gets to mate with the females in a herd.”

The man nodded. “That’s true. Bucks fight fiercely for the right to mate. For them, it’s a matter of life and death, and they’ll risk their lives to attract does and breed a family. They do this every year, until they lose to a younger buck. That’s what living means to them. And that’s why we call a long-lived stag the Deer Chief and name our elders who have been blessed with many children after them.”

He paused again and then added quietly, “But we respect the Deer King most of all.”

“The Deer King?”

“Have you ever seen a herd of deer?”

“Yes. A few times.”

“Then you must know that each one has a single deer that serves as a lookout, the first to notice any danger and warn the others.”

“That’s true. But it’s never the dominant buck, at least not in the herds I saw. The lookout gave the warning, but if I remember right, it was the leader that responded and led the rest to safety.”

The man nodded. “Yes. But with pyuika, it’s a little different.”

“Pyuika? I thought you were talking about deer.”

“Sorry. I guess I should’ve explained that first. Among my people, when we talk about deer, we mean pyuika, the flying deer.”

The man took a long breath. “With pyuika, when the herd is in danger, one buck will rise to defend the others with his life. He’s not the dominant buck, nor one with young of his own. Usually, it’s a mature stag past his prime that’s still strong enough to fight. He’s the first to sense danger and confronts it head-on to save the others. My people venerate such a stag as the Deer King because he ensures the survival of the herd, even though he’s not the leader.”

With a pensive look, the man added, “In the same way, when a man who has survived much suffering protects his clan, winning their love and respect, we also dub him the Deer King. That’s the kind of person we revere, not someone

of noble birth. Though I suppose you and your people wouldn't call anyone like that a king."

Maybe that's why I find this man so disconcerting, Hohsalle thought. "Well, that's a lousy custom," he said with a grimace.

The man's eyebrows rose. "You think so?"

"Yes, I do. If being an Otawalle noble doesn't impress you, then I don't stand a chance. If you assess people by strength of character and experience, I must seem like a little brat to you."

To Hohsalle's surprise, the man smiled. After a long pause, he said, "It never occurred to me to think of you as a little brat."

Hohsalle scowled. "Now you're just making it worse." He sighed. "Forget about that. Let's get to the point. Who are you?"

The man's expression sobered. "I am Van of the Gansa."

Hohsalle rolled the name over in his mouth, then his eyes went wide. "Oh! You're Broken Antler Van?"

The only slave to survive the massacre in the Aquafa salt mine. Hohsalle stared at him with intense curiosity. He appeared a little over forty. Though tough and powerful for his age, he was no hulking brute like Makokan. "How'd you break free of your shackles in that mine?" he asked.

"I just pulled."

"Pulled?"

"I was so mad that I yanked with all my might, and they just snapped. I've heard that people sometimes exhibit incredible strength when faced with danger. Maybe that's what happened." Van broke into a grin. "My arms and shoulders ached for days after, but when I was pulling on that chain, I didn't feel a thing."

"Really?" Hohsalle's voice was tinged with awe. "So your body slipped its reins."

"Slipped its reins?"

“The human body keeps a lot of things in check to protect itself from harm, including physical strength. Normally, we can only tap into a fraction of the strength we have. When our body senses that exerting more force might be harmful, it pulls back on the reins. It only drops them when it’s in such a tight spot that tearing every muscle won’t matter.”

Van looked grim. “I see.” In a low voice, he recounted everything that happened in the mine—the rochai that raced into the tunnels, the cold-like symptoms that followed the bites, the rash, the slaves who never awoke come morning, and the little girl hidden in the oven.

His tone was flat and matter-of-fact, but Hohsalle was enthralled. When the tale ended, he leaned forward and asked eagerly, “You mean that little girl you were holding survived a bite, too?”

“I think so. There was a scratch on her ankle that looked like she’d been grazed by fangs. She didn’t have a fever when I found her, though.”

Goose bumps formed on Hohsalle’s arms, and he could barely contain himself. The child had lived even though she carried the disease agents. And the lichens she’d claimed were shiny...

Van’s voice wrenched Hohsalle from his thoughts. “Actually, that’s why I came to see you. I’m worried about Yuna.” He gave Hohsalle a searching look. “Last night, you were surprised when Yuna said that the medicine glows, weren’t you? It doesn’t do that for you?”

Hohsalle cocked his head. “No. What about you?”

Van shook his head. Just as Hohsalle was about to heave a sigh of disappointment, he added, “It didn’t give off any light, but it did have a powerful odor.”

“Odor? Was it unpleasant?”

Van narrowed his eyes as he thought back. “It smelled like ashimi, but much stronger. The scent was so intense that it seemed to pierce my head. My nerves tingled the whole time I carried that sack.”

Hohsalle stared at Van, stunned. An idea bounced wildly around his mind—an absolutely crazy idea, but one so enticing, he simply couldn’t dismiss it.

“Is it abnormal to see light shining from that medicine?” Van questioned. “Or to think it has a strong smell?”

Before Hohsalle could respond, someone piped up from behind him. “Yes, it’s abnormal. But it’s also fascinating.”

Milalle had thrown off her bedcovers and was struggling to sit up.

“Get back into bed,” Hohsalle ordered. “It’s too cold for you to be up.” He reached out to pull the covers over her again, but she laughed and pushed his hand away.

“I’ll be fine. My fever’s gone down. If you’re worried, I’ll wrap myself in a blanket. You’re the one who should take care not to catch a cold, sitting on the edge of your bed with your bare feet dangling.”

The room brightened. Sae had stoked the embers in the fireplace and put on some wood that caught quickly and burned brightly. “Would you like to come over here by the fire? I’ll boil some water for tea,” she said, hanging an earthen teapot on an iron hook above the flames.

Hohsalle chuckled. “This is a strange state of affairs. Here, brewing us some tea, is the woman who fell into a ravine and was presumed dead. And standing beside her is the escaped slave she was sent to pursue. Am I dreaming or what?”

Milalle joined him on his bed and flung a large blanket around his shoulders. Hohsalle pulled her inside the blanket with him. Laughing, they climbed down from the bed together. Settling themselves in front of the fireplace, they cuddled and let the warmth slowly penetrate their bodies.

Van took a seat before the hearth, too. In the firelight, his face appeared much gentler than Hohsalle had imagined.

“I must apologize to Makokan tomorrow,” Sae said. “I’ve caused him nothing but trouble.”

Hohsalle flashed a crooked grin. “That’s an understatement. He came rushing back from Oki in a panic, sure that you were dead. He searched all over for you in vain. Now that he’s finally found you again, you go and slip something into his drink and knock him out cold.”

Although Sae looked flustered, a smile rose to her lips. While preparing and pouring the tea, she briefly outlined what had happened so far. Once he grasped the whole picture, Hohsalle cursed silently. *Tohlim. That sneaky old fox.* He'd been pursuing his own ends all along while pretending to cooperate with their search for the runaway slave. Makokan had gone all the way to Oki only to be hoodwinked into returning empty-handed.

"Honestly! Makokan's so useless," he grumbled.

Sae shook her head. "No. That wasn't part of our plan. We really were attacked by Kinma dogs."

"You were?"

"Yes." Sae glanced at Van. His lips twisted in a wry smile.

"It seems that several hunters laid traps for me at the same time," he explained. Yotalu, who'd sent the trackers to bring back the escaped slave and hated leader of the Lone Antlers. Hohsalle, who saw Van, a survivor of black wolf fever, as a valuable medical specimen. Tohlim, who sought him for similar reasons, but a different goal. And Kenoi of the Ahfal Oma, who desperately needed a new leader capable of controlling the Kinma dogs.

As Hohsalle listened to Van recount his tale, his throat grew parched. Looking up at Sae, he said, "Open that cupboard and get down a bottle of mokoi, would you? There should be some cheese in there, too."

Milalle glared at him. "We're in the middle of their story. This is no time for liquor. Besides, she's already made us some tea."

"Oh, hush. I want something stronger than that!" Hohsalle accepted the bottle from Sae and splashed a dollop in the cups she'd just finished pouring. "Not for you, though," he said, skipping Milalle's cup.

"I didn't want some anyway," she retorted.

The pleasant aroma of mokoi mingled with that of the tea. The hot liquid slipped down Hohsalle's throat straight into his stomach, warming him instantly. He took another swallow.

Milalle sipped the hot tea and sighed with contentment. Hohsalle's arm

rested against hers, and she felt its heat slowly seep into her body.

When his voice had first roused her, she'd remained under the bedcovers, listening drowsily to their conversation. Even now, sitting here before the fire, she felt she must still be dreaming. It was as though they were in some different time, floating in foam and gazing at this world through bright translucence. Anticipation bubbled to the surface of her mind, filling her with restless joy. Hohsalle was undoubtedly struggling to suppress his excitement, too. Noticing Van and Sae watching them with gentle smiles, she supposed that she and Hohsalle must appear like eager little children. She blushed.

I wonder what their relationship is. They had started as hunter and hunted, yet they seemed to share a comfortable bond, like that of a couple who'd been together for many years. They maintained the quiet bearing of people who'd endured much hardship, and there was sadness beneath their warm expressions.

Hohsalle caressed his cup with his fingers. "So they took the girl hostage to lure you to them." He frowned. "But that doesn't really make sense. If they needed someone to lead the Kinma dogs, why not choose one of their own? Why were they so fixated on you? You don't even belong to the Ahfal Oma."

Van stared into the fire for some time without answering.

"It's hard to describe in words," he said at last. "Remember that I told you that your medicine has a powerful odor to me? Something strange seems to have happened to me after I was bitten. For one thing, I was strong enough to break those shackles."

Pausing occasionally to search for words, Van told them about his heightened sense of smell and how his body reacted when the Kinma dogs approached, that feeling of turning inside out, and about how, in that state, his soul resonated with those of the dogs so that he could control them like a handler leading them by a leash.

Hohsalle hung on every word, letting out a long sigh when Van finished. "Well, that's an incredible story. And their dog handlers can't do that?"

"No, I'm pretty sure they can't." Van rubbed his arm and gazed at Hohsalle. "If you know what's going on inside me, I'd be grateful if you could explain it. Has

this happened to anyone else?”

Hohsalle glanced at Milalle and then shifted his eyes back to Van. “To be honest, we’ve never heard of any other cases like it. I can tell you what I think might be happening based on what we already know, but it’s nothing more than a guess, and any competent physician would likely scoff at my ideas.”

“I still want to know. Please tell me.”

Hohsalle gave a short laugh. “Oh, but it’s not that simple. It’ll be hard to understand without knowing the assumptions we make about living things.”

Van smiled faintly. “I realize there’s no comparison between what I know and the wisdom of the Otawalle. Could you outline things as you would to a child?” Van was gripping his knees so hard that his fingertips had turned white. “Yuna and I were bitten by Kinma dogs and survived. But we’re not the same as before.” A shadow lurked in Van’s eyes as he watched Hohsalle. “If you can, please tell me. What’s happening to us? Why do people get sick? And why do some people who get sick recover, while others don’t?”

Hohsalle’s expression turned grave. “All right. I’ll do the best I can.” After moistening his lips, he said, “But if you’re satisfied with my explanation, I want you to do me a favor. Give me some blood.”

Van’s eyebrows shot up. “Blood?”

Hohsalle nodded. “Remember the little tube with the needle that I used to give Milalle medicine in the cell?”

“Yes.”

“Just three of those vials will do. Please give me some of your blood. If you’re satisfied, that is.”

Van gave him a long, probing look and then nodded.

2

Disease-Free

“What do you think makes people sick?” Hohsalle asked.

“I think something evil must enter their body,” Van answered.

Hohsalle smiled. “That’s certainly one cause.”

“You mean there are others?”

“Yes. Other causes, other effects, and other processes. Diseases result from different combinations of factors, so complex and varied that it’s staggering. And I’m only talking about what we know presently.”

Van gazed at the young man’s fine-cut features. What kind of thoughts filled the space behind that pale forehead?

Hohsalle held up two fingers. “But if I were to divide them very roughly, I would say there are two causes of disease. The first is that something enters the body from outside, just as you said. The second is that the body itself causes the disease. The important thing here is that these two causes are not necessarily exclusive. Within that fact lies the answer to why some people who get sick recover, while others don’t. No two people are the same. Human bodies are both surprisingly similar and astonishingly different.”

Van’s eyes narrowed. “Such as some people being born healthy and others, not?”

“Mmm. Yes and no. Some are indeed born with weaknesses that make them more susceptible to disease and harder to heal. But even if you’re born healthy, that doesn’t mean you’ll automatically win every fight against disease. Did you know that Utalú died after being bitten by a Kinma dog?”

“Yes.”

“See what I mean? He was a strong and healthy warrior who’d never been sick in his life, whereas that little rascal you took under your wing was just a baby when she was bitten, right?”

Van nodded.

“There may be some exceptions, but young children are almost always more susceptible than adults to the seeds of any disease that enter their bodies. You’ve heard the saying that children under seven have just been placed in our care temporarily by the gods, right? That’s owing to how suddenly and easily they can die. Despite this, a helpless little infant occasionally endures a disease that kills a hale adult. Behind the question of whether someone will get sick, there are many complex factors for which there’s no simple explanation. Both the strong and the weak will get sick at times. No one in this world is completely free from disease.”

Van listened without uttering a word. Behind him, he sensed the specters of his wife and son. After a long silence, he asked, “Is it just luck, then?”

Hohsalle narrowed his eyes. “Luck? You mean whether someone gets sick?”

“Yes, and whether they get better.”

Hohsalle wrinkled his nose. “Luck. I hate that word. It’s so convenient. Probably true, too. But does it change anything to accept illness as mere fortune?” His expression turned defiant. “There’s a lot we still don’t know about why people get sick or why they recover, but we’ll never give up searching for the threads of cause and effect. If we keep trying, we’re bound to find clues.”

He took a deep breath. “For example, if we continue researching why Utalu died of black wolf fever when your adopted daughter didn’t, we’ll reach an answer one day. And once we do, we’ll save a lot of lives. Do you follow?”

Van nodded, feeling as though he’d glimpsed a shaft of pure white light pouring through young leaves, a long-forgotten scene from the past. “You told me you have a guess about why Yuna and I survived.”

Hohsalle’s mouth curved in a lopsided smile. “I certainly do. Have you ever heard people say that someone’s ‘free’ of a disease?”

Van remembered his grandmother using that phrase. He'd come down with the measles at the age of six. When the fever had broken, Van awoke to find his grandmother smiling down at him. "Good," she'd said. "You've made it through. Now you're free of that disease. You'll never get the measles again."

His eyes widened, and he stared at Hohsalle. "Are you saying that I've had black wolf fever before?"

Hohsalle's eyes went wide. "I'm impressed! You catch on quickly." Then, perhaps realizing his own impertinence, he plowed on hastily. "To put it very simply, yes, I think so."

"But—"

Hohsalle raised a hand. "Hang on. I said that I was putting it simply. I know you were never bitten by a Kinma dog before... Wait. Were you?"

"No."

"Right. I thought as much. And I'm sure your girl was never bitten previously, either. Yet I'm guessing the disease agents that cause black wolf fever had already infiltrated your bodies before you were bitten." A strong light gleamed in his eyes. "I believe that's precisely why the disease didn't kill you."

Van frowned.

"Look," Hohsalle said, pointing to himself. "The human body has many different points of entry. I don't mean just cuts and scrapes, but our eyes, ears, mouths, and noses. Disease agents so small they're invisible can enter through any of these, and if they multiply inside us, they can make us sick."

"But they're actually infiltrating our bodies constantly. They lurk in our food, or even in the water with which we wash. Yet they don't make us sick every time. Why? The answer to that question is one key to the puzzle of what's happening to you and Yuna."

He laughed. "The human body is really like a country."

Van blinked, recalling what the Echo Master had told him, that the human body was like a forest. How odd that two learned men of such divergent backgrounds would compare the human body to a country and a forest, both

populated by diverse creatures.

Hohsalle tapped his chest with his forefinger. “Invisible beings live inside me and are working to keep me alive—never resting, always collaborating.”

He touched his eye. “If a speck of dust gets in my eye, tears will wash it away. Similarly, if a disease agent enters my body, there are warriors who will attack and kill it.”

Van’s expression clouded. How could there possibly be little warriors inside him?

Catching sight of his expression, Hohsalle added hastily, “Of course, these things inside us aren’t really soldiers, but they act in the same way.” He explained how minute and invisible beings attacked and defeated disease agents that entered the body through a wound, giving up their lives in the process, and how their corpses formed pus.

As Van listened, understanding gradually dawned. “So people who have a big army of these little warriors inside are strong and healthy and can fight off disease?”

“Basically, yes. But there’s a bit more to it than that. This is a crucial point, so bear with me. When someone enters your clan territory, how do you tell if they’re a friend or an enemy?”

“By their behavior, I guess.”

“Right. Well, although many things enter our bodies, not all of them will harm us. If we assumed that every outsider who entered our territory was an enemy, we’d kill the traveling merchants who bring us goods and riches, and our countries would perish. The little warriors have to instantly discern whether intruders are friends or foes. It wouldn’t do for them to kill their allies. However, if they fail to spot a dangerous enemy and let them in, that enemy will multiply in no time, and soon, it’ll be impossible to defeat them. The ability to distinguish one from the other at a glance is crucial.” He paused and threw Van a questioning look. “So as leader of the Lone Antlers, how did you single out the Zolians?”

Van chuckled. “By their helmets. I could tell by the tip of one poking out of

the bushes.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. If someone dressed in an unfamiliar way entered your territory, you might be suspicious, but you wouldn’t suddenly attack them, would you? You’d wait and see. Yet if he was a Zolian soldier, you wouldn’t pause to think. Why?”

“Because I’d already know he’s an enemy.”

“Exactly! So if you know your enemy, you can attack right away. You know their faces and how to defeat them. The same is true for the little warriors inside you. They can stop invading soldiers before they multiply and gain control because they recognize them.” Hohsalle smiled. “That’s the mechanism that keeps people from getting the same illness twice and makes them ‘disease-free’ for the rest of their lives.”

“I see,” Van said. Hohsalle’s explanation was finally taking shape in his mind. “So that’s why we only get the measles once? Because the warriors inside us already know what its agents look like and can destroy them as soon as they enter?”

“That’s right. While bravely fighting off the invaders, they gain the skills and experience they need to battle effectively. The next time they meet that same enemy, they can defeat it instantly.

“Of course, it’d be easy if this mechanism worked every time, but some disease agents change shape very fast, which means we’re bound to get sick occasionally. Even so, we stay healthy most of the time thanks to this army inside us.”

Van felt as though the bizarre and incomprehensible saturated his body. Even now invisible little beings inside him were fighting disease and keeping him alive. “How strange,” he muttered. “All that is happening inside me, yet I never even knew.”

Hohsalle’s eyes shone. “I know. It’s crazy, isn’t it? We can’t see or hear what’s going on inside us.”

A log crumbled on the fire, sending up a puff of ash and sparks. Hohsalle stared at the flames, lost in thought. Then he raised his head and looked at Van.

“Actually, there’s something even stranger.” He smiled. “The black wolf fever agents that entered your body are probably still alive inside you.”

3

While the Fox Goes Mad, the Pyuika Sleeps

The four of them sat pensively before the fire, their shadows dancing on the wall each time the flames wavered. A shiver ran through Van's chest. He'd known for quite a while that something else dwelled within him. Hohsalle claimed it was the disease agents that caused black wolf fever.

"But how could that be?" he asked. "I thought you said the warriors in my body recognized the invading disease agents and killed them. That's why I survived."

"Yes, but..." Hohsalle paused as though struggling to find the right words. Suddenly, his face lit up. "Remember when Makokan's sister came running into the cave where we were imprisoned? She fought ruthlessly. Yet you saved the guard, even though he was our enemy. Why?"

"Because he was still so young. It seemed cruel to kill him. Besides, I knew he was helpless."

"That's what I'm talking about. The warriors inside us don't bother killing disease agents if they know they won't harm us."

"Wait a minute," Van protested. "Whatever this thing inside me is, it's not harmless. Clearly, it's changing my body. And Yuna's, too."

Hohsalle opened his mouth to respond, only to close it. A few moments later, he was about to try again when Milalle butted in.

"Have you ever heard of the mozufig?" she asked, gazing into Van's eyes.

He blinked. "You mean the fruit tree?"

"Yes. I thought you might be familiar because it grows in the northern

mountains.”

“I am.”

“Have you ever seen tiny wasps inside the fruit?”

Van nodded, wondering where Milalle was going with this. The tree grew wild in the mountains, and the sweet figs often had tiny wasps inside. As a boy, Van had been careful when eating them.

“Wasps lay their eggs in the fruit of the mozufig so that when they hatch, the larvae will be wrapped in nourishing food until they mature and fly away. The fruit makes a perfect little cradle. But it’s not only the wasps that benefit. The mozufig does, too. You see, the figs in which the wasps hatch and grow are both fruit and flower. You’ve seen how narrow the mouth of a fig is, right?”

Milalle drew her fingertips together. “Most insects could never crawl inside to pollinate it. But that’s no problem because the tiny wasps are there from birth. By the time they grow up and fly to another tree, they’re carrying lots of pollen.” With her finger, she traced a flight path through the air. “We tend to see relationships between living creatures only as hunter and hunted—those who consume and are consumed. But there are many cases where very diverse creatures use each other to survive. Whether or not something is harmful simply depends on your perspective. On whether you only see things that threaten your survival as harmful, or whether you see change itself as dangerous.”

Her expression sobered. “You said your body has changed. I think it’s your mind that sees that change as a bad thing. As far as your body’s concerned, there’s no need to destroy the agents of black wolf fever because they’re not life-threatening. So instead, it’s chosen to coexist with them.”

Van stared at the young woman. Her face had the sallow tinge of one who’d just recovered from sickness, yet her eyes were bright and alive. Van recognized that she likely had very rosy cheeks when healthy.

She’s smart. However, her intelligence seemed different, more compassionate than Hohsalle’s, perhaps.

“They may not harm me physically,” Van said. “But it’s unnerving to feel my

body transforming. I want to know why this is happening. And even more so, what could happen in the future.”

Milalle nodded gravely. “We can’t say for sure why you and Yuna have changed or what will occur going forward. To help us consider those questions, let me explain a little more why we think black wolf fever didn’t kill you.”

She gestured toward Van’s chest with her hand. “I believe that the disease agents have actually become a part of you. I also think you and Yuna aren’t the only ones.”

Van looked puzzled.

“I suspect that your parents, your grandparents, and all the people of your clan carry these disease agents inside them.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because your territory is in the Toga Mountains, home to the black wolves that destroyed our kingdom.”

Van’s eyes widened.

“Consider it,” Milalle went on. “Did the black wolves ever succumb to that disease? Somehow, they carried the sickness without dying. The same thing happened with humans. Some got sick, but others didn’t. For the Otawalle, the disease was fatal, but not for the Aquafaese. And no one died of it in your homeland, either, did they? Even though the black wolves who carried it lived there in packs.”

Van’s skin prickled.

“I’m guessing the agents of this disease normally live in ticks,” Milalle said. “Infected ticks passed them on to wolves when they sucked their blood. When the agents that passed through the wolves infected our ancestors, who were never exposed before, black wolf fever manifested itself as a fearsome scourge.”

She leaned forward a little. “Yet the Gansa who live in the land where those black ticks thrive never contracted the illness. Although it’s still conjecture, I’m pretty sure your people must be exposed to a weak form of the disease during

childhood, giving them a chance to develop the little warriors they need to resist it. This theory would certainly explain why the peoples of the Toga Mountains have lived there for centuries without succumbing.”

Van rubbed a hand over his face. “I see. ‘While the fox goes mad, the pyuika sleeps.’”

“What?”

A deep sense of awe surged quietly through Van’s breast. “The Gansa really are the People of the Flying Deer,” he muttered. He paused to moisten his throat with a sip of now tepid tea.

“In the season when the spark ducks return, the black tick population explodes. The bushes are full of them. Sometimes, ticks attach themselves to foxes and feast on their blood. I’ve seen poor foxes thrashing about in the thickets, contorting from seizures. It’s a pitiful sight. They look as though they’ve gone mad. Yet strangely enough, the pyuika prefer those very same thickets, especially during foaling season. They’ll curl up in them and sleep quite peacefully, even though they’re covered in ticks. My father thought they picked such places to foal because foxes avoid them, which means their foals will be safe. I guess the disease affects foxes but not pyuika.”

Hohsalle and Milalle looked at each other, their cheeks flushed.

“Do pyuika give milk?” Milalle asked.

“Of course. In the Toga Mountains, we’re raised on the milk from our mothers’ breasts and that from the pyuika, too.”

Milalle glanced at Hohsalle, and he nodded. “Go ahead. Ask,” he said.

She turned back to Van and took a deep breath. Her fingers trembled, and she clasped her hands together. “Do the pyuika eat the lichens found on trees?”

“Yes. It depends on the season, but in winter especially. During the mating season, bucks and does eat lots of ashimi. Ikimi, too. I’ll follow them to the edge of a swamp, thinking they’ve gone to get a drink, and find them grazing on ikimi instead.”

Milalle let out a long exhale and cast her gaze at Hohsalle again. Smiles spread

across their faces slowly. Van blinked. “Is there something special about ashimi and ikimi?” he asked.

“There sure is!” Milalle beamed at him. “At least, I’m pretty certain there must be. It seems very likely, considering that multiple cases have several factors in common.”

Hohsalle tapped Milalle on the knee, gave her a wry grin, and turned to Van. “You told me that the medicine I used on Milalle in the prison smelled like ashimi, remember?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you were right. That’s actually what it’s made from. Your sense of smell is quite extraordinary, you know. Ikimi can be used to create that medicine, too. Although they look completely different, those two lichens share a common component.”

“Lichens,” Milalle interjected, “are a combination of algae and fungi that coexist in a mutually beneficial relationship. The fungi determine the shape of the lichen. As Hohsalle said, ashimi and ikimi are different species, but their fungi produce a common component from the nutrients their algae makes from light. We discovered that this component suppresses the disease agents of black wolf fever and have been refining the medicine we make from it. It doesn’t cure the disease yet, but we think it has great potential.”

Understanding showed in Van’s expression. “So that’s why you were so surprised when Yuna said the medicine glowed.”

Both of the Otawalle nodded. “Yes,” Milalle said. “To Yuna, the element in those lichens that suppresses disease seems to give off light. Before we were captured, she told me she knew of a place with lots of shining plants and led me to the shore of a swamp that was thick with ikimi.” Milalle gasped abruptly.

“What?” Hohsalle asked.

“I just remembered. That swamp. It was a graveyard.”

“A graveyard?”

“Yes. For fire horses, I think. There were lots of horse bones there. Even in the

water. The swamp stood at the edge of the forest, and the trees on the opposite shore had been cut down to make pastureland. That must have changed the ecosystem. But I bet when it was all swamp, the soil on top of those bones was covered in ikimi, too.”

Hohsalle slapped his thigh. “Now it all makes sense!” He laughed and patted the startled Milalle on the shoulder. “I didn’t get around to telling you yet, did I? Before we were caught, I talked with the elder of the Yusula Oma. He claimed that, in the past, fire horses never got sick when bitten by ticks, and neither did people who drank their milk.”

He explained how Kinma dogs were bred and how the burial mound had changed after the settlers turned the place into a watering hole. Van and Sae stared at him as all the pieces fell into place.

When Hohsalle finished, he looked at Van. “I think the change that came over the Kinma dogs is similar to what befell you and Yuna. Neither the Ahfal Oma nor the Yusula Oma got sick from tick bites when they drank plenty of mare’s milk. And in the past, when Kinma dogs ate the flesh of horses buried in the lichen-covered mound, they never underwent the kind of transformation they do now. That in itself is a clue to solving this riddle.”

The others stared at him with bated breath.

“Some people have speculated that transplanting black wolves from their native habitat in the north to the very different environment of Otawalle is what made the disease so virulent that it wiped out our kingdom. And I’m inclined to believe that’s correct. Because even though the black ticks in the mountains and forests of Aquafa still carried the disease agents, no more outbreaks occurred once the capital of Otawalle was sealed off. There may have been isolated cases, but there were no follow-up epidemics. This suggests that the Aquafaese were immune.

“The more people stricken with a contagious disease, the more virulent that sickness becomes. And yet, hardly any Aquafaese have contracted the old strain of black wolf fever. Over the last few centuries, the Otawalle may have gradually developed immunity through exposure to the diet and customs of Aquafa. However...”

Hohsalle paused, his eyes shining. “When the Zolians settled here, the environment changed radically. The settlers cut down the forest and turned grasslands into pastures. They raised sheep instead of horses. Horse and sheep manure have different properties. As the number of sheep grew, their manure altered the soil and affected the vegetation. Perhaps the lichens that suppress the disease decreased, leaving fewer for the fire horses to eat.”

“The toxic grain incident!” Milalle jumped in eagerly. “Maybe it wasn’t the wheat that killed the horses after all. Quite a bit of time had passed since the settlers arrived. Some of the horses may have simply lost their immunity to black wolf fever.”

Hohsalle paused to consider this. “I see what you mean,” he said slowly. “But you know, I think there’s a greater possibility it was something else. The elder said some of the horses and sheep that ate toxic grain didn’t die.”

“Really?”

“They must have had some resistance to it. But even so, the toxin weakened them, and they died later when ticks bit them. They were buried in separate mounds, which grew over with ashimi and ikimi. The pups born from bitches that ate the carcasses in those mounds were even smarter and more fearsome than previous Kinma dogs.”

Milalle’s expression brightened in evident understanding. With his eyes still on her face, Hohsalle continued, “We’ve got work to do, don’t we? First, we’ve got to identify the properties of that toxic grain. Then we need to examine how those properties interact with the disease agents in the ticks and the disease-resistant component in ashimi to produce the new breed of Kinma dogs that carry the most recent strain.

“Clearly, the transformation of the Yukata Plains must be involved, too. Let’s review what we know so far.” Hohsalle raised a finger for each point. “People who show resistance to the disease were all raised on the milk of animals that were immune to it, even when bitten by ticks. Those animals all ate lichens. We can’t rule out the possibility that some other food might be involved, but for the sake of this study, let’s start by assuming the weakened disease agents were passed through the milk.”

