

FIVE

TURN OF FATE

1

THE VOICE OF THE HARP

Propelled by the inspiration from her dream, Elin burst from the stable and raced through the dark forest to the dormitory. The moon had already set, and only the stars glimmered through the thin clouds. There was not a light to be seen in the dormitory. The black shape of the building huddled against the darkness. Everyone must be asleep by now, she thought.

She tried the back door, but it was locked and would not budge. She paused for a moment, biting her lip. She couldn't bang on the door to wake the dorm mother at this time of night. But when she thought of Leelan's condition, she could not bear to wait until morning. With only the starlight to guide her, she made her way to the west side of the building. The room she shared with Yuyan was on the second floor, but the window was dark. Yuyan, too, must be asleep.

A windbreak had been planted near the building, and a branch from one of the trees almost reached her window. Yuyan had once joked that when she and

Elin became young women, boys might climb it to court them. Elin rubbed her hands together. She was a good climber. Although there were no branches to give her a foothold on the lower trunk, she had often climbed trees like this with the boys in her village.

She slipped her feet out of her shoes and undid her sash. After tying the hem of her robe at her waist to keep it from flapping open, she wrapped one end of the sash around her right hand, put it behind the trunk and grasped the other end with her left hand. Gripping both ends firmly, she leaned back and hopped onto the trunk. Then she shimmied up the tree like an inchworm, slipping the sash up the trunk and then following with her feet, over and over again. Soon she had reached the thick branch that stretched toward her window. Holding on to the trunk with her left hand, she whirled her right hand in the air to wind the sash around it and then used both hands to pull herself up onto the branch and straddle it.

Looking along it, she saw that it was too thin at the end to bear her weight for very long. She would need to wake Yuyan up first and get her to open the window before she went that far. She broke off a long, thin branch and, holding it at arm's length, tapped it against the window. The sound was muffled by the leaves at the tip, but after tapping three or four times, she saw a shadow move inside.

"Who's there?" It was Yuyan. Just as Elin opened her mouth to answer, however, her friend spoke again. "Kashugan? Is that you?"

Elin almost dropped the stick she was holding.

"You shouldn't be here..." Yuyan whispered hoarsely. "I mean I'm glad you like me, but we're still at school, you know."

Elin's mouth hung open as she stared at Yuyan's shadow. Suddenly, a fit of giggles seized her. She clapped a hand over her mouth and shook so hard that she almost lost her balance. Roughly reminded of where she was, she froze, then hastily clutched the branch. This was no time to laugh. If she stayed here too long, the branch might break. She slid gingerly along it and said in a hushed voice, "Yuyan, sorry. It's me, Elin. Open the window."

Yuyan stopped pleading with Kashugan abruptly and wrenched the window

open.

“Elin?”

“Shhh!” Elin quickly hushed her. “Sorry I woke you up. Move. I’m going to jump.”

After making sure that Yuyan was out of the way, Elin crouched like a frog on the branch, then leapt toward the window and, grabbing the ledge, propelled herself inside. Her feet hit the floor with a loud thud. The two girls remained motionless, listening intently to see if anyone on the floor below had woken up. Fortunately, there was no sound.

“Elin! What’s going on?” Yuyan whispered.

“I’m sorry. There’s something I need right now, but the back door was locked.”

Yuyan let out a deep breath. Stroking her chin and trying to act casual, she said, “So, um, you didn’t hear me say anything, did you?”

“No, nothing at all ... Not even the name Kashugan.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Elin doubled over, clutching her stomach and quivering with suppressed laughter.

Yuyan gave her a playful kick. “Hey! How dare you laugh at me?” She pummeled Elin’s back with her fists, then hugged her as the two of them rolled on the floor, breathless with laughter.

Footsteps thundered up the stairs, and the door slid open with a snap.

“Just what do you think you’re doing? It’s the middle of the night!” Kalisa, the dorm mother, stood in the doorway. She must have jumped out of bed, because she was still in her nightdress.

The girls hastily knelt on the floor. “Sorry!”

When she saw Elin, Kalisa’s eyebrows flew up. “Elin? I thought you were staying in the stable. I’m sure I locked the doors. How did you get in?”

Elin cringed. “I’m very sorry ... There was something I really needed ... I didn’t want to disturb you, so I climbed in the window.”

“The window? But this is the second floor!” She must have noticed the branch outside the window then, because she suddenly lost her voice. After a moment, she said, “You didn’t ... Well ... In all my twenty years as a dorm mother, you’re the first girl who has ever snuck in by climbing that tree.” She gave Elin a stern look. “How could you be so reckless? I thought you were a good girl, but I guess I was wrong. I’ll let you off this time, but don’t you ever try that again! Do you hear me? Think what could have happened if that branch had broken.”

“I promise. I won’t do it again.”

Kalisa sighed and left the room, shaking her head.

Alone again, Elin and Yuyan looked at each other. Their fit of hysterical giggles had passed, leaving in its wake a gentle tickle of amusement in their bellies.

“So what did you come back for?”

Yuyan’s question reminded Elin of why she was here. She jumped to her feet and opened the door to her closet. Behind her, she heard the sound of two stones being struck together to make a spark, and within moments, Yuyan had lit a lamp. Elin pulled out the bag containing her small harp.

Peering over her shoulder, Yuyan said, “What’s that? Oh! A harp!”

Elin stroked it softly. Of the three harps she had once made with such passion, this was her favorite. When she had lived with Joeun, she had played it often in her spare time, but for the last two months she had not even touched it. Since coming to the school, all her energy had been spent on getting used to her new life.

“I made this myself,” she murmured as she stroked it.

“You made it? That’s amazing. I never knew you could make a harp.”

“It’s nothing compared to what a craftsman could do.” She began plucking a few phrases of a favorite tune and noticed that the strings had loosened since she had last played it. It sounded slightly different from the pitch of the Royal Beasts in the wild.

“That’s lovely,” Yuyan said with a blissful smile, but Elin shook her head.

“No, this won’t do.” She frowned as she plucked the strings one by one. While

the tone was similar to the sounds the Royal Beasts had made, it was not quite right. To Leelan, it might not sound like the same language.

When she shared this thought with Yuyan, she looked puzzled. “But why wouldn’t it work?” she asked. “It might be a little different, but wouldn’t it still be recognizable? I mean, look at us. You and I don’t have the same accent, but we still understand each other.”

“I know. But somehow I don’t think it’s going to work. We can recognize words as words because we can tell the difference between sounds like ‘eh’ and ‘lee.’ Human languages have an incredible number of very distinct sounds. But the Beasts only seem to have a few. The differences are in pitch and length, and the echo after the note, as well as the order in which those sounds are made. But the differences are so slight that, at first, the notes sound the same. If the Beasts can pick up meaning from such tiny differences as these, then even the smallest deviation might make a sound meaningless.”

Yuyan grunted. “Well, I guess the only way to find out is to try it and see,” she said.

Elin nodded. There was no guarantee that she could even tune her harp close enough to those notes. It would be a long process, and there was no time to waste on complaining about it. She would just have to try. She stood up.

Yuyan looked startled. “You’re not going back there now, are you?”

“Yes, I am.”

Yuyan frowned. “Elin, you just can’t let something go once you get started, can you? But you’re not indestructible, you know. Remember to take care of yourself, will you?”

Elin smiled. “Thanks, Yuyan.”

Leelan did not budge, even when Elin opened the stable door and walked inside. Her heart began to pound as she readied her harp and faced that black shadow. Taking a deep breath, she plucked the string that was closest to the sound she remembered, a low middle tone. The note reverberated in the silence.

Lon ...

The Beast cub moved faintly, as if the sound had disturbed its sleep, but it did not open its eyes or show any interest. Elin tried a few more times, but the cub only shifted slightly, as if annoyed, without opening its eyes.

Elin's shoulders slumped, and she exhaled slowly. She had expected a more dramatic response. While she knew the sound was not exactly the same as the mother Beast's, she had expected Leelan to respond, just as a person in a foreign land might turn to look if she heard a word that resembled her own language.

I guess I was wrong.

She crouched down. The disappointment was worse because she had put so much effort into this. Still cradling the harp in one arm, she pulled the blanket around her and curled up inside. She had barely noticed the hard, cold floor before, but now it seemed to bite into her shoulders. She hugged the harp to her chest, as if to stem the despair that beat in her heart, and closed her eyes. Once Elin fell asleep, her dreams were disjointed and meaningless.

When she woke, the morning light was shining into the stable. She was trembling with cold.

I forgot to put the plank back on the wall. The draft must have chilled my neck and back. I'll have to remember to put it back on tonight.

She had slept with the harp in her arms, and it had left a mark imprinted on her chin. She stroked the spot thoughtfully and raised her eyes to look at Leelan. As usual, the cub sat motionless. The straw beneath it was filthy. If she couldn't do anything else, she might as well clean its stall. It was unfortunate that she would have to use the Silent Whistle, but it would be worse to leave the stall like this.

She sat up and hugged her knees. Still cold, she kept the blanket wrapped around her and touched the harp. Did the sound that the cub's mother made come from its chest? If so, perhaps it was not a clear, ringing tone, but rather duller, resonating inside its body. She might be able to reproduce that sound if she loosened the string a little. She plucked the string absently.

Lon ...

Leelan's eyes popped open. Elin started and stared at the cub. Its blinking, golden eyes were fixed on her.

Elin plucked the string once more. The cub was still staring at her. It did not react any further, but she had clearly gotten its attention.

What?... Why?

It had not responded at all last night. Why was it responding now? What was different? Yesterday it had been sleeping. Maybe it hadn't heard her. Had it responded now because it was awake? Or ...

Elin looked at her hands. She was holding the harp inside the blanket. She felt the hairs rise on the nape of her neck. Maybe that's why ... Had the muffled sound from under the blanket been closer to how the note sounded in its mother's body?

Elin closed her eyes and plucked the string again. She listened intently. Yes, it's close.

It was much closer to the sound she remembered, but something still wasn't quite right. Leelan seemed to feel the same way. Now that it had grown used to the sound, the cub closed its eyes, as if it were tired. Elin bit her lip. Leelan had reacted to the harp. If she could just produce the same sound as its mother, she was sure the cub would respond to her. But how could she do that? When she plucked the harp inside the blanket, it was muffled, but the sound she remembered had more resonance. If she could just get a little more tension, if she could pluck the string inside something like a drum, she might get closer. She stood up with the blanket still draped over her shoulders.

"You want permission to leave the school?" Esalu had just returned to her office after breakfast. Resting one hand on her desk, she lowered herself into her seat and looked up at Elin. "Where do you want to go and why?"

"I want to go to the town at the bottom of the hill. I saw an instrument maker there when Uncle Joeun and I were passing through on our way here. I'd like to go as soon as possible."

"You want to go to an instrument maker?"

Elin licked her lips. "There's something I want to try."

Esalu watched her as she explained what had happened since yesterday. The girl kept running her thumb over a red mark on her chin, as if nervous about what the headmistress would think. When she had finished, the only sound in the room was the ticking of the clock. Esalu brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. "I had heard that Royal Beasts make that kind of sound. You remember that I once went to see some Beast Hunters?"

"Yes."

"Well, at that time, a veteran hunter told me that Royal Beasts in the wild make a different sound from those in captivity. He, too, said it sounded like a harp string."

Elin nodded. "Yes, it does."

Esalu continued to gaze steadily at her. "But even if you can reproduce that sound, isn't it a bit simplistic to think that you'll be able to communicate with a Royal Beast?"

A faint blush crept into Elin's cheeks. "I'm not expecting to be able to talk to Leelan with a harp," she said passionately. "Beasts don't think or feel the same way that people do. So even if I could understand the words they used, I don't think I could have a conversation with them. But it should still be possible to communicate very simple things, just like with a dog or a horse. If a dog is trained to understand the command to wait, it will wait until we tell it to eat. I've heard that Royal Beasts are very smart. If that's true, then we should be able to teach them at least the same things that a dog can understand."

Esalu shook her head. "Elin, dogs live in packs that have a very clear hierarchy. Communication with members of the pack is crucial. If they recognize a human as their master, they will obey. Bonds of trust can be formed ... But Royal Beasts are not the same. They don't live in packs; they're solitary creatures. They will never grow accustomed to people, and they will never form bonds of trust."

"But the Beasts I saw in the wild often spoke to their young. Dogs or horses tend to communicate more through touch, but the Royal Beasts seemed to communicate through that harp-like sound quite a lot."

Esalu's eyes narrowed, but Elin leaned forward. "Miss Esalu, you told me to look for the differences between Royal Beasts in the wild and those in captivity.

Well, this is a remarkable difference. I want to know why. Why don't Beasts in captivity make the same sounds as Beasts in the wild?

"Also, Leelan was definitely asking me something. I want to know what it was trying to say."

Esalu ran a finger across her lips and gazed blankly at the bookcase, as if pondering something. "All right," she said finally. "Go ahead and try it." She pulled open a drawer and took out a piece of paper with some writing on it and a bag of coins. "Use these. There are fifty copper pieces in here. If that's not enough, give them this promissory note. It should be worth the loan of a small piece of silver because it's from the school. But don't buy anything that costs more than that."

Elin bowed happily. "Thank you so much!"

Esalu nodded without smiling. "Can you ride a horse? It will take two toh on foot."

"Yes, I can ride."

"Then ask one of the custodians to lend you a horse. Be careful, and make sure you're back before curfew."

"I will."

2

TURNING POINT

A shadow fell across Elin's hands. "There you go again, making something weird. What's that?" She did not look up. Although she heard Tomura's voice, it registered as meaningless sounds rather than as words. Her full attention was focused on trying to decide whether to directly cover the wooden frame of the harp in leather, or to bend a curved bamboo piece along either side of the frame and stretch the leather around them.

She had not been able to get as much leather as she would have liked. If she

made a mistake, she would have to go back and buy more. While it would be more work, it would be easier to adjust the sound if she stretched the leather across an outer frame of bamboo. This would also mean that she could use the leather as a single large piece. Then, if that didn't work, she could try the other method and cut the leather into smaller pieces without worrying about running out.

"All right, then. That's decided," she murmured. She picked up two thin bamboo sticks she had gotten from a bamboo artisan. From the instrument maker, she had managed, after much persuasion, to purchase a piece of unscraped cowhide for making drum leather, as well as a piece of scraped hide that had already been stretched and dried across a drum shell. The latter would resonate better, but Elin decided to try the unscraped cowhide first.

It was too dark in the stable for this job, and she was longing for some sunlight, so she had spread a cloth on the grass outside. It was a bright sunny day, warm enough to raise a light sweat as she worked, and a reminder that spring was almost over. She clamped the bottom end of the bamboo frame between her toes and placed the top end against the harp, nicking the spot with her knife to mark it. It was not just the strings but the wooden frame of the harp that resonated. What she was about to do would change her harp permanently. The thought that it would never sound the same again brought a twinge of regret.

She continued working steadily. By the time she had finished, the late afternoon sun had dyed the world with golden light. A leather pouch, curved by the bamboo, now stretched around the right side of her harp. Placing it on her knees, she closed her eyes and plucked a string.

Lon ...

Resonating within the hide, the sound was muffled. Elin frowned with concentration, eyes still closed as she followed the note. It was close, much closer than before. There was a slight difference in pitch, but the way it resonated was very like the sound that the mother Beast had made. A slow smile spread across her face. This just might work. If she adjusted the tuning slightly, she should be able to get even closer to the sound she wanted.

She let out the breath she had been holding and opened her eyes. They felt raw, and the muscles at the back of her skull were so tight, they gave her a slight headache. She looked around and frowned in puzzlement. A breeze passed gently across the twilight meadow. Somehow, she had had the impression that Tomura was standing beside her, but no one was there. In fact, he had left long ago in disgust because, no matter what he said, Elin only responded with vague noises. She had no recollection of when he had come to stand beside her or when he had left.

Her back and knees were stiff from sitting so long. She grimaced as she stood up. Holding the experimental harp, she looked toward the stable. Considering Leelan's physical condition, she should really test it now. But her legs would not move.

What if this doesn't work either? She sighed. She would call it a day and try tomorrow when it was light. It was almost time for Leelan to sleep anyway. She knew that she was just avoiding it, but still she packed up her tools silently and returned to the dormitory for supper.

"Miss Esalu! Miss Esalu!"

At the sound of Tomura's urgent voice outside her door, Esalu stopped writing and raised her head. "Come in."

No sooner had she spoken than the door slid open violently. Tomura burst into the room, his face pale except for two bright spots on his cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Esalu asked, frowning.

With trembling lips, Tomura said, "The cub ... It's eating. Leelan is eating!"

Esalu's eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"Please, come. Come and see."

Esalu rose and ushered Tomura, who was all but hopping up and down, out of the room. When the cub's stable came into sight, the first thing she noticed was a large hole in the wall. Following her gaze, Tomura hastily explained. "Oh ... I should have reported to you sooner, but I widened the hole yesterday. Elin

asked me to.”

“That must let in a lot more light. Doesn’t it frighten Leelan?”

“No, not at all. Leelan’s not afraid of light anymore.”

Esalu pursed her lips and approached the stable door. It was much brighter inside than in the other stables. The acrid smell of dung and urine stung her nostrils, but this barely registered. The sight before her brought her to a standstill, her heart in her throat.

Elin was standing on the other side of the bars, face to face with Leelan. In her hands she held some strange instrument with which she produced a soft sound. *Lon, lon*. The Beast cub held down a large piece of meat with its feet and bobbed its head up and down as it tore off chunks and swallowed them.

Esalu stared, forgetting to breathe. The early summer light shone brightly on the filthy straw, on the giant cub, and on the slight figure of Elin, who only came up as high as the cub’s shoulder. With each jerk of Leelan’s head, dust particles danced in the air.

Elin’s face was expressionless, her eyes half closed as if all her attention was focused on the sounds she was making. Leelan gobbled down the last lump of meat and then cried in a wheedling tone. *Shashasha*. Elin walked slowly backward, plucking her harp—*lon, lon, lon*—as if in response, and then ducked her head through the gate of the enclosure. She did not close it, but instead stood on the other side of the bars, quietly and slowly plucking the string. The cub’s head swayed as if in time with the harp. Then its eyes grew glazed and sleepy, just like a baby with a full belly and no fear in the world.

Only when its eyes closed did Elin put down her harp and shut the gate. When she picked up her harp again, expression finally returned to her face. As she met Esalu’s gaze, her eyes filled slowly with tears. Weeping soundlessly, she walked over to Esalu, and the three left the stable without uttering a word. Once outside, Esalu placed a hand on Elin’s trembling arm. “You did it, Elin,” she said huskily, then could say no more. Tears pouring from her eyes, Elin nodded.

The three of them sat down on the grass beside the stable.

“So, Leelan responded to your harp just as you thought,” Esalu murmured.

She ran a hand over the instrument with the hide frame.

“Yes ... Two days ago, when I plucked the strings in the stable, Leelan looked at me as if surprised. And began making a noise that seemed like a response.”

“What did you do?”

“I tried answering back.”

Esalu frowned. “But how? Could you understand the meaning of the notes?”

Elin wiped the tears from her cheeks and shook her head. “No. But I remembered a sound that the mother Beast used to make and tried to reproduce it.” She adjusted the harp on her knee and plucked a string.

Lon, lolon, lon ... Lon, lolon, lon.

“The mother Beast often sang like that when cuddling her cub in the nest ... And when I played those notes, Leelan gave a cry that sounded like a baby asking for more attention.”

Esalu leaned forward. “You mean ‘*shashasha*,’ right? I’ve never heard a Royal Beast make that sound. Is that what it means?”

“I think so. Because, in the wild, the cub would rub its nose against its mother when it made that sound...”

For the last two days, Elin had played the harp frequently in the stable, focusing her thoughts on reassuring the cub. It’s going to be okay, Leelan. You’re safe now.

And every time, the cub had made that coaxing sound. Later, it had begun to rub its head against the bars of the enclosure, as if trying to get closer to Elin. It was at one of these moments that she had asked Tomura to enlarge the hole in the wall. Even when its whole body was bathed in light, the cub had not seemed to mind. Not only that, but whenever Elin returned after leaving the stable for meals, it had cried and flapped its wings, just as the wild cub in its nest had done when its mother returned.

This morning, she had been stunned to see it making the same motion the wild cub had made when it wanted to be fed. Now, she had thought. I’m sure it will eat if I feed it now.

But she could not play the harp and wave the meat on the end of a spear at the same time. She had hesitated, but if she let this moment pass, the chance might never come again. Quicker than thought, she had jumped to her feet and opened the gate. Placing a lump of fresh meat inside, and then, plucking the harp to soothe the cub, she had stepped into the enclosure. Tucking the harp under her arm for a moment, she had picked up the meat, raised it to the cub's eye level, and then had placed it at its feet.

Just as before, the cub's head had followed the meat down to the ground. Smelling it, Leelan had looked at Elin and cried uncertainly. *Lon, lon, lon*. Elin had held her breath and plucked out the response. *Lon, lolon, lon ...*

A light had gleamed in Leelan's eyes, as if the chains on its mind had sprung open. It had bit the meat ferociously, ripping off chunks and gobbling them up.

Esalu had been listening intently, but at this she looked shocked. "Elin! How could you! Thank goodness you were spared this time, but you should never, ever go near a Beast that hasn't been immobilized."

Elin winced at the violence of her tone. "Yes, I know. I thought the same thing afterward. I'm sorry."

Esalu shook her head slowly and sighed. For some time, no one said a word. Only the sound of the breeze stirring the treetops could be heard in the quiet meadow.

"Outrageous," Esalu whispered finally, and Elin braced herself for another scolding. But the headmistress's expression was gentle. To Elin's surprise, she saw admiration in Esalu's eyes. "You really are an outrageous child, you know," Esalu murmured. "You've done something that no one has ever achieved before."

Much later Elin was to ask herself many times, what was the turning point? Was it the afternoon she had begged Esalu to let her care for Leelan? Or the night she had decided to use her harp to respond? Or was it ...

And every time she came to the same conclusion. There had been many turning points. Some fate had forced upon her, while for others, she had forged the path herself. But one thing was certain: That particular morning represented a major change in her life.

THE DECISION

The Beast cub first ventured out into the sun three days after it began to eat. It had been fasting so long that Elin was worried it would not be able to digest the meat, but it was blessed with good health and steadily recovered without vomiting or getting diarrhea.

When the custodian slid back the large door to the pasture, Leelan ran out into the sunlight on slightly wobbly legs. Located in the highlands, the Kazalumu Beast Sanctuary was mostly meadow, and was bordered by a forest and a river on the far end. The main meadowland, which was the area near the stables, was dotted with large ponds formed by groundwater welling to the surface. These made perfect bathing pools for the Royal Beasts.

Elin and the others watched from a distance as the cub approached one of these ponds on its unsteady feet. It crouched at the edge and drank, then jumped in with a vigor that made those watching gasp. Leelan, looking very pleased, splashed about so exuberantly that Elin, Tomura, and even Esalu could not help grinning.

“Royal Beasts like to keep clean,” Tomura said with a laugh. “So I guess it makes sense that having a bath would be the first thing it would do.”

“Do you think it could drown?” Elin asked, but Tomura shook his head.

“No, the pond’s not deep enough. You don’t need to worry.”

Squinting against the sun, Esalu watched the cub. Finally, she nodded and said, “It looks like it’ll be all right. While it’s outside, you two go and clean that stable. I have a meeting now, but if anything happens, be sure to let me know right away.”

After watching her stride off into the woods, Tomura turned his gaze back to Leelan. The cub splashed, and drops of water sprayed through the air, glittering like jewels in the sunlight. At last, it climbed out of the pond, drenched and dripping, and sat down in a sunny spot, where it closed its eyes contentedly.

“I feel like I’m in a dream,” Tomura said as he watched the cub. “I can hardly believe that that’s Leelan over there basking in the sun ... You’re amazing, you know. And I’m not just saying that.” Startled, Elin looked up at him. “I mean, you actually did it.” He raised his eyebrows and looked down at her. “Even if, for example, you had used some secret of the Ahlyo—”

Elin frowned. “But I never—”

Tomura raised his hand. “Wait until I finish. What I wanted to say is that I would still respect you, even if you had known and used those secret ways.” She blinked as he continued calmly. “It’s your determination—your absolutely crazy determination—that I respect. For the last twelve days, the only thing you have thought about is Leelan. I have never seen anyone so totally focused as you.” His mouth twitched in a smile. “Not to mention your wacky ideas ... Watching you made me realize that worrying about what other people think really holds back the imagination. You’re just totally oblivious to all that. You say the craziest things and never even consider whether people will laugh at you. That’s why you come up with ideas that no one else would ever dream of.”

Not knowing how to respond, Elin stared at the ground. Tomura patted her shoulder with a large hand. “Time to get to work on that stable, don’t you think? I’ll rake out the dirty straw, and you run water over the floor, okay?”

Elin looked up in surprise. “What? No, wait. I can do the straw.”

Tomura laughed. “It’s okay. I’m faster than you anyway.” He strode off toward the toolshed. Elin started to follow him, but then turned to take one last look at Leelan. When she saw the cub dozing in the sun, its head nodding, she felt something warm rise from her middle and spread slowly to every corner of her body. The cub was napping in the sun ... Time, which had come to a halt, had begun to move again. Elin smiled and ran to catch up with Tomura.

The headmistress’s office was not that large. When all ten teachers gathered there, it felt quite stuffy. Esalu, however, always held meetings in this room because she found it easier to concentrate here than in the spacious dining hall.

The entire teaching staff was already there when she entered. Some had been puzzled by the urgent summons, and Yassa, her assistant, was in the middle of explaining the situation. The faces they turned to her betrayed their

excitement.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said.

When she had sat down at her desk, Yassa asked, “How did it go? Did you let it out into the meadow?”

“Yes. It was a little shaky on its feet, but it went out and bathed.”

Yassa smiled broadly. “That’s wonderful!”

Esalu turned to look at the others. “As I’m sure Yassa has just told you, Leelan has begun to eat and is recovering steadily. I called this meeting today to consult about this matter.”

She paused for a moment, but just as she opened her mouth to continue, another teacher cut her off. It was Losa, a middle-aged man with a biting tongue that made students keep out of his way. “Before you continue, may I be allowed to speak?”

“Of course.”

“I know that Professor Yassa was still in the middle of explaining, but have you heard the rumor that has been circulating among the students?”

“What rumor?”

“That the child of the Ahlyo has used their secrets to treat Leelan. I told the students not to be ridiculous and reprimanded them severely. However, if I may be so bold as to say so: In my humble opinion, the reason such rumors arose in the first place is because you, the headmistress, entrusted that girl—who is only in the second level of middle school—with the care of a Beast cub. That was a blatant display of favoritism.”

Esalu’s lip curled. “Yes, that is most certainly what sparked the rumor. But clearly, my decision was not a mistake, at least in terms of Leelan’s recovery.”

Losa opened his mouth again, but Esalu silenced him with a wave of her hand. “Let me hear your thoughts and questions later. First, let me explain how this all came about.” The teachers sat up straight. “You’re all aware of the circumstances in which Leelan suffered physical and emotional wounds, so there’s no need to confirm those details. The cub showed an extreme aversion

to light and had not taken any food or tokujisui for over a month. The situation had reached the point where the cub might have died had it continued to refuse food and drink for another two weeks. This is something that we had all discussed many times, but none of us were able to find a solution. Are you with me so far?”

They all nodded, and she continued. “The reason I chose a girl who was only in the second level to care for Leelan is because I saw a clue to a solution within the knowledge she possessed. Not because she was Ahlyo,” Esalu said, looking pointedly at Losa, “but because she had observed Royal Beasts in the wild.”

A murmur of voices rose from the assembly. Most of them were learning of this for the first time. Esalu looked around the room, and everyone fell silent again. “The girl, Elin, has observed Royal Beasts in the wild. In addition, she has outstanding powers of creative thinking and observation. This is something those of you who have taught her already know, and it also makes clear why Joeun, who for many years served as the headmaster of Tamuyuan, thought she was so special. I decided that if our traditional approaches had failed, we had nothing to lose by letting her try.”

Losa scowled, but many of the other teachers were nodding, particularly those who had taught Elin.

“The first thing Elin discovered was the reason Leelan was afraid of light. She reasoned that for a cub that was used to being in the nest with its mother, light would ordinarily come from below. Being exposed suddenly to light from above would mean that its mother was gone. She asked me if she could remove the boards at the bottom of the stable wall, and I said yes, because I thought it was an excellent idea. And it worked. Leelan was not afraid of light that gradually entered the stall from below.”

The teachers’ faces registered surprise. Esalu nodded and continued. “Even from this one idea you can see how innovative Elin is ... I’m ashamed to admit it, but until she said she wanted to remove those boards, I had never even considered the angle of the light.”