“I agree,” Milalle said. “Remember, Izam didn’t eat Oki laputa.”

Noticing the puzzled expression on Van’s face, she said, “Sorry. I’ve rushed ahead. Of those who survived after being bitten by the dogs, there was one Aquafaese boy named Izam who suffered under the illness far more than another boy who was part Zolian. Despite being Aquafaese, Izam preferred lapateh made from cow’s milk over Oki laputa, which, as you know, is made from reindeer milk. It’s not particularly unusual. Since the Zolians introduced their livestock, dairy products made with milk from cows and sheep have become more common than those produced from reindeer or fire horse milk.

“The half Zolian boy often ate Oki laputa, despite his father being a Zolian noble who avoids dairy products of any kind because they’re supposedly defiled. That’s actually why I became interested in the role of milk in the first place.”

Hohsalle nodded. His attention moved to Van. “Just as the Ahfal Oma and the Yusula Oma are raised on fire horse milk, the Gansa in the Toga Mountains are raised on pyuika milk, and the people of Oki on reindeer milk. All these animals coexist with black wolf fever disease agents, which appear to have been weakened, presumably from the consumption of lichens. We’ll have to research what component increases resistance to the disease, but it seems that when the Gansa drink pyuika milk, they also ingest both a weakened version of the black wolf fever disease agents and something that suppresses them and promotes immunity. We’re assuming that’s why you didn’t die when bitten by the Kinma dog.”

Van recalled something Nakka had told him. “Yuna, too,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Nakka said that Yuna’s mother was one of the Yusula Oma.” Van stroked his beard absently. “When she was sentenced to slavery in the salt mines, her father regularly brought her lapateh made with fire horse milk or Oki laputa that he’d bought in Kazan. His daughter always gave it to Yuna without keeping any for herself.”

A silence fell over the room. It was Sae who finally broke it. “To think that she was a Yusula Oma.” All eyes turned to her. “Fire horse milk is extremely

precious. The Yusula Oma were like servants to the Ahfal Oma. Presumably, they were only granted mare's milk on special occasions. I'm guessing that even when she was growing up, Yuna's mother rarely had the chance to taste any." A sad smile flitted across her face. "Yuna's grandfather must have sacrificed a great deal to get some of that cheese and take it to the salt mine for his daughter, but she gave it all to her child. And in the end, that's what saved Yuna's life."

Recalling Yuna's mother as she lay slumped against the oven, Van closed his eyes. The intricately woven threads of cause and effect could never be completely untangled to see what bound a life to this world or took it away. Yet, as Sae had said, Yuna lived thanks to the love of her mother and grandfather.

Another log crumbled in the fire. Tiny sparks danced in the air and then faded.

"So," Van said. "Both the disease agents and whatever suppresses them live inside Yuna, competing and coexisting."

He looked at Hohsalle and Milalle. "For her, ikimi and ashimi glow, and for me, they give off a strong smell. The same is true for the medicine you make from them. When I'm with the Kinma dogs, I turn inside out, and Yuna changes, too. Why?" As he spoke, another question popped into his mind. "And why hasn't anyone else changed like us? Many others must have been bitten by ticks and infected with black wolf fever."

Hohsalle and Milalle looked at each other. "I'm not sure," Hohsalle confessed. "But the disease agents may have mutated when they passed through the dogs. You were infected through the saliva of one of the new Kinma dogs born after the mound changed. According to the elder, they're different. Your body was already home to something resistant to the disease agents in black ticks. The introduction of mutated agents into your body may have generated compound changes."

Van's eyes narrowed. "If one of those dogs bit someone else from the Gansa clan, would the same thing happen?"

Hohsalle hummed. "It might, but..." He fell silent for a while, pondering something, then sighed and rubbed his chin.

“I’m afraid that my explanation has made it sound like we know everything already, but in fact, infectious diseases are incredibly complex. Immunity acquired through exposure to weakened disease agents isn’t the only reason some people get sick and others don’t under identical conditions. Even twins, for example, respond differently. One may get ill while the other doesn’t, and there’s quite a variation in the efficacy of any medicine from one person to another.

“However, when it comes to your changes—your heightened sense of smell, for example—we might be able to explain a little of why that’s happened.”

Hohsalle tapped his forehead with a long, pale finger. “Black wolf fever affects the brain. The patient develops cold-like symptoms first—a sore throat and a fever—followed by a rash and, finally, seizures.”

Van knit his brow as he remembered how all the slaves in the mine had started coughing when they first got sick.

“You and Yuna are resistant to the disease agents transmitted by black ticks. The agents carried by the Kinma Dogs, however, may have taken a slightly different form. If so, then when they entered your bodies, they might have affected your brains, even though they didn’t kill you.”

That’s right. In the middle of the night, Van had come down with a high fever, and his body had ached all over. That was followed by a splitting headache and a horrendous nightmare.

“The illness has evidently affected your sense of smell and vision, so I think it must’ve altered your olfactory cells or membranes. But at the same time, we know that the brain is also intricately involved in our sense of smell and sight.”

Hohsalle tapped his forehead again. “Thinking, feeling, breathing, temperature regulation. We believe that all these things and more are controlled by the brain. A brain transformation would therefore alter how you perceive or experience the world around you.”

Van frowned. A fragment of memory brushed against his thoughts. He snatched it back before it vanished into the dark.

“Ah!” he breathed. “I see. He was bitten, too.”

“Hmm?”

Van glanced at Sae, then fixed his gaze toward Hohsalle and Milalle. “Kenoï, the Dog King, was bitten, too.”

4

Death Hidden in Life

Fierce dogs, racing. His soul, joined to them by spirit threads. Kenoi...

Van gazed silently into the fire as memories of that night flooded back in full force.

“Kenoi,” Hohsalle said. “Wasn’t he the father of Ohfan, chief of the Ahfal Oma?”

Van nodded. “Yes. He was quite old and sick, although I don’t know what disease he had.”

Once again, Van saw Kenoi’s tortured eyes and heard his strangled scream. *Why?*

“So the milk of the fire horse protects the Ahfal Oma from the illness that destroys their enemies, and that disease lives in their Kinma dogs. Who wouldn’t be tempted to see the hand of a god in that?” Van mused.

Outside the window, the blue light of dawn crept over the sky.

“You said that the disease may have affected our brains. If that’s what causes me to turn inside out...” Van stopped, then continued in a low voice. “The world I experience when my body takes over my soul is so different from this one. Everything around me slows to a crawl. Scents come alive. The rustling of the leaves in the breeze is deafening. Colors change. And there are countless lights, all subtly different hues. The earth, the grass, and the trees are filled with them. Some swirl like smoke, trailing and drifting on the air.”

His face twisted. “When I’m in that state, the Kinma dogs and I seem so close. No, not just close—we’re one.” He took a deep breath. “In that world, there’s

no sense of loss or futility. There's only life."

A hush fell over the room when Van finished. The thin warble of a bird stole through the window, weaving through the silence. The cooks had been working in the kitchen for some time, for the faint aroma of homu, bread left to rise overnight and now baking in the ovens, drifted into the room.

Van rubbed his face slowly. "If the world I saw is conjured up by the disease agents, is that what the Kinma dogs see, too?"

Hohsalle shook his head. "I doubt it. I can't swear to that, but if you only started seeing it after being bitten, then I think it must be the disease agents influencing your brain."

"But why that particular landscape?"

Hohsalle exhaled slowly. "I don't know for a fact, but if you don't mind me hazarding a guess, I can think of one reason." He paused to take a gulp of cold tea. "Like all creatures, disease agents are driven to survive and multiply, but they can't do that without invading other living creatures. Perhaps they're manipulating you to achieve that goal. You know what rabies is, don't you?"

"Yes."

"The symptoms can vary, but once infected, some dogs become vicious and start biting everything. From the perspective of the disease agents, that makes perfect sense. When the carrier bites another animal, the agents can enter a new host and multiply."

Hohsalle grinned. "Of course, we've got no proof yet that they're actually manipulating the host's brain. Still, I don't think this hypothesis is too far-fetched. The mechanisms our bodies use to expel disease agents, like sneezing and coughing for example, actually help them find other hosts and proliferate.

"However, the Kinma dogs would never have attacked you, right? Not unless someone like the Dog King told them to."

"That's true."

"From the perspective of the disease agents, there's no point in having you fight with Kinma dogs. You wouldn't die if they bit you anyway, and you're both

valuable hosts that can coexist and help them spread. It would be a waste for you to harm each other. Instead, maybe they're trying to convince you that you're allies, so that you won't fight."

Van remained silent. As he mulled over Hohsalle's words, a bleakness gripped his heart. "What a lonely thought," he said.

"Lonely?"

Van smiled. "If I follow your idea to its logical conclusion, then even my love for my family and friends is just the urge for survival. Basically, you're saying that these feelings are generated by my body, because making friends and caring about my kin is to its advantage."

Hohsalle's eyes shone. "Oh, there's so much more I'd like to say to you about that! If only we could talk to our hearts' content." He laughed and shook his head. "But there's no time for that now, so let me return to your specific case. For you and the Kinma dogs, the black wolf fever agents are innocuous and bind you together as kin. But when they encounter other creatures, they undergo a complete transformation, turning into ferocious butchers, right?"

"Yes."

"My brother-in-law once told me that when certain diseases transfer to similar creatures, harmless disease agents can suddenly turn savage. For example, those that coexist with ossam may become lethal when they infect wolves. The healthy proliferation of ossam, which are their hosts, means that the disease agents thrive and flourish. Wolves, however, compete with ossam for game, so my brother-in-law posits that the disease agents may actually seek to eliminate them.

"Remember the example you gave before? What was it? 'While the fox goes mad, the pyuika sleeps'? That may be evidence of a similar principle. The disease agents have coexisted with pyuika for a long time. Foxes attack pyuika foals, so to the disease agents, foxes would be enemies that should be exterminated."

Van groaned. "So you're saying that those things inside us are doing all of that just to protect their hosts and themselves? But wouldn't ashimi, which glows to Yuna and smells powerfully to me, be an enemy of the disease agents in black

ticks? If your theory is correct, it would make more sense if the smell of ashimi was repellant.”

Milalle burst out laughing. “That’s true, Hohsalle. Your hypothesis doesn’t explain that one.”

“Not necessarily,” Hohsalle protested. “There could be a mechanism in your bodies that seeks to keep you alive by preventing the disease agents of black ticks from overmultiplying. It may be drawing your attention to things you should eat to suppress their spread.”

Catching sight of Milalle’s grin, Hohsalle’s mouth crooked. “I know, I know. This is all just a guess, one possibility among many. I took what happened and developed an argument from there, but nothing’s been proved.”

He scratched his cheek with a slender finger and sighed. “To be honest, whenever I pursue this line of thought, a part of me wonders if that’s really all there is. We base our theories on the premise that survival is the ultimate goal of every living thing. But sometimes I wonder if we’re right to assume that.”

A furtive shadow touched Van somewhere deep inside his head—the shadow of something that had long hovered in his subconscious. “You think there’s something other than survival?” he asked quietly.

“Mmm. If you look at the whole picture, that is.” Hohsalle gazed at the fire for a moment, then lifted his head. “Take my hand, for example.” He raised his hand and spread his fingers wide. “Did you know that the fingers of the fetus inside the mother’s womb are webbed?”

Van nodded hesitantly. Soon after their initiation into manhood, one of his clan mates had shared a story about a miscarried fetus with webbed fingers. Van had been filled with awe at the thought of the unborn baby swimming slowly in the salty fluid of its mother’s womb.

Hohsalle wiggled his fingers. “If those webs didn’t disappear, we wouldn’t be able to move our hands freely like this. So that part of the fetus expires. Our bodies are formed as parts of it die and vanish of their own accord.”

He paused and took a breath. “When I was a child, my grandfather gave me some interesting creatures called pika palu, or ‘shining leaf,’ to keep as pets,

and I've continued raising them ever since. They're a species of sea slug that resides in swamps near the sea in Pokishia. When the slugs first hatch, they swim, but by the time they're adults, they become completely stationary. They cling to fronds of seaweed, looking just like leaves, and glow green in the sunlight that filters through the water."

Hohsalle opened and closed his fingers, mimicking the way the creatures pulsed with light. "The young have mouths, but the adults don't, yet they can live almost a whole year like that."

Van's eyes grew round. "But how do they eat?"

"They don't. Can you guess how they survive so long?"

"Do they eat enough as young to survive a long time on nothing?"

"That's half the answer. The pika palu suck in enough food when they're young to survive for the rest of their lives. But it's *what* they eat that's really amazing—the chloroplasts of bulika algae." He went on to explain that unlike birds and beasts, plants, seaweeds, and algae led very different lives, obtaining the nutrients they needed from sunlight. "It's the chloroplasts that do this and that make leaves look green."

Van gaped at him. "You mean the algae those sea slugs eat when they're young makes it possible for them to produce their own food from sunlight as adults? I had no idea such an odd creature even existed."

Hohsalle grinned. "Yeah. Pretty weird, huh? They're sea slugs, but they're also plants, in a way. But the real surprise is yet to come." His face sobered. "As soon as they lay their eggs, pika palu get sick and die. Every single one of them, no exceptions. My grandfather, Limuelle, has spent years studying them to find out why, but he still hasn't been able to explain it completely. However, he does have one hypothesis. He thinks that when they're still young, pika palu must ingest some kind of disease along with the bulika."

Hohsalle pressed a finger against his lips. "Mature pika palu don't have mouths, so they can't possibly consume anything that carries a disease agent. Perhaps they could inhale some through bodies, but if that were the case, they ought to die of various illnesses because they live in different environments. But they don't. They all die of the exact same disease during the exact same stage

of their lives. This suggests that the disease agents that kill them are attached to the algae chloroplasts they eat when they're young. Understand?"

Van nodded. "But why would they eat something that would kill them? Even if the disease agents remain dormant for a while, won't they go extinct if the slugs all get sick in the end?"

Hohsalle shook his head. "That's just it. The disease doesn't wipe them out."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't emerge until they've laid their eggs. As soon as they've passed on their life to the next generation, they die. Every last one of them."

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the crackling fire.

"There are other creatures like this, too. Take the salmon that find their way back from the sea to spawn. They climb the river to the place they were born. The females lay their eggs, and the males fertilize them. Once they've given birth to new life, they perish almost immediately, as if their job has been completed."

Hohsalle gazed at Van. "Then there are some creatures that seem almost immortal. They'll go on dividing indefinitely. As long as nothing interferes, they can keep reproducing forever. But creatures that require a male and female to procreate die once they've given birth to the next generation. They might survive until their offspring can take care of themselves, but ultimately, they will grow old and die. They step aside to make way for new life, just as trees shed their leaves in autumn to make way for the buds in spring. The bodies of such creatures are designed from the time of birth to live and die as well."

The pale white light of morning was beginning to penetrate the curtains.

Sae spoke up in a low voice. "So, in a way, having children makes us immortal. To leave no offspring is to cut the thread of life that has been passed down for generations."

Milalle caught the other woman's eyes with her own. "No, that's not true." A soft smile rose to her lips. "I don't know if I'll ever have children. Maybe that's what makes me feel so strongly about this. But I'm sure you've got that wrong, Sae."

“Regardless of what our ancestors left us, there are far too many people living in this world for the chain of life to break just because some people can’t give birth.”

Sae’s face was pale, but she forced herself to speak. “Even so, they’ll break the chain their parents passed on to them.”

Milalle’s gaze was firm. “You mean facial features? Things like that?”

“That, too, but—”

“Sae, listen.” Milalle leaned forward. “Each of us is unique. Yes, we carry over some traits from our ancestors. However, no two people are exactly the same. Each life born into this world has never existed here before and never will again. Each creature has its own distinct personality.”

Sae frowned, and Milalle pressed on, speaking slowly and deliberately. “The bacteria in our intestines are an example of those creatures Hofsalle was talking about that could probably go on living forever if conditions permitted—dividing and multiplying endlessly. They’re sexless. No male and female coupling is required for them to make new life.

“But creatures that reproduce through the pairing of a male and female live just once and then die. The young born through this process aren’t replicas of their mothers or fathers; they’re totally new beings. Children don’t look exactly like their parents, do they? They don’t get one side of their face from their mothers and the other from their fathers. Even twins aren’t completely identical. Everything born into this world has its own personality and lives its unique existence.

“Although people do inherit traits from both parents, the possible combinations of these are infinite. That’s why you’ll never find two people in this world who are exactly alike. No individual has ever been, nor ever will be, born twice.”

She smiled. “As I said, we are all unique. This body, this face, this mind—they appear here just once and then are gone forever.”

Sae gazed at her silently. Ignoring her expression, Milalle said gently, “I was born into this world, I’ll live the life that is mine alone, and I’ll die. As Hofsalle

said, we're designed to die from the very beginning. Although I'm not sure what death means for the mind, I can't help thinking that it's not the end for the body."

Milalle cocked an eyebrow. "Remember Hohsalle claimed that the body is like a country? It really is. The human body looks like a single entity, but, in fact, it's filled with an astounding number of tiny little creatures. Through living, they help us live. When our bodies get sick, or grow old and die, they go on living, returning to the earth or becoming parts of other creatures. In that sense, for the body, death is really nothing more than change. The integrated whole simply disintegrates."

Van took a long, deep breath. Milalle's description matched what he experienced when inside out—that indescribable state without loneliness or regret, just the pale horizon extending endlessly into the distance.

Even so... The small figure named Van who stood on that horizon would surely grieve his own death when he passed.

"If a country perishes," he muttered, "its people carry on, absorbed into another nation. Still, it's a sad thing to see one's homeland, or one's own self, which exists just once, vanish forever."

"You're right on that one," Hohsalle said with a crooked grin. "Why do you think I became a doctor? Even if I cure them, my patients are doomed to die. Yet if someone gets sick, I still try to heal them."

For some time, Van had been aware of footsteps in the distance. People on the floor below were already up and about. Dawn had broken, and the light of the fire had paled.

"You said you wanted to take my blood."

Hohsalle nodded. "That's right."

Van smiled. "Then please go ahead. What you've given me is worth far more." To his surprise, disappointment crossed Hohsalle's face. It reminded Van of his son. He'd looked just like that when Van had to leave. "People are moving downstairs," Van said. "I should be leaving soon."

Hohsalle's eyebrows arched with surprise. "You can hear them even from

here?”

“Yes.”

Hohsalle sighed, his expression forlorn. “Look,” he said hesitantly. “Maybe I’m asking too much, but I’d like to meet again. Besides, we might not succeed in making the medicine with the blood you give us this time. It would really help if you’d drop into our clinic in Kazan sometime soon. I’ll guarantee your safety.”

Milalle glanced at Sae and then looked at Van. Leaning forward, she said, “Please. We don’t know what the disease will do going forward, and we want to save as many lives as possible. Please help us.”

Sae and Van exchanged a look. There were subtle and complex differences in the social statuses of all four gathered in that room. Hohsalle and Milalle’s request came with many risks. Still, Van’s heart was moved.

“I’ll come,” he said. “I can’t promise when. But I’ll come.”

5

Journey of Three

Loud snores greeted them when they opened the door to the chamber by the corridor. Makokan was sprawled on top of the bed, fast asleep.

Sae started toward him. “Don’t wake him,” Hohsalle called out from behind. She turned, and he waved his hand, grinning broadly. “You don’t want to waste time trying to explain everything to him, do you? I’ll tell him myself, so off you go.”

Hesitating, Sae looked back at Makokan, then to Hohsalle. “Thank you, sir. I would appreciate that.”

She and Van bowed deeply to the young couple and left the room. Early morning sunlight shone through the window at the end of the passageway. With quiet steps, Sae crossed the hall to a door on the other side and knocked once. After a long pause, it opened, and a woman peered out—Makokan’s sister, Ilia.

“My apologies for making you wait so long,” Sae said.

Ilia shrugged. “You certainly took a long time, didn’t you? Have you finished?”

“Yes.”

Ilia flicked her eyes to Van. Catching her gaze, he bowed and said, “Thank you for granting my request.”

She smiled faintly. “Don’t mention it. I wanted to repay you for your help anyway. Besides, I’m curious about black wolf fever myself.”

“But your brother—,” Sae began.

Ilia chuckled. “It’s fine. He’s less trouble when he’s sleeping.” She stepped

into the hall and closed the door behind her silently. "Shall we be off?"

Van and Sae followed Ilia down a narrow corridor that led to the kitchen. Delicious smells wafted toward them: freshly baked bread and roasting pork cured in herbs and smoked. Ilia must have instructed the kitchen staff to ignore her guests. When the three of them entered, the cooks only raised their heads briefly and bowed to Ilia without looking at Van and Sae.

"I'll take these," Ilia said, picking up two small round loaves of homu from the long narrow counter where they lay cooling. Grabbing a small cooking knife, she slit them open, stuffed them with the roasted pork, and then handed one each to Van and Sae.

"You must be hungry. You can eat these while you walk."

Van and Sae took the buns with thanks. The piping hot crusty bread felt good in their grips.

After leading them to the back door, Ilia bade them a curt "Good-bye" and then turned on her heel and disappeared inside. Van sighed as he watched her go.

Sae looked up at him. "Are you tired?"

"No, not really," he said. Then he laughed. "Actually, yeah. Maybe I am a bit tired." Although physically hale, he was filled with the lethargy that followed a long, bizarre dream. "I'm sorry to have put you through so much trouble. And before the sun rose, at that."

Sae smiled and shook her head. "Are you glad you met them?"

Van nodded. "I learned so much, it's going to take a while to digest it all," he said. "But yes, I'm glad I met them." The clear morning light danced in the soft breeze that stirred the forest, and the translucence of the tender newborn leaves seemed achingly beautiful. He bit into his stuffed bread as he strode through grass wet with dew. When the rich, savory aroma reached his nostrils, hunger struck him powerfully, and he devoured the rest in three hefty bites. The smoky flavor of crisp pork fat lingered on his tongue.

Beside him, Sae was still munching on hers. At times like this, she seemed calm and gentle, but she became a different person when she worked. If it

hadn't been for her, Tohlim, Hohsalle, and Milalle would still be hostages of the Ahfal Oma, pawns in negotiations that could jeopardize the future of the border peoples.

When Sae had told Van her plan to reveal everything to Ilia, he'd been unsure. The Gansa were in collusion with the Ahfal Oma, so it was quite likely the same was true of the people of the Yukata Mountains. He'd cautioned Sae that Ilia and her kin might be plotting to rebel against the King of Aquafa.

However, Sae had reassured him. "The Ofal Oma have always had strong ties with those in power, whether the Otawalle, the Aquafaese, or the Zolians. Besides, Ilia's a Servant of the Inner Circle. She must be fully aware of this country's delicate situation." Sae had paused, a twinkle in her eyes. "She's an expert opportunist, you know. And she cares about her people first. She'd never allow her judgment to be swayed by emotion. She'll only make her move after carefully assessing both the frontier peoples and those at the seat of power.

"Even if the Ahfal Oma in this area asked her to join them in their plot, she'd allay their fears by feigning interest, all the while watching which direction the wind blew."

Sadness had tinged Sae's face as she continued. "I'm certain she already knows the king has abandoned the Ahfal Oma. She'd never ride a losing horse."

Sae had been right. As soon as Ilia had learned that the Lightning Squad kidnapped Tohlim, she'd ordered her men to capture the leader of the Ahfal Oma in her area. That discouraged them from attempting to help the rebels. Then she'd gathered the best Aquafaese soldiers, and together, they attacked the stone caves. It had been a desperate battle that took the lives of some of her warriors, but the Lightning Squad, caught off guard, was unable to respond in full force and was swiftly overwhelmed.

Although cool and ruthless in battle, once she'd won, Ilia used the rescue as an opportunity to bargain with Tohlim. She'd explained that Ohfan's clan from the Toga Mountains had rebelled of its own accord after being abandoned by the king. The Ahfal Oma who'd settled in the Yukata mountain region weren't a part of the plot. Similarly, the Yusula Oma harbored no desire to rebel. Ilia had insisted they'd had no choice but to do as commanded. She'd convinced Tohlim

to leave them in her hands with the promise that she and her people would govern them strictly. In this way, she protected those who sheltered beneath her wings while placing the King of Aquaafa in her debt.

Her actions reflected the stance and sentiments of the border peoples of Aquaafa. The right to lead a peaceful life in their homelands took precedence over anything else. That was the only thing worth risking the fate of their territories over. As long as their lands were left alone, who ruled the country was of no consequence.

The Ahfal Oma...

Pity stirred within Van's breast. Now they were isolated even among the frontier peoples. Never again would they have the wind at their back. They could be impetuous and cruel, but it still pained Van to see them driven into this corner.

Sunbeams shimmered on a curtain of green leaves, and through it, the village of the Yusula Oma came into view. Yuna was a sound sleeper. Surely, she was still at rest. If she'd woken to find Van gone, she'd be hollering by now. He wanted to get back before that happened.

Yuna was a tough little thing, both physically and emotionally, but the terror she'd felt after being torn from Van was firmly imprinted in her mind. She cried if he was out of her sight for a second. Last night, she only fell asleep after being wrapped tightly in his arms for a while.

The sallow-faced woman who was her aunt appeared to have little patience or compassion for such behavior. Van guessed that she would yell at Yuna if she cried while he was gone. Despite their being sisters, the aunt bore little resemblance to Yuna's mother. Perhaps that was owing to her being eight years older. Van had only seen Yuna's mother in death, but her elder sister looked so haggard that she could have been her mother.

Van was surprised when Nakka told him of Yuna's background. Although the very thought of doing so was hard to bear, Van had decided that if this was Yuna's home and these were her kin, he should leave her here. However, his resolve faded quickly after he met Yuna's aunt. Poor and possessed of many children of her own, she had displayed no affection for the girl, despite Yuna

being her sister's daughter. When Van had asked if it would be all right to take Yuna with him, her face had brightened with relief, and she had agreed gladly.

"Nurture over nature," Van muttered. Sae looked up at him, and he smiled. "I've been led by the nose all the way here, but maybe it was the gods who guided me. It's because I came that Yuna is now officially my daughter."

Sae's expression softened, and her eyes narrowed. "That's true." Her steps slowed. "What will you do now?"

Van slowed down to match her pace. "Return to Oki."

Ohma and his family had to be worried. Van would have gone back immediately to reassure them that he was all right, but there was one place he needed to visit first.

"I'm going to stop by Yomida Forest on my way, but even so, I should get back before they move to their summer pasture."

Van looked at Sae. "How about you?"

She didn't answer. He thought her eyes wavered for a moment. Sae quickened her pace, but then she came to an abrupt halt and looked back. "I was sent here to spy on you. I haven't been relieved of that mission yet." Her expression was composed, but her voice sounded tight. "Though I suppose it's impossible to stalk someone whose nose is as sharp as a wolf's."

Van laughed. He wasn't ready to name the feeling that stirred in his heart. But there was no doubt that it was there. He nodded without saying a word.



Having been snatched away from Van and forced to live among strangers, Yuna clung to him like a little baby, struggling to bury her fear and anxiety. Van responded by holding her and keeping her close, making sure that she was in contact with his body. Gradually, her excessive attachment eased.

Van and Yuna rode together on Olaha, while Sae followed behind on a horse Illia had lent her. At first, Yuna was even afraid of Sae, but over the course of their travels, she slowly opened up.

They journeyed through early spring fields, tranquil and pleasant. Brooks

gurgled with newly melted snow, and tiny flowers burst into bloom across the meadows. Little insects hummed busily around them, hovering like particles of light, their gossamer wings shimmering in the pale sunshine.

Small towns dotted the road to northern Aquafa. They had sprung up around marketplaces, gathering spots for fur merchants from the north and peddlers of grains and dry goods from the south. For travelers, these locations offered a respite from their journey and a chance to stock up on supplies. Sae disappeared for a few hours at every town. Van guessed that the net of the Molfah was wide enough to reach even these places, but he never asked Sae what she did. Instead, he chose to wait for her to tell him.

In one of these towns, Sae returned so late that she missed supper. Yuna kept asking where she'd gone, and it wasn't until she'd finally fallen asleep and the lights in almost every room in the inn had gone out that Sae returned. She looked worn and tired. No sooner had she entered the room than she said in a low voice, "Kenoi's dead."

Van looked at her without speaking for some time. "Of sickness?" he asked finally.

She shook her head. "I don't know. But probably."

Sae approached the fireplace, sat, and recounted what she'd learned. Van listened, his expression dark, as she described the fierce battle between Ohfan's men and the king's soldiers sent to quash them.

He's dead... And the Ahfal Oma's dream is over.

Even if Ohfan survived, he couldn't use the Kinma dogs without the Dog King. This was good news for the border clans and for Aquafa. There was no longer any need to fear that awful disease. For many, Kenoi's death would seem like the greatest good fortune. The dream of one small clan had smoldered in secret, only to be snuffed out just as secretly. That was all.

When Sae told Van that the Gansa clan had taken in Ohfan's people, who'd now lost all hope of returning to their homeland, a dull sadness trickled through him. He watched the fire motionlessly.

Chapter 11:

Dropped Knife

1

Multiple Webs

Water babbled as it flowed through the garden channel—a sound not heard all winter, when the stream was covered in a thin layer of ice. This harbinger of spring reached Yotalu’s ears, but it failed to register to him. He stared hard at the man, white-haired and dressed in furs, who knelt before him.

“There’s no mistake?”

The man raised his head. “No, sir.”

His face, deeply seamed with age, was almost brazenly blank, but Yotalu paid no heed. The important thing was the information he bore, not his character. “Did you confirm it yourself, Malji?”

Even when addressed by name, the man remained impassive. “The soldiers of Aquafa wouldn’t know him,” he responded, his voice still muted. “It was I who examined the body.”

Yotalu’s eyes narrowed. “And Kenoi was the only one who could manipulate the beasts that carry the disease. Is that correct?”

Malji paused as though considering before replying. “Yes, I believe so,” he said. “I cannot say for certain because such power is indiscernible to the naked eye. However, Kenoi was the only one they called the Dog King. The other handlers appeared incapable of leading the pack.”

“Then what became of the Kinma dogs after Kenoi’s death?”

“They scattered into the mountains.”

Yotalu scowled. “You mean you don’t know where they are?”

Malji shook his head. “Not right now. But I sent my men after them.”