A rueful smile touched her eyes. “Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is a gap in our knowledge, rather than in our ability to think

creatively. Because Elin had seen Royal Beasts in the wild, she knew how a mother and cub live in the nest. We, however, don't even know that much. We, who have been entrusted by the Yojeah to care for the Royal Beasts, simply do not know."

A heavy silence fell over the room.

"But—" Yassa began.

"Yes," Esalu said, nodding. "There's nothing we can do about that because we are strictly bound to follow the Royal Beast Canon. Royal Beasts are the symbol of the Yojeah's sovereignty, and when they come under the care of humans, the Canon must be followed to the letter. Every item of their care is recorded in minute detail from what to feed them to the type of straw used in their stalls. The Canon states that Royal Beasts must always be given tokujisui and that we must use the Silent Whistle when we approach them."

Esalu looked at each of them in turn. "That is precisely why it never occurred to us that there might be any other way of raising them. There was no room for us to discover new ideas. But Elin, who is still only in the second level, does not know the Royal Beast Canon. The Royal Beasts that she knows were those she saw in the wild when she went deep into the mountains with her foster father, Joeun. So she treated Leelan not like a Beast in captivity, but like a Beast in the wild. She remembered how the cub demanded food from its mother and what made it feel safe and calm. That's where she got her ideas."

She rubbed her arms. "It made my hair stand on end to hear that the child had walked into the enclosure without using the Silent Whistle. Instead, she plucked a harp that she had altered to sound like the mother Beast. She got close enough to touch the cub when she fed it."

The teachers looked astonished, and Losa exclaimed, "But that's impossible. You mean the rumor is true, then? She used the secret ways of the Ahlyo?"

"Professor Losa," Esalu said with an exasperated expression. "Didn't you hear a word I said?"

Losa looked offended. "What do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what I said. Why do you think that I have just explained in such great

detail how Elin came up with her ideas? I was demonstrating that it was not the secrets of the Ahlyo that helped her to heal Leelan. Far from it. Rather, she succeeded because she could examine the problem through the lens of her knowledge of the Beasts in the wild, without being restricted by the Royal Beast Canon as we are. Now is it clear?”

Losa flushed bright red. “I know that. But being able to come up with an idea like imitating a mother Beast on a harp does not make one capable of actually doing it!”

Esalu shifted her gaze ever so slightly, a sign Losa’s sharp eyes did not miss. He continued, “You see I’m right, don’t you? She couldn’t have done it without some special skill. There must be something behind this—something like the tricks that the Ahlyo are said to use.”

Esalu stopped him with a movement of her hand. “Just a moment, Professor Losa. It’s perfectly natural for you to think that ... Or rather, I should say that that is precisely why I called this meeting. I knew that some people would think like this.” Her expression was stern as she gazed at them. “We must urgently consult about whether or not to report to the palace the fact that Elin did not use the Silent Whistle, and that instead she found a way to communicate with a Royal Beast using a harp.”

The teachers looked at one another and began talking among themselves, filling the room with the clamor of their voices. Losa waved his hand as though to cut through the noise and declared in his shrill voice, “But there’s no question about it! We cannot possibly fail to report a matter of such grave importance.”

Esalu thumped on her desk for silence. She waited for the clamor to recede like the tide pulling back from the shore, and then spoke. “First, think calmly about what would happen if we were to report this to the palace. Until now, we believed that the Royal Beasts would never become accustomed to man. The only method we knew by which we could control them was the Silent Whistle. And all it does is immobilize them. It does not communicate our intentions. Elin has overthrown these assumptions.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why—”

Esalu interrupted, her voice like thunder. “Hold your tongue until you have heard me out!” Everyone jumped at the fierceness of her tone. Esalu glared at Losa, her eyes aflame. Words flowed from her as though bursting through a dike. “If we report this to the palace, naturally it will cause an uproar. I will most certainly be accused of failing to obey the tenets of the Royal Beast Canon. I would readily accept that. From the moment I adopted this course of action, I planned how to explain myself. But my greatest concern is for Elin—for this girl that we accepted into our school as our responsibility. It’s Elin who I fear for!”

She slammed her hand on her desk. “She has done nothing wrong. Her only crime was to long, with all her heart, to cure Leelan. To do that, she spent twelve solid days and nights with that Beast cub, and because of that effort, she has done what we could not. She has achieved the impossible!

“But there are many who will not believe that this is the result of her efforts. They will look at the color of her eyes and connect her achievement to the blood that runs in her veins.” She seemed to be struggling to keep the anguish from her face. “If someone else had also been able to control Leelan as Elin did, I would not be so worried ... But both Tomura and I tried it. We plucked the harp the same way she did, but the cub only listened. It did not respond the way that it did to Elin.”

The expressions on the teachers’ faces revealed mixed emotions. Esalu watched them with her right hand pressed against her temple. “Yes, you see. Just as you are now thinking, anyone who hears this will feel that Elin must be different from us. But, you know, I don’t believe that that’s the case. I ask you to think about this objectively as beast doctors. From Leelan’s point of view, yes, Elin is special. But that’s not because she’s an Ahlyo. It’s because she managed to make Leelan see her as its mother.

“Think about it. It’s as if Leelan has been reborn. The cub was lost in the terror of darkness, with no mother to respond to its cries. And who was it who responded as its own mother had? Elin. It was Elin who gave it food, while reassuring the cub that it was safe to eat.”

Yassa stroked his beard. “You mean it’s a type of imprinting?” he murmured.

Esalu nodded. “Most likely. Our knowledge of the Beasts is limited, so it’s

hard to say for sure, but I believe that that's highly probable."

A young teacher spoke, his face thoughtful. "But many cubs that age have been brought to our sanctuary and raised here, yet there has never been any report of this kind of imprinting."

Esalu turned to look at him, brushing an unruly strand of hair from her face. "What is the procedure you use to feed the cubs?"

He looked surprised, as if he were wondering why she would ask such an obvious question. "I leave the food in the cub's enclosure while it's out in the meadow. If it's raining, or if for some other reason I can't let the cub outside, I blow the Silent Whistle and paralyze it before leaving the meat inside."

Esalu nodded. "Exactly. Now imagine what that looks like to the cub. Food is placed in its enclosure when it's not there, or food appears before its eyes while it lies paralyzed. How could a cub possibly see us as a mother figure who feeds it?"

"Oh," the young teacher whispered.

Esalu continued in a quiet voice. "We've never tried to have any intimate contact with the Royal Beasts. We care for them for decades and nurse them when they die, yet we never establish the type of relationship with them that we would with a cherished dog or horse ... And as long as we follow the procedures dictated by the Royal Beast Canon, we never will establish such a relationship." The teachers stared at her silently, as if pondering this new perspective. "Elin, who does not know the Canon, cared for Leelan as she would have for a dog or horse. As a result, she is the first person in the entire nation to have succeeded in bonding with a Royal Beast."

Esalu's face was tinged with sadness. "But in the eyes of the statesmen in the palace, this result will have an entirely different meaning. They will rejoice to know that the Royal Beasts can be controlled. And they will try to use Elin for their political schemes because of her special power." Esalu's voice grew hoarse. "When I think of how they will treat her—this unique young woman, who is so clearly of Ahlyo lineage—I am overcome with fear.

"If she becomes the focus of such attention, she cannot fail to attract the notice of the Aluhan and his people. Remember, the Royal Beast, the only living

creature capable of devouring the Toda, symbolizes the ascendancy of the Yojuh's power over the Aluhan. I am sure that even you can guess what would happen then."

A heavy silence enveloped the room. Esalu whispered, "If I had known that that child would do something so unorthodox, I would never have entrusted Leelan into her care. But regret will not turn back time. All I can do now is find a way to protect her.

"Let me ask you once again," she said quietly. "Do you think we should report what has happened to the palace?"

Despite the sunny afternoon, at sunset, clouds moved in to cover the sky, and night brought with it a driving rain. Elin crouched on the floor of the stable as always, watching Leelan sleep while she listened to the rain strike the roof.

At suppertime, Esalu had explained to the entire school how Elin had helped Leelan recover. Her explanation had been very clear, and so convincing, it squashed for good the rumor that Elin had used Ahlyo magic. When she had finished, Esalu had called on everyone to guard the story within the walls of Kazalumu. If people from the palace were to learn of this tale, she had said, they would find an excuse to take Elin and Leelan away to Lazalu, the official Beast sanctuary. She had begged them to vow to protect their classmate and the Beast cub and prevent that from happening.

When she had finished speaking, everyone—teachers and students alike—had risen to their feet and, placing their hands over their hearts, had vowed to do so. At the sound of their voices, which had shaken the dining hall, Elin had felt for the first time in her life what it was like to be protected by friends. A hot rush of joy spread through her as Yuyan's hand squeezed hers and her fellow students beamed at her.

But when the meal was over, Esalu had summoned her to her office. There she had learned the other meaning concealed within this vow, and the knowledge made her skin crawl. The Royal Beasts that devoured the Toda were the symbol of the Yojuh's power, Esalu had explained, and her ability to

manipulate them would make her a crucial pawn in the eyes of both the Yojuh and the Aluhan. It had never occurred to Elin that the bond between her and Leelan could be seen in that way. Esalu had once told her that the Royal Beasts were political creatures, but now, for the first time, the reality of those words pressed against her heart.

That's what Esalu was protecting us from by making the whole school vow to keep Leelan's story a secret.

Elin covered her face with her hands. It's all so stupid, she thought. Royal Beasts eat Toda because that's what they were born to do, just like horses eat grass. How could anyone claim that this gave them the right to rule the country? In her mind's eye, she saw the face of the inspector who had sentenced her mother to death. His reasons had been ludicrous, yet he had spoken as if what he was doing was for the highest good. "The most important qualification for the care of the Toda," he had shouted, "is unwavering loyalty to the Aluhan!"

Mother ...

Unlike her grandfather, she was sure that her mother had looked after the Toda for their own sake, not for the sake of the Aluhan. Otherwise, she would not have loathed the Silent Whistle or tokujisui. Had she cared about the Toda the same way that Elin cared about Leelan? Had she wished that these creatures, who were born in the wild, could live as nature had intended them to live?

Elin's hands slid slowly from her face. The damp night air touched her cheeks. No matter what happened, she would stay true to her heart. It was no concern of hers what the Yojuh or the Aluhan hoped to achieve through their struggle for power. Even if it should put her life in danger, she would not bend in her resolve. Regardless of what the Royal Beast Canon said, she would never make Leelan drink tokujisui, something a Beast in the wild would never touch. Nor would she ever use the Silent Whistle.

She had shared these feelings with Esalu, although she did not tell her about her mother. Esalu's expression had seemed dark, as if she were pondering something, but she had agreed. "Because," she had said, "I promised to leave

the cub in your care if you could make it eat again.”

Elin had always thought of Esalu as an intimidating woman, and had suspected her of having hidden motives. To her surprise, however, the expression that had flitted across her face at that moment had reminded her of her mother.

A strong wind shook the Beast stable, and the rain lashed against the walls. The sound must have startled the cub, because its eyes popped open. It stood up, making an anxious sound in its throat, and tottered over to the bars to butt its head against them. Without thinking, Elin rose and, putting her arm through the bars, reached up to rub Leelan’s cheek. Its fur, which she was touching for the first time, was far softer than she had imagined. The cub’s eyes narrowed, and it rubbed its cheek against her hand, crying plaintively. Affection welled up inside her. How she wished she was big enough to wrap her arms around this poor, frightened little cub.

4

THE LAST LETTER

Leelan grew rapidly. So much so that Elin noticed changes almost daily. The Summer Trials, exams that determined which students could go on to the next level, were approaching, and she could not afford to spend so much time with the cub. But when she was not there, Leelan wandered about the meadow forlornly, crying and searching for her, and this made it hard for her to focus on her studies.

Kazalumu School could not afford to let students stay any longer than necessary. Those who failed their exams had to leave. If their parents were wealthy enough to pay for tuition, students who failed could stay on for an extra year, but Elin had no intention of asking Joeun for money. Of course, Yuyan helped Elin to catch up on her studies but, much to her surprise, Tomura also came to her rescue. He would have to take the Graduation Trials very soon, which ought to mean that he had no time to spare for anyone else. But he did

not seem in the least concerned when he was tutoring her. His claim that he was an exceptional student must be true.

Somehow she managed to make it through the Summer Trials, and then the long summer holidays began. Students were allowed to return home, except when they were in charge of the Royal Beasts and any sick animals from neighboring farms. Most students could not wait to be reunited with their families, while their parents, who needed every pair of helping hands during the busy farming season, were just as eager to welcome them home.

When Elin found out that she could go home for the holidays if she chose, the thought of visiting Joeun passed through her mind. But when she considered how he might greet her now that he had returned to his old life in the capital, she did not have the courage to put that thought into action. And then there was Leelan. If she left the cub behind, someone might use the Silent Whistle. In the end, she contented herself with writing him a long letter. She wrote about life at the school, about Yuyan, and many other things, but she did not mention Leelan, just in case Joeun's son read it. Only a few months had passed since she and Joeun had parted, but the days they had lived together now seemed like some distant dream. She found this both strange and sad.

Yuyan left for her home far away, complaining repeatedly about how much she would miss Elin. Even though she knew that she would see Yuyan in the fall, the room seemed huge and empty without her.

Tomura had passed his exams at the top of his class and was now a qualified beast doctor. He told Elin that he was going to stay in Kazalumu for a year starting in the fall, and help care for the animals while he thought about what to do next. Having graduated with the highest score, he also had the right to remain at the school as a teacher. He had told her frankly that he was considering that option.

With far fewer people, the school was very quiet. The Kazalumu highlands remained fairly cool even in summer. Still, the sultry hum of cicadas could be heard from the forest bordering the meadow, and Elin found herself drenched in sweat every time she cleaned the stables.

Freed from her studies, she spent all her time with Leelan, from early morning

until late at night, as if they were parent and child or siblings. One day, she realized something astonishing. Leelan seemed to understand what she was saying—not everything, in the way that a human would, but without a doubt, the cub recognized and understood certain words.

She was cleaning the stable when she first noticed this. Leelan came back before she was finished and was about to come inside. Without thinking, she shouted, “Stay outside! I’m not finished yet!” Instantly, Leelan halted at the doorway. The cub poked its head inside to see what she was doing, but did not come in. At first, Elin could not believe it. She finished cleaning, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and placed a lump of meat in its stall. “It’s all right. You can come in now,” she said. As soon as she had spoken, Leelan rushed inside. Elin felt the hairs rise on the nape of her neck.

The only possible explanation for the cub’s behavior was that it had understood what she had said. When she thought about this, she realized that it was not so strange. After all, dogs, when trained, could understand such commands as “Stay!” so it made sense that Royal Beasts could, too. But the thought of the possibilities this opened up made her tingle with excitement.

How much language can Royal Beasts understand? she wondered. If she combined harp notes with words and gestures, Leelan might be capable of understanding quite a lot.

From that day onward, she threw herself into teaching Leelan words. Once she started, it was soon obvious that Leelan picked up meanings much more quickly and intuitively than a dog or a horse. Not only that, but the cub watched her closely and tried to mimic her. Perhaps Leelan was observing her facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice just as intently as Elin had been doing with Leelan in order to guess how the cub was feeling. Royal Beast cubs spent most of their time with their mothers, learning one-on-one how to survive, so remembering the mother’s gestures and tone of voice must be very important.

At the same time, Elin was struck by the enormity of the responsibility she had taken on. Is it really all right for me to act as Leelan’s surrogate mother? After pondering this for some time, she decided to consult Esalu.

Esalu listened carefully to her concern. When she spoke, her expression was

grave. "I see." She paused and stroked her chin. Then she raised her eyes and looked at Elin. "So you're worried that if you try to serve as Leelan's mother, the cub won't learn how to live or communicate as a Royal Beast, and instead will learn to communicate with humans. Is that correct?"

"Yes. If I go on like this, the cub will learn the words that I speak, but not the language of other Beasts."

A sad smile crossed Esalu's face. "Elin, you don't need to worry about that."

"Really? Why?" Elin asked.

"Because the cub will live and die here..." Esalu said quietly. "It was a gift to the Yojuh. It will never be returned to the wild. You have forgotten that."

Elin felt as if she had been punched in the chest. Stunned into silence, she could only stare at Esalu.

She did not remember bowing or leaving the room, or even walking down the corridor. When she saw Leelan standing in the bright summer sun, a fierce sorrow surged within her. Even if she never used the Silent Whistle and never gave the cub tokujisui, in the end, Leelan could still never live as Beasts did in the wild. The cub would have to live here to the end of its days. She wept soundlessly, the tears pouring down her cheeks.

Not long after, Elin's letter to Joeun came back in an unexpected way. One evening, as she was feeding Leelan, one of the custodians came and told her that Esalu wanted to see her urgently. She washed her hands quickly and hurried to the office, but when she asked for permission to enter, the voice that responded sounded so husky that she thought it must be someone else.

When she entered the room, Esalu gazed at her steadily with red-rimmed eyes and flushed cheeks. "Come here, Elin," she said.

Elin walked over to her, and Esalu handed her a thin envelope that lay on top of a parcel. Elin's name was written on it in strong black script. She turned it over and saw that the sender was Asan Tohsana. A chill pierced her heart. With trembling fingers, she opened the envelope and extracted the letter, spreading it open. The first line leapt out at her.

My father, Joeun Tohsana, passed away yesterday morning from a heart

attack.

The sentence rang repeatedly in her mind. Her brain seemed to have gone numb. No matter how many times she tried to read the rest of the letter, her eyes just slid over the words. She did not realize that she was crying until Esalu gently took the letter from her hands. "May I read it?" she asked.

Elin nodded. Esalu quickly read it through. "Very brief, isn't it? He wrote only the bare minimum ... What a heartless son." She sighed and gripped Elin's shoulder. "You must be brave, Elin."

Hearing the huskiness in Esalu's voice, Elin felt the truth sink heavy in her chest: Joeun was gone.

His face, his voice, rose in her mind. She would never, ever see him again. Even though she had hoped someday to surprise him by showing him Leelan. Even though she had been aiming to graduate at the top of her class so that she could see the pride in his face and hear him praise her. Even though she had been planning to thank him on that day for taking her in, to tell him that her life had been happy because of him.

She had not told him any of the things that really mattered. And now he had left her without any chance to do so.

Elin covered her face with her hands and wept aloud. Esalu came around her desk and embraced her awkwardly. She held her until she stopped crying. "Don't cry, Elin," she said. "Joeun told me how happy he was to have lived with you. He was so proud of you. So don't cry anymore." She let her arms fall and opened the large parcel that lay on her desk. "Look. Joeun left these for you."

Inside the brown waxed paper were the books that Elin had discovered in Joeun's closet and read in secret.

"Isn't that just like him?"

Elin did not answer. She rested her forehead on the books and wept again.

Joeun's son, in accordance with his father's will, had sent the books to Elin and Esalu after the funeral, along with the simple note announcing his father's death. It was very clear that he wanted nothing to do with the Ahlyo girl that his eccentric father had taken under his wing. Still, because of Esalu's prestige, he

would have done what was proper for Elin if she had asked him. Elin, however, had no intention of meeting him ever again. She felt no desire to have a guardian other than Joeun. She was no longer a child. Fortunately, she did not need to worry about food, clothing, or shelter until she graduated, and by then, she would be old enough to take care of herself.

Watching the sky darken to twilight, Elin thought of the summer days she had spent with Joeun. And it gradually dawned on her how incredibly lucky she had been. If no one had found her on the bank where the Toda had left her, she would probably have died. If the person who had found her had been cruel, who knew what kind of misery she might now be living in?

She saw Joeun's smiling face in her mind's eye. Yes, she had been happy. Those days with him were like priceless gems.

When I grow up, I'll go back to the meadow on Kasho Mountain where Joeun had his summer hut.

She would lie in that meadow full of flowers he had loved so much, look up at the sky, and speak with him. She would tell him how grateful she was for all he had done, how much she had longed to see him, how she had spent her days, and how she had grown up ... She would live in such a way that Joeun would declare, "Well done, Elin, well done. You've lived your life well."

She stood in the meadow gazing up at the sky until the clouds streaming across it turned from smoky gray to a deep, dark blue.

5

WOUNDED

Summer had passed, and the students were just returning when the Beast cub began to shed its baby fur. Beneath the soft down, a thicker coat with a brilliant sheen was beginning to emerge, but the effect was marred by shaggy clumps of partly shed fur clinging to its body.

"Oh, poor Leelan! What a sorry sight," Yuyan exclaimed. She had just

returned to the school and was visiting the stable for the first time.

“Don’t say that, Yuyan. It takes years for Royal Beasts to fully mature and develop a full adult coat. But at least she’ll have shed her baby fur soon. Then she’ll look prettier.”

Yuyan’s brows flew up. “She? You mean Leelan’s a female?”

“Yup. I just found that out recently.”

It was only when Royal Beasts shed their baby fur that it became possible to determine their gender. Esalu had taught Elin how to check, and she had been thrilled to find out that Leelan was female.

“She may be a girl, but she’s a raggedy one, that’s for sure,” Tomura remarked as he passed by with the medicine box.

Yuyan burst out laughing. “She sure is. A raggedy girl. You couldn’t have put it better, Tomura.”

It was true. Leelan did look very raggedy. Elin struggled not to laugh. “You’re so mean,” she teased, and then turned to Leelan. “Don’t you pay any attention to them. Just wait until you get your coat. Then they’ll see.”

Leelan raised her head and looked at them, as if she knew they were talking about her. Then she began scratching vigorously, making a rumbling noise in her throat. The matted clumps must be irritating her. Wisps of downy fur whirled in the air.

“Now if she were a dog or a horse, we could groom her with a brush,” Tomura said.

“That’s an idea,” Elin murmured. She turned abruptly and ran over to the toolshed. Although a dog brush would be too small, a horse brush just might work. When she returned with the brush, Tomura and Yuyan gave her a startled look.

“What on earth are you planning to do?”

“Do you expect me to sit by quietly while you call my little girl raggedy?” Elin said, grinning at Yuyan as she climbed over the fence. She walked over to Leelan, feeling her friends’ eyes on her back as they watched her anxiously. The

cub made a plaintive sound as she approached. Spreading her wings, which had grown significantly, she hopped up and down, stirring up a cloud of fur in Elin's face.

Elin covered her face with her arm. "Leelan! Stop that! Stay still, will you?" Although she still cooed impatiently, Leelan did as she was told, folding her wings and lowering her head to nuzzle her cheek against Elin's shoulder.

"I don't believe it..." Yuyan looked stunned. "Who would have thought a Royal Beast would do that ... She's acting like a pet dog or cat."

Tomura nodded. "I know what you mean."

Elin raised the brush to Leelan's nose so that she could smell it. "I'm going to brush your fur with this, so stay still." Leelan sniffed the brush inquisitively, but when Elin began running it gently over her lower back, she seemed to like the sensation and began purring happily. "You're just too big, Leelan. It will take me all day to groom you using a horse brush. We'll have to make one your size."

She kept brushing as she talked, working up to Leelan's belly and chest, but when she slipped the brush under the wing joint, it caught in a tangle. It must have hurt. With a squeal of pain, Leelan bared her razor-sharp fangs. Before Elin could react, they had nicked her left earlobe and shoulder. Heat shot across her skin, as if she had touched a pair of red-hot tongs. She leapt away with a scream. Staggering backward, she fell to her knees on the grass. Blood dripped down her face. Blood dyed the grass, spreading slowly around her. A single thought blazed through the confusion in her mind. She raised herself to one knee and twisted her body to look back at Tomura.

"Don't!" she yelled. "Don't blow the whistle!"

Tomura, who had just been reaching for his Silent Whistle, froze and let his hand fall. Elin pressed her right hand against her ear and stood up. She felt no pain in her shoulder. Or rather, she felt no sensation at all, as if it were numb. "Whatever you do, don't blow the whistle!" she shouted again. Then she tried to turn back to Leelan.

The cub was frightened. Panicked by the smell of blood and Elin's reaction, she flapped her wings frantically.

I must scold her, Elin thought. I must teach her right now that her fangs can hurt us.

But when she saw the blood dripping down her arm, she lost her voice. Her heart raced, and the world around her seemed unsteady. There was a ringing in her ears, as if cicadas were humming in her head. Silver specks of light flickered in front of her eyes, and she broke into a cold sweat. Turning her back on Leelan, she began tottering toward her friends. Dimly, she noticed that they had climbed over the fence and were coming toward her, but everything appeared blurred.

I must not fall.

If she did, Leelan would panic.

She forced herself on, dragging one foot in front of the other. Relief washed through her as she felt Yuyan and Tomura support her on either side. The ringing in her ears became a roar, and the world went dark.

When she opened her eyes, she wondered for a moment why she was lying on a soft mattress. She let her gaze wander over the ceiling. The clear light of an autumn afternoon shone through the window. A dull pain throbbed in her left ear and shoulder. She moved her head slowly, wincing, and saw someone sitting by her pillow. It was Esalu. When she saw the disgusted expression on her face, it all came back to her.

“Honestly, Elin,” Esalu grumbled. “What a stupid thing to do.”

Elin’s face twisted. When she thought of how she had sauntered so confidently up to Leelan with that brush in her hand, she felt so ashamed, she wished she could disappear. How was Leelan feeling right now? Yuyan and Tomura must be worried sick, too.

She pulled the quilt up over her head and hid her face. She wept, not so much because of the pain, but because of her stupidity.

“Now don’t you go hiding under those covers,” Esalu said sternly. “You’ll just make the cut on your ear worse. You’ve got three stitches in your earlobe and

eight in your shoulder, you know.” She pulled back the covers roughly. “If you’re ashamed of what you’ve done, then just make sure you never do such a foolish thing again! This time you got away with a cut on your ear and shoulder, but if those fangs had been even slightly to the right, they would have sliced your jugular. If that happened, you’d be dead. Royal Beasts are not pets. You were so cocksure of your bond with Leelan that it blinded you to the obvious risk!”

Elin was sobbing so hard that she could barely breathe, but she nodded.

Esalu sighed. “I have to admit that I’m partly to blame. I overestimated your ability. Leelan has almost matured into an adult now. I think it’s better if you don’t touch her anymore.”

Elin opened her eyes and stared at Esalu. “No ... I won’t stop.”

Esalu glared at her. “I don’t care whether you like it or not. No means no. Whether Leelan means to harm you or not, she could cut your throat and kill you just by baring her fangs.”

Elin shook her head as best she could without lifting it from the pillow. Struggling to suppress her sobs, she said, “I ... know that. I ... promise ... I won’t be ... careless again ... But if I ... distance myself from Leelan ... it won’t be fair ... She sees me as ... her mother ... Please ... let me stay ... by her side ... until she’s ready ... to be independent.”

Esalu frowned and looked at her for a long moment. Finally, she said with a sigh, “If you insist on seeing Leelan so subjectively, you’re going to get yourself killed one of these days. You’ve fallen into the same delusion that afflicts so many people who care for creatures. You think that this was just a freak accident, don’t you? That as long as a fluke like this never happens again, Leelan will never hurt you. Because you’re special to her.”

Elin’s face crumpled. Watching her, Esalu said softly, “It may be true that to Leelan you are like a mother ... But a beast is always a beast.” She broke off and rubbed her face with her hand. Her eyes were blurred with fatigue. She looked at Elin and asked, “Do you know what it takes to make a beast obedient?” She did not wait for an answer. “Beasts obey anyone they perceive as stronger than themselves, anyone they see as superior. For a beast, the most important thing

is the ability to discern how strong others are. You studied that, right? Beasts that live in packs or herds measure each other's strength and decide who is stronger. The weak obey the strong.

"In the world of beasts, strength and weakness are unforgiving measures that determine survival. A runt will not receive food from its mother. It will be kicked from the nest by its siblings and left to die. A weak male will never have the chance to mate and leave offspring in this world. The weak cannot protect their territory.

"In a one-on-one relationship, it's only natural for beasts to measure which one is the stronger."

Esalu pulled the Silent Whistle out of her robe and shook it in front of Elin. "You hate this, I know. But the Royal Beasts are far superior to us in strength. This is the only thing that can convince them of our superiority, despite our physical weakness." She threw the whistle on top of Elin's chest. "If you see yourself as Leelan's mother, then train her. While she is still young, drill into her the fact that you are superior, so that she learns to obey you without question ... If you don't, when she grows up, there will inevitably come a time when you can no longer control her."

Esalu's eyes had a cold glint that would tolerate no argument. "The feeling that all creatures share in common is not love. It's fear, Elin. Engrave that on your bones. If you continue to dream and nurture this illusion in your heart, your eyes will lose the ability to see the truth. Those wounds are a good lesson. Decide right now to abandon that dream. Be objective and logical, and learn to keep a proper distance, to take a stand."

Elin slid her hand out from under the covers and grasped the Silent Whistle. She stared at it for a while, but then held it out. Esalu looked at her silently, and Elin returned her gaze.

Finally, Esalu said in an exasperated tone, "Write your will then. Write that if you die, it was your own fault—that it was due to your own stupidity. Say that the headmistress is not to blame for your mistake. Write it and give it to me when you're done." And with those words, she left the room, an angry scowl still on her face.

Esalu might just have been venting her frustration, but when Elin was able to get out of bed, she really did write a will. She did not address it to anyone in particular. She merely wanted to record her feelings, because if she were to keep getting close to the Royal Beast, she might lose her life at any time. When she recalled the moment Leelan's fangs had sliced her ear and shoulder, her stomach knotted. If they had touched her neck or midriff ...

She did not need Esalu to warn her. She was terrified to the core. For the first time in her life, she was afraid of Leelan. Yet she still could not bring herself to use the Silent Whistle to "train" the cub. As she wrote her will, she remembered Joeun's warning.

"Listen. There is a big difference between people and animals. Don't ever forget that. Totchi is a gentle mare. She's used to you and to me. She's like family. But if a wasp stung her and she was startled by the pain, she could kill you with one blow of her hoof. A person stung by a wasp would go crazy with pain, too, but they would never kill their friend because of it. A horse can't make that distinction."

It was true. There was a huge gap between beasts and humans. She had a bad habit of taking that gap too lightly, such as the time she had killed a honeybee by trying to stroke it. These wounds were a warning stamped on her body so that she could never forget.

Still, she did not think that Esalu was right. Fear could not be the only emotion that living creatures shared in common. The feeling that she sensed Leelan had for her was far warmer than that. How could she use the Silent Whistle if she wished to teach Leelan that violence was wrong? Using the whistle would be like beating her with a whip, and she could not bear the thought of training her like that.

Not wishing to give the will to Esalu in person, she put it in an envelope with the headmistress's name on it and placed it in Esalu's shoe cupboard. She did not know if Esalu had read it or not, for she never mentioned it, but she did not stop Elin from going to Leelan once her wounds were healed.

SIX

FLIGHT



1

QUICKENING ANXIETY

By nature, Shunan was a light sleeper. And sleep did not come easily right now. His mind was busy with many thoughts, for he knew it might not be long before he must take his father's place as Aluhan. For that reason, he had chosen to wander through the palace gardens tonight. Although he pitied the guards who must stay with him so late, he found his thinking was sharper when he paced back and forth gazing at the thin clouds veiling the moon.

For the last few years, two concerns in particular had occupied his mind. One was the movement of the Lahza, the horse riders who were spreading across the eastern plains, swallowing up the many tribes that lived there. In the past, they had been just one small tribe among many, but now they had amassed more than a hundred tribes and were building a formidable nation. Their frequent raids along the eastern border of Lyoza were proof that they had ambitions regarding this land.

Up to now, the Toda Warriors had repelled them every time. But the Toda were few in number. With incursions so frequent, the Aluhan could not rely on Toda troops alone, and recently he had begun recruiting large numbers of soldiers from the common people. This only increased the commoners' discontent.

And that was Shunan's second concern. His people shed their blood to protect this land, yet instead of the respect that they deserved, they were viewed by the Holon with fear and contempt, and were suspected of plotting to kill the Yojuh. Why are we the only ones to lay down our lives in defense of the kingdom? This was the doubt that festered in his people's minds, and it was turning slowly into discontent and a deep-rooted bitterness.

That's what is breeding assassins in our midst, yet every attempt on the Yojuh's life increases the Holon's fear and hatred for us ... The longer this goes on, the more entrenched this vicious cycle will become. If we don't break free of it, there will be no future for our country.

But to choose the wrong way to do so would cut even more deeply into the fabric of the nation. No matter what, they must avoid acting hastily. Shunan's father, however, suffered from an old illness that was growing steadily worse, and Shunan feared that he would force himself to take action before he had resolved the doubts in his mind. He knew full well that if his father should commit the act of brutality he was contemplating, it would not be from self-interest, but rather to protect the future of his sons. But the method he was considering would be a colossal mistake.

The problem was the shape their country should take. He and his father were both in agreement on the ultimate goal. What they did not agree on was how to get there. Shunan was sure that his father's approach would not bring about a better future.

He claims that the Yojuh's authority is all froth and no substance, but he doesn't realize that the structure of that power is laid deep within his own mind.

And that is why coercion and force were the only solutions his father could see. If he knew what Shunan was thinking, his eyes would pop out of his head,

and he would undoubtedly declare it impossible. He would have good reason, too. Anyone would agree, whether they were Holon or Wajak. His brother Nugan, who believed that the true way of the Aluhan was to swear fealty to the Yojuh and accept defilement on her behalf, would blaze with anger and denounce his idea as a desecration.

But this country will only be reborn when we succeed in destroying the invisible yet rigid power structure embedded in people's minds.

Shunan was aware that his people trusted him, and he believed that he could do what it took to fulfill that trust. But if Lahza became a powerful kingdom, it would no longer be possible for the Aluhan's people alone to defend this country. Should that day come, their survival would depend upon their ability to unite their two territories.

He came to a halt at the edge of the pond and looked up at the moon. There is only one way to bind our two peoples together. But how was he to share this feeling, to communicate his thoughts to her? His mind had been focused on this problem for some time. Once and only once, he had summoned the courage to convey to her what he was thinking. Her response had been curt—a natural reaction. But if he failed to change her concept of “natural,” there could be no future for this country. To communicate with her would be dangerous, like walking a tightrope, but it would have to be done.

While Shunan was gazing up at the moon in the palace garden, Ialu was lurking in a back alley in the capital. Ever since the attempted assassination on the Yojuh's birthday four years earlier, he had been following a hunch. No one knew the true nature of the Sai Gamulu. Had the assassin really been a member, or was someone using its existence as a cover for their own assassination plot? If his suspicion proved to be right, it would mean that someone was trying to kill the Yojuh for a very different reason than the Sai Gamulu.

He tensed as he felt someone approaching. A dark figure emerged far down the street and moved toward him. As soon as he saw the outline of the person's face by the faint light of the moon, the tension drained from him. It was one of his trusted men who was helping with the investigation. The man bowed slightly.

“How did it go? Did you find anything?”

He nodded. “It may not be directly related to the same incident, but I uncovered something disturbing as I was checking up on the merchants he deals with.”

The demand for wild Toda eggs had risen dramatically over the last few years due to frequent skirmishes with the horse riders of Lahza, and many men had begun collecting the lucrative eggs, despite the risks involved. Most people in this trade were Wajak, not only because Toda were considered unclean, but also because they were bought by the Aluhan. Recently, however, some Holon had become involved. Wild Toda lived in the remote mountain rivers and swamps of Yojeh territory as well, so it was no surprise that people would be drawn by the promise of high profits. But to sell the eggs, they needed a connection with the Toda traders of Aluhan territory. According to Ialu’s subordinate, one merchant who served as a middleman had dealings with the person he suspected.

“Toda...” Ialu whispered. The man in question ought to have no relation to Toda at all. If he were indeed trying to gather fighting serpents, then Ialu could perceive a dreadful possibility. “Thank you. You did well. I’m impressed that you were able to find out that much in such a short time. Please keep your eye on that merchant. See if he is not only selling eggs but is involved in raising them somewhere as well.”

Whenever her maidservant Nami brought some of her mother’s baking, Seimiya’s heart beat faster, as if she had just run a race. As the official taster who protected the Yojeh’s only granddaughter from poisoning, Nami was highly trusted, and no one thought of inspecting the food she brought. But once, a letter had been hidden within one of her baked goods.

When she had given it to Seimiya, Nami had been prepared to die. She had waited until they were alone and then, her face deathly pale, she had presented it to Seimiya and told her that during her holiday the Aluhan’s eldest son had come to her alone one night. With a grave expression, he had told her his vision

of how the Yojeh could be saved from assassination and the nation spared from division.

With trembling lips, she had said, "Lord Shunan told me that he intended to kill me if I objected. But although I am not wise, I think his idea is the best way to save the Yojeh. I know that if others heard what he suggested, they would be furious. But for me, the only thing that matters is your life and the life of the Yojeh." A light had kindled in her eyes as she gazed at Seimiya. "You have the Se Zan to protect you, but in the end they are only human. There is no guarantee that they will be able to stop every assassin that comes. I ... I am afraid. I'm afraid that one day, both of you..."

Seimiya, her face bloodless, had grasped the girl's trembling arms. "That's enough, Nami. I understand.... But the road he proposes is unthinkable. He must know that. So why did he even suggest it?"

The blood that ran in her veins was not that of ordinary people. It was sacred, inherited in a direct and unbroken line from her ancestor, who had been born in the land of the gods far beyond the Afon Noah. It was this that made the Yojeh the soul of the nation. The most important duty of a woman born to that line was to protect its sacredness. That was why they often married an uncle or a cousin. If the women in the Yojeh's line married men without that ancestry, even members of the nobility, the sacredness of that blood would be watered down.

She could not help being attracted to Shunan. If only I had been born a noblewoman instead ... What joy she would have felt to receive this letter had that been the case. She had bitten her lip at this thought. She hated to give in to self-pity, no matter how small.

Looking sternly at Nami, she had said, "I understand why you did this. But you must never again bring me such a letter. Were anyone to find out, it would indeed divide this country, so make sure that you never mention it to anyone."

"Yes, my lady," Nami had replied anxiously.

In the four years since that time, there had never been another letter, but whenever Nami brought her mother's baking, Seimiya could not help but remember Shunan's proposal.

Nami was just pouring tea into a fine china cup when she heard the voice of a young Se Zan outside the door.

“Lord Damiya is here. Shall I let him in?”

Seimiya raised her head and nodded. Nami opened the door, and Damiya walked in bearing a large box. He must have just returned from outside, for he was cloaked with the smell of wind—a scent that raised Seimiya’s spirits. Whenever she saw her uncle, he reminded her of a fresh breeze blowing through a stuffy room—bright and bracing, but with a hint of danger, as if he might carry her off to some forbidden place.

“My dear Seimiya, how are you today?” He smiled and made to place the box on the table. Nami hastily pushed the tea and sweets to one side, and he nodded to her before gently putting it down.

“What have you brought me, Uncle? Knowing you, it’s bound to be something strange.”

Damiya looked at her in mock offense. “Strange? Now when have I ever given you something strange? Here, take a look.” He lifted the lid and gestured toward the box.

Seimiya gasped. Inside lay a perfect replica of the palace, along with the gardens and the forest surrounding it. Surely this must be what it would look like from the sky. The model was so exquisite, she could hardly believe it was man-made, but she gave him a playful glare. “Dear uncle, you’re still bringing me toys, as if I were a mere child.”

Damiya reached out a hand and caressed her cheek. His touch was so gentle, it was as if a wing had brushed her face.

“If I thought you were a child, I certainly wouldn’t bring you something like this. Only a grown woman could appreciate such fine craftsmanship. You know perfectly well how much talent has gone into this, don’t you?”

Seimiya cast down her eyes, her heart beating quickly. She strove to keep her voice calm so that he would not know how his touch had unsettled her. “Of

course, I do.”

He took her hand gently in his and placed her fingers on the tips of the wooden trees. They tickled like the hairs on a calligraphy brush, and she tensed.

“It’s amazing, don’t you think? See how soft they are. If the gods reached out to touch the trees in the forest, I bet they’d feel just like this.”

Seimiya endured the tickling in her fingertips as she listened to his voice.

Four years had passed since the autumn Elin had first arrived at Kazalumu School. Every fall, the trees hedging the highlands turned bright gold in a blaze of color against the distant snow-topped ridges of the Onolu Mountains. The sight always took her breath away. But autumn did not linger in the highlands. It sped away, followed by the cruel winter.

The snow-laden wind that blew from the northwest collided against the mountains, dumping heavy snow on the north face. Fortunately, this meant that not much snow fell on the highlands, which were on the southeast side. But the chill of the wind, freed from its burden and whistling lightly down from the mountains, penetrated to the bone.

By the winter solstice, snow fell even in Kazalumu, fluttering down to cover the meadow, the stables, and the school in a thin white blanket. While Royal Beasts did not like rain or thunder, they were impervious to the cold. Regardless of whether the meadow was covered in snow, as long as it was sunny, they went outside, their breath frosting the air.

Leelan had matured into a full-fledged, well-proportioned Royal Beast. But what everyone admired most was her fur. Tomura, who was now a teacher, was fond of remarking to his colleagues that even the coats on the Beasts at the Lazalu Sanctuary could not compare in beauty to hers. He need not have bothered, as they were already staunch admirers.

One day, Esalu stood watching Elin with Leelan. She remembered Elin telling her that the fur of wild Beasts seemed to change color depending on the light. True to those words, Leelan’s fur shone golden at sunset and silver in the

morning. But what caused this difference? Several things came to mind, but two of these seemed particularly significant. Since Elin had begun to care for her, Leelan had never been immobilized by the Silent Whistle, even though it was used regularly on the other Beasts, nor had she drunk any tokujisui.

If those are the differences that cause her fur to shine like that ... why on earth would the Canon dictate that we care for Beasts in a way that dulls their fur? For many years, Esalu had wondered if there wasn't some hidden purpose behind the Royal Beast Canon. I wonder if the warning which that man gave me has something to do with this.

Once, long ago, while searching for Royal Beasts deep in the mountains, she had met a tall stranger, an incident which she had never mentioned to anyone. When she had first learned that Elin had seen Beasts in the wild, she had feared that she might have some connection with him. Having observed her for the last four years, however, Esalu had discarded that suspicion and was now convinced that, just as Joeun had said, Elin knew nothing of the vows the Ahlyo kept, even though she was of Ahlyo blood. If she had been bound by those vows, she would never have deviated from the Canon.

The encounter remained clear in her memory—the tall man's cold green eyes and his robe that was as gray as the mist, the dim light among the trees that had surrounded them, the smell of damp moss.

When he had learned that she was a teacher at the Royal Beast Sanctuary, he had warned her, "You must stop looking for Beasts in the wild. From the moment a Beast falls into the hands of men, it is bound by Aoh, the Law. Without Aoh, Beasts are dangerous. You, and those like you, whose duty is to bind them to the Law, must not see them in the wild."

When Esalu had asked him why, he had answered coldly. "You are an intelligent and enthusiastic scholar who raises the Yojeh's Beasts. To see them in the wild would kindle a flame in your heart that could trigger the most fearsome calamity. I'm sure you find that hard to believe, but I know what you do not. I beg of you, please heed my warning. Do you wish to cause a disaster for which you would never forgive yourself?"

She had not wanted to bow to an Ahlyo prophesy that made no sense, but the

cold fear that had gripped her was still firmly rooted in her mind. She had felt as though the Ahlyo were always watching her, and so had not gone hunting wild Beasts again.

What could be so dangerous about seeing Royal Beasts in the wild? she had wondered. What was the Law meant to protect, and how was that connected to the Beasts? It had made her angry to think that those who dedicated their lives to caring for the Royal Beasts were not allowed to know. The idea that people would keep others ignorant in order to protect something was abhorrent. Sound judgment could only be made once one knew all the facts. To conceal them would prevent people from making an informed decision.

Who is trying to keep us ignorant? She did not think that the wandering Ahlyo had that kind of power. And besides, the Canon was supposed to have been written by the first Yojeh. Could it be the Yojeh?

For years, she had had no way of finding out, but then Elin had come along. In her naivety and ignorance of the Law and the Canon, she had burst through the rules with ease. At times, the sight of her with Leelan filled Esalu with foreboding. Will something terrible happen if we continue raising Leelan like a Beast in the wild? Leelan already stood out from the other Beasts in the sanctuary. If she continued to mature like this, would it cause some disaster? The Ahlyo had tried to stop Esalu from even seeing wild Beasts. What had he feared?

Esalu was aware that part of her wanted to learn what that danger was, and that this was one reason she had given Elin free rein. At the same time, however, she was afraid to put Elin at risk just to satisfy her own curiosity. Perhaps she should tell her everything. Even if she did, Elin was unlikely to change how she cared for Leelan because of what the Ahlyo had said. After all, this was the girl who had written her will so that she could stay with Leelan. Still, she could not bring herself to reveal to Elin that it was the Ahlyo's warning she had feared all these years.

Leelan spread her wings, and Elin's slender figure seemed suddenly even smaller. Esalu stood and stared for a long time at the girl as she reached up, without the least trace of fear, to stroke the Beast's chest.

FLIGHT

When the New Year's break came and Kazalumu was once again deserted, Elin breathed a sigh of relief. During the last four years, a disturbing idea had been germinating in her mind. Most people would probably have dismissed it as nonsense; but those who did not might be alarmed. She did not even feel comfortable sharing it with Yuyan.

As Elin had come to know Leelan better, there were times when the Beast's intelligence amazed her. In certain ways, Royal Beasts were very like humans. She did her best to prevent others from noticing these things, but by spring of her first year, Leelan could understand almost everything Elin said. She had not only mastered the "words" that Elin had created from variations of *lon*, the Beasts' harp-like cry, but she also used them to convey what she wanted.

The first "sentence" she had communicated had been very simple—"back," "itchy," "scratch." Elin, however, had been stunned. What she had just heard seemed impossible. She had taught Leelan sounds for different parts of the body, such as back, head, shoulder, and feet. She had also taught her sounds for "hurt" and "itchy," and for "touch" and "scratch." But she had never shown her how to put those sounds together to make a sentence. Instead of merely mimicking Elin, she had combined sounds on her own to convey where she itched and what she wanted done about it.

Elin knew that dogs and horses could understand some words and convey what they wanted to some extent, but only through sounds they already used, such as barks or whinnies, along with body movements and facial expressions. They did not use a language composed of arbitrarily combined sounds. Leelan, however, not only used the "words" that she had been taught, but had figured out how to combine these to convey a complex wish. She had grasped the sounds and the semantic rules that Elin had created and had used them to produce language. In no time at all, the two were communicating quite naturally—Elin speaking to Leelan in human speech, and Leelan responding with harp-like cries ...

There were times when Elin felt that she had opened a forbidden door. Honeybees built hives, marvelous structures that humans could never hope to imitate. In the same way, all wild creatures used innate, yet astounding, capacities to build the environment in which they lived. But she could not help thinking that what Leelan had done surpassed the bounds of nature.

Or could it be that Royal Beasts in the wild also modulated their cries to make conversation? If so, then they were much closer to humans in their thought processes than anyone had believed. And if that were the case, then why had no one ever had a conversation with one, despite the fact that Beasts had been raised in captivity for several centuries?

This point struck Elin as very unnatural. When she had first noticed Leelan's ability, she had reread the Royal Beast Canon. The first Yojuh must have known what Royal Beasts could do when she had written these rules, and it was then that the idea came to Elin: Did the Yojuh deliberately design the Canon so that no one would ever communicate with the Beasts? Elin's heart had grown cold at the thought. If that was her intention, then I may be making a terrible mistake ...

She did not know why it would be taboo for people to speak with Royal Beasts. But if the hidden purpose of the Canon was to prevent this, what would happen if the Yojuh or those around her discovered what she was doing? What if not just Elin but Esalu and everyone else at the school got into trouble? This was her greatest fear, and the reason she was so careful to conceal the fact that she and Leelan could communicate.

When anyone else was around, she hardly spoke to Leelan at all. The harp was a bit safer because no one else could understand, but even then she tried to use it when no one was there, limiting any conversations with Leelan to times when they were far from the school, such as when they were in the shadow of the forest or at the river. She had to be discreet, however, because people like Professor Losa might get nosy if she seemed to be keeping Leelan out of the way.

For this reason, she felt a tremendous load lift from her shoulders whenever there was a holiday.

Leelan wanted to go out every day. “I’m not like you. For me, snow is cold,” Elin grumbled, but Leelan ignored her. She hopped lightly on her hind feet, moving with ease across the snowy fields. Her favorite spot was the ravine through which the river flowed. She could spend most of the day perched on a crag just listening to the water murmuring.

But the cold bit through Elin’s leather boots and fur-lined coat, freezing her to the bone, and her feet sank in the powdery snow, making it a struggle just to walk. She had to stop frequently and stretch the kinks out of her back. Leelan could have raced ahead, but she always stopped, waiting patiently like a mother for her child. This made Elin wonder when Royal Beasts normally left the nest.

Leelan looked and sounded far more like the wild Beasts than those at the sanctuary, and she appeared to be full grown. Yet she still could not fly, nor did she show any sign of wanting independence or of going into heat. When did wild Beasts reach maturity and set off to stake out their own territory? Did being raised by humans delay growing up?

When I graduate ...

Elin’s dream was to study Royal Beasts in the wild and compare their behavior with those at the sanctuary. To do that and remain in charge of Leelan, however, she would have to win the right to stay at the school by placing first in the Graduation Trials. Yuyan assured her that even if she did not place first, she would still be able to stay, precisely because of Leelan, but Elin did not want special treatment. She did not want to owe anything to anyone.

These were the thoughts in her mind as she tramped through the snowy meadow. The land began to slope gently downward, and the forest came into view. The custodians kept the trees well trimmed to make it easy for the Royal Beasts to pass through it. Unlike the deciduous forest bordering the southeast edge of the highland, the wood here on the northern edge was filled with dark green conifers, which kept the ground virtually bare of snow.

The wind dropped when they entered the trees, and the air felt warmer. Except for the occasional thud of snow sliding from a branch, not a sound could be heard, not even birds calling. Inhaling the tangy scent of the forest, Elin followed Leelan to the ravine, where a steep cliff overlooked the river below. In

summer, they could climb down, but in winter, the icy snow clinging to the rocks made it far too dangerous.

Leelan's favorite place was a ledge that jutted out over the ravine. Exposure to the sun kept it free of snow, and a rock outcrop sheltered it from the wind. When Leelan perched on the ledge, Elin nestled like an egg between her legs to warm herself. She was sure that Esalu would have a fit if she saw them like this, but Leelan had learned a lot and now knew that Elin could be easily harmed. Once she was warm again, Elin pulled a book from her cloak and began to read. Leelan's chest rumbled like a bellows as she rested in the sunshine, looking blissfully content.

"That, good."

Elin raised her head at the sound of Leelan's voice. "What's good?"

"That."

Elin turned her eyes to follow the Beast's gaze and saw a single bird floating in the air. It did look nice and plump. "You're right. It's probably very tasty. But you can't catch it."

"Why?"

"Because it's flying."

Leelan made a cooing sound in her throat. "Fly?"

Elin put her book away and stood up. Spreading her arms, she waved them up and down, mimicking flight. Leelan spread her wings and flapped them, but nothing happened.

"Back, neck, itchy. Scratch."

Elin sighed. "The back of your neck? I can't reach. Bend down, will you?"

Leelan crouched and bent over.

"I'm going to climb up, so don't move, all right? Even if it hurts, don't shake me off." Leelan was three times taller than her, which made Elin feel like a tiny bug whenever she climbed onto her back. She gripped Leelan's fur to hoist herself up.

“Where? Here?” She noticed a spot on Leelan’s neck where the fur was ruffled. She began to scratch it, and Leelan purred ecstatically.

Suddenly, Elin lurched. For an instant, she thought Leelan had moved, but then she knew what it was.

Earthquake!

The trees whipped back and forth, and snow cascaded from their branches. She could hear the rock ledge groan beneath their feet. Never had she felt such a strong quake before. Leelan gripped the ledge with her claws and spread her wings as she struggled to stay upright. Elin closed her eyes and clung desperately to her neck. With a terrible sound, the ledge beneath them snapped, then crumbled, and Leelan, whether through quick thinking or pure instinct, kicked the ledge with her feet and beat her great wings.

Elin felt her body rise, and a blast of wind tore at her hair. Beneath her, she could feel Leelan’s powerful muscles moving rhythmically. The wind on her face was so strong that she could barely open her eyes, and even when she did, all she could see was sky.

We can’t be ...

Gripping Leelan’s neck tighter, she shifted slightly so that she could look down. The sight made her gasp.

We’re flying!... We’re flying through the sky!

The river looked like a narrow ribbon. The snow-covered woods and fields, brilliant in the sunlight, extended far into the distance. Elin could feel Leelan’s joy as she thrust through the air on her great wings. She moved as if she could see the wind and the layers in the atmosphere, as if she knew instinctively which currents to use and which to avoid.

“Happy, happy, happy...” she crooned as she soared through the heavens.

It was all Elin could do to hang on. Wind roared past her ears. She could not bear to look down, and the knowledge that there was no earth beneath their feet made her tremble. She forced the thought from her mind. She could hardly breathe, but when she raised her head for air, the wind hit her so hard she almost let go. Hastily, she buried her face in Leelan’s neck. This offered some

relief, as the force of the wind now pushed her against Leelan's back, but there was nothing she could do to alleviate the cold. Icy air flowed across her, her hands grew numb, her teeth chattered, and tears welled in her eyes, which were screwed shut.

"Leelan ... Leelan!" She screamed. "Down! Leelan, please! I'm cold!"

Leelan, drunk with elation, did not respond at first. Only after Elin had shouted repeatedly did she begin slowly to descend. Wings widespread, she glided down onto the snow-covered meadow. The impact as Leelan's feet hit the ground was painfully jarring. Somehow Elin managed to disentangle her frozen fingers from Leelan's fur and slide off her back. Unable to move, she lay huddled on the ground, shaking uncontrollably.

Leelan whimpered anxiously, peering at her, then gently lowered herself on top of her, like a mother Beast warming its young. Even when the Beast's warmth had seeped through her body, Elin could not stop shivering, and her hands shook as she pressed them against her mouth. When her trembling finally ceased, all strength seemed to have been leached from her body, and she lay curled fetus-like beneath Leelan's soft, warm belly for a long time.

At last, she crawled out, but remained crouched in the snow, eyes blank, oblivious to Leelan's cries. It was only when she slowly raised her head and saw Leelan's face that emotion returned.

"Happy, happy, happy." Leelan's eyes were shining, and Elin could see that she was bursting with joy. A grin spread across her face.

"You flew..." Her eyes burned with the tears that trickled down her cheeks.

"Flew! Flew!" Leelan cried, her head raised to the sky, but then she stopped abruptly and stared toward the forest.

"What's wrong?"

Leelan's hackles rose, and she made a rumbling noise in her chest that Elin had never heard before. What could be the problem? Elin followed her gaze. At first, she could see nothing. Then, squinting her eyes, she realized that what she had taken for the shadow of a tree was actually a man. She leapt to her feet.

Tall, dressed in gray, he stood beneath the trees watching them. Perhaps

because she had seen him, he began to walk slowly toward them. Snarling, her fur standing on end, Leelan moved in front of Elin, as if to protect her, but the man showed no sign of fear as he approached. His eyes were invisible beneath the gray hood. Taking something from his cloak, he brought it to his mouth. Elin started.

“No!” she cried, just as he blew the Silent Whistle. Leelan’s snarls ceased, and she stood frozen in place, her fangs bared and wings slightly raised. The man walked past her as though she were merely a statue and stood before Elin. Now she could see his face clearly. He looked to be in his mid-forties. Within the shadow of his hood, his green eyes shone coldly.

“There’s no mistake. You must be Sohyon’s daughter. You look so like her.”

Elin stared at him blankly.

“We need to talk. Come into the forest where the trees are denser. The Beast can’t follow us there.”

3

THE SIN OF THE AHLYO

As she followed him, Elin had the strange feeling that she was walking in a familiar dream. He belonged to the Ahlyo, her mother’s people, and seemed to know her mother well. Perhaps he was kin ... Her heart beat in her throat and her mind was spinning. She barely felt her feet touch the snow.

The man strode ahead into the forest. When he was deep enough among the trees that they could not be seen from the meadow, he stopped and turned to her. Then he spoke. “This is your first time to see me, but I have been watching you from a distance for several years. You and the Beast.”

Elin’s lips felt stiff as she spoke. “Watching ... us?... But why? Who are you?” For the first time, she saw a flicker of expression in his eyes.

“Even your voice is like Sohyon’s,” he whispered. He gestured for her to sit on

a dry log and sat down beside her. “Your mother and I were of the same clan. You wouldn’t know because you weren’t raised among us, but each clan is divided into two kinship groups. She and I belonged to opposite groups, or Toh no Hara.” A sad smile touched his lips. “We choose our life partners from our clan’s Toh no Hara. Sohyon was to be my wife.”

Elin stared at him, forgetting even to breathe. He smoothed the expression from his face, as if to rein in his emotions. “But it wasn’t because you are Sohyon’s daughter ... I was watching you because, four years ago, a Spirit Beast warned us about you.”

“A Spirit ... Beast?”

The man stared off into space. “Long ago, our ancestors committed a great sin in a far distant land beyond the Afon Noah. In their remorse, they placed a curse upon themselves so that their descendants would never make the same mistake. The curse was such that, when they died, their souls would not cross into the heaven of Afon Aluma, but would remain here as a Spirit Bird to warn us should anyone use the Handler’s Art. The Spirit Beast cannot speak to the people of this world, but the Spirit Bird can. It lives within the Spirit Beast and becomes its voice ... It warned us that someone had used the Art to communicate with the Royal Beasts.”