“I see. Let me know what they find.”

“Yes, sir.”

Yotalu remained silent for a moment, staring at Malji. The spy was the leader of what had once been called the King’s Net, but for many years now, he’d reported to Zol on political movements in Aquaafa.

To rule a frontier territory required skill as deft as that needed to handle wives and concubines. On the surface, wives were docile and obedient, but behind the scenes, they gathered information and schemed against potential rivals to strengthen their own positions. Men knew this, and women knew that they knew. But neither side let on, because they understood that this was the best way to maintain harmony.

Likewise, the King of Aquaafa surely knew that Yotalu received information from Malji, and that suited Yotalu very well. If he summoned and openly threatened the king over every little problem, it would expose the dilemmas that squirmed beneath the surface of frontier administration. That would lend those issues greater importance than they deserved, forcing Yotalu to submit a report, one that would be seen by the Emperor’s Eyes. In particular, Governor Oah would see it. He was the most ambitious prince elector, whose audacity seemed to grow daily, as if he were waiting for a chance to make Aquaafa his own. If he discovered even the slightest fault, he would counsel the emperor to replace Yotalu’s father. The emperor, who was fully aware that problems were normal in frontier governance, was unlikely to respond to a minor incident, but that would change if he thought anything might escalate.

Whatever the case, this is my chance to show what I can do. Yotalu believed that the best approach was to nip any problems in the bud. Making the King of Aquaafa aware that he’d been found out and would be ruthlessly crushed should he act unwisely without directly saying it was best. The Molfah were a convenient tool for such silent intimidation.

In the long run, using excessive force when managing a remote territory like Aquaafa was counterproductive. The inhabitants of such regions were merely people. If they felt oppressed, their anger would build to an eruption. In fact, it was Utalu’s vicious response to the toxic grain incident that set the recent

events in motion.

Those sanctions... At the time, Yotalu had protested the harsh punishment his brother had decreed. While beheading the perpetrators and sentencing their collaborators to slavery was just, to banish the entire people from their homeland was going too far. However, Yotalu's brother had scoffed at him and called him soft, insisting that this was a golden opportunity to impress upon the people of Aquafa the consequences of attacking any settlers. The more severe the penalty, the greater its impact, he'd argued.

Well, he found out the hard way which one of us was right. Punishment only works if the person on the receiving end feels that it's warranted. That was especially true when the object of punishment was an entire clan. Injustice begot bitter resentment, which could sprout into future trouble. Frontier management was no short-term task. It needed to be implemented steadily for generations. They couldn't afford to make the local people yearn for the days when the king ruled Aquafa.

I must consider the fate of the Ahfal Oma very carefully.

If they sided with Ohfan's radical faction and rebelled, they would have to be punished severely. But if they refrained from doing so and left the rebels isolated, their loyalty ought to be rewarded, to make them glad of their choice. Yotalu was quite prepared to do the latter. It's why he hadn't told his father of the Dog King who led the infected beasts.

Father has aged.

The death of his eldest son had taken the governor by surprise, and he still couldn't accept what had happened. The suspicion that the King of Aquafa was behind the attack consumed him. Like a rat trapped in a narrow box, racing back and forth in growing frustration, Yotalu's father's hatred for the Aquafaese waxed stronger every day. If he knew the whole story, he would punish Ohfan, the Ahfal Oma, and the King of Aquafa. His retribution on the kingdom would be so dire, it would kill any future attempt at rebellion.

And that would be utterly foolish.

The governor might succeed in venting his fury over his son's death, but in so doing, he would undo years of painstaking effort to lay roots in Aquafa. They

would have to start all over. *And we have no time for that. Not now, when friction with Mukonia is mounting.*

If the current crisis died down, Yotalu intended to bury the truth in the darkness of ignorance without ever informing his father. However, if the fugitive Ohfan should cause any trouble, Yotalu could face major repercussions for his failure to share that information. He sighed. In either case, everything depended on Ohfan's next move.

Yotalu returned his attention to Malji. "Have you learned where Ohfan went?" he asked.

Malji frowned and shook his head. "Not yet."

Yotalu peered at him silently, and Malji gazed back, a deep furrow between his brows. "My sons are following him, so I'm sure they'll locate him soon," he said.

Yotalu nodded. "Let me know as soon as you do."

"Yes, sir."

"Does Ohfan have any children?"

"Two daughters. No sons."

"Any siblings?"

"Two brothers, but they both died of illness. I've heard that Ohfan is the only one left."

Yotalu grunted and stroked his chin. "The bonds among the Ahfal Oma are strong. Even those unrelated to him can't be trusted. Spread your net wide."

"Yes, sir," Malji said, prostrating himself again.

Yotalu's face softened slightly. "You and the Molfah have done well. I promised that I would exempt your people from taxes. I'll extend that exemption for three years rather than two. Let me put that in writing and give it to you now."

Malji remained prostrate, mumbling his gratitude. Yotalu gazed at his bowed head. The man wasn't doing this for the tax exemption alone. Surely, he and his

men realized the effect their actions would have on Aquafa as a whole. And precisely because they knew, they were willing to cast their fine net at the risk of their own lives. Malji would be off now to bear news to the king's man. How Yotalu wished he could be a gecko on the wall to hear that conversation.



Malji strode away from Yotalu's hall, then paused and turned. In the light of the newly risen moon, the edifice cast a long shadow on the road. A man stepped from the darkness and approached. It was his son, Mukata.

"Did you learn anything?" Malji asked quietly.

"It's taking longer than we thought. Blizzards are still frequent in the north."

Malji grunted. "And Sae?"

"She's sticking close to the man."

Malji stared at his son motionlessly, but a grimness touched his features. Finally, he sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "What about the other Ahfal Oma?"

Mukata explained to his father the situation in each region of Aquafa, one by one. News of Kenoi's death had not reached the Ahfal Oma, with the exception of the Lightning Squad, which had ended up in the Yukata Mountains. Most of the clan continued their lives unchanged. "They were so deftly fragmented, it's very quiet," Mukata said. "I'm not sure how they'll react when they do learn the truth, but they're bound to hear it from a traveling merchant or the like eventually."

Malji snorted. He gazed off into space, mulling over this information. Upon returning his attention to Mukata, he replied, "Not much we can do about it right now, I guess. Just stay on your toes."

Mukata nodded. With a short bow, he made to leave when Malji called out. "Hey!"

Mukata turned.

"We've been exempted from taxes for an extra year. Let everyone know."

Mukata's face brightened. "I will."

As his son melted into the shadows, Malji set off in the opposite direction. He walked slowly, pondering what he would tell Tohlim. And what he wouldn't. Yotalu possessed a quiet manner, but Malji sensed something formidable beneath. It would not do to underestimate him.

Aquafa, Zol, and the frontier clans—if Malji failed to read the tangled threads correctly, his people would suffer. Perhaps it had been a mistake to refrain from mentioning Van when Yotalu asked if Kenoi alone could lead the Kinma dogs. It had been a snap judgment based on multiple factors. Malji frowned as he recalled the man who'd saved his daughter, Sae, and abandoned Kenoi.

Fatigue slowed his body. In the past, he could have run from one mountain to another without sleeping for two nights, but now, when twilight came, exhaustion lay heavy in his bones.

It's going to be a long night.

After reporting to the king's man, there was one other place he would need to visit. When Malji thought of the one who awaited him there, his mind was pulled, as if by an invisible thread, to yet another face—the pale, sickly face of his eldest son, stricken with disease since childhood. He was over forty now, but it was the innocent face of a boy that Malji remembered.

He sighed. *I wonder what he'll order me to do.* Having met with the last person he'd see tonight several times recently, he could pretty much guess. Besides, they'd known each other a long time.

Honestly. With so many overlapping threads in his hand, he would have to be extra careful that they didn't get snarled. Malji grunted irritably and, quickening his steps, dissolved into the night.

2

Reunited with Suohl

“Ahhhh.” Yuna gave a luxurious sigh as she slid into the bath. Her voice and the blissful expression on her face were so like an old woman’s that Sae burst out laughing.

Three days had passed since they’d reached the caves of the Echo Master. Upon arrival, Yuna had made a great fuss, insisting that she would only bathe with Van. Now, however, if she saw Sae in the bath, she slipped off her clothes and hopped in with her, climbing onto her lap and chattering away merrily. If Sae offered to give her a scrub, she would grab the cloth from her hand and announce huffily that she could do it herself, only to sidle up soon after, hoping that Sae would wash her. Sae smiled. The little girl was quite a handful.

Van and Sae had learned shortly after coming to the caves that Suohl was away treating someone in a village on the northwest side of the forest. Assenomi, relieved to see the two again, filled them in on what had happened after they left. When she mentioned that Tohma, concerned by their long absence, had come looking for them, Van’s face had clouded. Now that they knew Yuna had been kidnapped and Van had set off to rescue her, Tohma and his family were surely frantic with worry. Van had suggested they go to Oki first to reassure them. Assenomi, however, had advised that he and Sae wait a little longer. The Echo Master would return within four or five days, and if they left now, they would miss him. In the end, Van and Sae elected to wait.

Yuna seemed quite taken with the labyrinthine caves. Despite Sae’s warnings to stay out of the many tunnels, she often disappeared into them, only to reemerge much later from unexpected places. Sae worried whenever Yuna was out of their sight, but Van seemed unconcerned. He merely told Yuna to watch

her step while she was exploring so that she didn't fall into a hole.

"Aren't you concerned about her?" Sae had asked him. "This is where she was kidnapped. And besides, there are dangerous spots down some of those passages."

Van had grinned as he answered, "As long as we're not too far away, I always know where she is. And that seems to be true for her as well. When Nakka took her, I sensed that she was in danger. I don't feel anything like that right now, so there doesn't seem to be much point in fretting."

He was extremely easygoing, letting Yuna do pretty much as she pleased and rarely raising his voice. At the beginning of their journey, Yuna had clung to him constantly, demanding his attention, yet he'd never grown annoyed, even when she tugged his hand or pulled his hair. The pair reminded Sae of a bear and its cub with the little one crawling all over its sleeping mother, falling off and climbing up again, snuggling into her belly, or biting and tussling with her fur. Sae found Van's tolerance strange. Did all fathers and daughters of the Toga Mountain people enjoy such a relationship? If so, the girls were fortunate. For daughters of the Molfah, their fathers were the strictest authorities. Fathers were considered responsible for their children's behavior, and they shouldered the blame if their child erred.

Sae's own father, Malji, had served as the clan leader for many years. He was the model of behavior to which all the Molfah aspired. Although a superb tracker and an exceptional spy, he was a dour man. She couldn't remember seeing him smile or imagine any child tugging on his hand or climbing onto his lap. In fact, Sae had never seen any Molfah fathers place a child in their laps and play with them. Molfah women showered children with affection, as though to make up for this. While they didn't spoil them, they greeted every child, not just their own, with smiles and embraces.

Sae recalled an evening during her journey with Van and Yuna when they'd made camp in the shade of a large hoba tree. Yuna had fallen asleep with her head pillowed on Van's thigh. "She's a lucky girl to have such an easygoing father," Sae had remarked.

Van had remained silent for a long time, his eyes on Yuna's sleeping face.

Finally, he'd looked up with an equivocal smile. "I hope you're right. I've never raised a girl before, so I don't know how it's done." There was a bleakness in his eyes.

He's never raised a girl. Has he raised a son, then? A chill had gripped Sae's stomach as she remembered what this man used to be—the leader of the Lone Antlers, a band of men who'd lost their families. So..., she thought, averting her eyes. *He must have lost his son.*

"Oh! Look! A pwetty buttafly!"

Yuna's voice wrenched Sae from her memories. Glancing up, she saw a butterfly perched on the edge of a hole that served as a steam vent. It was indeed beautiful. The afternoon sunlight caught its wings, which flapped lazily, as though to part the steam.

On stubby legs, Yuna trudged through the water toward the creature. Suddenly, she slipped. Sae jumped for her, reaching out to catch her, but as she scooped Yuna up, she lost her footing. Twisting her body to protect the child clasped in her arms, Sae fell into the pool with a huge splash. The spray momentarily blinded her. Luckily, she didn't hit her head, but her left arm stung, and she winced. Crimson blood flowed from a shallow gash in her pale, water-softened flesh. She must have cut it on the edge of the bath.

Yuna sat stunned for a moment, robbed of speech. Then, wiping the water from her eyes and blinking rapidly, she turned to look at Sae. As she caught sight of the blood, tears filled her eyes. "Auntie Sae, you bleeding! Does it huht?" Her face crumpled, and she began to sob.

Startled, Sae reached out and stroked her head. "There, there. Don't cry now. I'm fine. Really."

But Yuna didn't stop. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she kept asking if Sae was all right. Tenderness flowed through Sae with a force that surprised her. Wrapping Yuna in her arms, she said, "It's all right now. I promise. It doesn't hurt at all. Please don't cry." As she held Yuna's warm, slippery body tight and rocked her, Sae felt an inexplicable urge to cry herself.



The Echo Master finally returned on the fourth day after their arrival. His eyes widened when he saw Van and his companions. “Well, well!” he exclaimed.

He looked shrunken compared to the last time they’d met, like all the vitality had been drained from him. The lines on his face had increased, and his skin was so pallid that he looked ill. The raven was nowhere to be seen.

“Great to see you made it back,” he said, then he mused, “Odd how these things happen, eh? Ask for somethin’ and you get it.”

Van raised a questioning eyebrow, and Suohl smiled weakly and shook his head. “Sorry, not now. I’m so weak I could fall over. I need a bit of rest first. Let’s talk later.”

There were no patients in the caves now, and Van and Sae joined the staff in the kitchens at dinnertime. They chose to do this because they thought it would be less trouble than having people carry food to their room, but they also found that they enjoyed the opportunity to chat and catch up on the news.

Steam rose from a large pot bubbling on the hearth, carrying with it the delicious aroma of reindeer meat slowly stewed with magi, spring-harvested mountain onions.

“People tend to get sick when the season changes,” Assenomi said. “We were full up with patients until recently, but now it’s as quiet as when the wind drops.” As she began ladling the stew into bowls, a shadow appeared at the entrance—Suohl.

“Smells good,” he croaked. His voice sounded thick, as though he had phlegm caught in his throat, and his face was puffy like that of someone who’d just risen from deep slumber. He walked into the kitchen and lowered himself down near the hearth with a deep sigh.

Sae stood and went over to an urn to scoop some water into a cup. He smiled when she handed it to him and drank it down in one long gulp. After wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, he sighed once more. “Ah! That’s better. I feel more like myself again.” Assenomi passed him a bowl of stew, and he closed his eyes and sniffed deeply. “Mmmm. Love that smell. I’ve been dyin’ for some of this.” He poked the magi with his spoon. “These’re what make it smell so good, but the settlers won’t eat ’em.”

Van remembered that Kiya had never used any type of onion in her stews. “Were you visiting one of the settler villages?” he asked.

Suohl’s expression darkened. “Yup. Seems like I’m always off to one settlement or another these days.” He fell silent and turned his attention to his food, sopping up the stew with chunks of pau, a dark sour rye bread, and cramming this, along with tender bits of meat, into his mouth.

For a while, no one spoke, focusing instead on the hot meal. The sweet reindeer fat mingled with the spicy nip of the mountain onions.

“You seem tired,” Van said at last.

Suohl’s eyes flicked between Van and his bowl. “Mmm. Been a bit rough lately. Ever since Granny Crow took off for the next world.”

Van had guessed as much, but hearing it from the Echo Master caused a cold pang of sadness to slip through him.

Suohl’s eyes remained fixed on his bowl, but his lips twisted. “Still, can’t complain, really. She stuck with me for ten years.”

Little by little, he spoke of his life with the raven. His wife had rescued the animal when she’d fallen from a nest. Together, Suohl and his wife named her “Lady Kaw.” She had been a clever little thing, and Suohl and his wife doted on her as if she were their child. Before they knew it, their souls had become linked with the raven’s spirit, and they heard her inner voice. At times, she sucked in their souls and took them flying.

When Suohl’s wife had perished of sickness, Lady Kaw remained by her side and grieved like a human. Soon after, she began to tease Suohl and help him, just like his wife. He took to calling her Granny Crow and soon began to feel as if his wife were still with him.

“I guess Lady Kaw was keepin’ her promise to my wife. She was always frettin’ about me, ’cuz I’m not much use, really.” Suohl gave a sad smile. “That was one special crow, but I guess carryin’ my soul around must’ve been too much for her. Some crows live as long as twenty years, but she only lived ten.”

Suohl heaved a sigh, then raised his face and slapped his knee as though to dispel the gloom. “But y’know, in the end, that was the life of Lady Kaw. I bet

she's curled up in my wife's arms in the next world now. They're prob'ly gabbin' on about me and havin' a good laugh at my expense, too."

Assenomi nodded emphatically as if to say, "That's right!"

Dinner was over, and Yuna, who'd been amusing herself by rolling a bowl around on the floor, was now fast asleep on Van's knees. Suohl glanced at Assenomi. She cocked an eyebrow. "Well," she announced, "looks like a good time for a bath. You just leave the dishes. We'll do them later." Then she and the other attendants left the kitchen, talking all the while.

3

Inside-Out Wolf

Without Assenomi and the other attendants, the kitchen felt larger somehow. An enigmatic smile touched Suohl's lips as he looked at Van and Sae. "Suppose it ain't so nice of me to get rid of 'em like that, is it?" he said. This remark seemed so like him that Van could not help smiling.

Suohl looked to Yuna and cleared his throat. "Was it really Nakka who took her?"

"Yes, under orders. He couldn't refuse."

"Under orders? From whom?"

Van gazed at the Echo Master. "If I tell you, it might cause you trouble. There are a lot of tangled pieces involved. Although I suppose you'll be all right, if you don't tell anyone else."

Suohl's lips quirked upward. "Well, I won't press you, but if you weren't gonna tell me the particulars, why'd you come all this way to see me? You musta had some business with me or you wouldn't be here, right?"

Van shook his head. "Well, actually, no, I don't, but if you remember, we were interrupted the last time we spoke. You were in the middle of telling me why you asked me to come, and I never got to hear you through."

Suohl's jaw dropped, and then he laughed sheepishly. "So I had business with *you*, then?" He scratched his head. "And just how far did I get last time?"

"I think you were talking about rabies when that young man was carried into the room," Van said.

Suohl nodded. "Ah, yes. I remember now. You said a rochai bit you, and I was

just thinkin', 'That explains it.' You and the rochai. There had to be some kinda connection for that to happen, you see." Suohl shook his head slowly. "What an incredible sight. Dogs and humans, all turned inside out and runnin' in a pack."

"What?"

Suohl flipped his hand upside down. "That night, when you were racin' across the snow, you were all completely inside out—you, the girl, and those dogs. That ain't normal for rochai, either."

Van's eyes widened. He'd never even considered that possibility, simply assuming that the Kinma dogs were always like that. Was there something that pushed them into that state, too? If so, what?

"Y'know," Suohl said, "after you guys left last time, I saw another strange thing. I thought it was just a dream, but now I think it mighta been the rochai." He gazed off into space. "It happened when I was so tired that I fell asleep at sundown. When I'm that wiped, my soul occasionally slips into the other world. Granny Crow used to suck my soul inside and take me to the night forest to keep me from wanderin' into strange places."

The kettle bubbled softly on the hearth.

"When I looked down, I saw lights flowin'. A pack of dogs. Dogs're livin' creatures, so of course they give off light, but those dogs, theirs weren't normal. Lights whirled up from their bodies like sea sparkles. And they ran funny, too. They'd be runnin' straight ahead, then veer off in another direction, weavin' through trees and leapin' over thickets, then change directions again. I thought they must be chasin' down some animal, but there wasn't any prey in front of 'em."

He paused and looked at Van. "No prey, but there was a leader. What do you think it was?"

Van frowned. "A man?"

Suohl shook his head. "Nope. Not a man." His eyes flashed. "Get this, will ya? A wolf was out in front."

Van blinked. "You mean they were chasing a wolf that invaded their territory?"

Suohl waved his hand back and forth. “Nope. Told ya, didn’t I? It was leadin’ the pack. A wolf with beautiful fur. It was givin’ off an odd light, leadin’ the rest as though it was pullin’ ’em along on a string.”

“A black wolf?”

“Coulda been. I just remember it had the prettiest coat of fur.”

Suohl’s eyes gleamed as he looked at Van. “And that wolf, it was inside out, too. Y’see?”

Silence filled the kitchen when Suohl finished speaking. Van gazed at him. “Was there a man controlling the wolf?” he asked.

“There mighta been, but I wouldn’t know ’cuz I only flew for a bit. I was so surprised to see a wolf leadin’ the pack that I woke up.”

Van looked down at the fire in the hearth. The story was woven of multiple threads, but he couldn’t see how they were intertwined. Van would have to unravel them carefully, or risk missing something critical. First of all, what did it mean to turn inside out? And how was that related to being controlled by someone else?

Stroking his chin, Van said, “You told me before that by ‘turning inside out,’ you mean the body and the soul switch places. The soul is usually in control, but when inside out, the body takes over the mind.”

“That’s right.”

Van continued, eyes training on the fire. “An Otawalle nobleman recently told me something similar. He said that disease agents try to survive and multiply, so they take over my brain and control my body.”

Suohl’s eyes shone. “That’s it! That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, and why I summoned you here in the first place.” He caught Van’s gaze. “You, Yuna, and those beasts, you all carry the livin’ spirits of disease inside you. Everyone does, in some form or other, but yours’re extraordinary. I mean, look what they do, turnin’ you inside out like that. They must be incredibly strong to restrain your soul and possess your body.”

Van frowned. The overpowering urge to bite—it was certainly theirs, not his.

But...

Just as a thought began to take shape in his mind, Suohl cleared his throat and said, "I called you here before 'cuz I wanted your help."

Van's brows shot up. "My help?"

Suohl stared at him intently. "Yeah. I wondered if there wasn't somethin' we could do 'bout that disease." His face paled slightly. "Tell you the truth, I'm scared. Livin' spirits of disease can cause a lotta mischief. Twice, I've seen dogs and humans with rabies turn inside out. Once someone gets it, they're done for. Nothin' I can do to help. They're gonna die."

He scratched his cheek. "But black wolf fever, that's another matter. It's similar, but different. You and the rochai, even though the spirits of that disease're inside you, you go on livin' just like normal till suddenly you turn inside out, all at once. For dogs and humans to flip like that together, now that's extraordinary."

He drew a deep breath. "Black wolf fever destroyed a whole kingdom, so maybe it's got some unusual feature not found in common diseases."

Suohl peered at Van with a dark expression. "When I heard that this sickness broke out in the salt mine, I wasn't worried 'cuz I thought it'd never reach us. But settlers live here now. Some fools rejoice when Zolians are bitten. They call it the Curse of Aquafa. What a load o' nonsense! A life's a life. Doesn't matter who you are. If you get sick, you're gonna suffer. I wanna help 'em. But I don't know how, 'cuz we never get that disease."

He looked down. "Ever since that incident at the salt mine, rochai have been randomly attackin' the settler villages. Just the other day, a little Zolian boy was bitten while out collectin' wood on the south side of Mikula Forest. I happened to be visitin' a nearby town when his parents came to fetch me. I hurried to him as fast as I could, but it was already too late."

Suohl rubbed a hand over his face slowly. "I knew that boy," he said with anguish in his voice. "He was a naughty lil' rascal, but a sweet kid nonetheless. He and his family moved here from the south. They were hardworkin' farmers. Good people, real helpful. They always shared what they grew with the reindeer herders for a fair price. Broke my heart to see 'em lose their son like

that. How I wished I coulda helped.”

The Echo Master buried his face in his hands and did not speak for some time. Eventually, he took a deep breath, lifted his head, and fixed his red-rimmed eyes on Van. “That night, when I saw you runnin’ with the dogs, I thought that if you could turn inside out like that, maybe you could see what’s inside your own body. If so, then you mighta seen the face of the livin’ spirits of that disease.”

Van’s eyes narrowed, and Suohl added hastily, “Course, when I talk about its face, I don’t mean that literally.”

“I know. I understand that, but...”

“Tell me anythin’ you can. Don’t matter how small. What’s it like when you’re inside out? Anythin’ might give me a clue for how to deal with it.”

Van looked down at his arm. Hohsalle had extracted blood from a vein in that limb, hoping to identify the disease and find a way to kill it. Now Suohl was asking Van for help to the same end.

Did I see its face?

When he was inside out, Van’s sense of smell grew sharp, and the world he saw transformed. But he never saw the sickness. He just felt an acute affinity with the pyuika and the rochai. Hohsalle had told him that pyuika harbored the disease agents, too, but they kept them in check by eating ashimi.

Which means lots of tiny organisms must live inside the pyuika, too. And in Van, who was raised on their milk, and in the Kinma dogs as well. Perhaps the sensations he experienced when inside out were caused by something those organisms produced when they fought or collaborated with the disease agents inside him. At the same time, however, they seemed to be part of him, of his loosely formed self in which all these things were pulled together.

Still pondering, Van said slowly, “When I’m inside out, I think what I see must be the same as what you saw when riding on Granny Crow. Perhaps it’s the shape of the disease, but to me, they just look like particles of light.”

Suohl’s shoulders drooped. “I see.”

Van glanced at Sae, who gazed back at him steadily. Suohl was worried about

the settlers to the north, but with Kenoi dead and no one left to lead the Kinma dogs, there wouldn't be any more attacks. *Should I tell him he doesn't need to worry anymore?* Without someone to lead them, the dogs would no longer target the settlers. With this thought, Van thought back to what he'd been about to say before.

His eyes narrowed. "Once, when I was inside out," he said, "I had a powerful urge to bite anything within reach. I think that impulse came from what you call the living spirits of the disease. But I didn't bite anything."

Suohl's eyes widened. "Eh?"

"I think that even when I was inside out, my soul didn't completely disappear."

Suohl knit his brow in consternation. "But the rochai," he replied, "they bite. Is it because they're dogs?"

Van looked down at his hand. *No, that's not why.* He was sure of it. When he was inside out, he was one with the dogs. Their feelings and actions were connected to his, as though joined by the same thread. They all felt the urge to bite. However, the dogs didn't lose themselves to it entirely, either.

They bite because... A light flashed through Van's brain.

"No, it's not because they're dogs. They bite when another impulse reinforces their urge to bite."

"Another impulse?"

Van nodded. "When I was inside out, the urge to bite was overwhelming. But even so, my soul didn't completely vanish. It resisted the spirits of the disease, maintaining a delicate balance, like spiders wrestling on a thin thread." He clasped his hands together in front of his chest. "They grappled together like this, keeping an even tension. But that balance was lost when another force hit them from outside." He slammed his knee up into his hands and broke them apart.

Suohl frowned. "I'm not sure I follow."

Van searched for another example. "If you ordered a trained dog to wait for

its food, it would wait, right? Even if you placed some food right in front of it, it might sit there drooling and trembling all over, but it would still wait. Even little pups try to control their bodily urges. But as soon as you say 'Go!' the dam breaks."

Suohl's eyes widened. "You mean when the urge to bite and the will to resist are wrestlin' each other and keepin' an even balance, someone else says, 'Bite'?"

Van nodded. "Yes. And when I'm inside out, it's very hard to resist that command. My body responds automatically."

"Hmm. Must take a lotta energy for your soul to battle the spirits of the disease. Maybe that's why your body gives in to an extra push from outside."

That could be it, Van thought. Maybe it had been hard to resist Kenoï's orders because his body was already urging him in that direction.

"But if so," Suohl said, his face tense, "someone musta told you to bite. Who could that be?"

Van just stared at him. After a moment, Suohl understood. "Ah, I see. That's one of them tangled pieces you were talkin' 'bout, is it?"

Without answering this question, Van said quietly, "Whatever the case, I don't think you need to worry anymore. The disease is bound to die out soon."

"What makes you so sure?" Suohl asked, puzzled.

"The person who controlled those dogs is dead."

Suohl blinked several times. "Dead?"

"Yes."

"When did he die?" Suohl asked with a frown.

Van glanced at Sae. "About half a month ago," she said.

Suohl's face froze. "But that can't be."

"Why?"

Suohl's voice trembled. "That settler boy from Mikula Forest was attacked just ten days ago."

4

Family

The gleaming spire of the prayer shrine was visible from far in the distance. Its brilliance grew more sharply defined as they drew nearer. Although now part of Zolian territory, Kazan remained a center of trade, and the shrine housed the gods of Aquafa and Zol, as well as those worshipped by visitors from many different lands.

A channel carrying water from the great Mahalu River in the grasslands ran alongside Okuha Road, the main thoroughfare that led to Kazan. Once travelers reached this path, they no longer had to worry about finding water.

“Ochan, whaddat?” Yuna shouted, resting a hand on Olaha’s antlers to lean forward and point. Olaha flicked his ears irritably.

Van followed the direction of her finger. “Those are flags,” he said quietly.

Colorful banners lined the top of the wall surrounding the city, flapping in the spring breeze. “That red one’s the flag of the former Kingdom of Aquafa,” Van explained. “The blue one’s for Zol. The yellow and green one belongs to the Kingdom of Igilia far to the south. The city flies the flags of every country it trades with. That way, traveling merchants and visitors can look up and say, ‘Hey, there’s my flag.’”

“Uh-huh. I get it,” Yuna said solemnly, although whether she actually understood was questionable. “Flags wavin’ and sayin’ ‘Welcome, welcome.’”

Sae, who rode beside them, glanced at Van and chuckled. A heavy dread had spurred them forward on this journey, but Yuna’s innocent delight at seeing Kazan brightened their spirits.

The ponderous rumble of cartwheels came from behind. “Hoh there! Make

way!” Van and Sae hurried over to the side of the road, and a horse-drawn cart piled high with enormous bags lumbered past. A young man stood on the edge of the cart, his body draped over the pile as he struggled to keep it in place. Every time the wheels bumped over a stone or rut, the bags swayed drunkenly.

The road was unusually crowded, packed with travelers heading for Kazan—some on horseback, some on reindeer—almost as if the flags were beckoning them, as Yuna had said. They came from all over Aquafa to join the celebration marking the Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes.

Van turned to Sae. “They said the Oki tents would be on the north side of the city wall, didn’t they?”