Elin imagined the spirits of her ancestors hovering in the snow-scented gloom of the frozen forest. She hugged her arms against her body. Had they been watching her the whole time? Were they still watching her even now?

“At first we thought that Sohyon must have taught you the Art. You cannot imagine how shocked we were when we realized that you weren’t using the skills passed down among our people.”

He gazed at her face. “Along with the Law, we are drilled in the Art from the time we are very young—so that it will never be used again, so that our people will never forget the past and rediscover it. Yet you developed it on your own.”

His voice was hoarse. “We do not possess the kind of magic that we are rumored to have. All we have are the skills passed down by our ancestors from a land that once flourished beyond the Afon Noah. We have no special powers at all. Yet you, without any knowledge of those skills, developed the Art from

nothing.”

He placed a hand over his face. “Our despair was deep. How, we wondered, could someone acquire this ability naturally? Is it impossible to prevent disaster even by sealing away our ancient skills? Is this how someone sets off down the path to destruction—without even realizing that she is doing so?”

Elin stared at her fingers. White and trembling, they seemed to belong to someone else.

Clearly, by “Handler’s Art,” he meant her ability to communicate with Leelan. He thinks that what I’ve done is wrong. Is it really so terrible as to cause my mother’s people despair? Why do they think it’s a sin?

Deep inside, she heard her mother’s voice, the words she had spoken just before she had used the finger flute to control the Toda. “Elin, you must never do what I am going to do now. To do so is to commit a mortal sin.”

Now, with a sudden flash of understanding, she realized what her mother had meant. She was speaking to the Toda with her finger flute. And she was warning me that to do so is a crime ...

A pain stabbed her heart. To communicate with the Beasts, to tell them what she wanted and direct their actions: Her mother’s people called this the Handler’s Art—and they considered it a mortal sin.

“Why?” Elin whispered. “Why is it a sin to speak with the Royal Beasts?”

The man did not answer immediately. He rubbed his face with a rough and bony hand as if searching for words. Finally he sighed and said, “Even if I told you, it would sound too simple. How can I possibly convey to you the true horror when you have never seen the other side of the Afon Noah? You would never believe that speaking with the Beasts could have such terrible consequences.” He raised his eyes and looked at her. “But, still, I must try ... When I saw the Beast fly today, I knew that I had no choice.

“I should probably kill you and the Beast now to avert future disaster. Our people have vowed, however, never to take a life for any reason except for food. All we can do is to share what we know and pray that you will make the right decision...” He gripped his knees. “Daughter of Sohyon, I beg you to listen

carefully to my words. And then I implore you never to let that Royal Beast fly again. Return it to the shelter of the Law. This is the wish of your mother's people. We beg you to understand, and pray, with body and soul, that you will make the right choice." Then he began his tale.

When he finally finished, he stood up and walked off into the forest. For a long time, Elin sat on the log as if stunned.

The story he had told her was indeed horrific. But just as he had warned her, it sounded like something that had happened long ago. Although she now knew what had happened in the past when people had manipulated Royal Beasts and Toda, she could not see how her conversations with Leelan, or for that matter how her mother whistling to the Toda just once, could cause such a disaster. Surely there would need to be a complex combination of factors to cause something like that. Had the Ahlyo blown the episode out of proportion because following the Law was the very reason for their existence?

Elin buried her face in her hands. Mother, did you believe your action was a mortal sin and try to pay for it with your life? Was that why you threw away the chance of a future with me?

She had no memory of when she stood up or how she left the forest. When the bright, snow-cloaked meadow came into view, she heard a keening wail rend the air, and sound came rushing back. She dashed out of the trees into the meadow.

Leelan, wings spread wide, was stamping her feet and crying in anguish. Running over, Elin hugged her and, burying her face in her warm, glossy fur, burst into tears.

How could it be a crime to speak with Leelan? Why was it wrong for Leelan to soar through the heavens? How could something that brought such joy possibly be a sin?

Elin felt Leelan's warmth against her cheek, and her heart cried out.

I won't stop Leelan from flying. No matter what they say, I refuse to bind her with the Law.

"She what? Leelan flew?" Esalu's brows shot up as she listened to Elin's

stumbling account of what had happened.

“Yes. During the earthquake, the ledge we were on crumbled and...”

Esalu stared at her openmouthed. “Well. Who would’ve guessed...” she whispered, absently running a hand through her graying locks. Then her expression sobered. “It’s unheard of for a Beast in captivity to fly. Absolutely amazing. But we’re going to have to make sure she doesn’t escape from the meadow.”

“I know. I was worrying about that, too. I don’t think she would actually try to run away. And even if she left the meadow, she’d come back. But if she happened to have some kind of accident while she was gone ... Just the thought makes me shudder.”

“You’re right there, Elin. We have to be prepared for every possibility. Because she’s a Royal Beast.” Esalu pressed her fingers against her forehead and thought. After a long moment, she raised her eyes and looked at Elin. “You said you rode on her back, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“In that case, maybe you should start flight training.”

“What?” Elin blurted out. “Flight training?”

“Yes. Train her not to fly unless you are on her back. Teach her that even if she flies, she must come back here. Drill it into her body and mind so that it becomes a habit.” Esalu laughed at Elin’s stunned expression. “You’re lucky it’s the holidays. Make sure she’s trained before the other students come back.”

“Er ... Headmistress Esalu ... it was actually ... quite terrifying to ride on Leelan’s back when she was flying.”

Esalu raised her brows again. “Well, I certainly never expected to hear you say that you were afraid of anything.” Then she grinned. “I’m just teasing. Of course, we’ll have to figure out a way to make it safe. Perhaps we can make some kind of leather harness, like a saddle on a horse. I’ll talk to the custodians and get their help.” She seemed to be struggling to keep her features calm and impassive, but a gleam of excitement shone in her eyes. Elin grinned at the sight, and elation spread through her. The heaviness that had filled her heart

since meeting the Ahlyo finally evaporated.

Esalu liked to put her ideas into action immediately. She marched Elin off to the custodians' office to explain what they needed, and found the men relaxing around the hearth. After listening to Esalu's rapid-fire explanation, they looked at one another.

"What should we make?" one of them asked.

The chief rubbed the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. A darkly tanned man well on in years, he was popular with the students for the clever toys he made in his spare time. "Ain't no time to make nothin' from scratch," he said. "If the girl's gonna train the Beast before the others get back, we've gotta use somethin' ready on hand. We could try a saddle, but most are made for horses, not the back of a Beast ... I'm thinkin' we might wanna try a quilt saddle."

"Ah..." Understanding lit the faces of the others. Such saddles were common in areas with harsh winters. Made of a large piece of cowhide that wrapped around the horse's flanks and was secured with a strap under the belly, they resembled a quilt, which was where the name came from.

"That'd be easier to fit on the back of a Royal Beast. We just need longer cinch straps to fasten it with. We'll need to figure out how to attach reins to the cinch, too, though the Beast might not fancy that. It won't do for the girl to fall off, either, so let's try fixin' metal rings to her belt and the saddle to hold a good strong lifeline. That'll make it easy to fasten and unfasten." The gleam in his eyes made it clear that he loved his craft. "Now who'd have thought that one day we'd be makin' a saddle for a Royal Beast?"

The result was a very sturdy and well-crafted saddle. The only drawback was its weight. While that would be no problem for Leelan, Elin was the only person who could approach her without using a Silent Whistle, and this meant that she would have to saddle the Beast by herself.

"You sure you can hoist that thing?" The chief custodian's brow furrowed at the sight of Elin balancing the saddle on one shoulder.

"Yes, I'll be fine." In reality, she was doubting whether she would be able to lift it onto Leelan's back, but there was no time to fix it. She would just have to make do.

Leelan raised her head as Elin drew near and watched her with interest. "What?" she asked.

Elin let her sniff the saddle until she was satisfied and then explained what it was for. She wondered if Leelan could understand the complex explanation, but when she told her to bend down so that she could put the saddle on her back, Leelan turned about and crouched down without question.

It made Elin feel strange every time Leelan responded like this, but she shook her head to chase the thought away. Placing the saddle on her knees, she swung it up and spread it over Leelan's back. Leelan craned her neck around at the sudden weight of it, and Elin ducked under her belly and fastened the two straps securely.

"I'm going to climb up, so don't move," Elin said. She shimmied up Leelan's back, settled herself onto the saddle, and thrust her toes into the stirrups. The chief custodian had fitted them perfectly to her feet. She felt much more secure sitting in a saddle. She grasped the end of the short lifeline and clipped it on to a metal ring on her own belt. Then she took the reins, which were attached to the cinch crossing Leelan's chest, and wrapped them around each hand.

"Fly!" she shouted. Before she had time to catch her breath, Leelan had kicked the earth beneath them and launched herself into the sky. Elin's head whipped back, making her dizzy. The wind pressed against her chest and pushed her backward. Hastily, she pulled herself forward to nestle against Leelan's back, just as she had done on their first flight. The wind roared in her ears and her hair tangled, but with the stirrups, reins, and lifeline, she felt very safe.

Finding an updraft, Leelan spiraled higher and higher, then joyfully slipped into a glide. Elin's heart froze when she looked down, and she found Leelan's descent gut-wrenching, but the gooseflesh thrill of flying far outweighed her fear.

Pressing her cheek against Leelan's back, she smiled. She could hear the bellows-like sound of Leelan's breathing and sense her ecstatic joy.

Hands shielding their eyes, Esalu and the chief custodian stood for a long time watching the Royal Beast soar through the heavens with Elin on her back.

THE MALE BEAST

When the snow covering the meadow had melted and birds once again darted through the air, a horse-drawn cart bearing a Royal Beast lumbered into the Kazalumu Sanctuary.

“I’ve never heard of a mature Beast being captured in the wild before,” Yuyan said as she placed her hands on top of the railing and stretched over it to peer into the meadow. The students were all clustered at the fence, watching the custodians bring in a Beast paralyzed by the Silent Whistle. Elin was standing beside Yuyan.

“The Hunters made a mistake,” Kashugan remarked casually. Recently, he seemed to be wherever Yuyan was. Whenever they were alone, Elin teased her, but Yuyan responded sagely that it was hard to be so popular.

“They were trying to capture a cub in the nest. The parent came back and crashed into the cliff when they blew the Silent Whistle.” He gestured as he spoke, making it seem as if he had actually been there when it happened.

Royal Beast Hunters were bound by strict rules that forbade them to kill a wild Beast under any circumstances. To have accidentally injured a mature one was shameful. They had retrieved the wounded Beast with the cub because they certainly could not leave it there. The wounded adult had been brought to Kazalumu while the cub was sent to the official sanctuary.

“So the mother was protecting her cub ... We’d better fix her up quick so she can get back to her little one.”

“You’re wrong there, Yuyan. That’s the father.”

“The father?” Yuyan’s eyebrows flew up.

“I heard them say it’s a male.”

Yuyan stared at Kashugan. “Where do you get that kind of information?”

Kashugan laughed a little bashfully without answering.

The Royal Beast had been transferred to a large cart built for Beasts. Even wounded and frozen, its beauty far surpassed that of the other Beasts in the sanctuary.

On the night of the next day, Elin was summoned to Esalu's office. When she walked in, the headmistress put her cup of tea down on the table and looked up.

"Ah, Elin. Sorry to summon you so abruptly."

Elin shook her head. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Esalu gestured for her to sit down. "You know a Royal Beast was brought here yesterday. We're calling it Eku, meaning male, for sake of convenience. Anyway, every time the effects of the Silent Whistle wear off, he goes into a violent rage. At this rate, even if we treat his wounds, they're just going to open up again."

"Ah..." Elin nodded, recalling what Leelan had once been like. Whenever she had woken after the Silent Whistle, she had gnawed furiously on her own fur. Just like Leelan, the new Beast, Eku, had been hurt when the Silent Whistle was used. Perhaps he associated the memory of the whistle with his injury and was reacting to it.

"So I wondered," Esalu said, adjusting her reading glasses, "if you'd like to try using your harp on Eku."

Elin frowned as the words of the Ahlyo flashed through her mind, but she pushed them away. "I don't know if it will work, but I'll try."

Seeing Esalu's eyes gleam with the pure curiosity of the scholar, Elin felt her own heart begin to race.

I wonder if a wild Beast will respond to the harp, too ...

As Elin approached the stable, a thudding sound jarred the pit of her stomach. Eku must be throwing himself against the wall. The harp was crooked under her arm, and she slipped it into her hand as she hurried inside. Frowning, the teachers stood looking through the bars at the raging Beast. When they saw Elin, their faces lit up with keen interest, and they stepped aside to let her through.

Eku was in a miserable state. With his wings spread wide for balance and his broken leg dangling awkwardly, he hopped on his sound leg and hurled himself against the bars. With each impact, the bars groaned, and dust trickled down from the ceiling.

“What do you think? Can you do it?” Esalu whispered.

“I don’t know...” Elin answered in a low voice. “But I doubt that he’ll even listen to the harp right now. He’s too excited.” She looked at Esalu. “Give me one night. Let me stay here with him.”

Esalu seemed to guess what she really wanted. “All right,” she said. “Listen, everyone, let’s leave this to Elin and go outside. If any of you feel the need to watch, you can, but to help Eku calm down, I think the fewer people in here the better.

“Elin, what about the light? Shall I turn it out?”

“Yes, please.”

Esalu nodded and, blowing out the lantern, she ushered the teachers out the door. Even after they had left, Eku continued to storm about the cage. Elin sat with her back against the wall and watched. He was big. A whole head taller than Leelan perhaps. If he broke the bars, she would be torn to shreds in seconds ... For the first time in a long while, she felt a lump of fear in her stomach. Motionless, she watched, waiting for the Beast’s anger to dissipate.

Past midnight, Esalu slipped in quietly. Eku, most likely exhausted, was fast asleep and snoring faintly. Esalu sat down beside Elin and wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. The two of them spent the rest of that long night cuddled in their blankets, nodding off occasionally.

When day began to dawn, Elin took out her harp and started to pluck it quietly, mimicking the sounds that Leelan made when she was feeling content and lazy. The Beast opened his eyes and raised his head, looking surprised. Esalu opened her eyes, too, but she kept quiet. The Beast listened for some time, and then began to make a slightly higher pitched sound in his chest. Elin smiled. It was the sound that Leelan made when she came too close to another Beast in the meadow. Elin thought it indicated lack of hostility.

Restraining her excitement, she plucked out the response repeatedly as she stood up slowly. The cooing of the Beast and the thrumming of her harp intersected and then resonated. The sound gradually faded, and the Beast no longer raised its hackles when she approached. She picked up a lump of meat containing a sedative and, opening the door, threw it inside. The Beast, which had been fasting ever since it was captured, devoured it in a single gulp.

Elin helped set the bones in the sleeping Beast's leg. "It's broken in two places," she murmured.

"Yes. Thank goodness it's a simple break. He should heal quickly." Esalu worked deftly and, in no time, the leg was splinted and bound. By the time they left the stable, they could hear the breakfast gong. As they walked toward the school, Esalu asked, "What does that sound mean?"

"You mean the one I played? I think that the Beasts use it to show they mean no harm. I've heard Leelan make that sound when she gets too close to other Beasts."

Esalu said thoughtfully, "That's interesting, isn't it? We've been taught that the Royal Beasts don't live in packs, yet if they communicate like that, checking for the presence or absence of hostility, and allowing those that intend no harm to approach, they may have more interaction than we thought. They may even form a sort of pack, but one that's spread out over a much wider territory."

Elin nodded. She had been mulling over this idea for quite some time. "Yes, I've been thinking the same thing. I'm not sure how to describe it, but Leelan often explains what she wants with quite a bit of detail. If Royal Beasts really are solitary, they shouldn't need such sophisticated ways of communicating."

"Really? That's fascinating ... There's so much we just don't know about them. They're like a blank sheet of paper. The more we observe them, the more we should be able to learn."

Elin felt a warm thrill course through her. It was true. The more she learned about them, the more she discovered new things, and if she could study them in the wild, she would be bound to learn even more.

When the school came into sight beyond the forest, Esalu said, "Your harp communicated to that Beast, even though you were not imprinted on his mind

from infancy.”

“Yes. But that’s because it’s a very simple sound. Just like mimicking a greeting will communicate in a foreign language.”

Esalu looked up at Elin. “Do you think that if I tried it, it would work for me, too?”

“Yes, probably ... If you had never used the Silent Whistle on Eku.”

Esalu frowned. “Oh ... right. I did use it. Do you think he remembers?”

“Yes, Royal Beasts have excellent memories. I believe that they remember very clearly anyone who has used the whistle on them.

“Still, thinking of Leelan, even if someone has used the Silent Whistle once or twice, how that person treats the Beast afterward might change the response.”

“I see...” Esalu nodded and gazed at Elin. “It’s worth a try anyway. Would you teach me how to make those sounds?”

Elin blinked. She had prepared herself for the day when she would be asked this question. But now that the time had come, she found that it was not easy. If she taught Esalu, sooner or later people would realize that anyone could communicate with the Beasts ... and that might trigger a catastrophe. If the spirits of her ancestors were still watching her, would they tell the Ahlyo what she had done?

Elin stood still. She could not refuse without explaining why. While she hesitated to tell her what she had learned from the Ahlyo, she could not bear the thought that Esalu might assume she wished to keep the skill to herself. And besides, Esalu had a right to know. If Elin was to continue using the Art to treat Royal Beasts like this, then she must consult her properly, at least this once.

She turned to face her. “It would be easy for me to teach you, but before I do, there is something you need to know.” She was not sure where to start and, in the end, she took a long time in the telling, but Esalu listened without uttering a word. When she was finally through, Esalu sighed.

“So that’s what he meant...” she murmured. She rubbed her hands over her face, as if she were scrubbing it. Then she looked up at the sky and said, as if to

herself, “So that’s what he meant by a ‘catastrophe.’” She looked at Elin and smiled. “I met an Ahlyo once, too. Deep in the mountains...”

“I see...” Understanding dawned in Elin’s face. “So that’s why you seemed suspicious of me when we first met.”

Esalu’s smile deepened. “Yes. I should have told you much sooner, but I just couldn’t bring myself to talk about it. I’m sorry it took me so long, but now I’m glad I’ve told you.”

She looked back at the Beast stable and said quietly, “Your fear may be justified ... It may be better to keep the Handler’s Art to yourself. If people knew that anyone could use it, others would be sure to try and control the Royal Beasts.” Her eyes shifted back to Elin, and a look of concern crossed her face. “But when I think of you, it seems to me that that road could be very dangerous. There would be less risk to you if it were a skill that anyone could use.”

Elin shook her head. “I would rather that the risk was mine alone. My mother’s people pleaded with me, yet I made the decision to ignore them, even though they were desperate. I just can’t bear to confine Leelan within the narrow cage of the Law to avoid some future catastrophe that might never happen. But if my actions might bring about such a disaster...” Her voice grew husky. “Then when it comes, I will not hesitate to lay down my life, if I believe that could avert it.”

Esalu gazed at Elin’s bloodless face—the well-defined features held a stillness that seemed beyond her eighteen years. She reached out and gently touched her hand. It was trembling slightly, and she gripped it firmly. “All right. I respect your commitment. But we must be careful not to let others know that you can use the Art.”

Elin felt the warmth of Esalu’s dry hand against her own. Her throat constricted, making it impossible to speak. She gazed at Esalu, noting that her hair was peppered with gray these days, and bowed deeply.

FLIGHT OF TWO BEASTS

Ekü recovered quickly and, within half a month, was completely healed. The teachers involved in his care could not hide their astonishment. Elin always accompanied them when they treated him, calming him with her harp so that she could feed him a sedative concealed in a lump of meat. It was her idea to use a slow-acting sedative rather than one that put him to sleep right away, and he ate eagerly, unaware that the meat had anything to do with him falling asleep.

Whenever Elin went to Leelan's stable after assisting with Eku's treatment, Leelan seemed very interested in her. She sniffed her intently until she was satisfied, and then turned away with a contented expression. Elin also noticed that the fur on Leelan's chest was taking on a pinkish hue. When she asked Esalu about it, however, Esalu said that she had never seen this in any other Beast.

Once sure that Eku was completely healed, the teachers decided to let him out into the meadow. He had only been brought here for healing, not as a gift to the Yojeh. Now that there was no longer any worry that he might die, they could free him. "Besides, he eats almost twice as much as the other Beasts," Yassa remarked, voicing what they all felt. Kazalumu Sanctuary had a hard enough time making ends meet. It could not afford to feed a Royal Beast that received no funds for its care from the Yojeh.

Elin was standing beside Leelan when they opened the stable door to let Eku out. It was a warm spring day, and the morning dew sparkled whenever the sun poked its face from between the thin stream of clouds. Eku appeared in the doorway and hopped out into the meadow, squinting as if to accustom himself to the light. He spread his wings wide, raised his head, and sniffed the air. At that moment, Leelan, too, raised her wings and sniffed.

Elin looked up at her in surprise, and then around at the other Beasts in the meadow. Although they looked at Eku, they just stood there, without sniffing. Leelan began making a strange cooing sound in her breast. Elin gasped. The fur on her chest, which had been a pale red, was now bright crimson, as if blood had spurted across it. And that was not all. She was exuding a strong, sweet

scent.

Ekū raised his head to the sky and gave a high-pitched trill. *Li, li, li, li, li, li.*

Immediately, Leelan responded, trilling an even higher note. Eku flew into the sky with powerful strokes. Leelan ran forward and launched herself into the air. As if pulled by a thread, the two Beasts became a single dot in the sky, flitting above and below one another in a strange dance. Radiating a hard light, they flew along the edge of the silver clouds, ripe with the sun. Leelan's chest gleamed like a bright red jewel.

Before the eyes of the speechless watchers, Leelan and Eku mated.

The confirmation of Leelan's pregnancy threw the school into an uproar.

"We can hardly keep this a secret from the palace," Yassa remarked, and Esalu could only nod in agreement. The number of Beasts under the Sanctuary's care was reported to the palace and meticulously recorded, and that number determined the amount of funds the Sanctuary received. If Leelan gave birth successfully, they would have to report her cub to the palace. As Yassa had said, they could not possibly hide what had happened. Not only that, but Eku had not returned to the wild. He had remained instead by Leelan's side, as if to protect her, and they would have to explain why they needed to apply for funds to feed him, too.

The night that the teachers decided to report Leelan's pregnancy, Elin was summoned to Esalu's office. The headmistress sat at her desk as usual, but she could not hide the fatigue in her eyes. Elin knelt before her and bowed her head to the floor.

"I'm very sorry."

That was all she could say. It should have been her who faced the great wave that would soon engulf Esalu, but even if she told the inspector that everything had been her decision alone, as the head of the school, Esalu would still be held responsible.

"Look at me, Elin," Esalu said gently. "There's nothing to be sorry for. You only

did what I have always longed to do myself.”

Elin looked up at her in surprise and saw that she was smiling.

“I went searching for Royal Beasts in the wild because I wanted to see what they were really like. But I gave up because I was afraid, and so I wasted my youth. When you came, Elin, it seemed like fate was giving me another chance. And you succeeded beautifully.” Elin stared at Esalu, whose eyes now brimmed with tears.

“To see Royal Beasts mate and bear young ... I never dreamed that such a day would come. I can never, ever thank you enough.” Her voice shook, and she wiped her eyes with a wrinkled hand. “You’ve done what no one else before you could. This is an outstanding achievement, worthy of the highest praise ... It makes me boil with anger to think that we can’t simply celebrate your success.”

Elin looked down to hide her tears. The dream that she had cherished for so long—for Leelan to fly, mate, and bear young, just like Beasts in the wild—had finally come true, yet she could not rejoice, and that was so frustrating. It was a huge comfort to her just to know that Esalu shared this feeling.

The headmistress sighed. “When I saw Leelan mate, a riddle that had puzzled me for many years was finally solved ... Royal Beasts mate in flight.”

Elin nodded and wiped her tears with her hands. Looking at Esalu, she said, “I was surprised, too. I think from what I observed standing beside Leelan that the scent of the male may have brought her into heat.”

“That’s right. Both she and Eku sniffed the air, didn’t they?”

“Yes. Then Leelan’s fur suddenly turned bright red, and she gave off a very sweet scent. I think those must have been signs that she was ready to mate. Now that I think of it, whenever I visited Leelan after being with Eku, she sniffed me. It was around that time that the fur on her chest began to change color, too.”

“I see. So the scent of a mature male brings a female into heat.” Esalu’s gaze shifted to her desk. “But the other Beasts showed no interest whatsoever.”

There were three other females in the Sanctuary in addition to Leelan, and they had all been sunning in the meadow. Elin shivered at the thought that,

even though they could smell Eku, they had not responded at all.

Esalu murmured as if to herself, “What could be the reason? What prevents the other Beasts in the Sanctuary from going into heat? The Silent Whistle? The tokujisui?”

“I think it’s the tokujisui.”

Esalu looked at her in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“There could be other factors involved, so I can’t be certain, but I think that tokujisui is definitely one factor ... The night before they took my mother away, she told me that tokujisui made the Kiba’s fangs harder and their bones larger than Toda in the wild, but at the expense of other things.”

Even when she tried, Elin could no longer remember her mother’s face. The one thing she did remember clearly were the words she had said. “She told me to think about it. She said that there was something Toda in the wild do naturally that those raised in the Ponds can’t. She said that I’d find the answer for myself one day. But then she warned me not to tell anyone the answer, not until I could understand why I shouldn’t tell them what I knew...”

Her throat closed, and her words faltered. She clenched her teeth to hold back her tears. Then, taking a deep breath, she said, “When I saw Leelan mate, I knew exactly what she had meant. I knew what Beasts in the wild do as a matter of course that Beasts raised in captivity can’t.”

She lifted her eyes to look at Esalu. “Horses and cows raised by men still bear young. It is only Royal Beasts and Toda that become barren ... And only Royal Beasts and Toda are given tokujisui.”

A heavy silence fell on the room. The only sound to be heard was the night wind rattling the window.

Someone, long ago, had devised an ingenious way of preventing both Royal Beasts and Toda from reproducing, one which concealed this motive so that not even those caring for them realized what was happening. But why? Was it to prevent the catastrophe that the Ahlyo had described? But it had been the first Yojuh, not the Ahlyo, who had written the Royal Beast Canon.

A thought rose into Elin’s mind, and she paused in shock. If what the Ahlyo

had told her was true, they had come from beyond the Afon Noah—just like the first Yojeh ... A chill spread through her chest. What if the first Yojeh had experienced the same catastrophe and had felt the same way as the Ahlyo?...

Looking up, she saw that Esalu was watching her. “I have a request,” Elin said, with a very pale face. “Don’t keep my existence a secret.”

Esalu’s eyes widened slightly. “What did you say?”

“I don’t want someone else to take the blame for what I’ve done while I hide. If the Canon was intended to prevent a catastrophe like the one the Ahlyo fear, then the Yojeh will be very angry that we allowed the Beasts to breed.” She leaned forward, but Esalu interrupted her before she could continue.

“Elin, just a minute.” A smile touched her face. “I’m glad you’re taking this seriously, but in this, you are still inexperienced. Is that what you were worried about? I’m not concerned about that in the least.” Elin blinked, looking puzzled. “What happened here was a coincidence,” Esalu said. “We tried very hard to save the life of the Beast cub, and, lo and behold, she happened to bear young ... Why would the Yojeh reprimand us instead of celebrating?”

Esalu’s smile broadened when she saw the blank look on Elin’s face. “Don’t you see? We may be scolded for not following the Canon, but for those who work in a Beast sanctuary, the top priority is to save the life of the Beasts. So the fact that our efforts were aimed at healing Leelan is a given. But more than that, the true purpose of the Canon is a secret. No one has told us the reason for it, so we can’t possibly be blamed.” She laughed, but then her expression sobered.

“You must not show yourself in public ... What we need to worry about is what happens after people know about Leelan. You understand, don’t you?”

Elin nodded.

Just as Esalu had said, when the news reached the palace, Leelan’s pregnancy was hailed as a promising omen, and the Yojeh’s praise and congratulations were conveyed to the Sanctuary. Kazalumu rose instantly to fame, and the Yojeh substantially increased the amount of funds awarded to it, much to the delight of staff and students. As the students were fond of noting, thanks to Leelan, they now got an extra side dish every evening.

The fact that a Royal Beast gifted to the Yojeh was now pregnant cheered the hearts of her people. Recently, the only news seemed to be bad news, such as attempts on the Yojeh's life and ominous increases in the Aluhan's forces, which they claimed were needed to defend the borders against marauders. Wherever people gathered, they spoke of Leelan's pregnancy as a sign of good fortune.

And the person most excited by the news was the Yojeh herself.

Pregnancy for a Royal Beast lasted longer than for humans. By the time the swelling in Leelan's belly began to show, it was time for Elin, along with Yuyan, Kashugan, and her other classmates, to sit for the Graduation Trials. Having been so busy with Leelan, she had barely had time to study and went into the exam feeling quite anxious. When the results were announced and she found that she had passed at the top of her class, she stood for a moment staring at Esalu's face in stunned silence.

Then Yuyan raised her hands and began clapping enthusiastically, and the whole room erupted with applause. Elin walked toward the front as if in a dream, hardly feeling her legs move. It was only when she felt the touch of the diploma in her hands that joy finally welled up inside her.

Esalu smiled. "Congratulations, Elin! You worked so hard for this, didn't you?" Elin pressed her trembling lips together and bowed deeply. It was a hot summer's afternoon, and the incessant sound of the cicadas in the trees outside poured like rain through the open windows of the dining hall.

That summer was a season of joy mingled with sorrow. The graduating students, who had spent the last six years in the dorm, must now leave the nest, each to begin their own path in life. Yuyan had decided to return home and become the village beast doctor. Letters from her family and relatives spoke longingly of her return. Not only her village, but three others in the same remote valley had no beast doctor to care for their livestock.

"Everyone's counting on me," Yuyan said with a grin. But when the day of her departure finally arrived, she clung to Elin and wept bitterly, as if they would never see each other again. Elin, who found it hard to express her feelings so freely, could find nothing to say. She just stood there, tears streaming down her

cheeks. Her pain at this parting was even deeper than her friend's. The thought that she and Yuyan would never share the same room again seemed to open a gaping hole in her heart through which a cold wind blew.

Yuyan's family came to get her, but Elin had no mother or father to greet her or to rejoice in the fact that she had come first in her class. Once Yuyan left, she would have no one to whom she felt this close. If Joeun had still been alive, he would have grinned and hugged her tightly.... If only he were here. She could not help missing him.

When Yuyan and the others had left, Kazalumu was so quiet it seemed deserted. At first, Elin was plagued by a hollow sense of loneliness, but the summer was so busy and her work so demanding that this feeling gradually faded. For one thing, she could not rely on Esalu or the other teachers for advice, as none of them knew how to care for a pregnant Beast either, and she was frequently overcome with anxiety. For another, she not only had to prepare for the Entrance Trials at the end of summer, but in addition, from the fall, she would begin teaching for the first time.

From the day she was officially appointed a teacher, Elin wore the Silent Whistle around her neck every day. It was her duty as a teacher responsible for the lives of her students, but she kept it concealed inside her robe because it bothered Leelan. Esalu said nothing, although Elin was sure that she must have noticed.

When the highland breezes had once again turned cooler, a horde of children, their faces taut with excitement, invaded the school. Although Elin was used to new students entering at this time of year, it was one thing to welcome them as an older student and quite another to greet them as a teacher. The thought that, in the eyes of these young twelve-year-olds, she appeared to be a teacher filled her with a strange mix of pride and embarrassment.

She was charged with teaching first-level students about the lives and habits of beasts, birds, and insects. It was a beautiful autumn day when she first stood at the podium. Sunlight spilling through the window cast the shadow of the window frame on the floor. Ten students sat up straight and tall, their eyes riveted to her. They must be curious because I'm a new teacher, she thought, and this made her so nervous that her voice shook. Later, she realized that it

had been their first class, too, and they had probably been just as nervous as she. Nor would they have known that she was a new teacher. To them, she was just one of many. Although this did not dispel her shyness at being seen as a teacher, to her surprise, she really enjoyed teaching them.

She did not have Yuyan's gift for speaking and creating a cheerful atmosphere, but the children listened eagerly when she shared her personal experiences about what she had learned or what caught her interest. Once she overheard a student in the hall say, "I love it when Professor Elin talks about when she was a child. That's the best part, don't you think?" This made her so happy, she felt like jumping up and down.

As she taught, a longing began to grow in her heart. She wanted to share with them the mystery of the creatures that lived in this world. She wanted them to feel the shiver of excitement that she felt when learning. At the same time, however, the act of teaching frightened her. As a student, all she had needed to do was to think and question. If her idea was right, she would be able to prove it in time, and if it was wrong, she could correct it. But as a teacher, she needed to believe that what she said was correct, so that they could memorize it with confidence. Yet, even while she taught, she could not help questioning whether or not the things she told them were true.

When she shared this with Esalu, the headmistress said, "The knowledge we teach is simply the truth as we know it at a particular time. What we believe to be true now may be exposed as error through the discoveries of succeeding generations. That's how human knowledge has been renewed throughout the ages. Remind your students of this every chance you get.

"A good teacher is not one who never doubts, but rather one who strives to keep on learning despite the doubts in her mind. At least, that's what I think."

Elin's days as a new teacher flew by. As spring approached, it became increasingly difficult to balance teaching with her care of Leelan. Noticing Elin's pallor, which was obviously due to lack of sleep, Esalu arranged to have another teacher take over her classes temporarily. As Leelan's time drew closer, Elin almost never left the Beast's stable. However, one day, on her way back to the dormitory for a change of clothes, she ran into her students as they were leaving the dining hall after breakfast.

“Professor Elin!” one of them called out in a high-pitched voice.

She stopped and turned, and was surrounded by first-level students.

“Is the Beast cub going to be born soon?”

Elin smiled. “Not yet. It will need to get a lot warmer first. But her belly’s already very big.”

The children’s eyes shone. “I wish we could see. Professor Elin, can’t we go and look?”

Elin shook her head. “I’m sorry, but no. This is Leelan’s first pregnancy, and she’s quite nervous. Please let her be.”

The shortest boy grabbed her hand. “Professor Elin, is it true that you can talk to the Beasts?”

Elin felt as if something cold had brushed her heart. She did not answer immediately, and, seeing her expression, one of the boys put his hand across the other’s mouth. “We’re not supposed to talk about that, remember? The older boys said.”

The other boy glared at him and shook his hand away. “But—”

He would have continued protesting loudly, but Elin placed her hand on his shoulder. Pressing a finger against her lips, she said, “Quiet please.”

She looked at the faces of her students, staring up at her in silence, as if in awe, and the thought spread through her that she could not keep her ability a secret forever. It was close to a miracle that the school had managed to conceal it at all when so many people lived here. Such a miracle could not last. Like water percolating through an earthen wall, the day would certainly come when her secret seeped into the outside world.

“It’s true that Leelan and I can communicate certain words to each other,” she said. “I learned to understand her a little because I spent all my time with her, day and night, when she was a cub. But this isn’t something you should talk about lightly. It’s quite complicated. The older students were right when they told you not to mention it. Don’t ever tell anyone outside the school that I can speak with a Royal Beast ... Will you promise me?”

The students frowned, as though puzzled, but they nodded. Looking at their faces, Elin felt that it could not be much longer before her secret was known. And she was right.

SEVEN

AMBUSH



1

THE YOJEH'S VISIT

The Yojuh's visit to Kazalumu Sanctuary was planned for the tenth day of Tosalu Balu, the month of early summer, around the time that Leelan's cub would be weaned.

From the day she was born, the Yojuh had never set foot outside the palace grounds, and her announcement that she was going to Kazalumu caused an uproar. The ministers, her granddaughter Seimiya, and her nephew Damiya joined forces to convince her to abandon the notion. If she were to leave the palace, they insisted, it would be far more difficult to protect her. But the Yojuh would not listen.

Damiya suggested that if she wished to see Leelan's cub that badly, they could

have it brought to the palace, but she retorted that she did not want to see a Royal Beast dragged into her garden. Such stubborn insistence was very unlike the usually rational and considerate Yojuh, but her longing was acute and stemmed from the fact that, unlike her forebears, the risk of assassination had prevented her from setting eyes on the country she ruled. In the end, all who opposed the idea gave in.

After that, the discussion focused on planning their travels and how to protect the Yojuh and her procession. The Kazalumu highlands were about one day's travel from the capital. They had decided that the Yojuh would stay one night at the manor of the Lord of Kazalumu. However, traveling by horse and carriage on the unpaved highland roads would be very hard on her at her advanced age.

"There's no choice on the way there because the terrain is all uphill. On the return journey, however, the best solution might be to travel to the town of Salano and, from there, take a boat down the river." This proposal came from the Lord of Kazalumu, who had offered her his manor on the way there.

"But she might feel queasy," one of the ministers protested. "And besides, traveling by boat is dangerous."

The Lord of Kazalumu shook his head. "That river is very broad and flows slowly, so there is no fear of capsizing. Many elderly people prefer to travel by river than by horse because it's much easier on the body than bumping over rough roads in a horse-drawn carriage.

"As the river flows all the way to the capital, I believe that going by ship will be less strenuous than other forms of travel."

Trial runs by both boat and carriage were undertaken, and it was confirmed that boat was easier, just as the Lord of Kazalumu had said. The Se Zan were split in two, some to accompany the Yojuh and the rest to remain in the palace to guard Princess Seimiya. Ialu was to be in charge of protecting the Yojuh.

It was on a bright, cloudless summer day that the Yojuh left the wood surrounding the palace, and the air was fresh with the scent of green leaves. People eager to see the procession lined the road and strewed flowers before her carriage wherever she went. The entourage proceeded to the Kazalumu highlands without incident. The Yojuh, for whom this was the first long journey

of her life, was certainly tired when she reached the lord's manor, but she was treated to such a warm welcome, and had such a good night's sleep, that she felt refreshed by morning.

Gazing at the vast green meadow from the carriage window, the Yojuh exclaimed with childlike excitement, "What a lovely place!"

A leisurely wind pushed cloud shadows slowly across the field, while birds flitted between earth and sky, chirping merrily. Flowers, yellow and white, dotted the field and swayed in the breeze. But when Kazalumu School came into sight, the Yojuh's face clouded.

"My goodness ... What an old building. I never thought it would be so plain."

Her nephew, Damiya, who sat across from her, smiled dryly. "It's a sanctuary for Beasts that are ill. Naturally, the official Royal Beast sanctuary in Lazalu is much grander."

The Yojuh frowned. "Then we'll have to think of a more fitting treatment for Kazalumu. After all, they have achieved what the grand Lazalu Sanctuary could not."

Damiya grinned. "I'm sure your gracious words will send this lot into ecstasy."

lalu rode ahead, intent upon the surroundings. Although he had posted many guards around the highlands, in a place as open as this, it would be quite possible for an assassin to kill one of his men without being noticed, and so he remained vigilant as he escorted the carriage.

The entire school, from the teachers to the students to the custodians, were dressed in clothes specially ordered for this day. Tense and nervous, they stood to attention to greet the Yojuh. The twelve-year-olds, their cheeks flushed, burst into a song of welcome.

The Yojuh smiled as she listened. When the song came to an end, a middle-aged woman, who appeared to be the headmistress, stepped forward. She delivered a speech of gratitude for the honor of this visit in prim and proper language befitting her station. She then gestured for the Yojuh to proceed toward the stables.

It was a fine day, and the Yojuh could see the Beasts in the sanctuary napping

here and there in the sun. Her eyes crinkled in a smile as she watched them from outside the fence.

“They look so content. The grass must feel very warm and cozy on such a sunny day.”

The headmistress stopped just before the rolling meadow and said, “If it would please Your Majesty to look in that direction, you will see Leelan, Eku, and their cub, Alu, just over there.”

“Oh my!” the Yojeh exclaimed. “So there they are! Why, what a darling little cub!”

Hearing her excited cry, the others also looked toward the meadow. There, indeed, stood two large adult Beasts with a small cub at their feet. The grand chamberlain who had accompanied the Yojeh frowned, however, and turned to Esalu.

“But they’re so far away,” he said. “We can’t see them very well from here. Why didn’t you keep them in the stable?”

“If we kept them inside on a sunny day like this, they would make a great fuss to go outside. We let them out because if they threw themselves against the stable walls, they could injure themselves.” Esalu responded with firm composure, and the grand chamberlain fell silent.

The Yojeh, who was a head taller than the headmistress, smiled down at her. “I see ... But as the chamberlain said, it is a bit far. We have come all this way to see them. Could we not be allowed to go a little closer?”

Esalu shook her head. “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty. Royal Beasts never become truly accustomed to people and...”

But Damiya interrupted. “What could be the problem? Her Majesty only wishes to go a little closer. Surely the Royal Beasts would never harm the Yojeh. And even if some problem occurred, you could use the Silent Whistle.”

Ialu noticed the frown that flickered across Esalu’s face at his words. But Damiya missed this reaction entirely as he turned to Ialu. “Our dear swift-footed Ialu, it is the Yojeh’s wish. It won’t matter if we go beyond the fence and get a little closer, will it?”

Ialu thought a moment, and then asked Esalu, "If several people with Silent Whistles stand ready, would they be able to stop the Beasts for certain?"

Esalu said reluctantly, "Yes, I believe so, but I still cannot recommend it. Besides, if too many people approach at once, Leelan may become agitated."

Ialu nodded. "In that case, choose a few teachers who are accustomed to handling the Beasts to accompany the Yojuh with their Silent Whistles ready. From our group, only the Yojuh, Lord Damiya, and I will go." He turned to his men and gave them instructions, while at the same time checking his bow.

As Esalu was selecting the teachers to accompany the Yojuh, Ialu noticed something unusual. Instead of being focused solely on the Yojuh, the eyes of the teachers and students, who were keeping their distance, kept flitting elsewhere. Following their gaze, Ialu's eyes fell upon a tall woman. She appeared to be a young teacher. She wore the same uniform as the others, but of all those assembled, she was the only one who never even looked at the Yojuh. In her hands she bore a strange-looking harp partially covered in leather, and she stared steadily at the Beasts with their cub. This bothered him, but as he sensed from her no hostility or intent to harm, he shifted his attention outward to the whole picture.

Esalu, who up to that point had been very efficient and quick, seemed to be having trouble selecting the teachers. She said something to the teacher beside her. He turned on his heel and began making his way through the students, heading toward the young woman. When he spoke to her, she listened carefully, then began to speak. The teacher, obviously her senior, listened to her, nodding frequently. Ialu thought that he would bring her, too, but when she had finished, he came back alone.

"What message did you give that girl?" Ialu asked.

Esalu raised her face to look at him. She mumbled at first and then said, "Well, er, she's the teacher in charge of Leelan, you see, but she has a cold, so I asked her to leave this to us and not to come any closer."

The teacher returned and whispered something to Esalu. She nodded. "All right. I see ... But you've told her not to come this way just to be on the safe side, yes? Good." Esalu then turned to the Yojuh. "Your Majesty, I beg pardon

for the delay. The preparations have been made. Allow me to serve as a guide. I must ask Your Majesty not to make any loud noises or sudden movements.”

The Yojeh’s attendants looked offended, but the Yojeh nodded magnanimously. They entered the meadow through a place where the fence swung into the field. Ialu walked in front, opening his being to every sensation around them, and placing himself between the Yojeh and the Beasts.

The two adult Beasts raised their heads and looked toward them, as if wondering what was going on. The cub, which stood between its father’s feet, extended its neck just like its parents and watched them approach.

“It’s adorable,” the Yojeh whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

The cub’s fur shone brightly in the sun. Its innocent eyes moved from one face to another as if fascinated.

“I’ve never seen such beautiful Beasts before ... Of course, the cub is amazing, but look at its parents. The color of those wings! Lapis lazuli with fine lines of red, just like a gemstone! And their breasts of shining silver. They are more magnificent than any Beast I’ve ever seen. The large one is Eku, and the smaller one, Leelan, yes?”

“Yes,” Esalu whispered from behind her. “Forgive my rudeness, but I must ask Your Majesty to please stop here.”

The Yojeh stopped, but Damiya smiled and looked back at Esalu. “Surely a little farther won’t hurt. That Beast was a gift to the Yojeh. It would never harm her.”

The Yojeh hesitated for a moment, but then, as if pushed on by the thought of the long distance she had traveled, she stepped forward toward the Beasts.

With a frown, Esalu whispered to Ialu, “You must stop her. If we approach any closer, it will alarm the Beasts. Remember, they are protecting their cub...”

Ialu nodded and was about to call out to the Yojeh when Eku began to quiver. Letting out a shrill warning cry, he raised his wings protectively. As the startled teachers raised their Silent Whistles to their lips, a stern voice cried out. “No!”

Ialu was stunned to see the teachers release their whistles. Nocking an arrow

to his bowstring, he spun in the direction of the voice. The young woman was racing toward them. “Don’t use your whistles!”

The maidservants, who were crowded along the fence, screamed.

Damiya whispered fiercely, “What’re you doing? Use your whistles! Hurry!”

But the young woman ran straight toward the Beasts, without even a glance at the Yojuh. She spoke to them, and then began plucking her strange instrument, which, although it sounded like a harp, had a duller tone. She played a complex melody, and the Beasts mimicked it, as if in response. Eku flapped his wings angrily two or three more times, but then reluctantly folded them in response to the soothing sounds Leelan was making in her throat.

For a moment, Ialu forgot his mission and stared at the tall girl. She was standing so close to the Beasts that she could have touched them. Gazing up at them with a worried frown, she plucked the strings of her harp, oblivious of all else. From here, her eyes looked green.

Impossible. Could she be Ahlyo?

At that moment, a shaft of sunlight shone through the thin clouds and softly lit her hair as she exchanged sounds with the Beasts.

“What is she doing?” the Yojuh whispered.

Esalu wore an anxious frown. “She’s calming the Royal Beasts.”

“She can do that? With a harp?”

“Yes,” Esalu answered and then abruptly changed the subject. “Your Majesty, we must leave this place. Please understand that it is particularly dangerous to approach Royal Beasts when they are rearing their young.”

Leaving the Beasts with the young woman and her harp, they quietly exited the meadow.

2

DAMIYA’S PROPOSAL

The Yojeh was enjoying a conversation with Esalu over tea and sweets in the dining hall, which had been specially decorated in her honor. The headmistress, whose skin was like tanned leather, appeared intimidating, but the Yojeh seemed very taken with her. She asked her many questions, not only about the Royal Beasts, but also about everything from education to the management of the school, and made no move to retire, even though the afternoon was wearing on.

Ialu, as usual, stood listening to the conversation from a slight distance with his attention focused on their surroundings, yet he noticed that every time the Yojeh tried to bring the conversation back to the young woman who had calmed the Beasts with her harp, the headmistress casually changed the topic. When the Yojeh said, "I have never seen anyone calm the Beasts with a harp before. Is that a method you often use at the Sanctuary?" Esalu was silent for a moment, as though considering her words with care. When she finally responded, she was still hesitant.

"No, Your Majesty, we do not ... In the case of Leelan ... She has been listening to that harp since she was a cub ... I believe that may be why the sound of it soothes her."

Ialu was puzzled. Why did she become disturbed every time the young woman was mentioned? Did she fear that she would be reprimanded for entrusting a Royal Beast to an Ahlyo?

"I'd like to talk to her myself," the Yojeh said.

Esalu bowed, but then replied, "I am afraid that that is not possible ... The girl is coming down with a cold, and therefore I have strictly forbidden her to approach Your Royal Highness."

Damiya drank his wine and listened to the two of them for some time without uttering a word, his eyes on Esalu's face as if he was pondering something. Presently, he put down his glass and rose from the table. With a flick of his eyes, Ialu directed the guard beside him to follow him. Even when close to half a toh had passed, Damiya had still not returned.

Noticing that the light shining through the window had turned the color of honey, the Yojeh smiled. "My, look at the time. It was so interesting talking with

you that I could not stop. But we should be going soon.” Yet despite her words, she appeared very reluctant to leave. She looked at Esalu. “The Royal Beasts return to the stables for the night, don’t they?”

“Yes. It is almost time for their evening meal. They are most likely returning to the stables now.”

The Yojeh laughed lightly. “I would love to see the Royal Beasts and their cub one last time before we leave. Please take me to see them. Surely you will let me see them feeding?”

Esalu did not respond immediately. Her face went blank for a moment, as though she were thinking, but then she nodded. “Yes, of course, Your Majesty. It would be a great honor ... Allow me.”

Esalu took the lead. Ialu directed his men to encircle them as they walked, while he himself walked at Esalu’s side. The procession moved through the long shadows of the trees and the golden light of the westering sun that filtered through the leaves.

Esalu pointed out the largest of the stable buildings and said, “That is the stable that houses Leelan, her mate, and their cub.” Ialu noticed that the guard he had sent with Damiya was standing idly by the door.

“What are you doing?” he asked as they approached.

The man’s face went rigid. “He ordered me not to come in...”

Peering inside, Ialu frowned. The young woman was standing by the bars where the Royal Beasts were. Her face was stiff, and she was staring at her feet. He could hear a man’s voice.

“There’s no need to be so defensive. I’m a straightforward man. I like you, and I’m just letting you know that.”

It was Damiya’s voice. Hearing footsteps approach, Ialu looked over his shoulder. Before he could speak, the Yojeh put a finger to her lips and shook her head. Her face taut, Esalu also stopped and stood listening to the conversation inside.

“Think about it. My offer is to your advantage, too, isn’t it? There’s no need

for you to be separated from these Beasts. All I'm asking is that you bring them with you and move to Lazalu. If you think that working with the teachers there will be a problem, I can simply replace them for you with the staff from Kazalumu."

The young woman made no response. Damiya grasped her arm, as if he had run out of patience. She raised her face with a startled expression, but her eyes went not to Damiya but to the Beasts. They had begun to growl, perhaps out of concern for her, and she seemed to be desperately trying to calm them with her eyes. She turned quickly toward Damiya and said in a low but clear voice, "I beg your pardon, but as I have already told you, I am not in the position to make such decisions. Forgive me. Please, would you let go of my arm?"

Standing by the door, Ialu suddenly smiled. Damiya's charms appeared to have no effect on this girl. He could imagine the surprised look on the man's face.

Damiya dropped her arm abruptly. Accustomed as he was to courting women, he must have recognized that pushing her would only have the opposite effect. "You're a coolheaded woman, aren't you? That was a bit of a blow to my confidence. I thought myself a little more attractive than that. Did you feel nothing? Not even when I touched you?" She did not answer, but gazed at him steadily. There was not a trace of flirtation in her face.

"What beautiful eyes. I have never seen eyes like yours so close before. Now I can see why people say the Ahlyo have magic." He reached out his hand and gently touched her cheek. Her face froze, but she said nothing, only glaring at him.

"Now don't be angry with me," he murmured. "The Ahlyo are wanderers who have not sworn fealty to the Yojuh. If it became known that such a person was caring for Royal Beasts, people would be bound to talk. The position of the headmistress might be jeopardized. But I have fallen in love with you. I will protect you."

From behind him, Ialu heard the Yojuh's sigh. She walked past him and entered the stable. The young woman turned, and Ialu saw her eyes widen in surprise. Then he heard Damiya's laughter.

“Were you listening? Well, that’s embarrassing. How long were you there?”

“Long enough to know that you were pestering this girl and that she refused your advances.” She sounded amused. Turning to the girl, she said, “I apologize for my nephew’s behavior. It’s a bad habit of his. When he sees an attractive girl, he just can’t help but approach her. I hope you’ll forgive him.”

The young woman knelt and bowed her head. “Your Majesty, please pardon my rudeness.”

The Yojeh smiled. “Rise. I was most pleased by the way you stood firm in the face of my nephew’s flattery. Tell me your name.”

Elin rose and bowed. “My name is Elin, Your Majesty.”

“Elin ... ‘mountain apple.’ I see. The fruit with a lovely fragrance that grows deep in the mountains. The name suits you.”

Elin’s pale face suddenly relaxed.

She looks so different when she smiles, lalu thought. He had first guessed her to be about twenty-five, but when she smiled, she looked about twenty.

The Yojeh smiled gently and gazed at Elin. “So you are Ahlyo. Tell me, how did an Ahlyo come to be working here? You don’t need to worry. I have no intention of reproaching anyone, so please speak freely.”

“If it pleases Your Majesty, I am not Ahlyo.” The Yojeh’s brows rose, but Elin continued calmly. “When my mother met my father, she chose expulsion from her people in order to marry him. So I have never lived as an Ahlyo. I entered this school because I aspired to be a beast doctor, and I have lived here ever since.”

The Yojeh’s eyes shone with curiosity. “I see. Your mother must be a very determined woman. What is she doing now?”

A shadow crossed Elin’s face. “She’s dead. I have no parents. My father also died when he was very young.”

The Yojeh frowned. “I see ... So this is your home.”

At that moment, Leelan let out a cry. She had been pushing her head against the bars for some time, as if trying to touch Elin, but now, apparently having

lost patience, she began complaining loudly. The cub at her feet followed suit, beating its little wings and shoving its snout through the bars as it tried to lick Elin's hand. Only Eku stood aloof and seemingly unconcerned.

Giving Alu her fingers to lick, Elin looked pleadingly at the Yojeh. "I beg your forgiveness, Your Highness, but the Beasts wish to be fed."

The Yojeh laughed. "It is I who must apologize. I interrupted their dinner. They must be very hungry. I'm so sorry, Leelan. Go ahead and feed them, Elin. May I watch from here?"

Elin cast a quick glance at Esalu and, when she nodded, bowed to the Yojeh. "Yes, of course, Your Majesty. Please watch from there."

Elin took several chunks of meat from the corner of the room and, opening the gate, walked inside the enclosure. Ialu and Damiya watched with amazed expressions.

"She doesn't use the Silent Whistle?" Damiya whispered.

Esalu sighed and said in a low voice, "Because she has been caring for Leelan since she was a cub."

With the cub fawning at Elin's feet and the mother beast demanding her attention, the scene seemed to contradict the idea that Beasts could never become accustomed to humans. Elin did not give any meat to Alu, nor did she respond to Leelan's persistent calls. Instead, she threw a large chunk at the feet of Eku, where he stood protectively by the cub. He held the meat down with his hind foot while he tore it into smaller chunks and fed these to Alu. When the cub was breastfeeding, Leelan had never left its side, but once it was weaned, Eku had taken over its care. Now the father Beast never left its side, while Leelan spent much of her time basking in the sun as she pleased. Once Eku began feeding the cub, Leelan butted Elin's back with her belly while calling insistently, as if to let Elin know that it was her turn. The Yojeh, Damiya, and Ialu watched speechlessly.

Wiping her hands on her apron, Elin came back through the gate. As if trying to excuse her behavior, Esalu murmured, "Leelan was near death, you see ... Elin cared for her day and night, never leaving her side. She saved Leelan's life, so, as you can see, unlike the other Beasts, Leelan has become very attached to

Elin.”

“I see...” Damiya said. “Leelan was the cub that was hit by the arrow.”

The Yojeh raised her brows. “The arrow?”

Damiya looked at her quizzically. “Why yes. You remember, don’t you? This is the cub that I presented to you on your birthday, my dear aunt.”

“Oh...”

The Yojeh’s face darkened, but Damiya paid her no heed. Laughing, he said to Elin, “This Beast that you raised saved the life of that man over there.”

Elin looked at Ialu questioningly, and he nodded. “The arrow grazed Leelan’s shoulder,” Damiya continued, “so that by the time it lodged in his stomach, it had lost much of its force. Isn’t that right, Ialu?”

“Yes, but to me it was still sufficiently painful.”

Damiya laughed cheerfully, but Elin frowned, as if she could feel the pain. “The arrow struck him in the stomach?” she whispered.

“Ialu served as my shield,” the Yojeh said. “He threw himself between the arrow and me ... But let us speak of this no more. I have no wish to recall that incident.”

Ialu stared at Leelan as she licked the mouth of her cub. So it was you who saved me ... He recalled how she had looked so pitifully anxious when the men had dragged her on a cart into the garden, and her terrified scream when the arrow had sliced through her shoulder. She must have been in miserable shape when she was brought here. What an amazing recovery.

“I can understand why Damiya was trying so hard to seduce you,” the Yojeh said in a cheerful voice, as though attempting to lighten her mood. “I, too, wish that you would come and care for the young cubs at Lazalu. You do not use the Silent Whistle, do you? I am glad, for I, too, hate that whistle. If it were possible to raise the Beasts without it, then that would be my greatest wish.”

Elin and Esalu looked like children who, expecting to be whipped, had been

given a sweet. “What’s wrong? Are you reluctant to leave here?”

Elin blinked, as though the Yojuh’s voice had suddenly brought her back to her senses. “Oh, ah, yes ... This is my home.” She drew a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Also, Alu is still a cub, and therefore I do not wish to make him move a long distance ... If it is possible, I would prefer to stay here.”

The Yojuh looked disappointed. “I see. Well, I do not wish to force you against your will, but do think about it. I have taken a great liking to you, and would very much like you to care for the cubs at Lazalu. I am sure that Leelan was able to bear young because you raised her with so much love and without the Silent Whistle. I would so like to see the young Beasts at Lazalu raised in the same way. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see the meadow filled with Royal Beast cubs? I will be in touch again.”