“I bet they’re over there,” Sae answered, pointing. “Let’s go a little farther and then cut across that field.”

A breeze ran across the road. Clouds appeared low on the horizon and scudded across the sky, casting faint shadows on the grass.



When the Echo Master revealed that the settler villages were still being attacked, Van’s first thought was that the disease had spread to wild dogs, ossam with no connection to the Ahfal Oma. However, Suohl had said, *“They weren’t ossam. They were huntin’ hounds. Rochai, no mistake. Made by breedin’ dogs with black wolves.”*

Van’s skin had crawled at the possibility this raised. *“Do you think the soul of a dead man could be riding them?”*

“Well, it ain’t impossible,” Suohl had answered with a grimace. *“But y’know, even if that were the case, there’s no way a dead man coulda controlled ’em.”*

“You’re sure? Not even if his soul had run with them when he was alive?”

“Not even then. Ain’t no way you can control ’em like that once you’re dead,” Suohl had explained slowly and deliberately. *“You’re you because of your connection with your body. Maybe some souls stick around after they die ’cuz they’ve got unfinished work, but they take the same shape as when they were alive, right?”*

Having never seen a soul, Van had been unable to agree with any certainty, but he'd heard people say that the ghosts of those who bore a grudge looked the same as they did in life. *"Don't some people come back as butterflies, though?"* he'd asked.

Suohl had chuckled. *"You mean young women in love who die before they marry?"*

"Yes," Van had responded, only to smile at himself for even half believing such a romantic tale. *"Still, you said you rode the raven's wings."*

"Darn right I did," Suohl had said, wagging a finger at Van. *"That's why I know. It ain't easy to stay on another livin' creature. It's kinda like a contest of souls. You oughta know what I mean."*

Van did. When he'd run with the pack of Kinma dogs, the ground had loomed close, and even the grass looked different. Surely, that was how the dogs saw the world. He'd lost the ability to speak, and the part of him that was human seemed to shrink to nearly nothing. The emptiness inside Van had receded, lulling him into a state of peace, but somewhere in his mind, there had remained an uneasiness, a stomach-gripping fear—the fear of completely losing himself as a human being.

"I was only able to hang on to my sense of self when I rode that crow 'cuz I was alive. 'Cuz I had my body to come back to. If I'd tried to ride Lady Crow when I was dead, she'd have won. I'd have lost my soul and become a crow myself."

After lowering his voice, Suohl had said, *"Y'know, there were times when I wondered if my wife's soul was actually ridin' Lady Crow. She talked and acted just like her."* Then he'd laughed and shook his head. *"But I know that wasn't the case, 'cuz I rode on her wings myself. It's hard to explain, but I'm sure the soul of that bird was Lady Crow's. My wife might've possessed the crow before she passed on, leavin' a shadow of herself somewhere. But even so, it was nothing more than how a dog's demeanor resembles its master's. Lady Crow's soul was her own."*

Still smiling, he'd added, *"Y'see, the body's just too important. A soul without a body can't hold its shape for very long. If it could, this world would be full of*

ghosts.”

Pausing, he rubbed his arm. *“Maybe the guy’s soul latched onto the rochai when he died,”* he’d continued. *“Maybe it’s even with ‘em still. If that’s true, it musta fused with the dogs’ souls by now. I’m sure of it. The bond with the body ties the soul to this world. Without the body, that bond dissolves. Those dogs’re still livin’, so they’re gonna be way stronger than a dead man. I guess his will coulda survived awhile after death ‘cuz that’s how he communed with the beasts, but once he fused with the dogs, it couldna lasted more than a day or two. It’d just melt away to nothin’.”*

Spreading his hands, he’d sketched the figure of a man in the air. *“I told you that the human body is like a forest made up of all the little lives inside it. Yet I’m still me, and you’re still you. It’s because of our bodies that we can think of ourselves as ‘me’ and see ourselves as separate entities.”*

That makes sense, Van had thought. He’d experienced that for himself. Did that mean Kenoi was no longer leading the Kinma dogs? Consumed as he was by a powerful delusion, he might have retained his will, but even so, it would’ve been hard to control the pack the way he had while alive. But if it wasn’t Kenoi’s soul shepherding them, then the only other possibility was that some rochai found their way to Oki after Kenoi’s death or perhaps that Oki was already host to rochai carrying the disease.

Van had shared these thoughts with Sae as they rode toward Oki that night. She’d frowned. “Those are both possibilities,” she’d said. “But the fact that rochai are attacking settlers must mean that someone’s controlling them, right?” Van had nodded, and Sae’s expression clouded over. “But who, then? I thought Kenoi was so fixated on you because you were the only other person who could do it.”

Van had stared at the night-shadowed road. “There may be a pack that isn’t led by men,” he’d said in a low, measured tone, “but I think it’s more likely I was used as a dropped knife.”

“A dropped knife?”

Van had pulled his dagger from his belt and held it up. “Let’s say I run into an enemy with only a dagger in my hand. First, I show my opponent how good I am

with it.” He’d flourished his weapon and slashed at the air. “Then I drop it.”

“Ahh.” Sae had nodded. Her father had taught her this same trick. *“If all your attention’s focused on the other’s weapon and he suddenly drops it, you’ll think you’ve gotten lucky and relax. That unguarded moment is the most dangerous.”*

Frowning, Sae had asked, “You think that Kenoi and Ohfan planned to use that trick all along?”

“It’s certainly conceivable, don’t you think? Kenoi was sick and didn’t have long to live. The Dog King was the key to their whole plot. It was a very fragile plan. Without someone to lead the Kinma Dogs, it wouldn’t work. Sure, it might’ve succeeded if I’d been willing to simply do what they asked, but it would’ve been foolish to depend entirely on the good intentions of an outsider. I’d never gamble the fate of my clan on something that risky.”

Sae’s expression had darkened as she listened.

“They may have just used me as a pawn to distract all of you,” Van had concluded.

Sae cocked her head to one side. “I think that would be difficult,” she’d replied. “We’re not infallible, of course, but the Molfah net is spread over the entire country, and spies report from every corner. Were someone else capable of manipulating the Kinma dogs, we would’ve noticed.”

Van had peered out toward the dark road ahead. “That may be,” he’d said quietly. “But it’s when you’re sure something’s impossible that you let down your guard.”

Sae had pondered this for a moment, then peered up at him. On this spring evening, a hazy moon had shone through the tree branches. Heavily shadowed in that faint light, the expression on Van’s face was that of the man who’d led the Lone Antlers.

Fear had coursed through Van when Suohl told him about the settler boy. Relieved by the news of Kenoi’s death, the king and the Otawalle nobles would no longer fret over black wolf fever. Even if it turned out that the beasts attacking the settlers were wild ossam, instinct told Van that disaster could strike unless the leaders were warned immediately.

So it's not over after all, he'd thought. In fact, whatever's been hiding in the shadows is only now daring to reveal itself.

The Visit of the Emperor's Eyes was almost upon Aquafa. If Ohfan had survived, he would never let such an opportunity slip by. Van had been sure of that. He'd known he needed to hasten to Kazan and warn Hohsalle. However, his first stop had to be Oki, to reassure Ohma and the others and also ask them to look after Yuna.

Unfortunately, when Van and Sae had reached the pastures where the family spent the winter, they were met with unexpected news.

Ohma had trembled after he stepped from the tent and saw Van and Yuna. Van's chest had tightened at the sight of the tears gathering in the man's eyes. He'd grasped Ohma's hands in his own and said huskily, "I'm sorry to have worried you."

Ohma had shaken his head. Tears had trickled down his cheeks, and his voice was strained. "I'm so relieved to know you're safe," he'd managed before breaking into sobs.

Yuna, who'd chatted excitedly ever since the camp came into view, fell silent and peered at Ohma from Van's arms as though wondering what to do. Yoki's family had also emerged from the tent, but there was no sign of Tohma, Kiya, or Manya.

"How is everyone?" Van had asked anxiously.

Ohma's expression had tensed. He'd explained that his mother, Manya, passed away due to complications from a cold. Van had closed his eyes, remembering the broad smile that creased the elderly woman's shriveled face, and her tuneless voice as she'd hummed to Yuna on her lap.

"She lived a good life," Ohma had said, smiling through his tears. "Bet she's in the Land of Eternal Spring right now, surrounded by everyone who passed on before her and hummin' some old tune she likes."

Van had nodded. Opening his eyes, he'd asked, "What about Tohma and Kiya?"

"Ah," Ohma had said, raising his brows. "They've gone to Kazan."

“Kazan? At this time of year?”

“Uh-huh. They went with Kiya’s family. There’s gonna be a special event to show how well we’ve done raising pyuika. For the Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes.” According to Ohma, officials had come to Oki when the snows on the mountain pass melted and invited all the settlers who successfully bred and trained pyuika. “There’s gonna be some kinda exposition, and they want us to race our pyuika in front of the Emperor’s Eyes. The best riders will get prizes. Tohma went prancin’ off on Tsupi, all eager to get there.

“I told Kiya she should go, too, ’cuz her whole family’s makin’ the trip. It’s the chance of a lifetime. Told her to pick up a new dress at the market, too.”

Settlers riding pyuika, a species native to Aquafa. What better way to show successful governance of the frontier? According to Ohma, there were to be reindeer races, horse wrangling, other events, and a market showcasing products from every part of the realm.

“Wish I coulda gone, too,” Yoki had remarked. “But someone has to take care of the herd.”

As Van had listened, an uneasiness stirred inside him. Sae had slipped into the forest when they reached Ohma’s settlement, mentioning that she would catch up with Van later. Had she been with Van, he undoubtedly would’ve seen the same anxiety on her face.

The Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes.

Van had known it was this spring, but it hadn’t occurred to him that settlers would gather from all over the country to celebrate this grand occasion and demonstrate their success at taming Aquafa. Such a display would be unbearable for the Ahfal Oma.

Tohma and Kiya. He’d worried for them both and wanted to ride to Kazan at once to protect them. But what would he do with Yuna? Van would’ve preferred to leave her here where she would be safe, but Kiya was gone. Burdening Ohma and the others while they were already short of hands would’ve been wrong.

When Van had thought of the carnage that might take place, he hesitated to

take Yuna, but Kiya and the others were in Kazan. Besides, Yuna could really talk now, and understand, too. Although she could be headstrong sometimes, she was considerate and capable of doing what she was told. Van had no choice but to trust she'd be all right to come along.

Later, as Van had ridden through the forest on Olaha with Yuna perched in front, leaning against his stomach, he recalled how the two of them were brought together. The little warm life that he'd discovered amid that desolate landscape, strewn with corpses, had since become precious and irreplaceable.

Absently, Van had stroked her glossy hair with his hand. Yuna had glanced up at him in surprise, then smiled happily.

As they drew near the city wall, Olaha raised his head and flared his nostrils, emitting a short snorting sound from his throat.

"What's wong wif Olaha? Is he mad?" Yuna turned and looked up at Van anxiously.

He smiled down at her. "I expect he's caught the scent of his kind."

A shrill sound came from the other side of the wall. *Hyo, hyo*—the sound of pyuika indicating their territory. Olaha stretched out his neck and answered. *Kyoh, kyoh*.

"What's he sayin'?"

"Hmm, let me guess. Maybe he's telling them, 'I'm coming your way. Don't make a fuss.'"

It was the sound pyuika made when it approached a herd that was not its own. Although it was a kind of warning, the creatures never fought or locked antlers, unless it was mating season.

When they rounded the corner of the wall, Yuna gave a cry of surprise, and even Van gasped. "Well!" he exclaimed. "That's really something."

Countless tents stood in the grassy field, and simple corrals made of hastily driven stakes linked with rope had been set up to enclose herds of reindeer and horses. Although few in number, there were some pyuika, too. Dogs were hitched here and there, and they barked furiously, pulling at their leads when

Van and the others approached. Beside them, boys in charge of the corrals shouted for the dogs to be quiet, but the animals were slow to obey. Each gust of wind carried with it the scent of horses and reindeer mingled with the aroma of stew bubbling in large cauldrons.

The campgrounds were far larger than Van had imagined. While wondering how he would find Tohma and his family, Olaha shook himself. Turning toward a familiar scent, Van saw a young man on a pyuika rounding a reindeer corral as he approached.

“Look! Tohma! It’s Tohma!” Yuna shouted, stretching tall.

Tohma waved as he rode up. He’d grown into a fine rider, and Tsupi was now a full-fledged mount, carrying his weight effortlessly.

“Van! Yuna!” Tohma shouted as he drew near. His face was flushed, and his lips trembled. Tsupi and Olaha faced one another and bent their necks low, then stretched for each other, nostrils flared, and sniffed, making little snuffling noises.

Van clicked his tongue reassuringly, and the pyuikas’ tension eased gradually. They shook their heads and returned to their normal stances.

“You’ve really learned to ride well,” Van praised. Tohma’s face scrunched up, and he struggled to hold back tears. Van felt the inside of his nose grow hot. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Tohma shook his head. After drawing a deep breath, he turned to Yuna and smiled. “You made it back safe and sound.”

Yuna looked back and forth from Tohma to Van, clearly excited to be reunited with Tohma but perplexed to see him smiling when he looked ready to cry.

“I’ll fill you in later on everything that’s happened,” Van told him. “Right now I need to go into town on some urgent business. Do you think I could leave Yuna with Kiya?”

Tohma nodded. “She’ll be overjoyed. Kiya’s really missed Yuna.”

Van started after Tohma, then paused to look back. As expected, Sae was nowhere to be seen. He wondered where she’d gone, but he followed Tohma.

Knowing Sae, she would likely reappear by the time he reached the town.

The tent where Tohma and the others were camped stood right beside the city wall. As Van and Tohma approached, the young men tending the pyuika in the pasture glanced their way. For an instant, they froze, eyes wide, then they came charging over.

“Mino, Chida, Moki!” Van shouted.

Their faces screwed up to hold back tears, and although they managed to gasp out Van’s name, they stood there speechless afterward. The tent flap rose, and Kiya stepped out. Her eyes went wide at the sight of Van. In the past, she’d always had a healthy plumpness to her and constantly wore a gentle smile. In the time since Van last saw her, she’d grown thin, and her cheeks were so gaunt she seemed a different person. She stared at Van and Yuna, lips trembling. A look of fierce joy suffused her face, and Van felt as though something had gouged his chest.

These people. They’re my family.

Heat surged inside him. With trembling hands, he dismounted and lifted Yuna from Olaha’s back. He bowed in Kiya’s direction. His throat felt so tight he could barely speak, but somehow he managed to squeeze the words out. “Please forgive me.”

Tears built in Kiya’s eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

5

The Scent of Kinma Dogs

Makokan pushed open the door with his shoulder while carrying a tray of tea and refreshments in one hand. The aroma of slow-roasted tea and fresh-baked cookies spread through the room. Milalle's face relaxed into a smile, but fatigue showed in her eyes.

"Oh, you made us some tea?" she remarked. "What a heavenly smell."

Makokan placed the platter on the table and set out its contents. Hohsalle, slouched in a chair, his body sunken in its embrace, stared absently at the cup in front of him.

"You must be tired, sir," Makokan said.

Hohsalle sighed. "Exhausted. Honestly."

Three days ago, he'd received a letter from the director of the Academy of Deeper Learning asking him to mediate between Tomasolle and the King of Aquafa. Tomasolle and his assistant, Shikan, had arrived last night, following on the heels of that letter. They must have been chasing wolves again, because wolf hairs were stuck to their clothing. They'd stayed the night and, until a short while ago, Tomasolle had been ranting at Hohsalle in this very room.

"He's like that sometimes," Hohsalle muttered. His brother-in-law was a good man, open-hearted and full of curiosity, and Hohsalle maintained a good rapport with him, but when he got stuck on principle, he could become intractable.

Last night, Tomasolle went on and on about wolves during dinner. The black wolves that had been driven to near extinction in the Toga region were returning in small numbers in the northern forests. Tomasolle and his people

had caught a significant number of them, as well as some ossam. All were shipped off to the Sacred Territory of Otawalle to be tested for mittsual.

“Limuelle really helped us out,” Tomasolle had said. “There was considerable opposition to sending potentially infected live specimens to the academy. And not just from the Zolians. Even some among the Otawalle objected. I doubt we could’ve done it without Limuelle putting in a word for us. The specimens have to be injected with a sedative in repeated doses so as not to overtax their bodies. They likely haven’t even arrived in Kazan yet. Still, it’s an experienced team, and I’m sure the specimens will reach the Sacred Territory safely.

“Oh, and by the way,” Tomasolle had added, as if it were an afterthought, “when I was in the northern forests, one of the Inner Circle delivered a copy of your message. We tried testing ticks for mittsual, as you proposed. But there was still snow on the ground, and there weren’t enough specimens. We might find infected ticks, if we try again when it gets a bit warmer and the population increases, though.”

When Tomasolle smoothly changed the topic to praising Hohsalle’s recent accomplishments, Hohsalle felt ambivalent. Unwilling to believe that his brother-in-law, who spoke with such excitement, was trying to deceive him, he’d asked point-blank, “Did you know what Kenoi was plotting?”

Tomasolle had shaken his head with a dire expression. “I wasn’t involved at all. I swear to the gods that’s the truth.” Frowning slightly, he’d added, “Though I guess I did suspect something was going on. I suppose I should’ve reported it to the director of the academy, but I didn’t want to subject the Ahfal Oma to any more unnecessary scrutiny.”

Tomasolle had glanced at Shikan, and his expression turned fierce. “I still sympathize with the Ahfal Oma, you know. And I can’t help but regret my failure to save Kenoi.”

Fatigued from his journey, Tomasolle had quit the subject there, but this morning, fortified by breakfast and a full night’s sleep, he’d launched into his defense of the Ahfal Oma again, spewing grievances that had built inside him.

“The king caused the tragedy inflicted on the Ahfal Oma. He bungled the negotiations and bowed to Zolian demands. I hold him responsible for the

results. It never would've come to this if he truly regretted his actions and wished to aid the Ahfal Oma."

From there, Tomasolle had launched into such a venomous tirade that Hohsalle interjected with "Remember you've been sent here by the head of the academy to tell the king that Otawalle had nothing to do with this incident."

Tomasolle had flushed. "I know, I know. But that's why I need to get this anger out now. If I don't, I won't be able to see things objectively. I might just knock the king down the instant we meet."

He'd continued for some time until he finally tired himself out and left with Shikan to get some fresh air. Hohsalle knew Tomasolle was likely to return angrier because everywhere he looked, he would be confronted by preparations to celebrate the Visit of the Emperor's Eyes.

"I can see his point, though," he muttered.

It was true. The king was to blame. If he couldn't defend the happiness of the many small clans that called Aquafa home, there was no point in calling himself king in an occupied territory. Muzzling his people for fear of Zol would mean losing the respect of his supposed subjects. The king stood for all that united the peoples of Aquafa. If he squandered their affection, the bonds that loosely knit together the many clans as Aquafaese would disintegrate, and Aquafa would be reduced to the name of a territory on the edge of the Zolian frontier.

Tohlim understood this. "*We must not cause the Ahfal Oma any more suffering,*" he'd said. "But the Mukonians wax in strength every year. Without Zolian support, we've no hope of maintaining peace. To survive, Aquafa has no choice but to walk this precarious tightrope, paying close attention to all sides."

Hohsalle had to admit that his sentiments were closer to Tohlim's than to his brother-in-law's. With a grimace, he thought of Shikan, who'd sat beside Tomasolle, silent and dour, betraying not a flicker of emotion as he watched Hohsalle.

"Even so, it's still unforgivable," he muttered.

"What?" Makokan asked through a mouthful of cookie.

"Hey! Who said you could eat those before me?" Hohsalle snapped, rapping

the table with a finger.

Makokan gave him a startled look. "I thought you did. When I asked you if it was all right, you nodded."

Hohsalle blinked. "I did?" He didn't remember doing anything of the sort.

Milalle grinned. "You sure did. With an expression that looked like your thoughts were miles away."

Hohsalle pulled the plate of cookies to himself with a scowl and sank his teeth into one. Crunchy on the outside and chewy on the inside, it was sweet and fragrant with roasted seeds.

"So what's unforgiveable?" Milalle asked.

"Oh." Hohsalle took a gulp of tea. "The fact that the Ahfal Oma used a disease to advance their claims. I just can't understand how my brother-in-law can approve of that, so I guess I can't forgive him, either. Swords and arrows kill people, too, but a sickness doesn't choose its victims. Once it spreads, there's no way of stopping it. It will kill people who never wronged the Ahfal Oma."

"From their point of view," Milalle interjected, "no one is innocent. I expect they feel that anyone in Aquafa who doesn't care about their tragedy, anyone who lives a comfortable life, deserves to be punished." She sighed. "And besides, with disease, they can claim that the gods decided who should live or die."

Hohsalle pursed his lips. "That's the part I really can't stomach. It's absurd. How can Tomasolle even pretend that such reasoning is logical? I can't stand the way he checks Shikan's reaction whenever he speaks about the Ahfal Oma." Just the memory of the disdain on Shikan's face and his obstinate refusal to show respect to anyone filled Hohsalle with disgust.

Milalle leaned forward and gently touched his hand. "Hohsalle, it's no good staying angry when you talk with Tomasolle. If you keep it up, you'll end up saying things you shouldn't."

Hohsalle snorted. "Maybe I should go for a walk myself. If he comes back and starts lecturing me again, I won't be able to hold my tongue."

Makokan looked out the window. "If you're going out, you'd better hurry. It's starting to rain, so I'm betting they'll be back before long."

As if on cue, one of Hohsalle's apprentices called out from the other side of the door. "You have visitors. May I show them in?"

The three shared a look. "Visitors?" Hohsalle muttered.

Makokan stood. "Let me take a look." He returned quickly with an odd expression on his face. Upon seeing the people who followed behind him, Hohsalle understood why.

"Well, well," he said, leaping up from his chair.

Van and Sae entered the room, bringing with them the smell of rain. Milalle rose and beckoned them to sit in chairs by the fire while Makokan, who should have been ushering them to those chairs himself, stood sullenly by the door.

"Stop sulking," Hohsalle chided with a grin.

"Surely, sir, you would feel far more uncomfortable were I to welcome the one who hoodwinked and drugged me with a smile," Makokan said stiffly.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then Milalle began to chuckle, and Hohsalle's and Van's lips twitched. Sae, however, looked up at Makokan with a contrite expression. "I'm so very sorry," she said, and bowed low.

Makokan glowered down at her. "Oh, never mind," he said after a beat. "You can raise your head. I know you had your reasons. I'll be able to talk with you more normally once I've had a bit of time to get over it."

Hohsalle laughed. "Knock it off, Makokan. Do you have to be so roundabout? Why not just say 'It's okay'?" Hohsalle could feel his own excitement rising and had to laugh at himself. For some reason, he could never maintain his composure when Van and Sae were around.

Milalle's cheeks were flushed as well. "We didn't expect to see you again so soon," she said, gesturing again for the guests to come and warm themselves by the fire. The air had grown chilly, perhaps from the rain.

Van was dressed in the tanned leather worn by the reindeer herders of the north, and his expression was more grim than when they'd met in the Yukata

Mountains. He walked around the table toward the fire but stopped abruptly when he approached the empty chair. He gazed intently at it, as though there was something on it.

“What’s wrong?” Hohsalle asked.

Van raised his head. His eyes carried a hard glint. “Was someone sitting here?”

Hohsalle blinked. “Yes, my brother-in-law’s assistant... What about it?”

“Your brother-in-law’s assistant?” Van repeated, his brow furrowed. “He’s an Otawalle, then?”

Hohsalle glanced at Milalle and saw his own uneasiness reflected in her face.

“No. He’s a young man of the Ahfal Oma.”

A keen light kindled in Van’s eyes. The sound of the rain on the roof grew louder.

6

Tomasolle and Shikan

Tomasolle returned a little after noon, striding into the room while rubbing his hair with a towel.

“Brrr. It’s cold out there,” he said. “The temperature really drops when it rains.” He paused at the sight of the guests. “Oh, pardon me.”

Makokan slipped behind Tomasolle and discreetly closed the door.

“My dear brother-in-law,” Hohsalle greeted, walking over to stand before him. “Where is Shikan? His luggage is no longer in his room. Did you send him off somewhere?”

Tomasolle frowned, clearly wondering what this was all about. “We parted after lunch. He’s probably just wandering around nearby. I can’t very well take him with me when I go to see the king, now can I? He said he hasn’t been in Kazan for a while and wanted to do some shopping, so I let him have the afternoon off. Is there some problem with that?”

Hohsalle watched his brother-in-law’s face closely but spied no indication that his bewilderment was false. He really hoped that Tomasolle wasn’t that devious.

“You said you visited the northern forests before coming here. With Shikan.”

Tomasolle’s eyebrows bunched together. “Why bring that up now? I already told you that’s what we did.”

“Was Shikan with you the whole time?”

Although Tomasolle started to nod, his eyes wavered ever so slightly, a sign that did not escape Hohsalle. “So there were times when you weren’t

together?" he pressed.

Tomasolle glowered. "What is this? Some kind of interrogation? Are you accusing Shikan of something?"

A chair scraped. Van stood and approached with slow and measured steps. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Van of the Gansa."

Tomasolle blinked. Still frowning, he beheld the man with eyes wide. "Van of the Gansa? You're Broken Antler Van?"

Van nodded. "Sir Hohsalle told me you Otawalle know all about me. Did you know that I'm unusually sensitive to smell?"

Tomasolle looked impressed. "Yes. I heard about that. And that your adopted daughter possesses unusual vision."

Van nodded. "Well, sir, you smell of black wolves. I would guess that you caught a lot of females, because their scent is particularly strong."

Surprise showed plain on Tomasolle's face. "Incredible. You're right."

Van gazed at him. "You smell of black wolves, but you don't smell of rochai."

"Rochai?"

"Kinma dogs, a cross between hunting hounds and black wolves."

Tomasolle was growing more astonished by the moment. Gazing straight at him, Van said, "You don't smell of rochai, yet the chair where the man you call Shikan sat reeks of them."

That set Tomasolle rigid. In the silence, the drumming of the rain outside seemed abnormally loud.

"Brother," Hohsalle said, his voice stern.

Tomasolle faced him, anger showing through on his pale features. "You've got some nerve!" he spat. "Clearly, you think Shikan did something wrong. People always misunderstand him because of his wooden expression, but he'd never do anything wicked."

"Enough!" Hohsalle snapped. "Surely in your heart, you already know the truth, Tomasolle. That's why you're trying so hard to protect him. But we've no

time to waste. We need to stick to the facts, not emotion!”

A blue vein throbbed on Tomasolle’s forehead. “Facts?!” he shouted, his voice an anguished howl. “I’ll give you facts! Shikan’s kin were butchered! His older brother served the ailing Kenoi and stood by him to the bitter end. They were murdered by the King of Aquafa!”

He laughed derisively. “Yes, from your point of view, Shikan looks very suspect. We don’t stick together during every moment when we’re surveying. We’ve divvied up the work for years to cover broader areas. I admit it would have been possible for him to meet Ohfan in secret. But what of it? To Shikan, Ohfan is his respected kin. The desire to know what’s become of his older brother, to hear how he faced his end, is only human!”

Tomasolle jabbed a finger at Van. “You claim Shikan smells of Kinma dogs. Well, what of it, I say! Kenoi is dead. The Dog King is slain. Even if Shikan met Ohfan, even if he came into contact with Kinma dogs, there’s absolutely nothing he can do!”

Van stepped closer to Tomasolle and looked him in the eye. “A child died to a Kinma dog.” His calmness doused the heat in the room.

“What?” Tomasolle said, mouth agape.

“A boy from a settler village in the southern part of Mikula Forest died from a Kinma dog bite just the other day,” Van explained. “He was only eleven. The beasts attacked while he was out collecting firewood. His parents thought he’d been attacked by an ossam and applied an herbal poultice to the wound. Within a day or two, he developed a sore throat followed by a high fever, and then the seizures began. By the time a healer reached him, it was too late. The boy went completely rigid and died in agony.”

Tomasolle stared at Van, robbed of speech.

“The next day, the beasts that attacked that boy appeared in another settlement. Fortunately, no one died, but one of the little girls they bit still can’t walk.” There was a direness to Van’s expression. “I don’t know if Ohfan led the pack there or if Kinma dogs already roamed the northern forests. Nor do I know if the young man called Shikan was involved. But he was in the same region as those children when they were attacked, and he was in contact with Kinma

dogs. It stands to reason that he might know something at the very least. Don't you agree?"

Tomasolle said nothing. Van pressed him further, his voice low and even. "Do you believe that little children deserve to suffer and die just because they're settlers?"

Tomasolle's lips trembled, and he finally found his voice. "No, I don't. But..." He hesitated, shaken with doubt.

"Sir Tomasolle," Milalle interjected. She leaned across the table, her stomach resting against it. "Surely you agree that we should find out what, if anything, Shikan is trying to do."

Tomasolle stared at her without replying.

"He may simply have become entangled in something by accident, but we'll never know if we just continue discussing it here. At the very least, we know that Shikan is in Kazan when many Zolians have gathered to celebrate the Visit of the Emperor's Eyes. Not only that, but he may have some connection to Kinma dogs. Doesn't that thought frighten you?" Milalle put a hand to her throat. "Personally, I'm terrified. We must act before disaster strikes. If you wish to help Shikan, then you must stop him before it's too late."

Tomasolle took a deep breath and exhaled. His fingers shook. "Yes, I suppose you're right." He looked rattled, as though various possibilities were racing through his mind. "I've been a fool," he whispered. After taking another deep breath, he looked at Hohsalle. "While we were in the northern forest, there were several times when Shikan was on his own. It was more efficient to work that way. I can't deny that he could have met Ohfan without my knowing."

He brought a hand to his mouth and sighed. "I know what he's feeling so well, it hurts. I'm sure he longs to follow in the footsteps of the brother he loved so dearly. He would gladly lay down his life to fulfill his people's wishes."

To Van, Tomasolle said, "Surely you too can relate as well. After all, you were the leader of the Lone Antlers."

Van's gaze hardened. He gave Tomasolle a long, measuring look, then replied, "You don't understand the Lone Antlers at all."

“What do you mea—”

But Van cut him off. “There’s no time for that now. Where did you last see Shikan?”