Elin bowed deeply. “I am honored, Your Majesty.”

As the Yojuh’s procession rolled out of sight, fatigue etched the faces of everyone at Kazalumu. The teachers breathed a sigh of relief that the visit had gone smoothly, but when Elin thought of what Esalu must be thinking, she could not bear to look at her.

“How could you do that when I begged you to stay out of sight?” Esalu scolded her when the teachers had gone.

“I’m sorry.”

Esalu sighed. “It’s not that I don’t understand how you must have felt. I was so worried about Alu, my heart almost stopped.”

The cub was far younger than those that were captured and brought to the Sanctuary. When the Yojuh had insisted on going closer, all the teachers had been concerned that the whistle might harm it. And that was why Elin had shouted for them to stop when they had been about to blow.

“Still, it’s very odd,” Esalu murmured with a frown. “I wonder if the Yojuh doesn’t know the purpose of the Royal Beast Canon ... Or did she say that even though she does know?”

Elin recalled the Yojuh's face when she had said that she hated the whistle too. "She didn't seem to know, did she?" she said.

"No, you're right. She didn't." Esalu brushed back her hair. "Perhaps we were reading too much into this. Maybe the Royal Beast Canon doesn't have the meaning we thought it did."

Although Elin thought this unlikely, it was also clear from the Yojuh's response that, unlike the Ahlyo, she did not wish to keep the Royal Beasts confined within the Law.

"At any rate," Esalu continued, "we'll have to figure out what to do if she really wants the Royal Beasts to breed and increase ... Her nephew seemed pretty intent on having you under his thumb, too."

The thought of Damiya made Elin's flesh crawl.

After leaving Esalu and returning to her room, Elin found it difficult to sleep. Anger flared whenever she remembered how Damiya had pressed her. She had been very afraid. No man had ever touched her like that before, and fear had made her cringe. It was this that made her angry. How she missed Yuyan. Confiding in her friend would have helped to dispel the feelings that weighed like mud on her mind, leaving it free and clear.

Yuyan must be living happily in her village now, working as a beast doctor. Kashugan, as the third son in his family, had no obligation to carry on the family line, and, if they married, he would probably be adopted into Yuyan's family. Elin gazed absently out the window. A cold loneliness spread through her chest. The solitude to which she had long grown accustomed had suddenly returned.

As she gazed at her reflection in the windowpane, the faces of everyone she had met that day flitted through her mind. For some reason, the person who had left the strongest impression was neither the Yojuh nor Damiya, but rather the guard who had stood quietly in the background. Perhaps it was the air of solitude that had enveloped him, like the silence of an empty forest in midwinter. He had hardly spoken, yet he did not wear the grim expression of the other guards. Rather, he seemed to be one step removed from everyone there.

To use his body as a shield and throw himself into the path of an arrow aimed

at the Yojuh ... What kind of a life was that? Would he go on like that forever, never knowing when he would have to throw his life away?

A wind must have sprung up. Elin stood for a long time gazing out the window at the branches moving in the darkness.

3

AMBUSH

The whole school had gathered on a bluff overlooking the Kazalumu River where it wound along the edge of the highlands. From here, they could see the many streams that flowed from the wooded hills to join the river, slowing it and widening its course. The vessel that would bear the Yojuh back to the capital would leave Salano around noon and, after passing below this spot, would vanish under the broad forest canopy.

One of the teachers had complained that to look down on the Yojuh from the bluff would be disrespectful and proposed that they abandon the idea, but everyone else pretended not to hear. After all, they might never have another chance to see the lavish ship in which the Yojuh sailed.

Elin was leaning against a rock and chatting with Tomura and the others. The sun-warmed stone made her drowsy. A well-prepared student had brought a telescope and was under orders to announce the boat's appearance.

"There they are!" he shouted, and everyone jumped to their feet.

Far in the distance, three ships glided toward them on water so calm that it gleamed like molten silver. Two small ships sailed in front. Behind them, they towed a large vessel topped by a cabin adorned with glittering gold. Cheers rose from the group on the hill.

The ships had just passed the mouth of one of the tributaries when the student with the telescope said, "What's that?... What are ... those ... things?"

The boys beside him gave him a friendly shove. "What're you babbling

about?”

But the lookout ignored them, keeping his eye glued to the telescope. “They’re coming out of that stream. Lots of them. They look like logs ... with men on top ... They’ve got bows slung over their backs...”

A confused clamor erupted from the other students, and the teachers shielded their eyes with their hands, peering up the river. Although they were too far away to discern any bows, they could make out men astride what appeared to be logs, gliding from the shadow of the forest into the river. With a start, Elin realized what they were.

Toda!...

Toda bearing Warriors. And they were closing in on the vessel that carried the Yoje. It was only too clear what they planned to do.

When the boy with the telescope shrieked, “They’re going to shoot!” Elin set off at a run.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tomura yelled, but she did not stop to answer.

You’re about to do something very foolish, Elin, she thought. She knew she shouldn’t do it. If she did, something terrible would happen ... But if she didn’t, the Toda would rip the Yoje to shreds. The vivid image of what that would look like spurred her on.

Faster! Faster!

She raced down to the meadow. “Leelan!” she yelled.

Leelan had been romping about in the grass, but she raised her head and then bounded across the field. As they met, Elin shouted, “Take me up!” Leelan turned around and dropped into a crouch.

Everything seemed surreal. Before she even realized what she was doing, Elin had shimmied up Leelan’s back and grasped her neck, pressing herself against her body. There was no time to get the saddle. She would have to fly like this.

“Fly?” Leelan asked.

“Fly!” Elin answered. Leelan’s muscles rippled beneath her as the Beast

spread her huge wings and leapt into the sky.

“To the river. That way.” Shifting her weight, she leaned to one side to indicate the direction. Leelan responded instantly, veering to the right. As they flew over the crowd of spectators on the cliff, Elin heard the faint sound of surprised voices, but she had no time to look.

The Toda Riders had already reached the stern of the Yojuh’s ship. Arrows fell like rain on the deck, striking several soldiers, but the Yojuh’s men put up a stiff fight. Standing near the stern, Elin saw one man in particular loosing arrow after arrow. With each shot, another rider fell from his mount into the river. But this did not slow the Toda. They rammed the lead ships, capsizing them, and the men on board were thrown into the river, where the Toda snapped them in their jaws.

As they swarmed around the lead boats, the Yojuh’s ship began to tilt, pulled to one side by the ropes.

It’ll capsize!

The vessel listed sharply, and the gunwale almost touched the water. Several men who had been thrown from the boat clung to the thick cables. The Se Zan in the stern threw down his bow and drew his sword as he half slid, half ran to the gunwale. He raised his sword and severed the ropes with a single stroke. They shot into the air, and the ship ponderously righted itself, rocking slowly back and forth. Before it could come to a standstill, however, Toda began slamming into it. Bursting through the rails, one beast clambered onto the deck and made straight for the cabin. The man who had cut the ropes flung himself away from the gunwale and leapt in front, blocking its path. The Toda reared its head, preparing to snap him in two, but at that instant, the man plunged his sword deep inside its gaping maw. The Toda crashed to the deck, squealing in pain, and the man, dragged by its weight, fell with it.

“There!” Elin shouted, but before the word had even left her mouth, Leelan launched into a dive, her muscles as hard as steel and her fur standing on end. Although Leelan had never seen a Toda nor been taught how to respond, the sight of this natural enemy seemed to trigger an instinctive hatred that told her exactly what to do.

A piercing sound cut through the wind roaring in Elin's ears—a long, high-pitched whistle that she had never heard from Leelan before. The Toda below paused, then rolled over and exposed their bellies to the sky. Their Riders screamed as they were flung into the river. One of them fell onto the deck, and he bravely raised his bow, aiming straight at Leelan's belly. Elin closed her eyes as the arrows flew toward them, but when the shafts met the Beast's steel-hard muscles, they bounced off and fell harmlessly into the river. The archer stared openmouthed, then dived into the water.

Leelan attacked the huge serpents in a frenzy, ripping their bodies to pieces with her sharp claws. The cloying scent of Toda and the metallic odor of blood filled Elin's nostrils. Overcome by a wave of nausea, she closed her eyes again. The sound of rending and crunching seemed to go on forever, and it was all she could do just to hold on and not fall off.

The Yojeh's men and Damiya, who was peering through a hole in the cabin wall, watched dumbfounded as the Royal Beast, with a young woman perched on its back, slaughtered the defenseless Toda.

Only when she had killed every last Toda did Leelan seem to come to her senses. She flapped her wings and flew leisurely across the river to alight on the bank. Elin was shaking so violently that she could not move. She clung to Leelan's back even when the Beast waded into the shallows to wash the blood and slime from her belly. Every time she bowed her head to lick her chest, Elin felt herself jerked forward. At the sound of Leelan's lips smacking, her stomach heaved. Sliding off, she crumpled to her knees in the shallows and vomited.

A thin film of Toda slime spread across the water's surface and drifted slowly away. Chunks of flesh fell from Leelan's fur and plopped into the water. She poked them with her snout and sniffed, then plucked them out with her pink tongue and ate them. Oblivious to the water soaking her clothes, Elin knelt in the shallows and watched her blankly. A deadly chill spread from the pit of her stomach—as if a block of ice had slid across her insides. Gripping her thighs with her hands, she tried to still her trembling, but to no avail. Shuddering uncontrollably, she stared at the blood-spattered Beast.

Elin heard shouting—someone calling a name over and over, as if trying to keep a dear friend from dying. For a long time, the sounds of people screaming in agony had only registered as distant background noise, but the sudden realization of their meaning jolted her back to reality. A horrifying sight met her eyes.

Tattered fragments of warriors, boatmen, and Toda floated down the river. Perhaps because of their weight, those Toda corpses that were still relatively intact had floated in to shore, where they caught in the shallows and bobbed against the bank. The smaller vessels, still upturned, had drifted away, but the Yojeh's boat remained in the middle of the river. Without a steersman, it would be carried precariously downstream. A voice from on board was frantically calling someone's name.

Elin rose. If there were survivors, then they would need help. And for that, they would have to bring the boat to shore. She walked slowly over to Leelan.

4

HEALING

The teachers rode straight to Salano and reported the news to the Lord of Kazalumu. Then they, and others from the manor, traveled swiftly downriver by boat. By the time they reached the scene of the attack, however, an hour had already passed.

While she waited, Elin made Leelan tow the Yojeh's boat to shore, following the direction of the current. Then she climbed aboard. She considered riding Leelan back to the school to get supplies, but decided that her first priority was to bind the wounds of those who were bleeding profusely.

She had ripped open the sleeve of a man whose arm was pierced by an arrow and had just begun staunching the blood when she heard someone call her from the cabin. One of the Yojeh's menservants was beckoning her from the cabin door.

“Come quickly! The Yojuh’s hurt! Hurry!”

Elin stayed to tie off the man’s wound, from which blood was gushing. The servant, however, ran over, grabbed her by the arm, and yanked her to her feet.

“I said, ‘Hurry!’ The Yojuh’s badly hurt!”

The damage inside the cabin was pretty bad. A huge hole gaped in one wall. The Yojuh’s servants lay sprawled on the floor or sat crouched over, groaning with pain. They must have been thrown against the walls when the Toda had rammed the boat. The Yojuh lay on a mat, pale-faced, with her lips slightly parted and her eyes closed. Damiya sat beside her, his face chalk white and filmed with sweat. His left arm hung awkwardly and appeared longer than his right. He must have dislocated it, Elin thought.

A maidservant knelt on the other side of the Yojuh, calling her. Elin dropped to her knees by the mat.

“She hit the wall hard when the Toda attacked,” Damiya said, breathing shallowly. “I tried to catch her, but I was too late...”

Elin brought her face close to the Yojuh’s mouth and felt a breath of air brush her cheek. Relieved, she sat up and took the Yojuh’s wrist in her hand to feel for her pulse. Then she raised her eyelids to check whether the pupils were different sizes and how they responded to the light. Closing the lids gently, she glanced around the room. Seeing an armrest lying in a corner, she asked the maidservant to fetch it. She was a young woman and seemed to be still in shock, for her hands shook violently when she handed Elin the armrest.

Elin slipped it under the Yojuh’s neck as a brace and then turned to the maidservant. “Fortunately, the injury is not life-threatening at the moment. But I must ask you not to move her head under any circumstances. Please keep her still.” She picked up a small blanket from where it lay on the floor and carefully covered the Yojuh. Then she stood up to leave.

Damiya stared at her. “Surely you’re not going to leave without treating her?”

Elin shook her head. “There is nothing more I can do for her right now. The teachers were watching from the hill, and I’m sure they’re on their way with the

medicines and equipment we need.” She grasped the shoulder of the maidservant who was gazing up at her and said, “You must not let anything jar her. Listen to her breathing and if you notice any change, let me know.”

The woman nodded, her face very pale. Concerned, Elin looked at her closely. “How about you? Are you all right? Do you feel any pain?”

The young woman looked surprised, then smiled faintly and shook her head. “Thank you. I’m fine.”

Elin turned to the manservant who was standing behind them. “Damiya’s shoulder is dislocated. Will you help me fix it?”

The man nodded. “He hit his shoulder against the wall when he tried to catch Her Highness.”

Elin knelt beside Damiya. Leaning over him, she looked into his eyes. “Did you hit your head?” she asked.

“Yes ... I feel a bit nauseous.”

She checked his pupils to see if they responded properly to light. “You probably have a slight concussion. When the doctors come, be sure to tell them that you hit your head.”

“I will.”

Elin glanced at the manservant. “Do you have something stiff that we can stabilize his neck with? Even thick paper will do.”

The manservant looked around the room in a fluster, but the maidservant held up a book that had fallen on the floor. “What about this?”

“Ah! That might work.” Elin placed it against Damiya’s neck. The width fitted perfectly between his shoulder and his ear. She placed it against the back of his neck to support his vertebrae, then wrapped it securely with a sash that the maidservant gave her. When she was finished, she turned once again to the maidservant and said, “Resetting his shoulder may be extremely painful. Do you have a piece of cloth we can put between his teeth so that he doesn’t bite his tongue?”

“Don’t worry,” Damiya interjected. “I can use my sleeve.” He raised his right

arm, bit his sleeve, and grinned.

Elin nodded. "Thank you. It may be very painful until the bone is back in the joint, but once it's in, it should feel better. Try and bear the pain until we're done."

Damiya let the sleeve fall for a moment. "I may not be a warrior, but I believe I'm strong enough. If you fail, I'm not going to blame you, so you might as well go ahead and get revenge for yesterday."

Elin smiled in spite of herself. "All right, then. Let's begin."

The manservant supported Damiya from behind while Elin grabbed his left wrist with both hands. Relocating a shoulder is hard work, and Elin, as well as the white-faced Damiya, was drenched in sweat by the time she finished. When the bone finally slipped into the socket, none of them could speak for some time.

Damiya spit out the gag and let out a long breath. "Amazing ... The pain seems to have almost disappeared."

Elin secured his arm with a sling made of some bleached cotton recovered from a trash basket, and said, "Don't move your arm. And please remember to tell the physicians that you hit your head."

Damiya looked at her. "I understand. And thank you. We owe you our lives."

Elin bowed her head. "It was nothing." She rose and looked around the room. Even those who had been lying prostrate when she came in were now sitting up. Although some held their heads in their hands, there were none with life-threatening injuries. The wounded on deck were in need of more urgent attention.

As she bowed to Damiya and turned to leave, he said, "Is there really nothing you can do for the Yojeh? Surely you could use the secret powers of the Ahlyo."

Elin stopped and looked at him. "I have no secret powers."

He gazed at her steadily. Although he said nothing, his eyes gleamed with a strange light.

As Elin passed out the door, she almost collided with a man coming in from

the deck. It was lalū, the Yojeḥ's guard. He seemed to exude a savage heat along with the smell of blood, sweat, and Toda, and Elin shrank back instinctively.

"How is the Yojeḥ?" he asked in a low voice.

"The fall was severe, and she's still unconscious. The fact that she hit her head worries me. Right now, however, all we can do is keep her still and warm."

lalū nodded as he gazed over at the Yojeḥ. His right arm was blood-soaked from the shoulder to the fingertips. Even with a tourniquet tied round his right armpit, blood still dripped from his fingers. Elin suddenly recalled the man who had plunged his sword and arm down the Toda's throat.

"Were you cut by Toda fangs?"

lalū looked at his arm. "Ah, this? It's just a gash. It should be all right. The bleeding will stop if I put pressure on it."

Elin frowned and gently raised his blood-drenched sleeve to examine the wound. Then she looked up at him and said, "Toda fangs are poisonous. If it isn't washed with a brew of shilan leaves, you could lose that arm."

Expressionless, lalū gazed down at his arm as if it belonged to someone else.

"Please wait while I go and get some," Elin said, and turned to leave, but lalū grabbed her arm.

"Help my men first. Please."

Elin stared at him intently, but his face remained unmoved. She nodded and then went out onto the deck. Many men lay bleeding and groaning in agony. A life or an arm—lalū was right. She should stop the bleeding first.

Behind her, Damiya's voice rose in fury. "lalū! How could you let this happen? Why weren't you aware of the Aluhan's treachery?"

She could not hear lalū's reply.

She was busy tying a tourniquet when lalū came out of the cabin. He immediately joined her, deftly using his good arm to help. By the time a ship bearing the Kazalumu flag drew near, first aid measures were complete.

“Did you bring stewed shilan leaves?” Elin called out as soon as the ship was close enough to make out the faces of those on board.

The teachers looked dismayed. “We brought bandages and ointments for treating most injuries, but we were in such a hurry, we didn’t think of that. Have some of the injured been bitten by Toda?”

“Yes, the wounds are mostly arrow wounds or lacerations from Toda fangs and scales, with some broken bones and bruising. Her Highness, the Yojuh, was slammed against the cabin wall and hit her head. She’s still unconscious.”

There was a commotion as people boarded from the other ship. While the teachers could see the wounded lying on the deck, the true extent of the slaughter was not apparent, as most of the bodies had already been washed downstream.

Quietly, Elin said to lalū, “I’m going to ask Leelan to take me to the school so that I can get some shilan potion.”

lalū nodded. “Please. But don’t bring it here. Go to the lord’s hall. I’m going to have this boat towed there. The Aluhan is a clever general. If he has a second unit waiting to attack, we can’t possibly repulse them here.” Then he added in a low voice, “When you come to the hall, come by horse, even if it takes more time.”

Elin looked at him in surprise. He was warning her not to let people see her riding the Royal Beast. She nodded. “I understand.”

On her way back to Leelan, Elin had to pass the corpses of the Toda where they had washed against the shore. Whether she wanted to or not, she could not avoid seeing them. At the sight of their dorsal fins, however, she frowned. There were no notches. A chill ran through her as she realized what that meant.

It can’t be ...

She glanced back to where lalū stood on the ship. Should she tell him? But if she did, she would have to explain why she knew so much about the Toda. Still frowning, she walked over to Leelan.

The Beast was grooming her fur, but she paused and looked up. “Fly?” she asked.

Elin nodded. “Fly.”

Leelan crouched down to let Elin mount as if it was the most natural thing to do, then, once Elin was on, she shot into the air.

As he watched the Royal Beast dwindle into the sky, Ialu struggled to understand his own heart. He should not have let them leave—not if he were considering the best strategy for defense. With no one left in any shape to fight, they would be slaughtered should the Aluhan send a second wave of Toda. So why had he let the girl go? Why had he been so anxious that she leave as soon as possible?

Remembering that he had told her to come to the lord’s hall by horse, he closed his eyes. While he knew what he had thought and the choice that he had made, he could not understand what had moved him to do so.

I must be getting used to this, Elin thought, for she had lost her initial fear of flying. With her cheek against Leelan’s neck, she could hear the sound of the Beast’s breathing and her mouth moving. At times she heard a clicking noise, like nails being clipped. For a while she wondered what it was, then she recognized the source. Leelan must have Toda scales caught between her teeth, and she was nudging them out with her tongue and cracking them between her jaws.

The sound of Leelan tearing the Toda apart leaped vividly into her mind—a sound like shattering glass. Something twisted in her gut, and a shiver ran up her spine. The sensation was disturbingly pleasant. Realization dawned. When she had ridden Leelan, wild with the scent of blood, when she had felt her invincible power and heard her crush Toda hides like mere glasswork, she had experienced not just fear, but pleasure as well.

Pressing her face into Leelan’s fur, she closed her eyes and did not open them again until they began to descend.

When Leelan landed in the meadow beside Eku and Alu, Eku sniffed the air. His hackles rose, and he began to growl. He quieted reluctantly when Leelan responded in a low, soothing tone, but his fur still stood on end.

Elin slipped off Leelan's back and looked up at her with a heavy heart. She seemed as calm as if her killing frenzy had never occurred. And that very calmness alarmed Elin. If Leelan had been human, she could have talked to her about what their actions meant. But Leelan was not human. No matter how much Elin might wish otherwise, she could never share with her the fear, or the elation, that violence could evoke. Nor could she consult with her about what they should do next.

Royal Beasts were beasts. They did not think like people. With a word, she had made Leelan fly and kill the Toda, and Leelan had done exactly as she had been told. Like a sword that fit perfectly in the hand, once tamed, Royal Beasts could become convenient tools to be wielded as their master pleased. And by using Leelan as a weapon, Elin had just demonstrated that fact to the world.

Alu brushed up against her and licked her hand. Elin looked down at it, then squeezed her eyes shut.

Royal Beasts must never become accustomed to people.

Intoxicated with the joy of communing with them, she had trained them to respond to her. Now she could see all too clearly where this would lead. She buried her face in her hands. Although she had washed them in the river, they still smelt of blood.

Passing through the back door of the school and into the dark hallway, she felt as though she were seeing it for the first time, despite its familiarity. All sound—the clamor of the students, the voices of people who spoke to her—seemed to come from very far away.

Someone must have told the headmistress that she was back. With swift strides, Esalu approached, her face fierce with anger, but when she saw Elin's expression, the fury in her eyes ebbed. She grasped Elin's hands in her own. "Are you all right?"

Elin looked at her in a daze. "Yes. I'm all right." Even her own voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Well, you certainly don't look it. You look like the walking dead."

Elin shook her head. "No, I'm fine ... But some of the wounded were bitten by

the Toda. I need to brew a potion of shilan leaves and take it back.”

Esalu nodded and fell in beside her as they walked to the dispensary. “I saw what happened from the hill. Is the Yojeh safe?”

Elin spoke softly. “She was thrown against the wall and hit her head. She’s unconscious.”

Esalu frowned. “I hope it’s just a mild concussion.”

“I checked the pupils of her eyes, and she didn’t seem to have any internal bleeding. For now, at least...” She knew that even when nothing happened immediately after a hard blow to the head, bleeding could begin much later, and that could be fatal. But she could not bring herself to say something so unlucky.

“I told the Lord of Kazalumu to take physicians and sent our most experienced teachers,” Esalu said. “There’s nothing more we can do but leave Her Highness in their hands.”

As she helped prepare the potion in the dispensary, Esalu glanced frequently at Elin, as if there was something she wanted to say, but in the end she said nothing. Elin concentrated on her work, pretending not to notice. She was all too aware of the gravity of what she had done. But she was not yet ready to confront it.

The finely chopped dried shilan danced in the boiling water. Her eyes were focused on the leaves bubbling in the pot, but her mind was racing round and round, seeking excuses for what she had done. Reasons why she had had no choice floated up one after the other.

So this is how the human brain tries to protect itself when exposed to shock, she thought. But none of the reasons her mind suggested could erase the coal-black darkness at the bottom of her heart. Quietly and coldly that blackness declared the reality. She had opened a door that must not be opened. If she acted now, she might still have time to close it with her own hands. But if she went any further, she would never be able to do so again.

She watched the leaves dye the boiling water red.

5

THE MARK OF THE TODA CLANS

The gate to the lord's hall was firmly shut and guarded by soldiers, but when Elin dismounted and told them why she had come, they let her in. Ialu must have warned them in advance. The hall and garden were surrounded by thick mud walls roofed with clay tiles. Inside, everything seemed to be chaos. Men hurried to and fro, many of them dressed in obviously makeshift armor.

The scene reminded Elin of a hive of honeybees when a hornet approached. At least three times as large as their prey, hornets were ferocious, and, if they attacked in a group, they could exterminate an entire hive. But honeybees did not give in passively. Elin had once seen them swarm over a lone hornet, wrapping it in a ball. When the bees had dispersed, she saw not only the corpse of the dead hornet but also that of a tiny honeybee, crushed by its fellows with its mandibles still sunk in the hornet's leg. In her mind's eye, the tiny corpse merged with the figure of a man, and she shook her head to dispel this gloomy association.

Someone was weeping quietly, fighting to suppress their sobs. Perhaps a loved one had been killed by the Toda. The sound made her want to plug her ears. A maid came running up as she stepped into the lord's hall and led her into a room beside the entrance. The wounded Se Zan lay on mattresses on the floor. There were already two men fewer than those she had treated on the ship. A young man whose arm had been bitten off and another whose breast had been pierced by an arrow were nowhere to be seen. They had not made it. She closed her eyes for a moment.

Only two others had been gashed by Toda ... It was, she realized, a miracle that as many as two of those within range of the Toda's fangs had survived at all. She smeared their wounds with the shilan ointment and helped them drink the antidote she had brought, all the while wondering where Ialu was. When

she finished treating them, she went out into the corridor and stopped a maid who was hurrying past.

“Excuse me, but do you know where I can find Ialu, the Se Zan?”

The maid shook her head impatiently. “I’ve no idea. I’m sorry, but I’m in a hurry.”

Elin watched her as she rushed away, wondering what to do. She could not leave without treating his wounds. She began walking along the corridor deeper into the hall and bumped into a middle-aged man coming through a door on her right. He was speaking to someone in the room behind him.

“Be sure to follow my instructions. You can serve dinner in about an hour,” he said. Turning, he noticed Elin and stopped, staring at her as if she were a ghost. His face was familiar, and she realized it was the servant who had been on the boat with the Yoje. Judging from a blue bruise along his jawline, he must have hit his chin when they were attacked. He was a very lucky man to have come away with such a minor injury.

“How is Her Majesty, the Yoje?” she asked quietly.

“Ah...” He blinked, as if recollecting himself. “Her Royal Highness has not yet regained consciousness. But according to the physicians, while we must be vigilant, her condition is not life-threatening at this moment.”

Elin let out a sigh of relief. “I am very glad to hear that.”

“Yes, well, Lord Damiya’s injury is also not dangerous, but he has gone to bed with a fever.”

“I’m sorry. Please take good care of them, and of yourself.” He nodded, and Elin asked, “Forgive me, but can you tell me where I might find Ialu, the Se Zan? I have brought him some medicine.”

“Ialu? He’s in the middle of a meeting.”

“A meeting? When he was that badly hurt?”

The manservant frowned. “He failed to save Her Royal Highness, the Yoje. As a Se Zan, he has no right to be concerned about his own health.”

Elin’s temper flared at the tone of his voice, but she hid her emotions. “I am

very sorry to trouble you,” she said, “but may I ask you a favor? Could you please tell lalü when the meeting is over that I am here treating the wounded Se Zan?”

The manservant nodded haughtily and stalked off down the corridor.

lalü did not come. Even when the last rays of the sun falling through the window had faded and a blue darkness spread across the land, he still had not appeared. A servant came and lit the lanterns, but when Elin asked if the meeting was over, she just shrugged her shoulders.

The medicine administered by the physicians must have been working, because the wounded were all sleeping. While she listened to their shallow breathing, Elin noted that the tension inside her must have eased, for she was suddenly starving. Thinking back, she realized that she had not had a bite to eat since breakfast.

Annoyed, she stood up. She had just put her hand on the door when someone pulled it open from the other side. It was lalü.

He raised his brows. “You’re still here?”

“You mean you didn’t come here to be treated? I asked the servant to tell you that I was here.” It was obvious from his expression that no one had told him. “Well, never mind. We need to do something about your wound.”

She led him to a corner of the room. Being careful not to wake the sleeping men, she brought a candlestick over and set it beside him where he sat on the floor. Someone must have dressed his wound already, for his arm was securely bandaged, but his thumb, which protruded from it, was red and puffy. Gently removing the bandage, she found that not only the area around the wound, but his entire arm had swelled.

“Why didn’t you come to me sooner? You knew that I must be here.”

“There was no time.”

Elin frowned as she cleansed the gash with the ointment. “You could lose the use of your arm with the poison spreading like this. How could you put off taking care of yourself like that? Especially your right arm.”

Staring dully at the wound, he whispered, "It wasn't much use to me when I needed it most."

Elin's eyes flew to his face. He raised his head and looked at her. "I never even thanked you, did I? Forgive me. It was you who saved all of us, yet we didn't even offer you a meal..."

She shook her head and turned her gaze back to his arm. "It's better that way. It would be so much easier if everyone would just forget what I did..."

His face darkened. "That will never be ... Now everyone sees you as a wielder of the Ahlyo's secrets."

Pain pierced Elin's heart. Washing his wound carefully, she said, "Do you also think so?"

"There's too little evidence as yet," he said quietly. "If raising a Royal Beast from infancy can make it tame enough to lick your hand, then you wouldn't need any secret powers to get on its back and fly." He smiled faintly and added, "And besides, if it is you who wields those secret powers, then as a Se Zan, I have nothing to fear."

Elin looked up. "Why?"

"Magic is the same as martial arts—what matters most is the user. If you had attacked us, then we should worry. But as you saved our lives, there should be no need for concern, right?" Still, there was a shadow in his eyes. He started to say something, then shifted his gaze to his companions where they lay in the darkness.

"Whatever the case, these lives you saved won't last long."

Elin shook her head. "Yes, they will. They'll all get better. None of their wounds are fatal."

"I wasn't talking about their wounds." He looked at her again. "Today it became very clear that the pillar which has shored up this country for so long is too rotten to last. The Yojeh has no army. If the Aluhan has decided to dispense with reverence and awe, with faith in and loyalty to the Yojeh, and to take up arms against her, then this country will never be the same again."

Elin watched him, saying nothing. Gazing into her green eyes, he continued, voicing thoughts he normally would never have shared with a woman or a commoner. “It is not the Se Zan that have protected the Yojuh. It is the hearts of the people who love her and believe that she, as the divine ruler, brings happiness to this land. There are only forty-three Se Zan in all. While we may be able to protect her from assassination, we would be no more than a wall of straw against even the smallest of the Aluhan’s Toda troops.” He spoke simply, without either belittling or romanticizing the Se Zan’s state.

He knows exactly what he’s protecting, Elin thought. He isn’t sacrificing his life from a blind belief in the Yojuh.

As she listened to him speak, it was as if the kingdom as she knew it had grown thin and transparent, exposing the structure beneath—a land held together by placing an army-less ruler at its summit, a ruler supported solely by her people’s will.

She looked down at the floor. Yet someone is trying to shatter that will like brittle glass. Clearly, he believes that the Aluhan has finally revealed his intention to rebel. Because Toda were used in the attack. But he’s probably wrong.

From the moment she had noticed the lack of notches on the Toda’s dorsal fins, Elin had been thinking, and her thoughts always led her to the same conclusion. The Aluhan could not have ordered the attack. Rather, someone had used the Toda to implicate him. If she were to tell Ialu this, she would have to tell him about her mother. If she did not tell him ... both the Yojuh and the Aluhan would be forced down a terrible path, dancing to someone else’s tune.

She raised her eyes and watched him sip the medicinal brew she had given him. “Those Toda...” she said. “They weren’t the Aluhan’s.”

He took the cup from his lips and stared at her. “How can you be so sure?”

“Their dorsal fins bore no clan marks.”

“Marks?”

Elin continued. “There are twelve villages that care for the Aluhan’s Toda. The Stewards of each village take great pride in the Toda they raise. In order to

determine which village's Toda excel on the battlefield, each clan makes distinctive notches in their dorsal fins so that they can tell them apart ... There were no notches on the fins of the Toda that attacked you today."

Ialu frowned. "But what if they were raised especially for the purpose of assassinating the Yojuh..." he began, then shook his head. "No, there would be no point. The Toda themselves are the symbol of the Aluhan. And if the Aluhan indeed attacked with the intent to kill the Yojuh, then he would have no reason to hide his intentions..."

He rested his chin in his good hand and stared into space. Finally, he returned his gaze to Elin. "If you speak the truth," he said in a strained voice, "then I must reexamine the meaning of what happened today. Not even I, a Se Zan, knew about the notches. It's not that I doubt your word, but can you be absolutely sure?"

Elin nodded. "The Toda marks were developed out of clan rivalry. I doubt that anyone outside those clans would know about them." She closed her eyes briefly, then looked straight at him. "There is no mistake. I know because I was raised among Toda from the time I was very small. My mother was a Steward."

His eyes widened in surprise. She told him about her upbringing, her mother and the reason she was killed, and finally about how she had ended up in Yojuh territory. She told him everything, except the fact that her mother had controlled the Toda.

Ialu listened, his face expressionless. When she had finished, he still said nothing. In the wavering light of the candle, they sat in silence while he stroked his chin thoughtfully. Suddenly, a spark of amusement kindled in his eyes. Seeing the look on her face, he explained hastily, "Don't get me wrong. I wasn't laughing at you ... I'm not quite myself, maybe because of everything that's happened today. I feel like I've been telling you a lot of things that I shouldn't. And I just thought that perhaps the same was now true for you."

A faint smile rose to Elin's lips. He might be right. She did not know why, but telling him about her mother had been much easier than she had expected, even though she barely knew him.

Just as he opened his mouth to speak, a bell rang in the distance, heralding

the coming of night. As though waking from a dream, he said, "It's so late ... You should stay here tonight. I'll let the servants know."

Elin shook her head. "No, I have to get back to take care of Leelan."

"Ah, I see."

Standing carefully so as not to knock over the candle, Elin said quietly, "You should rest. Even if just for a little while. You'll probably have a fever tonight. I'll ask someone to bring you some water. Be sure to drink as much as you can."

"I will." Ialu paused, then said, "I won't return your kindness with disloyalty. You can rest assured that I won't tell anyone about your mother."

Elin smiled. "Thank you ... But if necessary, don't hesitate to tell. It may still be hard for me to talk about, but it's over." She bowed and left the room.

Ialu watched her leave. Only when she had closed the door behind her did he lie down in the dimly lit room and turn his eyes toward his men. Listening to their breathing, he thought of those who breathed no longer. Like him, in return for serving as the Yojeh's shields, they had all gained a station and lifestyle far beyond that into which they had been born. Yet, even so, a life was a life. Was there not something he could do before they were caught and crushed within the schisms of this kingdom's twisting structure? He ran a hand through his sweat-damp hair.

If it was not the Aluhan who attacked us ... The ambush now revealed a scheme completely different from the one he had been considering. Because the attackers were Toda Riders, he had simply assumed that they were the Aluhan's men. Now, however, he realized that the Aluhan would never stoop to such underhanded measures. It was completely out of character. If he ever decided that the Yojeh must be removed, he would announce his intentions openly and surround the capital with his formidable army.

What can that man be thinking?

The man he had suspected for so long ... If the attack were his doing, then the scheme made more sense. Yet, the falsely accused Aluhan would be furious. Even if the man had connections with Toda dealers, surely he could not have amassed a force large enough to oppose the Aluhan. He could never prevent

the destruction of the Yojuh's sovereignty if the enraged Aluhan should attack, and what could he possibly gain by bringing the Yojuh's reign to an end?

He sighed. As he puzzled over the meaning of the attack, an image of a woman's face distracted him. Half hidden in the shadow cast by the candle, it flickered in the back of his mind and would not let go.

She saw her mother devoured by Toda, right before her eyes ... Maybe that's why she had a quietness that set her apart—because she carried such a cruel memory concealed within. He recalled her face as she had cared for the Royal Beasts, and closed his eyes. He did not want to drag her into this any further. But that was likely impossible.

The sight of the Royal Beast descending from the heavens and feasting on the docile Toda like sacrificial offerings had been burned into the mind of every person there. He could see all too clearly the path that she would be forced to tread.

6

RESOLUTION

Four days after the attack, Elin received an invitation to dine with the Yojuh. She found the lord's hall much calmer than when she had last visited, and the maid who greeted her at the door treated her with deference. As she followed her down the wide, shadowed corridor, Elin's agitated mind raced madly. It was highly unlikely that she had been invited here purely out of gratitude for saving the Yojuh's life. There would be no turning back once she stepped into the room at the end of the corridor. Now was her last chance to decide, yet her mind was still frantically seeking a way out.

Two guards with unsheathed swords stood on either side of the entrance. As she approached, they swung the doors open, and light spilt out of the room. Myriad candles burned in a glass chandelier, shedding a soft glow over the rich gold-threaded tapestries that covered the walls. A feast of sumptuous dishes had been spread across a low table in the center of the room, and servants

knelt near the door. At the far end of the table, the Yojuh reclined on a rug bolstered with soft wadding, while Damiya sat on one side of the table holding a wineglass in his hand. His other arm was still in a sling, but he looked far better than the last time Elin had seen him.

When she entered the room, all eyes turned to her.

“Elin,” Damiya said happily. “It’s good to see you. Come, come. There’s no need to stand on ceremony. Come and sit beside the Yojuh.” He gestured with his hand.

Elin knelt where he had indicated and then bowed her head to the carpet in formal greeting. “Your Majesty, I am here in response to your summons.”

The Yojuh smiled and said gently, “Raise your head, Elin.”

She did as she was told. There was a bright gleam in the Yojuh’s eyes, despite her neck brace, bandaged head, and sallow skin. “It is thanks to you that we are able to sit together at this table tonight,” she said. “We owe you our lives.”

Elin bowed her head again. “I do not deserve such praise ... Please accept my humble felicitations on Your Majesty’s speedy recovery.”

“Thank you. Now raise your head and relax. There is no need to speak so formally with me.” She gestured to her lady-in-waiting. Rising gracefully, the woman approached Elin and placed a large, heavy brocade bag in her hands.

“Forgive me for not giving you a greater reward at this time,” the Yojuh said, “but as you know, I am traveling. Ask for anything you desire, and I will make sure it is yours.”

Elin set the bag she had been given on the carpet. “I am very honored, but—”

Before she could finish her sentence, however, Damiya interrupted. “There’s no need to hesitate. Your service was outstanding. When you dropped from the sky on that Royal Beast to rescue the Yojuh, I shook with awe ... It was as if the legends of the gods were coming to life before my very eyes.”

Elin kept her eyes on the floor, but he ignored her, continuing gaily. “With you and that Royal Beast on our side, we have nothing to fear. Even if the Aluhan were to send more Toda against us, you could easily repel them. How could we

be any safer than that?”

Elin stared fixedly at a single point on the carpet.

In her soft voice, the Yojeah added, “It’s just as Damiya says. Thanks to you, we can sleep soundly at night.”

Elin bit her lip and closed her eyes. The heat seemed to ebb from her body, yet sweat beaded her brow.

“While we stay here, let Leelan sleep in the garden and watch over us,” Damiya said. “Then, when the Yojeah has recovered, the two of you can guard us on our journey to the capital.”

Elin took a deep breath and opened her eyes. A cool stillness spread through her, and she knew that the time had come ... Here, right before her, was the last line. Once she had crossed it, it would no longer be in her power to close the door.

She raised her face and looked straight at the Yojeah. “While you are here, Leelan and I will protect you. However, I beg of you, please do not ask me to take Leelan to the capital.”

The Yojeah’s eyes opened wide. Before she could speak, however, Damiya leaned forward. “What exactly are you saying?” he asked quietly, as if trying to reason with her. “Do you realize what that means, Elin? Think carefully before you speak. What you just said could be interpreted as a refusal to protect the Yojeah.”

Elin turned to him. “I beg your pardon, Lord Damiya, but I am fully aware of what it means.”

His expression changed abruptly. “Then no doubt you are equally aware that it is a crime for which the punishment is beheading.”

The Yojeah did not protest. Her gentle expression had turned cold, and there was a stern glint in her eyes as she gazed down at Elin. Damiya calmed his breathing, but his voice still resonated with suppressed anger. “Let us pretend that we did not hear what you just said. Elin, I hereby command you to take the Royal Beast and accompany the Yojeah to the capital.”

With a face drained of color, Elin gazed at the Yojeh. "Please forgive me. I beg you."

Silence fell over the room. She heard Damiya draw a deep breath. "Did you not hear me say that you would refuse on pain of death?" The words sounded as though he were forcing them through his teeth.

Elin nodded. "Indeed, I heard you, sir." The air was so taut with tension that she felt it must snap at the slightest touch.

"So you're prepared to die for this, are you?" Damiya said quietly. "But I am afraid that your life alone can hardly atone for such a heavy crime. The fault lies also with those who allowed you, who would refuse to protect the Yojeh, to care for the Royal Beasts."

Elin could scarcely breathe. Gazing steadily at the Yojeh, she inhaled shallowly and said in a shaking voice, "To accuse the teachers who trained me of treason ... such a punishment would be far worse than killing me ... it would feel like being torn in two. If you wish, you can torture me like that ... but you cannot make me obey you." Just to utter those words was like spitting blood.

Looking intently at her white face, the Yojeh frowned. "Why would you refuse to protect me, even to that extreme?"

Elin inhaled slowly. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them. Struggling to keep her voice steady, she said, "I would tell that reason to you alone, Your Highness."

Damiya turned pale. "Are you saying that you can't tell me?"

Elin ignored this outburst. "Your Majesty, you told me that you would grant me whatever I desired. If you will honor your word, then I beg you to grant me this wish. Please ask the others to leave this room."

The Yojeh raised her hand to silence Damiya and gazed sternly at Elin. "Are you suggesting that I remain alone with someone who has just refused to protect me?"

"If you fear that I may betray you, then please have the Se Zan here remain by your side."

The Yojuh narrowed her eyes. "You mean that you trust Ialu, is that it?"

"Yes. I can trust him because he used his body as a shield to save Your Majesty's life."

Turning to Damiya, who was demanding in a shrill voice whether Elin meant that she could not trust him, the Yojuh said quietly, "Please take the others and leave this room."

"Aunt Halumiya!" Damiya protested, but she did not bother to repeat herself.

When the door had closed behind them, quiet descended on the room, as if a thunderous wave had receded from the shore.

"Well then, let me hear what you have to say," the Yojuh said.

"It will be a long tale, Your Highness," Elin said, her voice tenuous. "May I suggest that you lie down while I speak?"

A cold smile lit the Yojuh's eyes. "After all that, you now show concern for my well-being? Do not trouble yourself. Get on with it."

Elin sat up straight and rested her hands on her knees. "Before I begin, allow me to ask one question. Was it not in fact in accordance with Your Majesty's wishes that I should refuse to use the Royal Beast to protect Your Highness?"

The Yojuh looked bewildered. "My wishes?..."

At that moment, Elin, who had been watching her intently so as not to miss the slightest nuance of expression, felt her last thread of hope snap. She had thought that, if the Yojuh were forbidden to speak of the Canon and its secret purpose in front of others, she might be merely feigning ignorance, but it was clear from her answer that she simply did not know.

Apparently impatient with Elin's silence, the Yojuh demanded, "What on earth are you getting at? Speak plainly so that I can understand."

Elin made up her mind. If she doesn't know, then I'll have to start by explaining what I think about the Canon.

"I was told that it was the first Yojuh who wrote the Royal Beast Canon," she began. "Therefore, I assumed that Your Majesty must already know why I refused to manipulate the Royal Beasts. It would seem, however, that I was

mistaken.”

The Yojuh raised her brows. “The Royal Beast Canon? Yes, it was written by the first Yojuh. Is there some connection?”

Elin nodded. “Yes. If those who tend the Royal Beasts follow the procedures written in the Canon ... the Beasts they raise will never fly and never bear young.”

The significance of this must have been lost on the Yojuh, for she merely gazed at Elin silently.

“The first thing we learn about caring for Royal Beasts is that they can never be tamed. The rules for their care make sure that they have no human contact. Their handlers are taught to place food in their cages when the Beasts are outside and to paralyze them with the Silent Whistle before treating them. Repeated use of the Silent Whistle and daily doses of tokujisui prevent the Beasts from sexually maturing. That is why, for several centuries, no Beasts in captivity have ever borne young.”

The Yojuh stared at her intently, as if searching for the meaning behind her words. “Are you saying that the first Yojuh purposely made the rules to prevent the Beasts from multiplying?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“It would be presumptuous of me to guess what the first Yojuh intended, but I believe that she wished, at whatever cost, to avoid repeating the catastrophe that she had experienced in her homeland.”

The Yojuh’s expression suddenly changed. Although her eyes never wavered from Elin’s face, they no longer saw her. After a long pause, she finally spoke. “So you know what happened on the far side of the Afon Noah?” Then, as if to herself, she added, “I, myself, do not.”

Elin looked at her in surprise. This was not what she had expected to hear. The Yojuh’s eyes were as still as glass.

“When the palace burned and my mother died, I was only three. My

grandmother died of the aftereffects when I was just five. I ascended to the throne knowing nothing..." Anger twisted her face. "The filthy Sai Gamulu! They took everything. My mother, my grandmother, and the memory of my people that had been passed down for three hundred years!" She clenched her age-stained hands, as though to suppress the wave of anger that disturbed her thoughts. Shakily, she took a deep breath and opened her fists, then pressed her fingers against her mouth. After a few moments, she dropped her hands and looked once again at Elin.

"My ancestor came down from the far side of the Afon Noah. That is the only memory of my people with which I was left. I do not know what gods lived in that land far across the mountains or why she left it to come here.

"Elin, how do you know what happened on the other side? Do the Ahlyo have some kind of connection to the gods?"

Elin gazed at her and said, "I do not know if the story I was told is true. But having seen firsthand the clever way in which both Royal Beasts and Toda in captivity are prevented from breeding, I feel that it is quite likely. Will Your Majesty listen? It is a very long tale."

The Yojeh nodded. "Let me hear, no matter how long it may be."

Elin took a deep breath, then began to speak. She told the Yojeh about her mother, about how she had commanded the Toda with her finger whistle and chosen death because she believed this was an unpardonable sin. And she shared the terrible tale that had been told to her by the Ahlyo. She told her everything. When she finished, the Yojeh stared at her unblinking. Her face seemed tragically aged, as though Elin's tale had sucked all the vitality from her.

"I see..." she whispered. Placing a trembling hand over her eyes, she was silent for some time.

"Your Majesty..." lalu said. It was the first time he had spoken.

His voice must have penetrated her mind, for she said hoarsely, "There's no need for concern." She placed her hands, still trembling, into her lap and looked at Elin. "If your tale is true..." Her words died away. She appeared to be struggling to grasp the reins of her mind in the maelstrom of her confused thoughts. Closing her eyes, she waved her hand. "You may leave me now ... You

shall hear from me in due course.”

Uncertain, Elin glanced at Ialu. He nodded and, with his eyes, gestured for her to leave. She bowed deeply and left the room.

Ialu slid forward on his knees and sat formally before the Yojuh. She opened her eyes slowly and murmured, “Ialu, you have wasted your life by serving as my shield.”

He regarded her sternly. “If you will pardon me, Your Majesty, I must beg you never to say such things. Regardless of who the first ancestor was, Your Majesty is, without doubt, the true ruler of this kingdom.”

The Yojuh stared at him with a look of surprise. He continued quietly, “If what Elin said is true, then the previous Yojuh, and the Yojuh before her, knew. They knew, and yet they still fulfilled their duty as rulers of this land. I am Your Majesty’s shield, but it is you who are the shield of this kingdom. Without a strong and sturdy shield, this land would still be doomed, regardless of the past.”

As his words permeated her mind, she felt the familiar weight of responsibility wrap itself around her like a cloak of steel. A faint smile crossed her face. “You never lose your head, do you? Even when the pond is murky with mud and debris, you can reach in and seize the fish.”

Ialu bowed his head. “Your Majesty, while there are no other ears to hear, there is one other thing of which I must speak.”

As she listened to what he said, her eyes clouded with pain. When he had finished, however, there was no longer any doubt in her face. She might be old and hurt, but she was still the Yojuh.

Two days later, Elin received a message from the Yojuh. In it, she praised Elin’s service and expressed her gratitude for sharing what was in her heart. And she declared that she had no need of the Royal Beast’s protection. Ten Se

Zan arrived from the capital and, with them as her guards, the Yojuh began her journey home to the palace.

If she had reached the capital safely, Elin's fate would have been very different. However, as the Yojuh passed through the palace gate, she complained of a severe headache and fell into a coma. Although her bruises had faded and her head injury appeared to have healed, blood must have been seeping slowly into her brain. The long journey home in a jolting carriage had aggravated the damage. Carried into the palace, she never regained consciousness. Her sudden death caught everyone by surprise.

EIGHT

THE GATHERING STORM



1

A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

“Six, seven, eight cartloads...” the Aluhan murmured as he looked down from his window at the castle gate. He snorted. “She’s returned everything.”

Noting the vein throbbing in his father’s temple, Shunan said soothingly, “It was only to be expected. If I were in her shoes, I would not accept them either.”

The Aluhan turned slowly toward him but said nothing. The rumor that the Yojeh had been ambushed by Toda had reached his ears the morning after the attack. He had immediately dispatched messengers to the Yojeh in Kazalumu and to Princess Seimiya at the palace to deny any involvement, but they had been turned away, unable to fulfill their mission.

Again, as soon as he had learned of the Yojeh’s passing, he had sent gold, silver, silk, and other precious goods to Seimiya as mourning gifts. But now

these, too, were being returned, still packed in their horse-drawn carts. Even before the carts arrived, the messenger bearing his letter of condolence had returned to say that Seimiya had refused to even let him pass through the palace gate.

“She may be the Princess,” the Aluhan said in a low voice, “but to respond like this without even attempting to verify the facts is unpardonable.” Backlit by the window, his figure was sunk in shadow. “This kingdom is doomed if its ruler can be deceived by such an obvious attempt to frame an innocent man.”

“Father—” Shunan interjected, but the Aluhan ignored him.

“Using Toda to brand us as the Yojuh’s assassins is beyond contempt. If, by any chance, the one behind this foul scheme finds a way to manipulate the Crown, the kingdom will rot from the inside and perish. We cannot leave this ship on which we all sail in the hands of such a foolish captain.”

“Father!” Nugan pushed his brother aside to stand before the Aluhan. His eyes shone with outrage and his voice lashed out like a whip. “How can you be so disrespectful? I demand that you retract your words!”

Even as Nugan spoke, the Aluhan swept his sword from its scabbard and smacked his son on the ear with the flat of the blade. Nugan fell to his knees and clutched the side of his head. Shaking with rage and astonishment, he gazed up at his father.

The Aluhan glared down at him. “It’s about time you grew up,” he said coldly. “If your shortsighted, obstinate stupidity ever threatens your brother’s position, I will not hesitate to lop off your head.” His sword whistled as he whirled it into its sheath. He turned to Shunan. “Do you have some objection too?”

“No. It would seem that the time has come,” Shunan said.

At this, the Aluhan smiled. But before he could speak, Shunan added, “I believe, however, that it would be wise to allow the Princess a period of grace—to give her some time to think.”

The Aluhan frowned. “At times like this, speed means everything. It’s far more effective to respond immediately.”

Shunan shook his head. “If we were launching into battle with a foreign

country that possessed an army, yes, of course. But I think this case is different.” He walked over to his younger brother, grasped him by the elbow, and helped him to his feet. “Winning this battle will be easier than snatching away a baby’s blanket. The hard part will come after.” He looked at the Aluhan. “Father, I have an idea. Would you be willing to leave it in my hands?”

A fishmonger selling his wares for the evening meal rattled by with his cart, accompanied by the high, trailing note of his horn.

lalu rested his arm on his forehead and stared at the ceiling. He had woken much earlier, but had not felt like getting up. Instead, he had lain in bed, gazing absently at the pattern of the woodgrain in the ceiling where it caught the early afternoon light. For the last ten days, from the Yoje Halumiya’s funeral to the coronation of the new Yoje, there had been almost no time for sleep. While everyone in the palace dashed to and fro in a state of anxious confusion, he had watched over the new Yoje, just as always. This morning, when the night watch changed, he had not felt like returning to the antechamber set aside for the Se Zan. Instead, he had left Kailu in charge and returned to his house for the first time in weeks.

When he had fallen exhausted onto his bed, he had failed to notice the thin film of dust coating the floor and windowsills, but now he could see it plainly. His room seemed to belong to a stranger—empty but for a single chest of drawers and his woodworking tools, which had lain idle for far too long.

The emptiness that always lurked deep inside seeped slowly up his spine and spread through him, until his body felt thin and transparent. He had lived as an arrow to kill, and as a shield to block the arrows of others—that and nothing more. He had no life companion and never would. Before him lay endless days of empty solitude ... At times like these, this reality, from which he could never escape, permeated his being.

The fishmonger’s voice grew suddenly fainter. He must have turned the corner.

This land ... cannot possibly survive, he thought. It won’t be long before it

changes forever.

Regardless of what form it took, it was no concern of his. It was not his job to ponder how the country should be. He was simply a shield to guard the Yojeh. All he needed to think about was how to protect her.

Still ... He closed his eyes. What should I do about that man now?

In the lord's hall in Kazalumu, Ialu had told Yojeh Halumiya what he suspected, and she had promised to consider how to deal with it. But she had died suddenly, and he was back to where he had started. In his mind, he could still hear the fragile voice of the young Yojeh, Seimiya, as she conducted the funeral rites. He could not leave her ignorant of who had murdered her grandmother. Yet would she believe him if he told her?

He sighed. He could guess what the man planned to do with her. Unlike her grandmother, there was not much chance that he would take her life. In that sense, this case was already outside Ialu's line of duty. Except that now he must serve as the shield of a Yojeh who was only a puppet in that man's schemes. At this thought, a grim smile rose to his face.

Despite the nature of the life he had lived, he realized that somewhere deep inside he still yearned for a cause worth dying for. If he had to sacrifice this life, such as it was, he would still rather do it for something meaningful. But he already knew, didn't he, the value of his life? One bag stuffed with large gold pieces. His life as a person had ended the day his mother had accepted that bag of gold.

He covered his face with his hands and, for a long time, simply listened to the sound of his own breathing.

When Seimiya returned to her room and was finally alone, she thought that now, finally, she could weep. She sat on her familiar chair and stared numbly at the floor where the late afternoon sun cast shadows through the latticed window frame. But the tears would not come.

Her grandmother's death had been far too sudden. Even as she had performed the funeral and coronation rites, standing center stage throughout, Seimiya had felt strangely dull and removed, as though she were watching herself from a distance. That feeling did not leave her even when she was on

her own. She felt as though she were in a dream where reality had no substance.

There was so much to do. In particular, she must decide quickly how to punish the Aluhan for his vile betrayal. Yet even this thought, despite its importance, merely floated in the forefront of her brain, stirring no emotion.

A servant at the door announced that Damiya was requesting permission to enter, and Seimiya glanced up.

“Let him in...”

The door opened, and Damiya walked in. His face still looked pale, although he no longer used a sling. Ever since she was a child, he had been Seimiya’s father, brother, and friend. The moment she saw the gentle concern in his eyes, a sense of normalcy, of everyday life, rushed back with startling vividness, and she was hit full force with the knowledge that her grandmother was no longer a part of that life.

Seeing her lips tremble, Damiya strode across the room, opened his arms wide, and wrapped her inside them. Enveloped in his warmth, she felt tears spill from her eyes. Suppressing her sobs, she clung to him tightly and wept. Damiya buried his face in her hair and patted her on the back while tears coursed down his cheeks.

For some time, Seimiya wept. When her tears were almost spent, she whispered into his chest, “Thank you. Thanks to you, Uncle, I was able to mourn my grandmother.”

Damiya said nothing, merely stroking her hair gently.

“If death can come so suddenly, I had better get around to having children soon, hadn’t I?” She smiled and, with a catch in her voice, said, “I must make sure there’s another heir to the Yojeh’s throne.”

Damiya, his eyes still closed, took a deep breath and gently shook her slight frame twice. “Don’t say that.” His voice was almost a sigh, and he stroked her hair yet again. “You are not a tool for passing on sovereignty, Seimiya.”

She rested a hand on his chest and drew slightly away to look up into his face. “Uncle, I beg you. Please don’t try to comfort me with empty words. I know too

well what I am, what my duty is.” Her smile turned fierce. “From the time I was old enough to understand, I have never forgotten, not even once.”

Damiya shook his head. “No, Seimiya, you do not realize what you truly are. You have never seen what really matters.”

Seimiya raised her brows. “What really matters?”

“That’s right. The throne does not exist just to make the ruler suffer. If you must sit on it, then why not enjoy the view that can only be seen from there? Seimiya, you have never once thought of enjoying your sovereignty, have you?”

She gazed at the ground. Damiya placed a finger under her chin and gently raised it. “You are the only woman in this land who can choose any man she wishes. Choose the one you love and marry him.”

“Impossible,” Seimiya said with a mocking smile. Her scornful expression was just like her grandmother’s. “I am the only woman in this country who truly cannot choose the man she wants. You know that.”

“No, in fact, I don’t know that. Why?”

She sighed. “Just think of the choices, Uncle. If we go by blood, perhaps you are thinking of my distant cousin, Oliya? That feeble boy with all the presence of a mayfly? Or, instead of the sacred bloodline, shall we opt for members of the nobility instead—all those spoiled, arrogant youths. Enough of this fruitless discussion.”

Damiya’s grip on her chin strengthened. “What do you mean by fruitless, my dear? This is a very important question, Seimiya. If there is anyone, say so.”