“On Madoro Street. In the restaurant that serves Yukata food,” Tomasolle said, words quivering.

Makokan raised an eyebrow. “You mean Muttao?”

Tomasolle glanced at him. “Yes. That’s the one. There’re some flowers in the window on the second floor.”

Makokan nodded and looked at Hohsalle. “That’s Muttao all right. I know the master well. Shall I take them there? I know what Shikan looks like.”

Hohsalle waved his hand. “Of course. Get moving.”

Makokan opened the door, and just as Van and Sae were about to pass through, Tomasolle hurried after. “Wait! Let me go with you.”

Van turned. “I’m sorry, but we can’t take you with us.” Although his voice was gentle, his manner was so forbidding that Tomasolle recoiled.

“What are you going to do with Shikan?” he asked plaintively.

“I’ll bring him here, if I can.”

Tomasolle’s anxious frown eased slightly. “I see. Then I will wait here. Please, be gentle. He’s like a son to me.”

Van gazed at Tomasolle for a moment, then left without a word.

7

Pursuit through the Rain

Rain cascaded from the lowlying clouds. Makokan looked to the stables. Shikan had to be traveling on horseback. The stall was empty.

“Shall we ride?” he asked, but Sae shook her head.

“Let’s walk. It’s not far to Madoro Street, and if we have to track him from there, horses will only get in the way.”

“In that case, we’ll take the back way. It’s faster.” Makokan pulled his hood over his head and led Van and Sae through a wooden gate behind Hohsalle’s clinic. The wind wasn’t especially intense, but the rain came so heavily that the narrow gutter overflowed and washed into the street. The town seemed deserted. Few people dared to brave the deluge, and the street vendors had moved their wares to the back of their stalls to keep them dry.

Makokan walked briskly as he watched Van, who strode along beside him. Although powerfully built with the lithe movements of a warrior, the man was not particularly large. Makokan found it hard to believe that he’d ripped the chains from the wall in the salt mine.

Makokan’s many years as a stake-fighter had honed his intuition. He could usually tell at a glance if an opponent was someone to fear. It was a gut response, a reaction of the skin rather than logic. However, he could not read this man. He couldn’t tell if he was strong or weak or what he was thinking. It seemed doubtful he could goad him into revealing his well-protected emotions. As Makokan mulled over the exchange with Tomasolle, he realized that Van had betrayed a flash of anger. Without slowing his pace, he said, “May I ask a question?”

Van looked at him and nodded.

“You told Tomasolle that he didn’t understand the Lone Antlers. What did you mean by that?”

Van trained his gaze on the road ahead and did not reply immediately. He only spoke once the three of them rounded a corner. “He seems to believe the Lone Antlers are a band of heroes who chose to die to save their homeland. But we weren’t anything so noble. We became death warriors because we were dead already.”

“Huh?”

“When we joined the Lone Antlers, every one of us was a living, breathing corpse. We longed to die, yet couldn’t take our own lives. That would bar us from the Land of Eternal Spring. We were waiting for permission to die. It was pitiful, really.” His voice carried no trace of self-derision or sorrow. “We never had any wild delusions of conquering the Zolian Empire. What mattered was how we lost. To be honest, when the clan chief asked us to become pawns in their game and help them negotiate better conditions for our people, I was relieved.”

Sorrow touched Sae’s expression at these words. Van resumed his silence, eyes still on the road, and Makokan pried no further. He quickened the group’s pace.

Madoro Street was one block off the main avenue. Paved only with packed earth, it was now slick with mud from the rain. Muttao was a small restaurant on the first floor of an old two-story building. As one of only a handful of establishments in Kazan that served Yukata cuisine, it was usually packed at meal times. However, when Makokan, Van, and Sae entered, lunch was over, and the place was quiet. There were only two customers, and they seemed to be taking refuge from the downpour. The owner spoke with them by the fireplace, but he looked up and smiled at Makokan’s arrival.

“Welcome! It’s been a while.”

Makokan greeted him and said, “Sir Tomasolle was here for lunch, correct? He appears to have forgotten his notebook. Do you remember where he was sitting?”

“It was so busy, I was in the kitchen the whole time, and unfortunately, everyone else is off on their break now. But no one mentioned anything about finding a notebook.”

While they spoke, Van approached a table in the right corner. Sae whispered something to him, and Makokan thought he heard the word “feet.” Van nodded and carefully paced up beside the table.

“There,” he said. Sae nodded and crouched. She stared at something on the floor. After a moment, she gestured to Van, who crouched beside her. They conferred on some unknown point. When Makokan walked over, Van straightened up. “His scent is still strong in here,” he whispered. “But...”

Makokan glanced out the window. “The rain. You think it’ll wash away his scent? That’s poor luck.”

Only now did Sae stand up off her knees. “For me, the rain is good luck,” she said. Turning away from the shopkeeper, she pointed discreetly to a set of footprints on the floor. Wordlessly, Makokan indicated that he understood and stared at the tracks.

So those are Shikan’s? Van must have identified them by their scent. The prints had been left by boots worn by someone of Shikan’s build, but they were hard to discern from among many others on the floor.

“Did you find it?” the owner asked anxiously.

“No, it’s not here,” Makokan answered with an apologetic smile. “Someone must have picked it up. Either that or he dropped it somewhere else. Sorry to have bothered you.”

Sae and Van were already headed for the door. Makokan nodded to them, and they stepped outside. In the deserted lane, Sae peered at the ground, rain dripping from her hood and heavy cape. Finally, she began to walk, her strides unusually long.

Makokan hurried after with a troubled expression. *Shikan’s tracks stand out clearly here because of the mud, but...* That would change once they reached the main road, which was paved in stone. If it had stopped raining, the mud from Shikan’s boots would have stood out clearly, but in this torrent, the tracks

had surely been washed away by now.

When they reached the main road, Sae stopped again, staring at the cobbles. Then she quickly strode on with that same peculiar gait. Makokan supposed that the angle of Shikan's tracks could have indicated his direction on the stone street, but he was still puzzled by Sae's confidence. He approached the woman. "Can you see his tracks?" he asked.

Sae shook her head. "No, hardly at all because the road is paved with stone. But I know his gait."

Ah, so that's it. Makokan recalled something his father had taught him long ago. *"Every person has their own distinct walk. If you can identify the length of their stride and how they bear their weight on their feet, you'll be able to mimic their gait after losing their trail until you come to the next clue."*

They had gone about a block when Sae turned down a side street. As he rounded the corner behind her, Makokan raised his eyebrows. A hitching shed stood in front of them.

I see. That makes sense. Anyone with business in the shop-lined alleys would leave their horse at one of these first. Without Sae, Makokan and Van would've had a hard time discerning which one Shikan had used.

It was a simple lean-to structure with a rail. The roof was barely enough to keep out the rain, and a crude drainpipe ran along it, sending a stream of water plunging off the edge. The boy in charge of the horses sat on a stool, amusing himself by flicking the toe of his boot into this miniature waterfall. He looked up when the group approached and gaped at them. Sae stopped in front of the shed and stared at the floor. She walked to the right without bothering to enter.

"Can you follow horses, too?" Makokan asked.

Her lips formed a slight smile. "It's basically the same thing."

Makokan glanced at Van and was reassured to see his own admiration reflected in the man's face.

I thought so. She's no ordinary tracker.

Only the most experienced of hunters could pursue someone in the middle of

a city. Makokan couldn't see what clues she followed, but she continued on at an even pace, only stopping occasionally. Shikan could presumably only move slowly through town because he was on horseback. Plus, it was raining. Most riders would steer clear of the slippery stone-paved thoroughfares and stick to the dirt-packed side streets. Shikan must have done the same because Sae strode wordlessly down the muddy lanes. Still, even if she could follow him, it was going to be hard for them to outpace someone on horseback. Van and Sae showed no trace of fatigue, though, and Makokan did his best to look unfazed.

At last, Sae came to a halt behind a run-down warehouse. "It looks like he dismounted here," she said. Makokan inspected the iron hitching rings set in the wall and the ground beneath. With tracks this clear, even he could read them. This was where Shikan had dismounted and tied his horse. And there were the tracks of other horses and men, too.

Van was already walking toward the back door. It was wide open, and several men were visible inside the dimly lit building. They were sorting and packing furniture, dishes, cooking pans, and clay pots.

"Storage for household goods," Makokan whispered. He glanced at Van and was immediately surprised by the intensity of his gaze.

With his eyes still fixed on the men inside, Van said in a low voice, "I can smell Ohfan. And something else, too. It's faint, but it worries me."

One of the workers looked up and, noticing the visitors, came toward them with a questioning look. "Do you want something?" he asked.

Resting a hand on the doorframe, Van replied, "I heard we could get dishes here for a reasonable price."

The man scratched his chest and shrugged. "Yeah. What've you got? If it's glue, we don't need any."

Van's eyes narrowed, "You don't need glue?"

"Yeah. Tough luck for you. Some other guys got here first, and we've enough to last quite a while."

Makokan finally caught on. They traded their wares for materials, such as glue, with which they could repair furniture and other goods. He was impressed

by how Van had so easily drawn that out of the man.

For the Ahfal Oma, glue would be a good source of income. Ilia had once told Makokan that the Ahfal Oma made excellent glue from the hides of their dead horses. Van must have known this. Feigning disappointment, he said, "So they beat me to it. It wasn't Ohtan and his gang was it? He's a small guy."

The man shook his head. "No. He was about the same height as you."

"Then it must have been Fahoe. Did he have his nephew with him?"

"Don't know if it was his nephew, but there was a young man with him."

"That would be Fahoe, all right. Damn. I told him I was coming here to trade, so he snuck in ahead of me. He bought dishes then, did he?"

The man shook his head. "No, not dishes. Just some of those small clay pots. But I wouldn't accuse him of anything yet if I were you. You might be mistaken."

Van sighed and gave a lopsided smile. "Yeah. You're right. How many were there?"

"You don't give up, do you? Three, including the young guy."

Once they had put some distance between them and the warehouse, Makokan said, "If it was Ohfan, why would he need clay pots?"

"There was a trace of gunpowder mixed with his scent," Van said, looking grim.

Makokan stopped and stared at him, and Sae's face went rigid. "So that's why," she breathed. Clay pots filled with gunpowder and equipped with fuses could make lethal weapons.

Makokan frowned. "But how would he get his hands on gunpowder?"

The substance was strictly supervised. The Zolians used it to make weapons and fireworks, but they kept it tightly controlled from production through distribution to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands. For someone like Ohfan, who was being sought by the Molfah and the Inner Circle, it should have been impossible to obtain. The king would have known immediately if Ohfan was spotted anywhere near places that dealt in gunpowder or any other form of weapon.

“Maybe it’s Mukonian,” Sae said with a troubled look. “The Lafan were using explosives when the Mukonians attacked the fort in Zakato.”

Van nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. Ohfan captured some of the Lafan and likely confiscated their weapons. They’d be too conspicuous to carry with him, so I’m guessing he removed the gunpowder and packed it separately, making sure to protect it from moisture.”

Makokan groaned. “I see. So that’s why he bought those pots. He would’ve drawn attention to himself if he’d bought them at a shop on the main street, but no one would really notice if he traded some glue for them here.”

Carefully and methodically, Ohfan and his band were plotting an insurrection, one that would slaughter as many people as possible with just a handful of men. For a few moments, Makokan, Van, and Sae were silent. Then Sae fixed her gaze on Makokan. “Would you please tell Sir Hohsalle? I’ll tell my father and look into it further.”

Makokan nodded.

The rain was now a drizzle, and the sky had begun to brighten. As the heavy clouds parted, golden threads of afternoon sunlight poured through the narrow gaps and into the city. Even the muddy water pooled in the tracks on the road shone dully.

8

The Visit of the Emperor's Eyes

The air cracked with successive explosions, and white smoke rose from the grassy field. Overhead, flowers of red and blue smoke blossomed, then stretched and faded on the wind. A thunder of applause rose from the crowd at this fine display of daytime fireworks.

Yuna, who'd jumped at the first bang and clung tearfully to Van, lifted her face and gasped when she saw the colorful smoke. "Oh! Look! Flowahs!! Flowahs bloomin' in da sky!"

A large tournament ground had been set up in a field outside the city and now overflowed with an exuberant crowd of people from every corner of Aquafa. An enormous stand visible even from a distance stood near the city's outer wall. In the center was a pavilion from within which the man who was the Emperor's Eyes could observe the festivities. Governor Ohan and Yotalu and his family were permitted to sit with him. In a separate pavilion to the right, the King of Aquafa sat with his family and raised his hand occasionally to acknowledge the cheers of his people from the field.

Courses had been set up on the tournament grounds for each competition. There was an enclosure for the sheepdog trial to test the beasts' skill and speed in herding sheep into a pen, and an obstacle course to challenge pyuika riders. Sheep and pyuika were already milling inside the waiting area, which was divided by ropes and fences. Dogs darted, barking, among the sheep, while their handlers ordered them to heel. The pyuika began to fret and prance.

"Those sheep are too close," Tohma muttered with a click of his tongue. Chida and the others struggled to calm their animals, which shied away from the noise. One young settler was yanked forward and fell when his pyuika broke

into a dash.

Van had hoisted Yuna onto his shoulders to watch the fireworks, but now he lowered her to the ground and passed her to Kiya. Leaning over the fence, he cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, “Hoh, hoh, hoh!”

The pyuika craned their necks toward him and went still. The men holding their reins looked at Van in surprise. “Cover their eyes,” he called out, laying a hand on Olaha’s neck and swiftly tying a scarf around the pyuika’s eyes to show them how it was done. Tohma and the others mimicked his movements somewhat clumsily, while Van walked among them, explaining how to calm the pyuika and when to remove the cloth. The animals calmed instantly at his touch, as though ensorcelled. The young settlers and the men from Oki grinned at Van sheepishly, thanking him in the ways of their respective peoples. Van was overcome by a strange feeling as he watched them.

Here he was, smiling and walking among flat-faced Zolian youths and young men from northern Oki, people who, for most of his life, had been distant strangers. He peered back at Yuna beaming and standing on the fence, Kiya gently smiling as she laid a hand on Yuna’s back, and Tohma and the others with cheeks flushed from excitement. A sense of kinship rose from deep inside him. Shepherds and reindeer herders, farmers who tilled the land, hunters who roamed the forests, merchants who ran the stalls in the city—they looked different, spoke different languages, and even smelled different, yet here on this plain, they were one harmonious whole.

People born and raised in this land and others from afar gazed together at the fireworks, shouting with delight as they waited eagerly for the tournament to start.

Van could distinguish each of these peoples by their scents, identifying where they were gathered without looking. Somewhere along the way, he’d come to accept his acute sense as normal. He couldn’t remember what it was like before.

I’ve changed. My body, my way of life, everything.

Moki muttered something into his pyuika’s ear as he secured the scarf. Affection shone in his eyes. As Van gazed at him, he realized that he didn’t care

that Moki was Zolian. He recalled Hohsalle comparing the human body to a country. Now Van understood what he'd meant. Although a body, or a nation, seemed like a single entity, it really wasn't. It was a collection of countless little lives that had come together to support a greater one.

We are born within this great law, a law that was probably spun by the fingers of the gods when the world first formed, and then we vanish. A quick flash of life, like bubbles in the foam.

And Ohfan...

As Van stared across the milling sheep at the vast crowd, he thought of the man who might be hiding in its midst. A man who, having wept at injustice and sworn to right that wrong, discovered a peculiar disease that had propelled him forward to this point in time. A small yet lethal disease seeking to infiltrate a large, robust body—that's what Ohfan had chosen to become. Sadness, not anger, filled Van at this notion.

Even if Ohfan's plan succeeded, there was no future there for him. Yet he would still go through with it.

Can I stop him?

The Molfah and all the king's men were on the lookout for him, but the crowd was far too big. The Molfah, who knew his face, had a slim chance, but the Aquafaese soldiers had no hope of identifying him from others in the throng. There were too many people on horses—shepherds herding their sheep, merchants, and others, often with scarves across their faces to keep out the dust. And dogs were running everywhere.

Van looked toward the stand.

If he's going to use a firebomb, he could heave it farther if he dropped it from above. And if his target was the Emperor's Eyes, the best way would be to hurl it from the top of the city wall into his pavilion. But the wall was lined so thickly with Zolian soldiers that not even an ant could have slipped through. Ohfan would never get close enough to throw a bomb into the tent.

Thus, he'd likely try to blend into the crowd until he had a chance to attack. *He'll probably wait until the tournament starts and everyone's focused on the*

competitors.

At that moment, the thunderous display of fireworks came to an end. When the sound of the explosions faded, a horn cut through the still spring air, announcing that the games were about to begin.

First came the sheepdog trial, and the contestants, their faces bright with excitement, gathered in front of a gate midway along the fence. A cheer rose from those gathered near the stand. The Emperor's Eyes and a boy who was probably his son emerged from the tent, accompanied by the governor and Yotalu. When they waved from the edge of the stand, the cheer swelled to a roar. After waiting for the noise to subside, the Emperor's Eyes spoke, but he was too far away to be heard by those along the fence, and they had to content themselves with staring at the dazzling light reflecting from his gorgeous brocade robe.

"Can you hear what he's sayin'?" Tohma asked. A red sash slung across his chest identified him as a competitor.

Van smiled slightly. "Nothing important. Just a typical greeting."

"Guess he's talkin' Zolian."

"He is, but the interpreter behind him is translating it into Aquafaese so people near enough to hear can understand."

Yuna piped up from beside him. "Ochan, is dis a feah land?"

"You can hear him, too?" Van asked, surprised.

"Course I can. Is deah an unfeah land?"

Van laughed. "He's not talking about fair and unfair. He means it's beautiful." As he said this, he caught a familiar scent and glanced over his shoulder. Sae was weaving her way through the crowd toward them. A quiver was slung across her back, and she carried a bow in her hand, even though bearing arms on the tournament grounds was forbidden. People stared at her as she passed, but when they saw the mark of the king on her belt, their expressions relaxed. She belonged to the security detail.

Coming up beside him, she favored Van with an embarrassed smile. "I stand

out too much, don't I? It can't be helped, though."

A vivid image surfaced in Van's mind at the sight of the bow in her hand—Sae on the cliff shooting a flaming arrow through the darkness into a distant hokuso tree. That had been no ordinary feat, and Van knew the king must value her archery skills. Sae appeared as composed as always, but Van noticed a tenseness in her cheeks.

A distinctive scent wafted from her bow. He recognized it as the smell that clung to her body. "Is that bow made from ichii? It has quite a strong odor."

Sae looked puzzled. "Odor? Does it smell?"

"Yes."

"Really? I can't smell a thing."

"It's probably the fault of my nose."

Sae smiled faintly. "That's true. Your nose is pretty extraordinary, after all." She ran a hand along her bow. "It's made of okuba ichii. They grow thickly where I'm from, but now that you mention it, I don't remember seeing that kind of tree anywhere else. The wood's very flexible and resilient, and the Molfah have used it since ancient times."

Tohma strode up, leading Tsupi by the reins. "Sae, you look so dashing," he said, his eyes shining with admiration.

She inclined her head with an embarrassed smile. He and the others now knew she was a Molfah. Sae and Van had decided that if Ohfan were to attack during the tournament, they would need people who could keep their heads and help get things under control. The night before, Van had introduced Sae and explained the situation to Kiya, Tohma, and the others, making them promise not to tell anyone else. Although they'd looked a little anxious, they accepted the news with more aplomb than Van had expected. He surmised that settlers like Chida and people of mixed blood like Tohma knew instinctively that their way of life still rested on shaky ground.

When he'd heard that black wolf fever was not the Curse of Aquafa but something caused by infected dogs, Tohma was tremendously relieved. He'd wanted to tell the others right away. Van had seen the disappointment in

Tohma's eyes when he explained that now was not the time. Ultimately, Tohma agreed.

There was a crack of gunpowder, and a section of the fence slid open. Sheep poured into the field, followed by southern settlers, skilled riders who sent their dogs racing after the sheep. They seemed to be competing by village, and the noise of the crowd grew tumultuous. It was a close contest, but in the end, a team with blue sashes separated their flock from the rest and guided it into a pen in the distance. A group of spectators on the right erupted into boisterous shouts and applause.

"We're up next," Tohma said, his voice tense. Van placed a hand on his shoulder. "Stay calm, and you'll do fine," he assured. Gazing at Tohma and Chida, he lowered his voice and added, "Remember what we told you last night. If you're attacked by dogs, don't panic. A pyuika can outrun any dog, even with you on their back. If something happens, jump the fence and escape into the meadow on the other side. While you're leading the dogs away, we'll find and stop the Ahfal Oma controlling them. Don't worry. Once we've taken out their master, we'll be able to handle the dogs."

Although their faces were pale, they pressed their lips together and nodded.

An official came along the fence, telling the contestants to head for the gate. Looking nervous, Tohma, Chida, and the others urged their mounts forward.

Yuna must have realized that they were going to compete because she shouted, "Good luck!" and started calling them by name. "Tohma! Chida! Mino!" Before she could finish, they moved off with the other competitors, but she climbed onto the fence, still calling their names. Kiya placed a hand on Yuna's waist to steady her and looked to Van. He saw the worry in her expression.

"It'll be all right," he said. "Those boys ride well."

"But what if the dogs..."

Van regarded her steadily. "Trust me," he said. "And please take care of Yuna. If anything happens, pull her inside the fence."

Kiya nodded and tightened her grip on Yuna's belt.

“I’m all wight,” Yuna said with a pout. “I won’t fall.”

Sae’s eyes narrowed as she smiled. Then, bracing herself for whatever might come, she took a deep breath and began scanning the crowd.

Only a few years had passed since the people of Oki and the Zolian settlers who lived among them began raising pyuika, and not many riders had the skill required to jump obstacles. Only seven lined up at the starting gate. Even so, pyuika alone were unusual enough, and the crowd leaned over the fence to watch. At the sound of the signal, the gate swung open, and the riders raced into the field.

The pyuika on the far left pranced and sidled, shaking its head, then veered off. Its red-faced rider struggled to regain control but failed, and together, they bolted away from the obstacle course. Laughter burst from the crowd along with many good-natured jeers, but the remaining six riders sped on toward the first obstacle, and the laughter quickly turned to gasps of admiration as Tsupi and Tohma sailed easily over a wall of stacked, sun-dried bricks too high for any horse to clear. Tohma, Chida, Mino, and Moki easily cleared each successive obstacle, then ran up a steep incline of planks and down the other side. The crowd roared their approval. Some watched with mouths agape while others clapped enthusiastically.

Van’s eyes were fixed on the young riders when he sensed movement on the periphery of his vision. As he shifted his gaze in that direction, his throat constricted. Dogs. Black dogs slinking under the fence into the tournament grounds.

“Sae!” Van shouted. She’d already pulled an arrow from her quiver and nocked it.

“Can you see who’s controlling them?” she asked.

He shook his head. *That’s odd.*

Whenever the Kinma dogs had drawn near, he felt himself turning inside out, yet now he felt nothing. Beside Van, Olaha shook himself but showed no sign of agitation.

Inside the field, however, confusion broke loose. Slipping like liquid across the

area, the dogs sped toward the pyuika, barking shrilly. A murmur rose from the spectators, and Van's sharp ears picked up the words "the Curse of Aquafa." Officials should have scrambled to stop the dogs, yet they stood hesitating on the opposite side of the fence instead of entering the field. They probably feared that the dogs carried the dreaded sickness.

Tohma and the others had been focused solely on tackling each jump, but now they seemed to have noticed the dogs because their hands faltered on their reins. The beasts closed in, howling. Tohma cast a desperate glance in Van's direction. Their eyes met, and Van gestured for him to jump the fence into the meadow. Tohma nodded and signaled to Chida. Shouting to the other competitors to follow them, they wheeled their mounts and made for the fence. Watching them go, Van leaped onto Olaha.

"No!" Sae reached out to stop him. "The Zolians are watching. Some of them may remember you."

He brushed her hand aside wordlessly and urged Olaha over the fence into the obstacle course. If he got close enough, perhaps he could connect with the hounds. Even if he couldn't, he should be able to disperse the pack and give Tohma and the others time to escape.

Olaha cleared each obstacle handily, and all eyes were now fixed on this new rider and his mount, who'd appeared from nowhere. Bearing down on the black beasts, Van spurred Olaha past them and wheeled to stand between them and the fleeing pyuika riders. Nostrils flared and muscles twitching, Olaha faced the beasts. When Van beheld the creatures, he paused in surprise.

Those aren't Kinma dogs. But why?

A commotion broke out on the west side of the crowd, and it split apart as a horseman burst through, galloping toward the fence. He clearly intended to jump into the ring. Gripping the reins in one hand, he raised his other arm high, revealing a clay pot with a throwing rope. Van could smell the lit fuse.

Arrows screamed through the air, and the man jerked and toppled backward from his horse. As he struck the ground, an explosion sounded, reverberating in Van's stomach. There was a muffled shriek and a spray of blood. People nearby toppled to the ground, and a cloud of smoke rolled over them. Through that

cloud surged another horse and rider. Van's eyes widened.

Ohfan!

With the reins bunched in his left fist, Ohfan charged straight for him, his right arm raised high. Their gazes met. Staring at Van with bloodshot eyes, Ohfan bared his teeth in a triumphant grin. Once again, a bowstring twanged, and an arrow pierced his right arm, tugging it backward. But he did not drop his weapon. Clenching his jaw, Ohfan shifted the makeshift bomb to his left hand, tucked it under his arm, and plowed on.

Van was about to turn and flee, but he stopped. Tohma and the others were behind him. If he escaped, the bomb might hit them. He glanced around to see where they were. Over the top of the stacked brick wall behind him, he glimpsed the tops of their heads. They'd cleared the fence and were already racing into the meadow. Van's body moved before he could think. Digging in his heels, he guided Olaha up and over the obstacle.

Glancing back, he saw Ohfan racing for the wall.

Will he jump or throw the bomb?

Either way, Van couldn't get away. The fuse was too short. Any second now, the gunpowder would ignite. Horse and rider launched into the air in a spectacular jump, aiming to clear the lowest end of the wall. An arrow pierced Ohfan's head. Another sank into his shoulder, a third pierced his side. His body was hurled up, then he and his horse came crashing down on top of the hurdle and slunk down behind it.

The blast shook Van to the core. Shattering thunder sent flame and smoke in all directions, enveloping the fallen horse and rider. Fragments of bone, flesh, and clay flew through the air. The wall of bricks ruptured. Van flung his arms over his head as brick shards whistled through the air and bit into his flesh.

His eardrums burst, deafening him. His face and arms felt as though they were on fire. Something slammed into his forehead, and with that, the world vanished.

9

A Father's Tale

He heard voices.

Meaningless sounds. Still, he was aware of a dull resonance surrounding him. He knew that voices were calling his name, talking to him.

Yuna, wailing, calling incessantly. Tohma, trying to tell him something. Kiya. Sae...

The voices came, one after another, appearing and disappearing as he wandered between sleeping and waking. How long he'd been lying like that, he couldn't tell, but he woke with a start at the touch of a chill night breeze and the scent of dew.

A gray darkness filled the tent. And silence. He felt no human presence. Perhaps someone had just left, letting in the night air that roused him.

Where am I? Why was he in this tent?

He couldn't remember. All memory of how he'd come here seemed to have been wiped from his mind. His forehead tightened, and he broke into a nasty sweat.

What could have happened?

His head throbbed, and his ears rang. With each heartbeat, pain stabbed his shoulder.

An image of Ohfan's face, an arrow piercing his skull, flashed into his mind, and the fuse connecting his memories sparked to life. A deafening blast, the acrid smell of gunpowder, and, with it, shards of brick mingled with blood, flesh, and bone exploding into the air—it all came rushing back. Relief spread through

him, and he breathed a long, deep sigh.

Ah, that's right. The blast from the bomb had knocked him flat. *The brick hurdle.* That simple, makeshift wall had determined his fate. And that of Ohfan.

Particles of memory flooded his brain. He'd been knocked out for only a few minutes. Many hands had lifted and carried him. Sae had walked beside him. He remembered asking if Tohma and Olaha were all right and being reassured that Tohma was taking care of Olaha.

He seemed to recall Hohsalle's face, too. Had the man tended to his wounds? A sickening dizziness had overtaken him, and someone had slipped medicine down his throat. After that, he remembered nothing.

Where is this? He didn't remember seeing a tent like this before. Whose was it?

Suddenly, he heard footsteps on grass. Sae. He knew her by her scent before she even raised the tent flap. She entered with a basin. Glancing at him, she stopped in surprise.

"You're awake." Her voice was always quiet. How thankful he was for that now.

"Everyone okay?" he croaked.

She knelt beside him and removed the cloth from his forehead. "Everyone's fine. Tohma and the others. Olaha, too." She laid a fresh cloth on his head, and the coolness was a welcome relief. Van sighed.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "How's the pain?"

Was it the dim light? Her face looked pale and drawn. "Not bad," he answered. "I'm all right."

She sighed. "That's a relief."

"How long was I out for?"

"Not that long. It's almost dawn."

"Dawn?" Van echoed, shocked. "You mean I've been sleeping since noon yesterday?"

“Yes. You did come to a few times. Maybe the drug Hohsalle gave you helped. He said you’d hit your head and shouldn’t move.”

How odd to think that he’d slept so long. His head hurt the worst, but his left shoulder, chest, ribs, and thigh ached, too. He must have twisted his body against the blast because all the damage seemed to be concentrated on the left. Pain raced through him when he moved, but at least he *could* move. It hurt just to breathe. Perhaps he’d cracked his ribs, but fortunately, his shoulder and thigh didn’t appear to be broken.

“Sir Hohsalle was worried about the wound on your forehead and told me to tell him immediately if you vomited. You didn’t, though.”

“Mmm, my head’s pounding a bit, but I don’t feel dizzy anymore.”

“How about your memory? Do you recall what happened?” Sae spoke softly, concern evident in her eyes.

“Pretty much. There’re a few gaps, though.”

Sae looked relieved. “That’s all right, then. I was worried because you repeatedly asked the same questions when we were carrying you from the field.”

“I did? What questions?”

“You wanted to know if Tohma and Olaha were all right.”

“Ah, yes. I sort of remember that.”

Sae smiled. “Anyway, it’s a relief to know you’re okay.”

He was. Because Ohfan had fallen on the other side. The wall had absorbed some of the explosion, and Ohfan’s and his horse’s bodies must have further cushioned the blast.

A vision of Ohfan’s gruesome end took shape in his mind again, and he shoved it down. “Where are we?”

“The medical tent. Sir Tohlim and the others saw to that. They explained that you were from Oki, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Tohlim?”

“Yes. He came while Sir Hohsalle treated you. He asked me to convey his gratitude.”

Van frowned and blinked slowly. “Gratitude?”

“If Zolian soldiers had confronted Ohfan and died or been wounded, the incident would have escalated into a major issue. But because it was you, Sir Tohlim could smooth things over.”

“Really?”

“He explained that there was a fierce rivalry among some of the northern peoples and that a few individuals had been mad with envy when they weren’t chosen to compete in the pyuika event.”

Van looked at Sae. “I’m surprised they accepted such a tale.”

She nodded soberly. “Apparently, Sir Tohlim approached Lord Yotalu privately and asked him to back up the story.”

Van’s brows shot up. “Yotalu? You mean Governor Ohan’s son?”

“Yes.” Sae exhaled. “My father works for him sometimes. For many years, Lord Yotalu has used the Molfah to obtain information about places beyond Zolian reach. The king knows this, and Lord Yotalu is aware that the king knows. It’s an intricate little web.”

Van frowned. “So the governor’s son already knew about the Kinma dogs?”

“Yes. My father has been feeding him information gradually while observing his reaction.” Sae pushed the basin of water to one side. “According to my brothers, Lord Yotalu believes Zol’s profit is also Aquafa’s. If any trouble arose right now, his father’s ability to rule this territory would be called into question. That’s probably why he chose to back up Sir Tohlim’s explanation and help us resolve the incident.”

Van had rarely heard the name Yotalu when he fought the Zolians. Whereas his older brother, Utalu, was known for his brutal measures, Yotalu had left little impression. Which meant he was probably the kind of statesman suited for peace. For a country like Aquafa, whose diverse peoples not only looked different but spoke different languages, it was important to have someone like

that around.

“Has Yotalu told his father, Governor Ohan?”

Sae shook her head. “I doubt it. The governor was devastated with grief when his eldest son died and has been searching for the culprit ever since. If he knew, he would have sought extreme retribution by now.”

Van’s eyebrows drew together. “But if he finds out that Yotalu withheld that information, it’ll put Yotalu in a very dangerous position.”

“I know. Yet still, he chose to remain silent.”

Van thought that a man willing to put the safety of this land ahead of his own interests must surely be extraordinary. “We can’t lose him, then,” he said.

“You’re absolutely right. My brothers were concerned about that, but Sir Tohlim believes his position is secure. While his older brother was still alive, ministers who supported Lord Yotalu were criticized for being spineless, and the council rarely considered their opinions, but now they’re growing in power. Most importantly, Governor Ohan depends on him. At least, that’s what Sir Tohlim claims.”

Van let out a long, slow breath. This was how the hole that bomb had blown open would be stitched back together.

What was the point of dying then, Ohfan?

After enduring so much to get this far, was that all he’d achieved? A fracture so small it would quickly vanish? Once again, the stench and gut-wrenching roar of the explosion burst into Van’s mind, and he grimaced. “Was anyone else hurt?” he asked.

Sae’s eyes darkened, as though a curtain had been drawn across them. “One person was killed, and some others were badly injured.” There was a quiver in her voice.

Turning his head to peer at Sae, Van stiffened. *She blames herself. Because she shot that rider when he was near the crowd. Even if she hadn’t, people still would’ve died—just differently. Yet she can’t help blaming herself.*

“It’s not your fault.”

The specter of a smile touched Sae's pale lips. "I know."

She knew, but she would still carry this burden forever.

"I wish I were a lousy archer."

Van exhaled slowly. "If you were, I'd be dead."

Sae grinned more earnestly, although the expression was grim. "You were the only thing I saw," she said, the words rushing from her mouth. "My only thought was to save you. I just wanted to stop him with my arrows. I didn't even see the others."

Van reached out a hand and placed it on Sae's knee. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she crumpled forward, burying her face in his pillow and sobbing like a child. He stroked her shuddering back until the waves of sorrow ebbed and died. At last, she pulled herself away and wiped her face with her hands, keeping her head down as though embarrassed.

Van stared blankly at a seam in the tent ceiling. "Years ago," he began, speaking the first words that came into his head, "my father told me that we humans are a sorry bunch. No matter what we do, we'll always be left with regrets. We think the lives of animals are so much simpler, that they aren't plagued with any hard choices, but that's just a selfish human assumption. He told me that animals likely have their own problems, too. Every creature alive is likely weighed down by regret."

Recalling his father's expression, Van gave a rueful smile. "My father was a dour sort. He mocked anything that other people praised. But he was sentimental, too, and cried easily. He could be a bit of a pain, yet some of the things he said stuck in my mind."

A memory formed before Van's eyes. His father's face lit by the campfire, one corner of his mouth crooked upward as he stared at the flames, lost in thought. *Ah, I remember now. That was the same night he talked about the Deer King.*

"He told me and my clan mates that he'd seen a Deer King once," Van said.

Sae frowned. "The one who gives his life to save the herd?"

Van nodded, then gave a lopsided smile. "But the way he talked about it

seemed completely different from the stories we'd listened to as boys. I suppose that was his gift to us, to mark our passage into manhood."

Sae wiped stray tears from her eyes and waited silently for Van to continue.

"We were all fifteen. We'd just finished the secret rites that made us men and were lounging around the campfire, exhausted."

The shadows of the braces supporting the canopy wavered each time the flames flickered in the firepit. Van fixed his eyes on them as he spoke. "Pyuika are usually too fast to be caught by wolves or ossam and can even pick their way down sheer cliffs. But if they're attacked on flat ground, the yearlings may get tired and start to lag behind. At a time like that, my father saw a single deer prance out and face the wolves. A mature buck, past his prime."

Van saw his father gesturing as he went on. "While the rest of the herd loped away, this buck stood alone in front of the pack and leaped and danced, challenging them."

Sae listened intently, wet streaks still marking her face.

"A deer on its own is vulnerable. It's foolhardy to face a pack of wolves alone, even for a strong, sturdy buck. Yet my father claimed that he danced, showing off how proud he was to be alive, defying the death that came to greet him."

Van smiled. "'He was a fool,' my father said. 'No matter how strong, that pyuika would never escape so many wolves. Only a fool jumped into danger willing and risked their life.'"

"We were all young men, and his words made us angry. 'That's not true,' we protested. 'He gave his life to protect the herd. That's what makes him king.'"

Van recalled the color of the campfire and the faces of friends he'd surely never meet again.

"My father laughed. 'You're all fools,' he said, pointing at each of us. 'You think you can be heroes, that you'd gladly throw your lives away for the sake of your clan? Don't be ridiculous. Young cubs should fight to live. If you succeed, consider yourself lucky. In the midst of battle, it's hard enough to keep yourself alive, let alone save someone else. If you recognize that your enemy's too strong, run. Run for your life, so that you can pass that life on to your children.'

That's your real job.'"

Van heard his father's gruff voice. And his own, raised in protest. "'But what if there are others who can't escape?' I asked him. 'What if the children are too slow? Isn't it the duty of a warrior to save them?'"

"And what did your father say?" Sae asked.

Van remembered how his father's smile had vanished as he stared at his son. "He turned all serious. 'Leave that job for someone capable,' he said. "'A buck that can face his enemy alone has been blessed with the body and mind for that right from the start. Talent is a cruel blessing. At times, it can drive a man to his death. If he'd never been cursed with that gift, he could've lived his life to the fullest. Don't you think that's sad?'" Van had heard the sigh in his father's voice.

"'It makes me sick,' my father told us, 'to hear people carry on like you do, thoughtlessly praising such a deer as a king. It's true that the weak will survive thanks to that buck, and they should be grateful for that. But I can't stand what motivates people to glorify the one who gives his life to save the herd.'"

Sorrow swelled in Van's chest, a quiet sadness such as he had never felt when he was young. His father had been right, although Van had been too young to understand it at the time. "Do you remember what Hohsalle said about the hand?" he asked. "How fetuses have webbed fingers, but that the web dies so that the fingers can move freely?"

"Yes."

"When I heard that, I remembered the Deer King. He forfeits his life so that others can live. And I wondered if that was inevitable because that's the way he was born."

Van took a soft breath and then added, "For some reason, that thought gives me the chills. Something in me rebels against the idea that we live and die simply because that's the way we are. Even though I know there's probably no particular meaning in life—that we are, just because we are, and die, just because we die."

Van closed his eyes and covered his face with his good hand. The only sound was the flutter of the tent in the wind.

10

Forgotten Piece

“Ochan!” Yuna shouted when she saw Van limp from the tent. She broke into a run, but Kiya grabbed her from behind.

“Yuna, no! Don’t jump on him. He’s been hurt.”

Van laughed. “It’s all right,” he said, and gestured for Yuna to come. She approached solemnly and gave his bandaged thigh a gentle poke.

“Does it huht?”

“Not so bad. I’ll be fine.” He put a hand on her head and stroked her soft, sun-warmed hair. The spring breeze felt good. He inhaled the scent of grass and savored the joy of being able to stand and walk.

“Van!” Tohma came running. “Is it okay for you to be up already?”

“Sorry to give you a fright,” Van said. “I’m feeling fine. Really.” He looked around. “Where’re Chida and the others?”

“At the market. We won some prize money, and they wanted to get some stuff before we go home.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll go tomorrow. Thought I’d take Mother and Yuna with me.”

Van realized they must have decided to leave someone behind because they were worried about him. “Thanks,” Van said.

Tohma laughed shyly. “I didn’t do anythin’.”

Picking up familiar scents, Van looked around and saw figures approaching from an area thick with tents.

“It’s Auntie Sae! And Auntie Milalle, too!” Yuna exclaimed. Before anyone could stop her, she scampered over and leaped into Sae’s arms like a little puppy. Sae laughed and raised her, and Milalle poked her cheek with a finger, making Yuna giggle.

Squinting against the sun, Milalle looked at Van. “You shouldn’t be up yet.”

“I just wanted some fresh air.”

Milalle smiled but shook her head. “I know how you must feel, but it’s still too soon. You shouldn’t take a blow to the head lightly.”

At her urging, Van turned toward the tent, and Kiya hurried forward to take Yuna away from Sae.

“No!” Yuna clung to Sae’s neck. “I wanna go, too. It’s all wight.”

“Yuna, you have to wait outside with me,” Kiya said. “They need to dress his wounds.”

Yuna’s lips began to tremble. Before she could start bawling, Sae looked at Kiya. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep an eye on her.” Turning to Yuna, she said, “Do you promise to be a good girl?”

Yuna nodded emphatically.

“Are you sure?” Kiya asked.

Sae smiled and nodded. “She’s been so worried about Van. It’s no wonder she wants to be with him. We should let her.”

“I guess so. But let me know if she gets to be too much to handle.”

Van lay down inside the tent, and Milalle deftly removed his bandages. “Are your wounds still quite painful?” she asked.

“They do hurt a bit, but not as much as before.”

“Hmmm. The swelling has gone down, but the wound on your thigh hasn’t healed over yet.” Milalle sighed. “You really shouldn’t be walking. This one’s much deeper than it looks, you know.”

Van nodded. His thigh still throbbed dully. Milalle told him to keep his eyes on her finger while she moved it back and forth, then asked him to close his eyes

and raise both arms. “Does that make you feel nauseous at all?” she asked.

“No.”

“How about your headache?”

“It’s almost gone.”

Milalle’s frown eased. “I think you’re going to be all right, but you should never take chances with a concussion. Be careful not to jar your head for a while, okay? Even if you think you’ve recovered, a second blow could end your life.”

Van frowned. “How long do I need to rest?”

“Don’t ride your pyuika for another two weeks.”

Van frowned, and a sharp pain shot through the gash on his forehead. “That long?”

“Yes. You were knocked out for a short time, so to be on the safe side, I’d recommend avoiding strenuous movement for another two weeks.”

“That could be a problem,” he replied, glancing at Yuna.

She was sitting on Sae’s lap and doing her best to stay still, but now she leaned forward. “Ochan, you gotta pwoblem? What’s wong?”

This brought smiles to their faces.

“I’m fine,” Van said. “You just behave yourself, okay?”

Yuna pursed her lips. “I am!”

Sae laughed. “So you are.”

Stroking his chin, Van said, “Tohma and the others need to get back to Oki, but I suppose I could let them go ahead and catch up with them later.”

“Yes, please do. Hohsalle and I would feel much better if you stayed here for a while.”

At the mention of Hohsalle, Van remembered a question he’d meant to ask for some time. “Has Shikan been captured yet?”

Milalle shook her head. “No. And we’ve got no leads.” She rolled the

bandages up with a puzzled frown. “It seems odd, doesn’t it? He should’ve been with Ohfan and the others. But if so, then how could he have slipped away with so many people watching?”

She raised her head and gazed at Van. “It just doesn’t make sense. The Kinma dogs ran into the tournament grounds, but they only chased the pyuika and ran away without biting anyone.”

Van frowned. “Kinma dogs?”

“Don’t you remember?”

Van narrowed his eyes and gazed off into space. An uneasy feeling squirmed in his gut.

I’ve forgotten something important.

Following the thread of his memories, he reeled back the pieces of that scene, one by one. Black beasts slipping under the fence into the tournament grounds. Sae asking him if he could see who was controlling them.

That’s it. He’d felt nothing. No one controlling them; no sensation whatsoever of turning inside out. A shock ran through him.

It must have shown on his face because Sae peered into his eyes and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Van gazed back at her. “Those weren’t Kinma dogs.”

For an instant, the two women froze.

“What did you say?” Milalle whispered.

“Are you sure?” Sae pressed.

“I just remembered. I’m positive. They were nothing but ordinary hunting dogs.”

“Then—”

“That’s right. Shikan wasn’t there.”

Milalle blinked. “Really? But why?”

Van groaned. Thoughts ran through his mind, setting off others like a string of

firecrackers. “A dropped knife. Ohfan pulled the same trick on us again.”

“A dropped knife?” Milalle asked.

“A feint. You brandish a weapon in front of your enemy, then deliberately drop it, pretending you’ve made a fatal error. When your opponent lets down his guard, you kill him.”

Milalle paled. “You mean Shikan hasn’t just run away, then? He’s got some other plan up his sleeve?”

Van nodded. “Something about all of this seems wrong. The way they used those firebombs was odd, sloppy. Why would Ohfan waste his life like that? It doesn’t make sense unless he had some other objective.

“Shikan must have been in a different place all along, enacting the real plan. Ohfan gave his life to make it look like they’d failed, knowing that we’d turn careless.”

No one spoke for a while.

11

A Frightening Possibility

“But then where is Shikan?” Sae asked finally.

“You know,” Milalle said, “I’ve been thinking for quite a while about what I would do if I were him. And I don’t think I’d use the Kinma dogs for one final attack, even with such a golden opportunity as the Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes.” She looked at Van. “Were I in his place, I would find a way to multiply the Kinma dogs and the disease agents they carry. Rather than one symbolic act of vengeance, I’d spread the sickness so far and wide that no one could stop it, no matter how hard they tried. Shikan was raised in Otawalle and studied medicine, physiology, and ecology. I’m guessing he thinks like me.”

Van’s eyes narrowed. If that was true, the result would be far worse than a suicide attack. “But how could he do that? Would he breed the dogs with ossam?”

Milalle shook her head. “There’s a much easier way. We’ve been worried about that possibility for a while, but when we heard that Shikan and the others had acquired bomb components, we assumed we were wrong. Honestly, we were relieved when we saw what we thought were Kinma dogs at the tournament.”

“What’s the easier way?”

Milalle’s expression darkened. “Ticks.”

“Ticks...”

“Yes. If the hypothesis we shared with you before is correct, then black ticks are the main carriers of black wolf fever. If infected ticks can pass the disease agents on to dogs and wolves, the opposite is true. Infected dogs can pass them

on to ticks that suck their blood.”

Van’s eyes widened. When they’d told him that the illness was passed from ticks to animals and humans, it had never occurred to him that it could be transferred back again. But it made perfect sense. And since Shikan had been born and raised in Otawalle, that possibility surely occurred to him, too.

Her face pale, Milalle said, “Judging from the fact that the disease didn’t kill the Aquafaese, there must be black ticks in this area that carry black wolf fever. But it was fatal for the Otawalle, who live east of Aquafa. In other words...”

“Ticks east of Aquafa don’t carry the disease.”

“That’s right.”

Van rubbed his chin slowly. “If the ticks carrying the disease multiply in the bushes east of Aquafa—say, for example, along the high road that leads from Otawalle to Zol...”

Milalle nodded. “The result will be terrible. Ticks will spread black wolf fever to ossam when they suck their blood, and the ossam in turn will then pass it to other ticks. As the carriers of the disease multiply, the danger will compound for those traveling the road.

“And as we told you before, when passed from one carrier to another, disease agents can become more virulent. If they mutate when they pass through Kinma dogs and back to ticks again, even people who are immune might contract black wolf fever.”

Milalle brushed a lock of hair from her forehead back. “The new strain must already have been transmitted to ticks wherever the Kinma dogs stayed for any length of time. We’ve been worried about that for a while, actually. But if this contagion begins spreading to the east, which has never been exposed to it before, the consequences promise to be appalling.”

So far, black wolf fever had been confined to the frontier region in the north because it wasn’t spread from human to human. There may have been some cases in other areas that went unnoticed. The occasional fur trader or merchant who moved to and from the frontier might have caught it, but even so, people would have assumed that they died of a typical fever rather than a dormant

affliction. No one would have bothered reporting such cases.

If the ossam that carried the disease made their home along the Otawalle Highway, a major thoroughfare for merchants, soldiers, and government officials on their way in and out of Aquafa, rumors of the disease would spread rapidly to every part of the realm. Aquafa would become an isolated island. And should the disease agents grow in virulence, mutating as they passed through the bodies of new hosts, the peoples of Aquafa might contract the new strain.

Van could almost hear the voices of Ohfan and his people raised in vengeful anger. “Invaders of our land! You who treated us like dirt! You deserve to suffer. The land that you wrenched from us will be so transformed, it will bring you nothing but agony, and in the end, it will become a paradise reserved for those blessed by the god.”

Milalle grimaced. “Worse still,” she said in a low voice, “there are many farm fields along that route. If ticks communicate the disease agents to field mice, things will be all the worse.”

Field mice reproduced at a far greater rate than dogs and left the farms en masse after the harvest, migrating to cities. They also crawled into the baggage of merchant caravans and could be ferried unwittingly to distant lands.

Milalle put a hand to her forehead. “We believe field mice caused the rampant spread of black wolf fever in ancient Otawalle. The nobles built enclosures in the woods on their property to breed black wolves. The disease agents were passed from the wolves to the ticks in the forest and from them to other animals, until finally, field mice carried the plague into the capital.

“What happened there was a tragedy, but there was one stroke of good fortune. The Otawalle’s capital, where the nobles resided, was on an island in an inland sea.”

“Into the sea the holy ones cast the bridge to the plague-stricken island,” Sae whispered, quoting a line from an ancient song.

“That’s right. Our ancestors shaved off their hair and shed their clothes to walk naked across that bridge so that they would bring no mice or ticks with them. That was how they prevented black wolf fever from spreading beyond the island.”

When Milalle finished speaking, the only sound was the tent rippling in the spring breeze.

“And the young man you call Shikan knows that,” Van stated.

Armed with that knowledge, he intended to release the Kinma dogs into the wild. The disease agents would move from the dogs to the ticks, and then to other beasts and lastly, to humans. The illness would roll across the land of Aquafa like a wave, bringing the wrath of Kinma. To Shikan, those who survived that wave would be those chosen by god to inhabit this land.

Milalle’s fingers trembled as she ran them through her hair. “If the medicine were ready, we wouldn’t need to worry, but we need more time before we can produce anything that we’re sure will work.”

She heaved a sigh. “Why did he have to go and do this?” she cried, shaking her head. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but I find it hard to hate Shikan. People misread him because he seems so sullen and moody, but that’s just a defense. He’s a kind boy at heart. He went for days without sleep to care for a dying pup that even Tomasolle had given up on saving. The Ahfal Oma decry gentleness as weakness, so I think he avoids revealing his true feelings.”

Milalle paused then added, “Still, he has a stubborn streak. When he thinks he’s right, he refuses to back down or see things from a different perspective. I think he believes other opinions are excuses.”

A tearful smile formed on Milalle’s face. “Actually, I guess I don’t really know what he believes. He never offered his thoughts. However, that’s the impression I got.”

“I heard that his older brother and maternal grandfather were punished for being involved in the toxic grain incident,” Sae said.

Milalle nodded. “Yes. Tomasolle told us that recently. He said that Shikan revered his grandfather. He insisted that it went against the law of the gods for the Zolians to go unpunished when the blame truly lay with them.”

Van sighed. “So he’s decided to exact justice himself.”

Seven days had passed since Shikan disappeared.

“It’s a race against time,” Milalle said. “I think we still have a slim chance, but if we don’t catch those dogs...” There was a desperate look on her face. “Once they’ve bitten a dog, the species of ticks that will carry the disease won’t drop off for ten days. Some can continue gorging on the blood for as long as two weeks. And the rate of infection from ticks is low. If the Kinma dogs only stay in the forest for around twenty days or so, I don’t think the contamination will spread too rapidly. But...” Her expression darkened. “A female tick swollen with blood lays between a thousand to three thousand eggs at a time. If we fail to catch the Kinma dogs, and they remain in the woods for longer, passing on the disease agents to many more ticks and then other ossam, black wolf fever will spread rapidly eastward. To make it worse, we’ve no way of predicting how the disease agents will change when exposed to a new environment. I doubt that we’ll finish developing the new medicine soon enough.” Her voice shook.

Sae laid a hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be all right.” Milalle regarded her with surprise. “Shikan must still be in Kazan,” Sae continued quietly. “He hasn’t gone near the road yet. That’s the route the Emperor’s Eyes will take home. The Molfah and the Zolians have laid their net so tightly that not even a drop of water could slip through. If Shikan had tried to leave, he would have been caught by now. Even if he attempted to cut through the forest where there are no roads, there are surprisingly few routes for humans to pass through.”

Sae’s expression was calm and composed, like a true-born Molfah. “For centuries, my people have devoted their lives to serving as the King’s Net. We know every possible path that man could take, and he hasn’t shown up yet. He must still be in Aquafa.”

She let out a short breath. “We’re lucky a person is leading the dogs. It would be much harder to track the beasts on their own. We need to capture them now while we still can.”

Milalle frowned and stared at Sae. Then she nodded.

Shikan intended to employ small creatures like ticks to proliferate the disease, and there were plenty of ways to sneak them through checkpoints and roadblocks. However, as Milalle and Sae left the tent, neither of them voiced this fear.

12

O Dancing Deer

Van lay staring at the cloth covering the tent entrance, which still shook gently behind Sae and Milalle. Why had they kept their fear to themselves?

They're worried about me. Afraid that I might go after Shikan despite my injuries.

Yuna tottered over and curled up beside him. When Sae had tried to take her out, the little girl looked so sad that they decided to let her stay and nap. She mumbled to herself for a while, then pressed her face against Van's arm and fell asleep. Van listened to her breathing and gazed at the tent ceiling, which glowed with the afternoon light.

Shikan must have slipped through the Molfah's net. It wasn't a hunch, but a certainty. Van had been thinking it through the entire time Sae had been talking.

Ohfan wasn't just a dropped knife.

He recalled the triumphant grin on his face as he'd stared at Van with bloodshot eyes. Now he understood the meaning behind the expression. *Ohfan wanted to kill me.* He'd guessed that if Tohma and the others were attacked, Van would step in to stop it. *He came there with that bomb, despite the risk, not just to trick us, but because it was the perfect chance to kill me.*

Ohfan, who'd schemed so coldly and methodically, would never rely on Shikan unless he was certain he could escape the Molfah's detection. *He must have found a way. Either that or Shikan is biding his time.* Would Shikan let the dogs loose in the countryside to multiply? And then have them bite men until a new Dog King appeared?

No...

That was too dangerous. The longer he stayed in Aquafa, the more likely he was to get caught. And the more complicated and time-consuming the plot, the greater the likelihood of it being discovered and thwarted.

So is he just bait to distract us from the truth?

Was there already someone else capable of controlling the Kinma dogs? Or had Shikan found a way to lead them without someone like Van or the Dog King? Van needed to consider that that was a possibility, but he felt it was doubtful.

If anyone else could lead the dogs, I wouldn't have been important to them. There would've been no point in Ohfan sacrificing himself trying to kill me.

Once again, Van saw that intense expression on Ohfan's face, his bloodshot eyes as he gripped the bomb and fought to reach Van, despite the arrows stuck in his body.

Why did he need to kill me so desperately? What do they fear from me?

If the Kinma dogs scattered into the eastern forest and the number of infected ticks exploded, there'd be nothing Van could do.

Which means they don't want me interfering before they get that far. But what do they fear I might do? I'm only capable of controlling the Kinma dogs.

His eyes narrowed. Was Shikan plotting something that Van could foil just by turning up and taking control of the pack? If so, what? Van didn't know. However, he had a good inkling of where. If Shikan's final intention was to release the dogs to breed in the eastern forests, then he'd have to enact his plot east of Kazan.

Is he going to attack the procession of the Emperor's Eyes?

Considering the timing, that was the obvious target. The Ahfal Oma undoubtedly longed to prove who deserved to be punished by their god, to show everyone that they had claimed the final victory. Attacking the Emperor's Eyes also fulfilled their desire for revenge against the King of Aquafa, who'd betrayed and abandoned them.

But as Sae had said, the procession's route was under meticulous surveillance. Not so much as a fly moved unnoticed. Would the Ahfal Oma really send their precious Kinma dogs and their handler to so heavily guarded a place?

Yes. They just might...

They'd do it precisely because it seemed so impossible. There was no point in considering what to do if they didn't. Right now Van had to follow the thread back to the source of their scheme.

Assuming they plan to attack the procession, then the question is how they'd go about it. How could they successfully attack the Emperor's Eyes and make a show of their god's power and wrath while still ensuring the dogs and Shikan escaped? Was there even a way to achieve so much?

The key is figuring out where they could launch an ambush. It'll have to be somewhere the Zolians and the Molfah would never expect while still being an easy location for the dogs to strike. Van had difficulty imagining such a spot.

However, a name soon emerged from the depths of his memory, as clear as a streak of lightning. He knew it to be right—it was the name Ohfan had spoken as he laughed with his comrades and patted his steed's neck. *"Fire horses can ride down cliffs, too,"* he'd said during that unguarded moment. *"Although not the Cliff of Alulufan. How about pyuika?"*

Van had thought it odd that he should name a bluff in east Aquafa rather than a place in the Yukata or Toga mountains. Now he understood.

The Cliff of Alulufan.

It must have been on Ohfan's mind constantly for him to blurt it out when in the presence of Van the Pyuika Rider. How he must have regretted that slip of the tongue.

Ohfan...

The man who'd stood in the bright sunshine, proudly stroking his beloved steed, was gone. Life was such a fleeting thing.

Yuna slept with her nose pressed against Van's arm, her breath brushing his skin.

Was there any point in leaving this child behind, in wrenching himself away from the warmth of a family circle that was only now coming together?

If I go... It was unlikely that he should ever return.

Van couldn't lead those dogs without becoming the Dog King. But once he turned inside out, he would lose the power of speech. The human part of him would dwindle and vanish.

If he let his body and mind trade places, if he joined souls with those hounds and led them deep into the wilderness where no man dared to tread, he would lose the link to his humanity. The small piece of Van that was his identity would dissolve into that vast expanse where all things became flowing specks of light, and he would become a beast.

The pale light of evening fell on Yuna's rosy cheeks. She wasn't in any particular danger. Black wolf fever was a scourge for the Aquafaese if they caught it, but there were so many other diseases that were just as bad. Van had been swept into this strange battle against his will. Was it really worth sacrificing his life?

He closed his eyes. Behind his lids, mirage-like images rose in succession. Ticks breeding, mice migrating from the fields to the city, people stricken with disease and dying in agony, their loved ones watching...

A distant memory drifted into his mind. He saw himself by his son's bedside at night, praying desperately as he listened to the boy's labored breathing. *"Please. I would do anything, if only..."*

If only he had the power to eradicate the disease that claimed his son. He would ask for nothing more, not even his own life.

How ironic. The power Van had once longed for body and soul was his at last.

Ohfan had seen the face of his god in disease. Sickness was so far removed from the hands of people that it did seem godlike. Deities wrote unknown destinies, making it impossible to tell when or why one might fall ill, or what separated those who lived from those who died.

But that doesn't mean it's all right to give up hope. Life is the very struggle to survive amid all that.

The endless pinpricks of light that Van had glimpsed while inside out were small and feeble, but each still shone as brightly as it could. Countless lights, fighting to live and give life, sometimes losing, sometimes winning, sometimes reaching out to help others. Every living creature took the body they received at birth and waged endless little battles just to live and pass life on. Some existed by taking lives, others, by supporting them. Myriad ways competed, mingled, and flowed, but all of them were life.

Only those without choice have the right to relinquish hope. And only those who can't save them have the right to turn a blind eye when the lives of others are threatened.

In the darkness behind his closed eyes, Van thought he saw a small deer prancing and leaping. And with each bound, its life shone brightly.

Shine on, o dancing deer.

Face the crushing darkness, and shine on, o little dancing deer.

“Aleesa, Moshilu.” Van whispered the names of his wife and son, long unspoken, and felt heat trickle down his throat. “Would you mind if I did for them what I couldn’t do for you, even though I’m not bound to them by blood?”

If they would only say yes, he could go without regret or doubt. He smiled bitterly. Hot tears stung his eyes. The dead did not speak. As ever, Van was left to find the answer inside himself.

He looked down at Yuna, who breathed peacefully. As he stroked her plump little cheek with his finger, he was overcome with a deep affection. He closed his eyes. “Forgive me.”

If he failed to return, Yuna would weep inconsolably. But she was still young. Time would pass and heal her sorrow until Van became a distant dream from the past. She had kin now. Kiya, Tohma, Ohma, Chida, and the others. They would love her and raise her like their own. How glad Van was that he’d met Tohma in that freezing rain. Thanks to that chance encounter, he could leave this child, born into a cruel fate, in the warm embrace of family.

Opening his eyes, Van rose softly so as not to wake her.

Chapter 12: The Deer King

1

The One Pulling the Strings

“What?” Hohsalle was practically shouting. Milalle had just told him that the black dogs that had snuck onto the obstacle course were not Kinma dogs. “You mean Shikan wasn’t even there?!” he exclaimed.

Milalle nodded. “I don’t think he could have been. Sae told me how the Molfah cover every point of passage, and I just don’t think it would have been possible for Shikan to slip through once the net was in place.”

Hohsalle frowned. “Which means...”

“Yes. He’s probably already in the east, preparing to use ticks to spread the disease,” Milalle said. “That seems most likely.”

“But how?” Makokan asked. “We started searching for him almost immediately after he disappeared. The Molfah must have cast their net just as quickly. How could he have left Aquafa without leaving any trace at all? Perhaps the dogs got by the Molfah and moved east on their own. Yet no matter how smart they might be, they’re still just dogs. Without someone to lead them, they’d never get where Shikan wanted them to go.”

Hohsalle groaned. “You’re right. Shikan must be with them. If Ohfan and his band hadn’t needed someone to lead the pack, they wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble in the first place.”

“If so, then—,” Makokan began, but his young master cut him off.

“That’s right. The problem is how.” Hohsalle frowned. “The Zolians have tightened security for the Visit of the Emperor’s Eyes. Plus, everyone is on the lookout for dogs now. So how could Shikan possibly have gotten past a checkpoint with a whole pack of them?”

“Through Saguda Forest or the mountains?” suggested Makokan. “Or perhaps he’s hiding in a completely different spot, just waiting for an opportunity.”

Hohsalle shook his head. “The Molfah aren’t stupid. They would’ve thought of that already.”

“Yes, that’s what Sae said, too,” Milalle interjected. “They spread their net not just in the east, but in every direction to make sure he didn’t sneak behind us. And the Inner Circle of Otawalle also seems to be involved. Sae didn’t say so directly, but she implied as much.”

Hohsalle sighed. “So if Shikan has really taken the pack to the eastern forest, he must have passed undetected, not only through Zolian and Aquafaese checkpoints but also the Molfah net. And he even evaded the Inner Circle. Do you really think he’s capable of that?”

“No,” Makokan said. “That’s impossible. He may be clever, but there’s no way he could do that on his own.”

Hohsalle’s eyes narrowed. He stared blankly at Milalle without seeing her. His brain worked furiously behind his forehead, which had turned the color of alabaster, standing out against his flushed cheeks. Finally, he said, “What if he wasn’t alone?”

“Huh?” Makokan exclaimed. “You think the Ahfal Oma are helping him in secret?”

“No, not the Ahfal Oma,” Hohsalle said. “They’re being watched too closely. If someone is aiding Shikan, it has to be someone we’d never suspect.” His eyes gleamed. “Someone who could get Shikan and a pack of dogs through the Zolian and Aquafaese checkpoints without being stopped. Someone familiar with the Molfah and the Inner Circle, who has the power to get by them.”

The glint in his eyes turned to steel. Milalle opened her mouth as if to ask him a question, but he raised his hand, gesturing for her to stop. He bowed his head and remained motionless for some time. Finally, he pushed back his chair and stood.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I’m going out for a moment.”

Makokan moved to accompany him, but Hohsalle turned and cast him a

forbidding scowl. "You needn't come."

"But—"

Ignoring him, Hohsalle strode quickly across the room and opened the door. Milalle did not ask where he was going. She knew that at times like this, he wouldn't answer. But as she watched him leave, she could almost see a dark shadow clinging to him. Her face tense, she turned and said, "Makokan."

He nodded. "I know. Don't worry." He waited just long enough for Hohsalle to walk down the corridor and exit the building, and then he left the room.



When sojourning in Aquafa, the Otawalle nobility stayed in their official residence located in the woods near the king's hall. The afternoon sun cast a rosy glow on the trunks of the trees. A faint breeze stirred the branches, and the dappled light that fell through them danced on the ground.

A startled-looking guard came rushing out when Hohsalle rode his horse through the gate unaccompanied, but Hohsalle ignored him and hurried to the front entrance. He shoved the reins into the hands of a man sweeping the broad steps without giving him a chance to protest and ran up the stairs to the door. Striding past the servants, who bowed hastily, he headed for a room deep inside on the right.

"It's Hohsalle!" he announced, and without waiting for an answer, he opened the door.

The two men in the room faced him with puzzled expressions. Hohsalle's grandfather sat on the far side of a large, sturdy desk. Facing him across it was Malji, head of the Molfah.

Catching the look on Hohsalle's face, Limuelle said, "Please give him the medicine as I directed. And don't hesitate to tell me if anything comes up."

Malji bowed deeply. He faced Hohsalle with a parcel wrapped in oiled paper to his chest. "It is a pleasure to see you again, sir," he said softly, then departed before Hohsalle could respond.

"What was in that package?" Hohsalle asked. "Alajina?"

Limuelle nodded. “The treatment seems to be more effective since we started using it. Had I noticed sooner, we could have switched earlier, but it’s quite expensive. If he’s going to be using it for a long time, perhaps it was just as well that we didn’t start too early.”

Malji’s eldest son had suffered from a severe illness since he was a boy. He was almost forty now, but without Limuelle, he never would have survived so long. A bitterness swelled in Hohsalle’s breast as he gazed at his grandfather. “You used Malji, didn’t you?”

Limuelle regarded the question with surprise. “What’re you talking about?”

“Shikan and the Kinma dogs.”

Limuelle’s eyes wavered.

2

The Future of Otawalle Medicine

“Why?” Hohsalle demanded. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Do what?”

“Send them to eastern Aquafa.”

Limuelle sighed. “I’m surprised you found out. Did someone tell you?”

“No. When I looked at all the factors, you were the only person who could have pulled it off.” Without taking his eyes off his grandfather, Hohsalle pulled out a chair and sat down. “The culprit would need to know about the disease being transmittable by ticks, be respected by the Zolians and the Aquafaese, and be able to get Shikan and the Kinma dogs through the checkpoints undetected. Considering they’d need close connections with the Inner Circle and a position that enabled them to control the Molfah, you’re the only possibility.”

A mocking smile touched the old man’s lips, but he said nothing.

“The black wolves and ossam specimens sent to Otawalle to check for contagion—you snuck the Kinma dogs in with them, didn’t you? Some of the Molfah know Shikan’s face, but I expect Malji would’ve handled that somehow. You’re the one man he can’t defy, after all.”

Limuelle steeped his fingers in front of his jaw. “True,” he admitted bluntly. “That’s what it means to be a parent. Politics, power, religion, convictions, loyalty, honor, desire—all those motives that tightly bind our behaviors—the only thing powerful enough to blast such chains apart is the need to protect our lives or the lives of those we love.”

Hohsalle's expression twisted. "But how could you do such a thing?"

Limuelle remained silent, rubbing his chin on top of his clasped hands. He continued like that for some time until he stopped and raised his eyes. "There are a lot of reasons, but certainly a major one was your discovery of a promising method of treatment for the disease. The medicine you developed appears to be effective for people infected by ticks, and there's a limited number of dogs carrying black wolf fever. It looked like we might prevent another major epidemic like the sort that occurred in the past. And since we'd reached that point, I thought it was worth a try."

Fury suffused Hohsalle's face, and he opened his mouth to speak, then frowned. "Wait. You mean, you didn't plan this from the beginning?"

Limuelle raised his brows. "From the beginning?"

"The very beginning. The salt mine."

Limuelle burst out laughing. "Don't be ridiculous. Where would I have found the time?"

"But then how did you know Shikan's plan?"

"I asked him." Seeing the puzzled look on Hohsalle's face, Limuelle turned serious. "If you'll calm down and listen, I'll explain it chronologically."

He lifted his cup and took a sip of tea, then launched into his story. "As I'm sure you know, the Inner Circle has been keeping an eye on Shikan's movements without intervening. He was very careful but couldn't mask the suspiciousness of his movements entirely."

He placed his cup on the table and ran a finger along the rim. Then he sighed. "But it appears that the Inner Circle was careless. After all, Shikan's still young, only about twenty, so the Inner Circle's members let him out of their sight occasionally when he was surveying with Tomasolle. Cheehana said that, in retrospect, they should've watched him more closely. But they never thought he'd cause such a sudden and drastic change in the situation."

"Shikan caused a change?" Hohsalle echoed. "Not Ohfan?"

Limuelle shook his head. "When Ohfan was the mastermind, we could just

wait and see. But unfortunately, the foundation of Shikan's thinking differs from Ohfan's."

"So it *was* ticks, then?"

"Yes, but that wasn't all. That boy figured out how to lead the Kinma dogs without relying on a Dog King."

"What? But how?"

"He trained a black wolf to lead them."

Hohsalle's eyes widened. He remembered a wolf throwing itself against the bars of its cage when Shikan passed by. *So that's it. The scent of another wolf on Shikan must have been driving it crazy.*

"And by the way, your research is involved in this."

Hohsalle blinked. "It is?"

"Recall your tests on mice. You've been making them senile and then returning them to normal, correct?"

"Yes, but..."

"Shikan told me it was the sight of a mouse remembering the way out of the maze that gave him the idea of using an infected black wolf to lead the Kinma dogs."

Hohsalle stared at his grandfather, mouth agape, as the elderly man launched into the tale he'd heard from Shikan.

When Ohfan realized that his father, the Dog King Kenoï, was fatally ill, he was desperate to find a cure and consulted Shikan, who was studying at the Academy of Deeper Learning. Through this conversation, Shikan learned what his clansmen were up to, and he quickly grasped how precarious their plan was with its dependence on Kenoï's unique ability to lead the Kinma dogs. If they could find a way to train them like hunting dogs and then teach that technique to others, their plan would be more viable and far-reaching.

It turned out, however, that the Kinma dogs, while clever, were also hard to train. Self-sufficient as a pack, they rejected outsiders. Even the most experienced handlers couldn't make them obey. Kenoï was the only person who

managed it, and without him, the Kinma dogs followed the dominant male in the pack.

That gave Shikan an idea. The dogs and Kenoi had been transformed after coming down with mittsual. Carrying this disease had forged a special bond between Kenoi and the dogs, giving him the power to control them. So why not train and condition dogs to obey human commands before infecting them? Such a dog was successfully integrated into the pack. Although it failed to become the leader, Shikan felt he was on the right track and tried again with black wolves, which were larger and stronger than Kinma dogs.

Shikan's position as Tomasolle's assistant provided the perfect cover for his trial-and-error experiments. He incorporated his own agenda into the research tasks he'd been assigned. Training wild wolves was more challenging than training dogs, but Shikan already knew from his work with Tomasolle that black wolves could be tamed more easily than other species. It also helped that Kinma dogs carried the blood of black wolves already. However, this did not appear to be enough to make a black wolf a leader. Not all of the wolves Shikan trained successfully led the dogs, and none of them were able to command the entire pack as Kenoi did. Still, Shikan eventually managed to raise one wolf that was master to a small group.

"As long as the dogs could only be led by someone with a special ability like Kenoi, we knew we could stop it at any time," Limuelle said. "But once it became possible for anybody to control them, we were incapable of thwarting the Ahfal Oma's plan."

He smiled. "You should have seen Cheehana. She was terrified. I suppose that's what the fear of disease does to people. She came to me in a panic, demanding to know if the new medicine you were developing could prevent a repeat of the ancient tragedy, should the fever begin to spread."

Hohsalle gazed at him. "And what did you tell her?"

"Just about every possibility I could think of. But I knew it would make no difference no matter what I told her. I knew what she was thinking. Unless we proved the new medicine was guaranteed to protect everyone in Otawalle, she'd never cross such a perilous bridge."

Limuelle sighed. “She told me it was a good thing we’d found out early, while the number of people who knew how to control the dogs was still low. All we needed to do was kill them.”

Hohsalle saw Cheehana’s wily old face in his mind. *Sounds like something she would say, all right.*

“What would you have done if it were you?” Limuelle asked.

Hohsalle blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“How would you have responded if Cheehana had said that to you?”

Hohsalle looked down and mulled this question over. What would he have done? Would he have chosen to murder Ohfan and the others? Undoubtedly, it was the surest way. Cheaper and less trouble, too. Considering the nature of their actions, Ohfan’s band would have deserved it.

A vision of the desolate scene in the salt mine on that cold, drizzly morning rose before Hohsalle. If he were to ask the dead, they’d probably tell him to kill Ohfan and his men, so that no one else would die.

But...

Hohsalle took a deep breath and raised his head. “I would have made a different proposal.”

“And what’s that?”

“Stop them, but not by killing them. Although I’m sure Cheehana would have scoffed at the idea.”

He looked his grandfather in the eye. “We’re not gods. And we’re not judges of any law that the Ahfal Oma would respect. Cheehana’s way of thinking is much the same as the fanaticism of Ohfan and his followers, and I’m sorry to say that the Otawalle nobility’s blindness to its own arrogance is no different from that of the Ahfal Oma.”

Limuelle watched Hohsalle, seemingly amused. “And? What would you have done?”

“I would have captured them. Captured them and taken them to the Sacred Territory. Then we could sit down and consult with them and others who’ve

been scattered across Aquaafa. I would have negotiated with the king and Yotalu as well. Even if it took years or decades, I would have searched for a solution amenable to all. And in the meantime, we could search for mittsual treatments.”

Limuelle smiled. “Too bad.”

“Huh?”

“Had you seen just a little further, I might have praised you for finding such an equitable solution, even if it is naive.”

Hohsalle glared at his grandfather. “And what precisely do you think I can’t see?”

Gazing steadily back at him, Limuelle said, “The future of Otawalle medicine.”

3

Physicians' Weapon

"I really should have taken you traveling with me more often," Limuelle said, absently rubbing his finger around the rim of his cup again. "I've lamented that for a while now. In the Zolian Empire, the Ohan province is no more than a petty frontier. And thanks to our amicable relationship with Lona, you've led a rather sheltered life. I'm afraid it's dulled your intellect in some ways."

Disgust rose in Hohsalle's throat as he stared harshly at his grandfather.

"Are you aware that they've already begun choosing the next chief priest-doctor?" Limuelle asked.

"Yes."

"Who do you think is the most likely candidate?"

"I have no idea," Hohsalle answered sullenly.

"I don't suppose you do. Even the Inner Circle couldn't find that out. I had to tell them." Limuelle's finger stopped circling the edge of his cup. "The next chief will most likely be Tsugana."

Hohsalle's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. Tsugana was extremely orthodox, a priest-doctor who was quick to denounce Otawalle medicine as heretical and defiled, even in front of the emperor. Hohsalle knew he was eager for fame, but most of the court priest-doctors were from distinguished families. It had not even occurred to him that Tsugana, who came from humble origins, might become the chief.

"While the elite vied for power, he emerged as a wild card," Limuelle continued. "Of course, his granddaughter being the favored concubine of a

certain prince elector who's been aggressively promoting Tsugana's rise helped. But that's the way things go sometimes." Limuelle sighed. "If that fanatic takes over, everything will get much more complicated. And he's still only in his fifties, younger than the emperor."

Hohsalle pursed his lips. Ice seemed to flow through his chest, and his skin grew clammy. The anxiety that he knew his grandfather felt, too, weighed upon him, vivid and real. The current emperor, Natalu, respected Limuelle for saving his wife and trusted the medical skill of the Otawalle. However, there was no guarantee that the next emperor would share these sentiments. Before Natalu took the throne, Otawalle physicians had been shunned as wielders of heretical magic. For many years, they were forced to practice in obscurity. Now that they'd come out into the open, they exposed themselves to potential backlash. If the emperor's successor was more dogmatic than Natalu and a man like Tsugana led the priest-doctors, Otawalle physicians could be arrested and purged.

"I've worked hard," Limuelle said quietly, "to securely root the medical science of Otawalle within this empire. I spared no effort, spending my wealth freely, and building strong connections with Zolian nobles by saving their lives."

He stared at the polished surface of the desk before him. "The emperor and many other Zolians have come to rely on our medicine, including powerful prince electors like Governor Ohan. So even if Tsugana ascends, I doubt that we'll face immediate persecution. But it's certainly going to be a big step backward."

He raised his head with a sigh. "Medicine is linked to everything."

Hohsalle gazed at Limuelle silently. He'd heard his grandfather say this many times. Medicine did not just save lives. It was connected to every aspect of society and influenced the state of the world, as well as people's definition and perception of life.

"You once compared the medicine of the Pure Heart Creed to a giant globe," Limuelle said. "That was an apt description. The priest-doctors have shut everything up inside their beliefs. As long as they stay locked within, there's no hope of spreading our medical science." A dull gleam lit his gaze. "There's only

one way to force them to step outside it.”

“By holding their eyes to the abyss of death?” Hohsalle whispered.

Limuelle nodded. “Like Emperor Natalu and Governor Ohan. If we could turn back time and you were to assure the governor that you could save his son, I’m sure he would’ve let you treat him.”

Hohsalle recalled the expression on the governor’s face as he watched his eldest son die. Fear. Fear of perishing or losing a loved one—for the physicians of Otawalle, that terror was a formidable weapon.

Limuelle’s eyes shone. “It’s human nature to make up reasons after the fact. There are bound to be people who, if they’re desperate to save another, will reinterpret the teachings and bend the precepts of the Pure Heart Creed to excuse Otawalle medicine.”

Hohsalle said nothing, but in his heart, he had to agree. Limuelle was right. If that happened, Otawalle’s medical science would thrive and prosper, even within the empire. And even if they incorporated a view of life and death incompatible with the Pure Heart Creed, Otawalle medicine would eventually circulate throughout the empire, like blood in the human body. Or rather, more like bacteria, Hohsalle realized—a life form that inhabited and multiplied within the body of Zol, supporting its existence while infecting other countries, proliferating and supporting yet more nations.

His grandfather’s words were profound. But while Hohsalle recognized the breadth and depth of his vision, something about his reasoning sat ill with him.

“What does that have to do with sending Shikan to the east?” he asked. “Do you plan to force the Zolians to the brink of death by spreading the disease through ticks and causing an epidemic?”

Limuelle wrinkled his nose as though at an unpleasant odor. “Don’t be absurd,” he snapped. “The means for controlling the disease is in sight, but it’s not in our grasp yet. Taking such a dangerous gamble without a cure would be foolish.”

Limuelle shook his head slowly. “I’ve explained this far, and you still don’t see where this leads? That’s not like you.”

Hohsalle stared at him. *If the goal isn't to increase the number of infected ticks, then what is it?* Why would his grandfather have gone to such great trouble and risked so much to send Shikan to the east? *Especially now, when security is tight because of the Emperor's Eyes return journey to Zol.*

With that thought, Hohsalle recalled the members of the party accompanying the Emperor's Eyes. *So that's it. The prince elector with Tsugana's granddaughter as a concubine...*

"Are you planning to use the Kinma dogs to attack the governor of Oah?" Hohsalle pressed, his voice strained.

Limuelle returned his grandson's gaze impassively.

4

Evening Light

It was brighter than Hohsalle had expected when he stepped outside. The last rays of the sun trailed across the sky. Looking up at that pure light, he pressed his lips together. Tears came unbidden. The sunset's brilliance stung his eyes.

A servant brought him his horse, and he mounted and rode through the gate, but he did not see the forest that spread out before him. While his horse plodded along silently, he gave himself up to his roiling thoughts.

Does Shikan know? Does he realize that, whether he succeeds in killing the Zolian noble or not, he and the Kinma dogs will be consigned to oblivion?

He heard his grandfather's measured voice in his ears. "Maybe. He's a clever young man, that one." Even so, he supposed that Shikan had been left with no choice.

When Limuelle had offered to go to the northern forest and arrange to have Shikan and the Kinma Dogs sent east, Ohfan had jumped at the chance. Although it was possible to control the dogs without Kenoï, thanks to Shikan, they still lacked a way to increase the number of handlers if they stayed put. With the Zolians and the King's Net closing in, it was impossible.

According to Limuelle, Ohfan had set the dogs on the frontier settlements to test the black wolf's ability to lead and to harry the king. However, killing settlers one by one wouldn't upset the center of power in Aquafa. It would take far too long. Besides, if he attacked too often, there would have been no point in leaving Kenoï's body behind as a deception. Ohfan must have felt the net closing around him and his people and sought a way to get the Kinma dogs outside Aquafa to multiply before they were irreparably cornered. An

opportunity with the condition that the dogs had to attack the prince elector must have seemed heaven-sent. It would make it clear to all that the spread of mittsual to the east was divine retribution exacted on the Zolians who'd defiled Aquafa.

Surely, Ohfan and Shikan must have realized that they and the Kinma dogs would be killed, even if they successfully attacked the procession of the Emperor's Eyes. Yet still, they had accepted his grandfather's proposal.

What were they thinking? Did they have some plan to avoid being killed? Or did they entrust their fates entirely to their god?

Birds flew across the evening sky, calling to one another, and a deep sadness rose inside Hohsalle. *Ohfan and his band deserved to die.* They'd killed and inflicted suffering on many through black wolf fever, and Shikan still aimed to spread it.

"They would have died regardless of my suggestion," Limuelle had said. "Cheehana had already ordered their assassination. I merely reached out a hand and stopped the door from snapping shut briefly."

At first, Cheehana had rejected Limuelle's proposal. To kill the governor of Oah was undoubtedly meaningful for the future of Otawalle medicine, but she'd asserted that it was best to do such things simply and quickly. The more elements that embellished a plan, the greater the likelihood that something unforeseen would happen. Sending carriers of mittsual to eastern Aquafa posed too many risks. Even with the master archers of the Molfah, there was no guarantee every Kinma dog would be purged. Thus, Cheehana had demanded to know what Limuelle intended to do if one escaped.

It was then that Limuelle had spelled it out in numerical figures. The number of carriers was the important bit, he'd explained. If ten or more disease-bearing dogs scattered into the forest, it could cause a major outbreak, but if only one or two slipped away, the result would not be much different from the disease spreading naturally. This was the argument that finally tipped the balance.

Assassinating the governor of Oah or the priest-doctor Tsugana wouldn't be difficult if Otawalle wished it. However, if they perished to disease, suspicion could fall on Otawalle. On the other hand, if they were slain by Kinma dogs,

their deaths would be attributed to a suicidal act of vengeance on the part of a frontier clan—as long as Shikan wasn't captured alive. Further, by having the Molfah shoot the dogs and save the Emperor's Eyes, the king would prove his loyalty to Zol.

Although the capacity of the king and the governor might be called into question, such minor conflicts were common in frontier territories. If they could clearly demonstrate that the king had no intention of rebelling, there would be no problem.

Hohsalle grimaced, recalling his grandfather's words. *"It's a pity for Shikan, but I'm sure he would prefer to die while delivering a final blow, instead of being killed outright."*

Grandfather's right...in theory. But something about this argument troubled Hohsalle, and he could not bring himself to agree. If they murdered the governor of Oah, Otawalle physicians would likely breathe easy for a while. The future was never certain, though, and there were many other possible ways of dealing with this issue. His grandfather had to know that. Yet he'd still used this to justify his argument. Why?

Hohsalle's eyes narrowed. *And that's not all. Grandfather has skillfully deceived Cheehana.* While the escape of one or two Kinma dogs would not lead directly to an explosive epidemic, nothing was guaranteed when it came to sicknesses. If the disease agents transferred to ticks and found new hosts in previously unexposed areas, there was no telling what could happen. Some unexpected mutation might emerge, just as it had with the arrival of the Zolian settlers.

A chill shot through Hohsalle's heart. *Maybe he's hoping for that.*

His expression darkened as he remembered his grandfather's uncharacteristic irritation when Hohsalle had protested the foolishness of such a gamble.

The shadows under the trees had deepened. In the blue dusk, Hohsalle's horse plodded on while he turned his thoughts, darker than the night, over repeatedly. The terrible temptation that lurked in his grandfather's heart also lay in his own.

Disease...

There was nothing more alluring. Yes, it was frightening, but it attracted him irresistibly. Within it, Hohsalle glimpsed the reality of living creatures that lay concealed in the bottom of the shadow behind the physical world. At times, his yearning to learn those secrets transcended his desire to save people's lives.

Once again, Hohsalle saw his grandfather's pale, impassive face when he'd told his grandson to give Sulumina the new medicine, knowing full well that it might trigger an allergic reaction. And Hohsalle had obeyed, even though he'd realized his grandfather was deliberately taking that risk just to see how the new medicine would affect the Aquafaese. Hohsalle had tried to convince himself that it was fine because he knew how to stabilize a reaction. Her life had already been in jeopardy anyhow, so it was better to try for the sake of improving the new remedy.

Grandfather's right. We can always make up convenient excuses for our actions—as long as we can convince ourselves that it's for the sake of medical science or that it will help save more people in the future. But isn't that turning a blind eye to our own extraordinary arrogance?

Long ago, Limuelle had shown Hohsalle the glowing green creatures in his aquarium. "Sometimes disease reveals the truth by killing things," he'd said. "By erasing that which is superfluous, it promotes the survival of that which was meant to exist. Like a chisel in a god's hand, it cuts away the unnecessary and reveals the form that being was meant to take."

Perhaps, deep down, his grandfather longed to unleash black wolf fever to see how it would change the world, even though he knew it would mean death for many. Maybe he believed that only those who survived such a heartless and terrible test were meant to exist.

Part of me longs to do the same.

The human body assumed its shape because certain parts of it chose to die and vanish. From the moment of conception, the bodies of living creatures were designed to live and die. Beneath this unsettling idea lay something still and fathomless.

Hohsalle reined in his horse. He took a slow, deep breath in the dusky night.

Van and I talked about this same thing. He could hear the man's low voice.

“Still, it’s a sad thing to see one’s homeland, or one’s own self, which exists just once, vanish forever.”

The forest was blanketed in darkness, and the trees were barely visible. The afterglow of the sunset lingered, a pale red line along the horizon beneath a blue-black vault. A single star shone in the evening sky—a tiny pinprick of light, so pure and white that it pierced his heart.

That’s right. Even if disease was the hand of the god that pointed toward the meaning of death, people—those tiny, insignificant life forms—had to carry on in this heartless world. *And I became a doctor because I wanted to help those who strive to live, despite the weight of that hopeless sadness.* He’d taken this profession to aid the insignificant existences that somehow kept bobbing to the surface as the great raging river of life swept them along.

Now Hohsalle knew what he must do. It wasn’t much, but at least he saw the direction to take. Digging in his heels, Hohsalle urged the horse to a trot. At that moment, he spied someone riding toward him, carrying a lantern.

“Young Master.” Makokan’s deep voice was instantly recognizable. “Did you leave the hall without so much as a lantern?”

Hohsalle patted his horse’s neck. “I’d like to say that my steed knows the way home, but I’ve just now changed my mind. I’m not going home.”

Makokan frowned. “Excuse me?”

Hohsalle jerked his chin toward the lantern. “Give me that, will you? There’s somewhere I need to go.”

5

Child with Good Intuition

The sound of a bawling child carried over the field. A light glowed in one of the tents where the Oki were camped, and shadowy figures flickered against it.

“Sounds like Yuna,” Makokan said.

Hohsalle frowned. It did sound like Yuna. But rather than a tantrum, it was more like a wail of inconsolable grief. A sense of foreboding gripped his chest, and he spurred his horse to a gallop.

Several people were gathered around the entrance to the tent where Van should have been resting. Kiya held Yuna in her arms, trying to console her. Several young men crowded around her, holding their pyuika by the reins. They raised their heads when Hohsalle hurried over.

“What’s happened?” he called out.

“Van’s gone,” Tohma answered with an anxious frown.

Hohsalle stared at him. “Gone? When?”

“We don’t know. He was here when Lady Milalle and Sae left, but Yuna ran into our tent a little while ago crying and saying that he’d vanished. We’ve searched all over, but there’s no sign of him. Olaha’s missing as well.”

Hohsalle’s expression darkened. The premonition that had sprouted in his mind took solid shape. Van had ridden off on his pyuika in the dark without a word after speaking with Milalle and Sae. Most likely, he’d departed in search of the Kinma dogs. He had a connection with them. Perhaps there was something that only he understood. If so...

He’s in deep trouble.

Hohsalle's pulse quickened. If Van ventured into the net flung by the Molfah to catch and kill Shikan and the Kinma dogs, he would die, too. The Molfah had been ordered to exterminate the dogs and the one who controlled them. Even if Sae had explained to them that Van was an ally, to the rest of the Molfah, he was an obvious threat, a man poised to become the next Dog King. Undoubtedly, they would judge it safer to eliminate this stray spark before it ignited further disaster.

What should I do?

There must be a way to save him. Hohsalle couldn't rely on Sae because she was a Molfah. Nor could he turn to the Inner Circle or Tohlim. He chewed his lip. "Makokan, can you follow his tracks?" he whispered.

Makokan frowned. "After daybreak, probably."

By then it would be too late. Van's injury was not completely healed. That might slow him down, but he was riding a pyuika. They couldn't possibly make up the distance he'd cover tonight, especially while trying to follow his trail. Hohsalle gnawed on his fingertips.

Had I only come sooner. He had been hoping to ask Van whether there was a way to find and bring back any Kinma dogs that escaped Molfah detection. Now he couldn't even warn Van about the danger.

Tohma watched Hohsalle closely with obvious unease. "What's wrong, sir? If you know anything, please tell us."

Hohsalle regarded him silently. Given the nature of the situation, it wouldn't do to unburden himself to these people. Seeing the worry written on their faces, he couldn't help but feel how cruel it was that they'd never learn what became of Van. However, it couldn't be helped. Telling them the truth would only cause them to worry more.

He shook his head. "I was just concerned about his injury, that's all."

Tohma's face twisted. "Is it still that bad?"

"I think he'll be all right, but you should never take a head injury lightly." Hohsalle sighed. "Let's split up and search for him. If you find him, Milalle's at the clinic. Let her know."

Tohma and the others nodded solemnly. In his heart, Hohsalle begged their forgiveness. If Van had gone after the Kinma dogs, they would never find him.

Bidding them farewell, he headed toward Kazan. "We'd better get back to the clinic," he told Makokan. "We should gather everything we need to respond to any emergencies and secure Yotalu's permission to travel the highway. I'll tell him we want to be prepared for any possibility."

Makokan frowned. "But Van wouldn't leave the city through the gate. He'd take the forest trails."

"So? You think we should do the same?" Hohsalle asked, shaking his head. "You want to carry our fragile medicine vials on horseback and pursue a pyuika? Impossible! Taking the highway will be faster. The Emperor's Eyes will leave tomorrow morning accompanied by his entourage. We won't be permitted to go with them, but if we follow behind, we're bound to run into Van along the way. Even if we can't stop him, we might be of some help."



Tohma watched Hohsalle leave, barely able to contain himself. "They're hidin' something', aren't they?" he muttered.

Chida nodded. "Yeah. I got the same feelin'. There's somethin' they weren't tellin' us."

Mino groaned. "I bet you're right, but what he said about Van's injury is true. Remember what Lady Milalle told us? He shouldn't be ridin' yet."

Tohma clenched his fists. "We've got to find him. And as soon as possible."

Moki frowned. "But how? We can't follow his tracks in the dark. We don't even know which way he went."

A fierce voice came from behind. "I know!"

The young men jumped and looked around. Yuna raised a finger and pointed, her face beet red. "Dat way! Ochan, ovah deah!" Her finger never wavered. As Tohma stared at this little girl who seemed so certain, he was seized by a strange feeling.

"Impossible...", he muttered.

The others seemed to share his thought. They blinked and looked at Yuna, then at Tohma.

“Yuna always finds Van, doesn’t she?” Tohma said. They nodded. “Like she has second sight.”

Yuna pressed her lips together under their intense scrutiny, but once again she pointed and declared, “Ochan dat way.”

The young men and Kiya looked at each other. For a moment, they stood lost in thought. Finally, Tohma said, “Y’know, I’ve got an idea. Promise me you won’t laugh.”

6

Bearers of Okuba Ichii

A few clouds drifted high above the earth, but barely a breeze could be felt on the ground. From the distance came the faint sound of bells. The procession drew nearer.

Sae adjusted her grip and checked the tension of her bowstring. *Good thing there's no wind.*

The Kinma dogs possessed extraordinary reflexes. Although her father had placed his best archers here, she had worried there might be a side wind, increasing the risk of shots straying wide.

If we miss and some of those dogs get away into the forest... The thought of what might follow made Sae's stomach knot.

She'd been summoned by her father immediately after parting from Milalle. Although surprised by his plan, she'd also been relieved. As usual, he'd simply said what to do without touching on the background, but Sae realized that if he knew from where Shikan intended to spring his attack, then he'd surely been aware all along that Shikan and the Kinma dogs had left Aquafa. The thought that, despite this, he'd calmly ordered his own daughter to kill Ohfan and his companion hung dark and heavy in her chest.

In Sae's mind, she saw Van's face, felt his gentle hand stroking her back, heard his quiet voice... He'd claimed that talent was a cruel thing. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a breath, and then opened them again.

We must stop this terrible disease here.

The procession would soon be upon her and the other Molfah. Any moment now, the attack would begin. Sae had taken position here some time ago,

choosing a spot where she saw the soldiers guarding the procession while she herself remained concealed. The cliff and the road before it were visible through the trees. Commoners had been forbidden to use the road during the passage of the Emperor's Eyes. There was no one on the path, just the early afternoon light gleaming on its surface. The cliff beyond rose tall and almost perfectly sheer.

The Cliff of Alulufan... Could the Kinma dogs really charge down such a precipitous incline?

Out of the corner of her eye, Sae spotted a flash of metal—sunlight glancing off the spear tips of the lancers leading the procession. The road narrowed here between the cliff and the forest, forcing the procession to stretch, increasing the distance between soldiers. No worry showed in their expressions. Even if archers at the top of the cliff aimed straight down, they could not hope to strike their targets. A sturdy wall had been erected along the edge of the road near the cliff to protect it from falling rocks, and the soldiers guarding the procession were concentrated solely on the forest side.

Horse-drawn carriages rumbled into view—one, two, three carriages. All of them were of the same type, large and magnificently ornamented. Curtains covered the windows, and it was impossible to tell which one hosted the Emperor's Eyes. Sae had been told that he wasn't Shikan's target, but she remained tense as she watched the carriages. Warriors astride splendid mounts tailed them. The Zolian nobles, including the prince elector, took pride in their bravery and refused to ride in carriages.

Sae narrowed her eyes and scanned the faces of the riders as they passed. At last, a large man astride a black steed appeared. Catching sight of the family crest on the shields his men bore, Sae tightened her grip on her bow. It was the prince elector, the governor of Oah.

He rode past Sae slowly. She frowned. There was still no sign of the Kinma dogs. Soon, the last of the men would pass beyond the cliff. After that, the road widened and the soldiers would once more surround the procession, making it much harder to attack, even for those beasts.

An icy finger brushed Sae's spine. Something was wrong. She and her fellow

Molfah had missed something. Her heart pounded as a thought flashed through her brain.

Could this be another dropped knife? Was Shikan playing the same trick that Ohfan had employed so well?

The procession passed without incident and disappeared around the end of the cliff.



From the cliff top, Mukata, son of Malji, watched the procession passing along the road below. His face tense, he glanced at the profile of the young man hiding in the thickets.

What's he doing? His chance to attack was rapidly slipping away.

Twenty dogs crouched behind him, waiting quietly for his command, and beside him was a black wolf. With one hand resting on the creature's back, the young man kept his eyes trained on the road. At his order, the whole pack had been drugged before being led to this spot. He must have calculated the dose perfectly because they woke not long before and now displayed no effects from the sedative.

The wolf kept flicking its ears in Mukata's direction. The Molfah were downwind, so the wolf couldn't be aware of them, but it still made Mukata uneasy. Each time the wolf moved its head, the young man stroked its back, urging it to be still.

The tail end of the procession below passed beyond the cliff.

Why isn't he moving?

The young man rose.

Ah. Finally.

However, Shikan turned abruptly from the cliff and flashed a grin toward the bushes where Mukata and his men hid. The wolf rose to its feet, followed by the Kinma dogs. Their gleaming eyes all trained on the same spot.

Shock ran through Mukata as if a bucket of icy water had been dumped over

his head, and he raised his bow at them. However, the pack launched toward the Molfah before he could draw the string taut. One arrow found its mark, and a dog flipped squealing into the air. However, those arrows loosed by Mukata and the rest found no target. The beasts dodged the missiles as though they could read their flight paths. As the raw scent of beast descended upon him, Mukata heard the young man laugh. "Traitors! You sold out your own people! Taste our wrath!"

The wolf's fangs sank into his bow arm, and Mukata confronted his own death. Gritting his teeth, he dropped the arrow in his other hand and pulled a hunting knife from his waist. With the wolf still clamped to his bow arm, he hurled the blade at the youth. It flew straight and true, sinking into the young man's stomach.

Shikan's eyes bulged. Staring at the blade lodged deep in his abdomen, he crumpled to his knees. Gasping for breath, he yelled, "Go! Down the cliff! Trample the bearers of okuba ichii and scatter into the forest!"

Mukata felt the weight lift from his arm as the black wolf released it. The wolf turned and plunged over the cliff, leading the Kinma dogs in a charge. Fleet and agile, they raced easily down the precipice, using only the barest depressions as footholds.

Mukata stared at his bow where it lay on the ground. Okuba ichii. The wood from which the Molfah fashioned their bows.

"You!" He glared at the youth doubled over with his head resting on the ground. "Did you train them to attack us?"

Shikan must have heard him because he twisted his head to look up. He coughed, then smiled. "O God Kinma," he rasped. "I have loosed your arrows. May your hounds multiply and prosper."

Several bows twanged, and arrows thudded into Shikan's body. After a groan, he went still. By the time the Molfah ran to the edge of the cliff, the pack headed by the black wolf was already racing down the sheer face, moving out of range of their bows.



Here they come!

Small black shapes hurtled down the Cliff of Alulufan. Sae gripped her bow but did not draw it. They might still be planning to attack the procession. It wouldn't do to shoot hastily.

Her companions seemed to have made the same decision. No arrows flew. Led by the black wolf, the Kinma dogs reached the bottom in no time at all. They scrambled over the stone wall that warded off falling rocks to reach the road. But they did not even glance in the direction of the procession. Instead, they fanned out and cut across the road, heading straight for the forest where the Molfah waited. They raced unerringly for the hidden archers, as though they knew where each was concealed.

Sae trained her bow toward the oncoming beasts. A bowstring twanged near the forest's edge, earning a muffled scream. The sounds of bows, men, and beasts crashed in from every side. Before Sae had a moment to think, one of the dogs found her, its gleaming eyes fixed upon her own. It leaped soundlessly, fangs bared.

Abandoning her bow and barely dodging the fangs that sought her flesh, Sae drew her hunting knife and made a horizontal cut, slicing the beast's jaw. A raw scent of blood clung to her nostrils as Sae ran. She didn't stop until she burst from the forest onto the road. Here and there, she saw her companions running out from the trees. Bows in hand, they stared back into the woods with bloodshot eyes.

Gradually, the sounds faded. Sae stared into the trees, her breath coming in quick gasps. Had they killed them all? Or...

Black beasts emerged from the woods like wraiths. Their eyes glowed with a strange light as they stared at the archers. One stepped ahead of the others. An arrow sped through the air and pierced its side. With a short yelp, it was flung backward.

Several beasts lunged at them. Again, arrows flew, but the beasts dodged them without slowing their pace. Sae's companions cast down their bows and drew their knives. Instantly, the dogs dropped to their bellies, keeping close to the ground as they charged. Rather than biting, they harried the archers,

attacking like a pack of wolves wearing down large game, nipping and scratching to wound with each pass. Whenever a knife came within reach, they backed away, then struck again, grazing their victims with their disease-bearing fangs.

It was impossible to take stock of everything happening. It took all Sae's effort to avoid the fangs and slash back at the beasts while seeking a path of escape. Her arm felt leaden, and despair slowly filled her breast. She kicked a dog away and fled through the barest of gaps. Sae had no idea how she got there, but she found herself back at the edge of the forest. Her legs cramped and refused to obey. When a vine caught her foot, she collapsed and dropped her knife.

By some miracle, she managed to sit up. A bloody stench enveloped her, and fangs snapped in her face. Without pausing to think, Sae grabbed the beast's snout with both hands. It scrabbled at her arms with its forepaws, scattering drops of blood, but Sae held firm. The warm flesh on the animal's muzzle slithered beneath her fingers, making it hard to keep her grip. The creature shook its head from side to side. If Sae gave in and let go, she was dead.

Her fingers slipped, and the beast wrenched its muzzle from her grasp. She closed her eyes and waited for fangs to sink into her flesh, yet nothing happened. Fearfully, she opened her eyes. The beast's face loomed before her, but its eyes had gone blank. It no longer looked at her, but at something distant. Its ears lifted, then swiveled backward. Turning on its heels, the beast raced for the road, pulled by some unseen string.

Sae stared blankly after the animal's receding shape, shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath. She was coated in a cold sweat. The dog was speeding toward the cliff. Looking up, Sae spotted a small figure leaping down the precipice.

7

To a Distant Wilderness

Van's whole body ached. The wound in his leg had reopened as he rode Olaha through the forest, and blood soaked his thigh. His head pounded dully. Ignoring all this, he focused on keeping Olaha plodding forward, but Van must have been weaker than he'd thought. The journey seemed to take forever.

As he neared the top of the cliff, the smell of fresh blood wafted on the air, along with the thick scent of Kinma dogs. Olaha's nostrils flared, and he shook himself with apparent distaste. Van stroked his neck, reassuring him as they approached the precipice. Van smelled the four men before he saw them. The stench of blood was particularly strong in the grass where they stood. That of the dogs, though still powerful, was thinning on the breeze. *They're gone.*

The men stank of blood, sweat, and okuba ichii.

The Molfah? If they were here already, gathered around someone drenched in crimson, and the Kinma dogs were gone, that could only mean one thing. Van all but saw what had transpired.

They found Shikan and killed him...

But the dogs had escaped, probably down the cliff. Van pursed his lips. If the dogs got too far, it would be hard to catch them. Van had to follow as soon as possible. But the Molfah exuded bloodlust. If he attempted to pass them without explaining, they were likely to shoot.

Van took a deep breath and urged Olaha forward. Stopping just out of range of their arrows, he called out, "Hello there."

The men, who'd been staring over the edge of the cliff, whipped around to face him. Several of them drew their bows, but one raised a hand to stop them

and peered at Van with bloodshot eyes.

“I am Van of the Gansa. I mean you no harm. May I approach?”

The man’s eyes widened. He raised his hands to show that he was unarmed and approached Van. Blood flowed from his forearm, and Van could smell saliva in the wound.

“Van? Broken Antler Van?” the man asked. He hesitated, as though wondering whether to speak, but then forged ahead. “Sae told me about you. That you saved her life.”

“And who are you?” Van asked in a low voice.

“Mukata. Sae’s older brother.” He reached out and grasped Van’s hand with a look of desperation. “Please. Help Sae. Shikan trained the Kinma dogs to attack us—the Molfah. They ran down that cliff.”

Van stiffened. *Sae*.

Gritting his teeth, he pulled hard on the reins, turning Olaha toward the cliff. When he reached the edge, he peered over. A wind blew up from the bottom. Far below, he could see the tiny figures of the Molfah grappling with Kinma dogs.

He remembered the precipice being so sheer that it had given him the chills, and gazing at it now, he realized that there were almost no footholds. He wondered if he could really make it down on Olaha with his injuries.

Should I just go as spirit? As Kenoi had once shown him.

However, Van rejected that idea immediately. Even if he managed to take control and lead the dogs away as a spirit, they were too close to farmland here, and to Kazan as well. If he was going to take the dogs anywhere, it would have to be into the forest that stretched away on the other side of the road. He had to lead them deep into the wildlands to the northeast, where no men ventured.

A voice came from behind him. “Watch out for arrows.” Turning, Van saw Mukata looking at him with concern in his eyes. “We were ordered to kill the Kinma dogs and anyone who could control them,” Mukata explained.

Van nodded. His eyes flicked to Mukata's arm and back to his face. "There's a remedy that might work for that. Don't give up hope."

Mukata blinked in surprise. Van gave him a quick nod, then took a deep breath and glanced up at the heavens. The sky, as always, spread far into the distance.

"Let's go, Olaha," he said. And with that, they plunged down the cliff.



Van gave the pyuika free rein. Though slender, Olaha's legs were sturdy and strong. Guided by instincts nurtured in the rocky terrain of his youth, the animal's body moved seamlessly, racing down the incline, supporting its own weight and Van's on the barest of footholds, mere bumps in the rock.

The scent of Kinma dogs rode on the wind, permeating Van's nostrils. An itching sensation spread from the space between his eyebrows into his forehead, then deep into his brain, and he felt the outer shell of his body peel away. He gave himself up to that feeling.

Invisible threads extended from his naked self, their tips stretching toward familiar glowing pinpricks scattered among a broad river of trailing, swirling lights. When the threads touched and fused with those pinpricks, a surge of joy swept through him. The Kinma dogs seemed to feel the warmth, too, because they paused as though confused and looked his way.

The instant Van touched their souls, a fierce impulse swelled within him. The urge to bite. Something inside squirmed and struggled to live, to multiply. He took a deep breath and pushed it down, then stretched out the hands of his mind to embrace the dogs. Warmth spread along the threads that joined them. With a voiceless voice, he called them. And they answered. Like children reunited with their father, they ran for him, pulsating with joy.

Pain pierced Van's body, squeezing his breath, and he groaned. An arrow had struck one of his fellows. Fury rose inside, and he fixed his eyes on the Molfah who'd loosed the shot. He bared his teeth. The man's face seemed to warp. Van shivered as a powerful desire to bite and tear the archer's arm off seized him.

The sensations in his body changed. Olaha had reached the bottom of the

cliff. The figure of the archer drew near. He'd nocked another arrow and was taking aim. Van charged straight at him.

At that moment, a familiar, beloved scent tickled his nose, and a high wailing voice struck his ears. "No! Don't shoot!"

Van turned and saw a woman running for him. Her knees wobbled, but she still ran, forcing her legs to move. At the sight of her, something cool flowed through Van, calming the burning madness that consumed his body.

Words came to him. His own human voice. *You must not bite...*

"Van!" Sae ran to him, her pale hands outstretched, but Van grimaced and evaded her reach. His bond with the dogs would break if he touched this woman now.

He pulled hard on the reins, turning Olaha's head, then urged him to a gallop. Something hot burned inside his nose, and his vision blurred. He closed his eyes. The road he needed to take appeared before him like a mirage. A single, narrow route. Thin and fragile, it belonged to neither man nor beast. This was the path he needed to follow, and he took care not to stray.

Van opened his eyes to slits and silently guided Olaha to that path while the dogs ran alongside him. The black wolf touched his thigh, and a soft warmth spread up his leg.

A bow twanged, and pain seared through Van. Another one of his comrades had been felled.

Run, Olaha!

Clenching his jaw, Van quickened the pace, and the pack followed suit. Trees loomed. Sailing over the shrubs, Van leaped into the dark forest. Beside him came the dogs, springing to keep up with the pyuika.

Follow me! Far, far from here! Van called them silently. A quiet sadness flowed through him. *Let's go where no arrows can reach us, where not even man's scent can find us. To where we can live, even though we carry this disease.*

The scent of trees, grass, and earth filled his nostrils.

The pack of beasts raced deeper and deeper into the dark and endless forest.

8

Companions

The westering sun dyed the tree trunks red, and sunlight wavered in the smoke that rose slowly from between them.

A cloud of billowing smoke was the first thing Hohsalle saw when he approached the Cliff of Alulufan. On the rocks at the bottom lay a heap of dog carcasses covered in flaming, oil-rich hokuso branches. Over this makeshift pyre, thick, black smoke rolled toward the heavens. A group of men had gathered around it, some standing, others sitting on the road with their heads resting on their knees. They turned when he drew near but merely regarded him blankly, as though they'd misplaced their souls. Malji stepped out from the circle and walked over to stand in front of Hohsalle.

"Did the Inner Circle know?" he demanded.

Taken aback, Hohsalle frowned. "Know what?" he asked.

Malji just stared up at him silently.

"What's going on?" Hohsalle pressed. "Where's the governor of Oah? And Shikan?"

Malji's eyes narrowed. After searching Hohsalle's face intently, he laughed through his nose. "No doubt the governor has reached his lodgings for the night. As for Shikan, my sons killed him." Then, through clenched teeth, he growled, "Was it Shikan who tricked us? Or you?"

Makokan stepped forward as though to shield his master, but Hohsalle laid a hand on his shoulder as he looked at Malji. "Even if it was my grandfather or the Inner Circle," he said, "I knew nothing about it. However, I doubt it was them. What would be the point?"

Malji glared at him, a dull gleam in his eyes, his breath ragged. Finally, he shifted his gaze away and returned to his men. Another approached Hohsalle. His sleeve was wet with blood. Bowing slightly, he said in a low voice, "Forgive my father's rudeness."

"Were you bitten?" Hohsalle asked.

The man nodded and explained flatly that the Kinma dogs had targeted the Molfah, not the governor.

Ah, I see. It makes perfect sense, Hohsalle mused gloomily. To the Ahfal Oma, the Molfah, who'd hunted them when they should have helped, were despicable. Plus, they would have hunted down and killed the Kinma dogs. To make sure the beasts roamed free and spread black wolf fever, the Molfah needed to be eliminated. Hohsalle had never considered this, and it likely hadn't occurred to his grandfather, either.

How careless. Hohsalle bit his lip. *I suppose Grandfather didn't really see the Molfah as people.* They were just tools, like hunting dogs. Maybe it occurred to him that the Ahfal Oma might hate him for planning and executing this scheme, but the notion that they would vent their fury on those who'd simply followed his orders never entered Limuelle's mind.

Or mine, Hohsalle thought. He was no different. Somewhere inside, he'd viewed the Molfah as convenient tools, not as people. He gazed at the men gathered around the smoking bonfire who stood staring into the face of death.

Of all the stupid, futile, wretched...

He drew a sharp breath and shook his head. Reaching out his hand, he grasped Malji's son's arm. "Show me your wound," he said.

With Makokan's assistance, Hohsalle injected the Molfah with the new medicine, then washed and stitched their wounds. As his hands moved, Hohsalle kept talking. He couldn't help himself. "This medicine is very effective. There's no need for you to worry. You're Aquafaese, so you already have some resistance to the disease." Although he knew no self-respecting physician should ever say such things, he let the easy words of comfort flow. They seemed to reach the disheartened men because once Hohsalle's work was complete, life had returned to their eyes.

“Thank you,” Malji’s son said.

Hohsalle shook his head. “I should be thanking you. Although I know it’s far too late for an apology. In fact, inexcusably late.” He looked at the man, then turned to the others around the fire. “You saved the lives of many people by stopping those dogs. Thank you.”

“But we didn’t stop them,” someone said from behind.

Surprised, Hohsalle saw a woman emerge from the dark woods. “Sae!” he exclaimed. Her clothes were in tatters, and she was covered in mud. Her arms were slashed, and dried blood speckled her skin. Reaching out, he gently took her arms and examined her wounds carefully. His face relaxed slightly. “At least you weren’t bitten. Did they scratch you?”

Sae nodded. Hohsalle washed the gashes carefully, applied an ointment, and then injected her with the new medicine. She stared at him silently the whole time.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

Her expression tensed. “We only killed six,” she muttered. “The other fourteen...went with him.”

Hohsalle looked up and stared at her. Tears welled in her eyes. “I went after him, but he was so fast... I couldn’t catch up on foot, and no horse could pass through the depths of this forest. The sun will set soon...” She covered her face with one hand and let out a sob. “His leg was drenched with blood. I think his wound reopened. He’s injured and shouldn’t even be moving his head yet.”

Hesitantly, Hohsalle put an arm around Sae’s shoulders, but he could think of nothing to say. The forest behind her was already sinking into blue shadow. *So he’s taken the dogs with him. To some place so far away that the disease won’t reach anyone.*

Sae raised her head, turned, and peered into the woods. “I knew,” she whispered. “I knew that one day something like this might happen.” Tears slipped down her cheeks, and she closed her eyes.

At that moment, a child called out, and everyone looked up in surprise. Craning their necks in the direction of the sound, they saw a tiny lantern at the

top of the cliff, bobbing as though someone was waving it.

“Auntie Sae!” The cheerful voice bounced down the cliff, echoing faintly. The lantern waved again, then disappeared.

“That voice,” Makokan whispered, and looked at Hohsalle. He didn’t answer but just stared up at the top of the cliff where the light had winked out.

When the flames on the pyre had almost died, two small lanterns appeared on the road, rising and falling as they approached.

“Auntie Sae!” This time the voice was unmistakable.

“Yuna,” Sae whispered; then, as if waking from a dream, she dashed for the lanterns.

Two pyuika came into sight. Tohma rode one with Yuna sitting in front, while the other carried a young settler. As soon as she saw Sae, Yuna twisted around to look up at Tohma and said proudly, “Told you so! It’s Auntie Sae!”

Looking stunned, Sae reached up and gently stroked Yuna’s cheek. The girl giggled and grabbed Sae’s finger, swinging it back and forth. “I came to find Ochan. Waz he heah?”

Sae’s expression softened. “I saw him,” she replied, her voice thick and hoarse. “But he ran off into the forest.”

Yuna sighed, exasperated. “Ochan! Such a bad boy!”

Hohsalle smiled weakly. “You did a good job of finding us,” he said to Tohma.

“Not us. Yuna. We just did what she said. She seems to know where Van is.” Tohma glanced at the young settler beside him. “There were a couple of times we were seriously considerin’ turnin’ back, though, weren’t there?”

The other man laughed and nodded. As he glanced around, his face sobered, and he lowered his voice. “Did we interrupt something? Is this a bad time?”

Sae shook her head. “No. I’m so glad you came, Chida.” Quickly, she filled the new arrivals in on what had happened. They frowned as they looked into the forest.

“And he’s injured. That sounds bad,” Tohma muttered.

Yuna craned her neck to look up at him. “We gonna follow Ochan, wight?”

Tohma blinked and gazed down at her. “Course we are. You know which way he went?”

She threw him a smug smile and pointed. “Dat way!”

Tohma and Chida grinned. “Sorry, Sae, we’ve gotta go,” Tohma said. He looked at Hohsalle. “Uhm, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” he said hesitantly, “would you tell my mother and the others that we’ll be gone awhile and not to worry?”

Hohsalle frowned. “I can tell them, but Van is with the Kinma dogs, you know.”

Tohma and Chida glanced at one another but just shrugged.

They knew, but they’re going anyway. Although moved by their love for Van, Hohsalle felt compelled to intervene. “Surely you’re not taking that child with you. The woods are wild, not even horses can pass once you get in deep.”

Tohma smiled. “We’ll be fine. We were born and raised in the wilderness.”

Chida patted the neck of his mount. “And to the pyuika, this kinda place is home.” Then he added in a quiet voice, “Van taught us to ride. Where he can go, so can we.”

Sae looked up at Chida. “Would it be possible to take me with you?”

Although his eyebrows shot up in evident surprise, Chida answered instantly. ““Sure. No problem.”

“Then please, let me come, too.”

Tohma’s face brightened. “It’ll be an awful lot easier with you along.” Then he grinned. “And it’ll make Van happier.”

Sae blushed. Grasping Chida’s hand, she swung herself up behind him.

“Sae!” Malji barked. He stood with his back to the fire. “Enough! We’ve washed our hands of this affair!”

Sae looked him straight in the eye. “Father,” she replied, voice clear and ringing. “I relinquish my okuba ichii bow. Never again will I return to my

homeland.” Malji gaped at her. Unconcerned, Sae bowed to Hohsalle. When she raised her head, a bright smile spread across her face. It was the expression of one freed from a heavy load.

“Hey! We gotta find Ochan, wight?” Yuna said impatiently.

Sae laughed and reached out to poke her cheek. “We sure do, Yunacha. Take us to him.”

Yuna nodded with an air of importance. “All wight! Let’s go! Dat way!” Laughing, Tohma and Chida turned their pyuika in the direction her pudgy little finger indicated.

The last rays of the sun shone red on their backs as the young man from Oki, the settler from Zol, the little girl of the Yusula Oma, and the woman of the Molfah rode close together like family and vanished into the depths of the forest.

Green Light

Hohsalle heard the door open behind him. Turning, he saw Milalle enter with a tray in her hands, holding the door open with one foot in a very unladylike fashion. Hohsalle caught the scent of tea.

Two days had passed since his return to the clinic following the incident at the Cliff of Alulufan, but he was still tired. He'd spent that time mulling over the manufacture of medicine, unable to put his heart into his work. As promised, he had passed on Tohma's message to his mother. Although he'd expected her to be frantic with worry, she'd taken the news quite calmly, much to his surprise. "Well, thank you for goin' to all this trouble," she'd said. "Guess I'll stay on a while longer and wait for 'em. If it takes too long, I can always send Mino back to Oki to tell the others." Then she'd smiled. "Yuna's bound to find Van. She's like that. And it's wonderful that Sae's gone, too."

Her placid voice helped calm Hohsalle's fears. He'd pictured Van as a loner and feared that he would turn into a beast and disappear into the wilds. After meeting Sae, however, he could envision Van, relaxed and smiling, surrounded by his kin.

He's no longer a Lone Antler. Somehow, Hohsalle was sure they'd find him.

Placing the tray on a small table, Milalle came to stand beside him and peered into the aquarium. "They've turned into leaves now, haven't they?"

Green waterweeds swayed gently inside the big tank, catching the rays of the afternoon sun. Flat, leaflike shapes clung to those swaying stems. Sea slugs. When they'd first hatched, they swam about energetically. Later, they'd attached themselves to the weeds and sucked in chloroplasts through their mouths. Now, however, they were completely transformed. At the tip of their

flat bodies remained traces of what were their heads, but they had no mouths and couldn't move. The veins covering their bodies made them nearly indistinguishable from leaves. They simply existed, having lost the joy of motion and eating.

In time, those green leaves would lay eggs, succumb to the disease inside them, and die. The disease agents would detach themselves from the dead bodies and float in the water to be ingested by the waterweeds. Once again, the sea slugs that hatched from the eggs would suck them into their bodies along with the weeds.

Seen from the eyes of the pika palu, the disease agents were the seeds of a fatal illness, but from the perspective of the disease agents, the leaves were the world that supported their existence. This strange and complex process, in which neither actor was the main protagonist, quietly repeated itself, unseen and unnoticed.

"When I was a boy," Hohsalle said with a crooked smile, "I was terrified to discover their corpses. I thought I must have made some terrible mistake."

Once again, Hohsalle felt the weight of his grandfather's hand on his shoulder and heard him speak. It was just after Hohsalle's mother had died. To a young boy still grieving his mother's passing and now faced with the dead pika palu and the eggs they left behind, his grandfather's hardheaded words had sounded cold and heartless.

"Pika palu carry within them the seeds of disease. All living things do. They live for as long as they endure but perish once they give in. Just like everything else in this world."

Perhaps his grandfather had been trying to comfort him in his way. Rather than offering reassuring words, he'd forced a young Hohsalle to confront the uncertainty that was, without exception, part of this world. That was his grandfather's nature. A terrible cold lurked behind his gentle, refined exterior.

But... Those words had been Hohsalle's starting point. *All living things carry within them the seeds of disease.* Death always lay concealed within life.

Yet even so, we have no choice but to live. To make sure that the fragile thread of life doesn't break, we keep mending it as best we can.

From the time we are born until we vanish, we keep on spinning and respinning that thread, tasting all life's joys and sorrows, sometimes reaching out to help others, and sometimes being sustained by the warmth of another's hand.

Hohsalle thought of the man who'd disappeared into the forest depths, carrying with him that dreaded disease. Another thought followed this—an image of his companions riding after him. One day, they, and Hohsalle, too, would melt into a dream.

The green leaves glowed faintly, basking in the early afternoon sun that warmed the water.

The End

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