“Anyone?”

“A man that you truly like.”

Seimiya held her breath. Her eyes slid from his, but then she raised them defiantly, gazing straight at him. “No, there’s no one.”

Damiya laughed. “Come, come. Love affairs are the one thing at which I’m a veteran. Your face just spoke far more eloquently than your words.” He let go of her chin and embraced her, rocking her like a little child. “Relax. At least when you are in my arms, be at peace.” He buried his face in her hair again and

whispered, “Remember, you are not alone. I am always by your side.”

Ialu, who was standing in front of the Yojuh’s room, sword and shield in hand, turned his head. Far down the hall, someone was hurrying toward him. There was an urgency in his step and his face was tense. It was Kailu, who had been on duty at the gate.

“What’s wrong?”

“The Aluhan’s eldest son,” Kailu whispered hoarsely. “He’s here and requests an audience with the Yojuh.”

“How many soldiers has he brought?” Ialu asked sharply.

“Actually ... none. They bear no arms.”

“What did you say?”

“He’s brought only three men, none of whom are armed, and they’re all missing something—like a hand or a leg.”

“Missing a hand or a leg?”

“Yes. And one of the men’s faces is pitifully scarred.”

Ialu was silent. He thought he could guess what Shunan, a quiet, intelligent young man, sought to tell the Yojuh. “I will announce their arrival. Wait here.”

Standing before the Yojuh’s room, he requested permission to enter. After a few moments, a voice from within bade him in. As he walked into the room, he could not help noticing how close Damiya and Seimiya stood. Seimiya’s eyes were red, indicating that she had probably been crying, but there was color in her cheeks, and her expression was unexpectedly cheerful.

Ialu’s heart sank, but he bowed and announced that Shunan was waiting at the gate.

The color drained from Seimiya’s face. “What did you say?”

Damiya put his arm around her thin shoulders as if to support her and said soothingly, “There’s no need to see him. You can turn him away.”

She cast him an imploring glance. He tightened his hand on her shoulder. “To refuse to meet him is also an important way of expressing your will. Don’t allow

yourself to be swayed by your emotions. Be firm.”

She turned her eyes from Damiya and looked at Ialu’s rigid face. Her eyes reflected the turmoil in her heart. She took a deep breath, then said in a faint voice, “Usher him into the audience chamber.”

Shunan entered the chamber alone. Seimiya’s eyes widened slightly when she saw him. In the last four years, he appeared to have matured into a wise and reserved young man. In comparison, she felt that, except for losing her youth, she had not changed at all, and for an instant she regretted agreeing to see him.

He dropped to one knee and bowed his head. “I thank you for granting me an audience. I was sincerely grieved to hear of the untimely passing of Her Majesty, Yojeh Halumiya.”

Her face rigid, Seimiya whispered, “You? Grieved? Why?”

Shunan raised his head, but rather than opening his mouth to speak, he seemed to be waiting to hear what she would say. Instead, Damiya, who sat beside her, spoke on her behalf. “Both we and you know very well who murdered my aunt. You have some nerve to utter such false condolences. I see you’ve inherited your father’s shameless arrogance.”

Shunan gazed back at Damiya, his expression unmoved. “I beg your pardon, but do you in fact know who attacked the Yojeh Halumiya?”

Seimiya’s cheeks flamed. “How dare you! My grandmother was attacked by Toda. Who else is there who wields those filthy beasts but the Aluhan?”

Shunan frowned slightly. “Surely, my lady, you must be aware that ever since the horsemen of Lahza began attacking our eastern border, the demand for Toda has drastically increased, and there are now many among the Yojeh’s people who handle them.”

Seimiya’s brows flew up. “And what of it? Are you saying that the Holon would scheme to assassinate their own Yojeh?”

“Your Highness, Seimiya,” Shunan paused to take a deep breath and then continued, “What possible benefit could we gain by assassinating the Yojeh in such a contemptible manner?” Seimiya frowned, clearly puzzled by his question. “The foolish Sai Gamulu are one thing, but why on earth would we

need to stoop to such measures? It never occurred to me that Your Majesty would fail to realize such an obvious truth.”

Seimiya retorted sharply, “With the Yojuh dead, you would become the rulers, of course. What could be of more benefit than that?”

“If we killed the Yojuh, the Aluhan would be king? In that case, assassination makes no sense at all.” There was an edge of steel to his voice now. “I never dreamed you would misjudge us to that extent. If we ever decided that this land could not be entrusted to the rule of the Yojuh, we would have no need whatsoever to stoop to assassination. We could seize power openly. We have at our command a hundred Toda troops and ten thousand horsemen, all of which have protected this land for centuries from external enemies, repulsing repeated invasions. We possess the power to destroy you and take over this palace tomorrow, if we so desired.”

Damiya gave a bark of laughter. “Well done. Now you are showing your true colors. My Lady Seimiya, I am sure you now understand all too well the true nature of the Aluhan. He intends to seize the throne by force.” Shaking his head, Damiya smiled at Shunan. “It is just as you say, Shunan. It would be so simple for you to kill us and usurp the throne. But by doing so, you will gain the throne of a country doomed to die.

“The Yojuh is a god. If you are so blind to the divine will revealed in the Yojuh that you take the throne by force, this land, bereft of its god, will perish.”

Shunan fixed his eyes not on Damiya but on Seimiya. After a long silence, he finally said quietly, “Do you also believe this, my lady?”

“Of course,” Seimiya responded immediately. “You mean you don’t?”

Shunan shook his head curtly. “No, I don’t.” He rose. “I do not believe that the Yojuh are gods. How can anyone who is incapable of bringing happiness to this land possibly be a god?”

Seimiya’s cheeks turned pale. Damiya leapt to his feet and opened his mouth to shout, but she silenced him with her hand. “Why do you say that I cannot bring happiness to this land?”

“Let me ask you this, my lady. How do you intend to heal the mortal illness

that afflicts this land?”

“It is the greed and ambition of your people that is the cause. I will heal it by refusing to be swayed by such contamination, by retaining a pure heart. It is true that I have no warriors to protect me. But if you use your military might to destroy me, this country will lose its soul. And at that moment, it will die. It will be you, not I, who destroys this country.”

Shunan shook his head. “No warriors to protect you? Surely you cannot be serious. Who on earth do you think has been protecting you all this time? Not you as an individual, but this entire kingdom?” The anger in his eyes was unmistakable. “I wonder if you have the courage to look upon those who have defended this land.”

“I am never, ever afraid,” Seimiya answered in a hard voice.

Shunan nodded. “Then let us look. Come in!” he cried.

The doors opened, and three men shuffled into the room. Seimiya caught her breath at the sight. They were young, not yet twenty. One was missing his right arm from the elbow down, another had lost his left leg at the thigh and walked instead on a wooden peg. The last one to enter was a boy who looked to be only fifteen or sixteen and had not even begun to grow a beard. A hideous burn, centered round his right eye, disfigured his otherwise smooth complexion, and there was only an empty socket where his eyeball should have been.

Shunan placed his hand on each man’s shoulder in turn as he introduced them one by one.

“This is Lahalu. The year before last, he lost his arm while fighting to protect a fort when the Lahza attacked from Hosalu Pass. Yunan here fought in the same battle with the cavalry and was badly injured. The wound festered, and in the end, his leg had to be amputated from the thigh down. And this boy is Lokalu. His keen eyesight made him a great lookout, but a flaming arrow pierced his right eye while he stood on the lookout tower.”

Shunan turned to face Seimiya. “Thousands of soldiers with devastating injuries like these live in this kingdom. Thousands more lie rotting beneath its cold earth. If they, and their fathers and mothers, their children and lovers, knew that you believed you have no warriors to protect you, I am sure they

would rise up and demand to know what on earth their deaths, and the deaths of those they loved more dearly than life, were for.”

Unable to breathe, Seimiya stared at the boy with the empty socket. He stared back at her with his one remaining eye, as if he could not believe he was really face to face with the Yojeh. His confusion was painfully evident. Was it right to feel awe in her presence? Was it safe to voice his doubt and anger? What feelings should he show her?

Seimiya could not even begin to identify the emotions that welled up inside her. She did not even know if she should weep. All she wanted was to be alone. To be alone and think. The right words to say at this particular moment simply would not come.

“Seimiya,” Shunan said, addressing her by name. “We have shed blood and tears for centuries to prevent this country from being laid waste by foreign powers. I am not seeking to romanticize our role or to demand your pity. But I simply cannot believe that it is right for one who does not know our reality to rule.” His voice was like the shadow cast through the window by the late afternoon sun. While regretting the dying of the day, he calmly announced the coming of the night.

“If you insist that you are a god and that placing the Aluhan on the throne will lead to this country’s destruction, then prove it. Four months from now, on the day we celebrate the dawn of this country’s founding, let us determine who is right. On that day, we will wait for you on Tahai Azeh, the Plain of Advent, where our nation was born. We will wait for you with our finest Toda troops, the ones that you despise as ‘filthy,’ but that I believe symbolize this country’s reality.

“If the god truly blesses your actions and watches over you, the Toda will, just as legend recounts, be so awed by your divine majesty that they will bow their heads before you. If this miracle should occur, then my father and I will rein in our troops and once again serve as your vassals, shedding our blood without complaint...”

He looked at her pale face, the one that had stayed imprinted on his heart all these years. Then he drew a deep breath and continued. “However, if such a

miracle fails to occur, then, Seimiya, I ask that you, for the sake of your people, give yourself to me.”

Seimiya’s eyes wavered. Shunan held her gaze as she stood speechless and dazed, then bowed his head slowly. “If you decide to accept my proposal, raise a blue flag. When we see that flag, the advancing Toda will halt before you.”

Without asking her leave, he turned on his heel and, urging the young soldiers ahead, quietly left the room.

2

THE NATURE OF BEASTS

Flowers dotted the meadows of Kazalumu, and a light breeze carried their sweet fragrance along with the scent of grass. While Alu and Eku bathed in a small pond, Leelan munched on yellow keema blossoms some distance away. Keema cleansed the stomach of parasites, and Royal Beasts liked to gorge themselves while they were in bloom. The fact that Leelan did so without ever having been taught by her kind made Elin pause to wonder at the innate knowledge of living things. She was watching dreamily as Leelan snapped the flowers in her jaws when the Beast suddenly reared her head and, wrinkling her nose, began to growl.

Surprised, Elin followed the direction of her gaze and saw three men on horseback swiftly ascending the gentle rise toward her. Behind them, she could see several teachers, one of whom she recognized as Esalu by her white hair. They were on foot, running after the horsemen, but the distance between them widened rapidly.

Leelan’s growl turned menacing. Elin raised a hand to still her and walked toward the men. As they drew closer, she could see that they were all dressed as Beast Handlers. Although she knew none of them, one look at the crests sewn to their uniforms told her who they were.

The first, who appeared to be the elder, dismounted, and the other two

followed suit. They watched her warily, fingering their Silent Whistles. The leader looked down at her haughtily. "Greetings. I am Ohooli, Head of the Lazalu Beast Sanctuary." He gave a polite bow, an act that contrasted starkly with the disdain in his eyes.

Elin bowed in return. "I am honored. How may I help you?"

There was a pause before he replied. His jaw clenched and bulged, and his neck turned red. He reminded her of a fighting dog she had once seen in a market, restrained by its master yet trembling with the urge to bite.

"I have come to escort you to Lazalu," Ohooli said, as if forcing the words from his throat. "Her Highness, Yojeh Seimiya, has graciously deigned to convey this message. In honor of your distinguished services in saving the previous Yojeh, Her Highness has commanded us to welcome you as the Head of Lazalu Beast Sanctuary. You are to move yourself and the Beasts you have raised at once to Lazalu, in order to protect the palace."

Pain shot through Elin's heart. From the moment she had heard of Yojeh Halumiya's passing, she had feared that this day must come. Breathing with difficulty, she said, "Her Highness is far too gracious. I am afraid that I must decline."

The men's faces remained unmoved. Clearly, they had been expecting this response. "We were told not to accept no for an answer," Ohooli said coldly. "If you refuse to comply with this generous offer, our orders are to bring you back to the palace by force."

Before she could even open her mouth, the two men standing behind Ohooli moved swiftly to each side of her and grasped her arms.

Ohooli's mouth lifted in a mocking smile. "Your colleagues were far more agreeable than you."

The men gripped her arms with more force than necessary, but Elin had no intention of struggling. "What did you say to them?"

"Just that we had come to carry out the Yojeh's wishes."

He's so vain, Elin thought. He must be furious with her for taking away his job. While he longed to ease the resentment smoldering in his heart by scoffing at

her, he was afraid to show his feelings in case it jeopardized his future. Despite this, he could not resist making spiteful little jabs that spoiled his pretense of politeness. A cold, heavy lump sank in her stomach, and she let the tension drain out of her. She had lost any desire to even try to reason with him.

Leelan had continued to growl, the sound growing steadily louder, but now it crescendoed to a deep and ominous thunder that Elin had never heard before. The men on either side of her grabbed the Silent Whistles that hung round their necks and placed them to their lips. An icy fear gripped her. At this distance, the whistles would paralyze not only Leelan, but the cub as well.

“No! Please don’t!” she cried, and twisted from their grasp.

The men, who had been focused on Leelan, were caught off guard and staggered. One of them dropped his whistle. The next moment, there was a loud snap, and the hand of the other vanished in a swirl of dark wind. Blood spurted from the stump of his wrist, while Leelan, her blood-smeared lips pulled back in a snarl, crunched his hand, bones and all, in her jaws. Her fangs had torn off not only his hand, which had held the whistle, but his lips and nose as well.

Elin and the men stood frozen in disbelief, gazing up at the Beast towering over them. Then the man who had lost his hand threw back his head, and a scream erupted from his throat. At the sound, the man on Elin’s other side jerked to his feet and, turning on his heels, broke into a run. Perhaps attracted by the movement, Leelan leapt into the air.

Elin felt like she was in a nightmare. She dashed after the fleeing man. He stumbled and fell, and she flung herself over him, waving Leelan back with her hand.

“Leelan! Stop! Stop!” she pleaded.

Intoxicated by the taste of blood, Leelan followed the hand that fluttered before her face and bit reflexively. Elin heard the bones in her left hand shatter. In the next moment, sheer agony shot from her hand to every corner of her body. Leelan’s frenzied, snarling face loomed over her. Spittle, frothy blood, and bits of broken bone splattered Elin’s face, and she prepared to die.

Just then, her hand brushed something on her neck. Light flashed in her eyes as she realized what it was. She brought the Silent Whistle to her mouth and

blew.

All sound ceased. Gasping for air, her shoulders heaving, Elin stared at Leelan's face, rigid as stone, fangs still bared. Pain throbbed in her hand and blood gushed forth, but it was as though her body were too far away for these to reach her consciousness. She watched in a daze as someone ran up, shoved her out of the way and dragged the fallen man from beneath Leelan's wing. That was the last thing she remembered before she tumbled into darkness.

All night, she lay tormented by fever and burning pain. Nightmares disturbed her sleep. When she finally woke on the morning of the second day, her fever was gone, but she was weak and weary, and her body felt like an empty shell.

Seeing Elin's eyes open, Esalu rose from beside her bed. "Are you awake?"

Elin looked at her foggily for a moment, then nodded slightly. As consciousness returned, the pain in her left hand came rushing back, and with it, the memory of that awful nightmare. A crushing fear seized her.

"That man..." She could barely force out a hoarse whisper, but Esalu guessed what she wanted to know.

"He's still alive. You can thank the gods that no one died at least."

As the words penetrated her mind, a hot lump rose through the mist that wrapped her heart, and tears welled from her eyes.

The Beast Handlers who had come from Lazalu were the same men who had dragged Leelan before the Yojeh when she was a cub. She had never forgotten being paralyzed by their Silent Whistles in the palace garden, and, worse, being shot by an arrow. She was so agitated, she had had to be chained in her stable. The wounded Beast Handler was being cared for solicitously in the room next to Elin's. Three fingers on Elin's left hand from her baby finger to her middle finger had been bitten off, and although the wound had been sewn up, she might lose the use of that hand.

All these things Esalu told her. Elin heard the words, but her brain registered their meaning only dully. Something black and heavy had spread through her mind, and all she could feel was the weight of it. Over and over, she saw herself twist out of the men's grasp, saw one of them drop his whistle. Again and again,

she saw Leelan swooping down like a black wind, heard the sound of the man's hand being chopped off, bones and all, felt her fingers shattering, heard the man scream ...

Whether her eyes were open or closed, the same scene, the same sounds, the same pain were constantly replayed in her mind, like a nightmare from which she could never escape.

Around midnight on the third day after she regained consciousness, she heard the sound of falling rain. As she listened, a thought spread through her mind.

Leelan ate my hand ...

She had snapped at Elin's hand just like that, without any hesitation. She would have eaten her, even though they had lived together for so long.

How could anyone even begin to understand how beasts thought?

She should never have projected human thoughts onto beasts and assumed that she understood them. In doing so, she had forgotten that they would always be a mystery to man and had convinced herself that she knew what they were thinking. On that fateful day, Leelan had growled in a way that Elin had never heard before, yet she had ignored her. Her own carelessness and arrogance had brought about this disaster. She could never undo what she had done. No matter how hard she might pray or plead, she could never, ever change it.

The man who had lost his hand and half his face must be in terrible pain even now. He would never be the same again. For the rest of his life, he would have to live without a hand, without a nose, without lips ...

Elin could not breathe. She closed her eyes and gulped for air like a fish. She did not hear the sound of her own breathing or the incessant rain drumming on the roof. The only sound that rang through her brain was the man's anguished scream after Leelan bit him.

It was seven days later that Elin was finally able to rise from her bed. As soon as she could, she went next door to visit the injured Handler. She apologized and gave him all the money that the Yojeh had given her, asking him to use it to get the care he would need. The Beast Handlers from Lazalu listened without a

word, their eyes cold with hatred and contempt. With bowed head, she bore their gaze.

Ohooli finally spoke. "We cannot wait for your hand to heal. We'll leave with the Beasts for the palace within the month, so be prepared."

Elin bowed wordlessly, then turned and left the room.

Esalu, who was waiting for her in the hall, came up to her. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Elin nodded. "I'd like to see how Leelan is doing."

Esalu stared at her silently, but then acquiesced. They had begun walking slowly down the corridor when Esalu suddenly put her hand into her robe and pulled out the Silent Whistle. Elin took it and hung it around her neck.

The stable was dark inside, and the stench of dung filled the air. Leelan swung her head up abruptly when Elin entered, but instead of cooing the way she usually did, she snorted and huffed loudly. The smell of Beast permeated the stable. Golden eyes stared warily through the bars. Bald patches on Leelan's chest oozed blood. She must have been gnawing her fur.

"We removed the chains but she refuses to go outside," Esalu explained. "We can't clean her stall, so we've had to leave it like this."

Elin said nothing. She did not even hear Esalu's voice. The instant those golden eyes had met her own, the sight of Leelan's snarling face close to hers had flashed through her mind, and her left hand jerked in its sling. She gasped for air and tried to stop the trembling that seized her body.

"Elin." Esalu grabbed her elbow, and she started. Beads of cold sweat ran down her body. She turned toward Esalu and waited until her face came into focus. Her brain was numb; she could not think. It was all she could do to suppress her panic.

"That's enough for today," Esalu said. "Wait until you're feeling a bit better before you try anything more." And taking Elin's hand, she urged her gently toward the door.

At that moment, Elin heard a low, questioning rumble. She stopped and

looked up at Leelan. The huge Beast towered above her like a shadow, her head almost touching the ceiling. Elin feared she might break down the bars at any minute and attack. Sweat broke out on her frozen face and dripped down her temples. A thought floated into her numbed mind. I must not leave the stable like this. If I refuse to face Leelan now, I will never, ever be able to face her again.

“Please,” she whispered. “Open the stall.”

Esalu frowned and searched Elin’s face, then nodded and went outside. Elin heard the sound of the pulley. The wall behind Leelan opened, and light poured into the stable. Leelan turned toward the door and squinted against the light.

“Leelan, out,” Elin said. The Beast swung her head back toward Elin and stared at her intently.

“We need to clean, so go outside,” Elin said in her usual voice, but still Leelan did not budge. Noticing that her eyes were fixed on the Silent Whistle hanging round her neck, Elin raised her hand and grasped it. Instantly, Leelan’s hackles rose. She growled, showing the tips of her fangs.

“Stop it!” Elin commanded sternly, but Leelan ignored her. Baring her fangs fully, she snarled menacingly. Anger flared inside Elin as she realized that Leelan was threatening her. She glared at the Beast and raised the whistle to her lips. Leelan’s growl rose in pitch, and all her fur stood on end.

“I said stop it! If you don’t, I’ll blow,” Elin shouted. She drew a deep breath, and Leelan ceased growling abruptly. A crackling tension filled the air as they glared each other down. Then Leelan’s eyes suddenly wavered and slid away. Elin did not miss this sign. “Go outside,” she commanded in a low voice.

Leelan flapped her wings two or three times, as though shaking something off, then folded them and lumbered outside. Elin gasped for air as she watched Leelan’s figure disappear into the white sunlight. Her eyes filled with tears. She felt Esalu’s hand gently touch her elbow, and she covered her face with her right hand.

Twenty days later, the three Beasts, having been thoroughly sedated, were chained and placed on carts. Elin climbed into a carriage with Ohooli. As they passed through the school gate, she glimpsed the anxious faces of Esalu, the

teachers, and the students watching her from the windows. With a crack of the whip, the carriage picked up speed, and the school vanished from view.

A blinding shaft of summer sunlight shone into the carriage. Cloud shadows dappled the vast meadow covering the highlands. The blue vault of the sky and the meadow where the Royal Beasts napped in the sun disappeared behind her. Six years had passed since Joeun had brought her here. The days she had spent with Yuyan, the happy years she had lived on this plateau, were all speeding away. She closed her eyes and lowered her head, surrendering to the swaying of the carriage.

3

DAMIYA'S COMMAND

Elin remembered almost nothing of the journey downriver to the capital. Her thoughts were so consumed by what lay before her that the scenery never even penetrated her mind.

Once in the capital, she was taken to the Lazalu Beast Sanctuary, where Leelan and the other Beasts were transferred to a stable. She herself was confined to a single room. Although she was given a sumptuous meal and a luxurious bed, her door was guarded at all times, and she was not permitted to leave, even to feed the Beasts.

The next day, it rained from early morning, and there was a chill to the air despite the season. She was led to the palace through a dark curtain of rain, but it seemed to breathe life into the forest surrounding it. Leaves fluttered like beckoning hands each time a large drop fell, and the air echoed with a ceaseless *pitter-patter* of sound. Peace filled her heart as she passed through the wood, redolent of bark, rich earth, and fresh green leaves.

An aged palace emerged abruptly before her. Wrapped in mist, it looked as if it had stood there for a thousand years. Having no idea how the buildings were arranged, Elin could not know that she had been led to Damiya's hall rather than to the Yojeh's. She only realized this fact when she was ushered through

the doors of the inner chamber and saw Damiya watching her languidly from a chair set on a dais at the far end of the room. Her guide went out, leaving her alone with Damiya. The hush of the rain shrouded the room in a shimmer of sound.

Damiya frowned, startled perhaps by her haggard appearance. "How is your hand?" he asked.

Elin bowed her head slightly. "It does not hurt much now."

"I'm glad to hear that, although I must say, you still look ghastly. Have a seat on that chair." He waited for her to sit and then said quietly, "It was quite sudden, I heard. No matter how accustomed they are to you, it would seem that Royal Beasts are still beasts. A terrible accident, yes. But Ohooli tells me that you didn't give in to fear, even though you were bitten, and that you're still able to control the Beast very well."

Elin spoke solemnly. "We no longer have the bond we once had. I will never be able to face Leelan again without a Silent Whistle in my hand."

Damiya smiled. "Even so, the Royal Beasts still obey you. That's what matters." He leaned forward in his chair. "Did you hear that the Aluhan's son visited the palace?"

Elin shook her head, and his mouth curled in a smile. "That boy doesn't know his place. He came to demand that the Yojuh give herself to him." There was no outrage in his voice as he described to her what had happened. Rather, he sounded almost amused.

"And," he concluded, "that is why the Yojuh must face the Aluhan's Toda on Tahai Azeh two months from now. If the Toda bow their heads before the Yojuh in recognition of her divine will, just as they did when the first Yojuh descended onto that plain, the Aluhan will recognize her as a true god and surrender. However, if no such miracle occurs, the Toda will advance across the plain and devour the Yojuh. If she wishes to avert such a fate, she must marry the son of the Aluhan. Or so he said."

Smiling, he gazed at Elin. "And here you are, just at the time our country needs you. The workings of the gods are wondrous indeed." Elin did not respond, nor did Damiya expect her to. "It seems unfair to be so harsh when

you are still recovering from your injury but, Elin, would you really defy divine will? Because believe me, if you choose that road, I will make your life a living hell. I know you can't be tempted by greed or ambition. However, neither are you capable of heartlessness, no matter how you may deny it. You proved that when you could not stand by and watch the Toda devour the Yojuh.

"After that incident, I used every means in my power to find out more about you. I know who you care for, and how you came to train the Beasts. I know everything." He turned his face to the window and gazed at the falling rain. "I have already seized Esalu. If that's not sufficient, I can certainly bring in the young woman who was your bosom friend. I would be most interested to see if you are capable of watching her die before your eyes ... to see if anyone can be so true to their beliefs.

"Oh, and you will not be permitted an audience with the Yojuh either. There is no one here who will protect you."

A low ringing sounded in Elin's ears. She remained motionless, her gaze focused on the floor. She had expected this. Yet even so, it did not ease the pain spreading through her chest. When she had told Halumiya that she would not change her mind, even if the lives of her loved ones depended upon it, she had meant it. But she had been able to say so precisely because she believed Halumiya would understand.

Damiya, on the other hand, would do exactly as he had said.

She closed her eyes. Esalu's life. Or the countless lives that would undoubtedly be lost should she open the door to this calamity. In terms of numbers, Esalu was clearly a sacrifice that must be made. But there was no way that she could choose that. She opened her eyes, and her gaze collided with Damiya's.

"I do not know why you refuse to use the Royal Beasts to guard our divinely ordained ruler," he said quietly. "Because you did not tell me, you see. However, if it's because you fear using the Royal Beasts as weapons of war, your reasoning is faulty."

He rose slowly and walked over to her side "The cracks in this country are caused by a disruption in the balance of power. The equilibrium between the

military force of the Aluhan and our authority to rule has been upset, and one side is about to be obliterated by the other, as if by an avalanche.” His voice was calm and detached. “I simply wish to restore the balance that is being threatened by one side amassing too much power. It’s the only way to prevent the people of this land from killing one another. Or do you think that there is some other way?”

Elin opened her mouth, but her lips felt stiff and clumsy. “Even if I were to fly Leelan and protect the Yojuh, would the Aluhan really be so foolish as to believe that a miracle had occurred?”

Damiya’s eyes widened.

“He might be sufficiently impressed in that moment to pull back his troops,” Elin continued almost in a whisper. “But once time passes and he begins to think objectively, the same problem would be sure to arise again. The root of the disease afflicting this land is certainly not going to vanish with a single, flashy miracle. As long as the cause of the imbalance remains, the seeds of division will never disappear.

“And besides, I don’t believe that Leelan can restore the balance of military power. One Royal Beast is not enough for that.”

Damiya stared at her intently. “Well, well, what a surprise,” he murmured, then changed his tone. “You’re quite a clever girl. If you’ve got enough insight to understand the situation that deeply, then let me speak plainly. I’m not planning to use the Royal Beast to destroy the Aluhan. As you pointed out, it’s unrealistic, although I do hear that you’re capable of controlling Royal Beasts that you haven’t raised yourself.” Her eyes wavered in surprise, and Damiya smiled. “I told you, didn’t I? I found out everything. But never mind that. Even with a pack of Royal Beasts, if you are the only one who can command them, then we can never hope to destroy the Toda troops led by the Aluhan.

“But for now, one is enough. If a miracle occurs on Tahai Azeh, the Aluhan will have to keep his word. That alone will turn the tide. If we can just get through this crisis, it will give you enough time to train others and form a formidable army of Royal Beasts. Royal Beast troops to match the Toda troops—a perfect balance, don’t you think?”

Elin's lips parted, and she gazed unseeingly at Damiya. The ringing in her ears had ceased.

"Of course, the purpose of the Royal Beast Corps would not be indiscriminate slaughter. In fact, we may not even need to use them at all. Think about it. Their very existence would give us the power to keep the Aluhan in check."

Elin lowered her eyes and stared blankly at his chest. Control the Toda with Royal Beasts. Just as we control the Royal Beasts with the Silent Whistle ... I see. So this is the way people think.

With this realization, the heavy weight that had been crushing her heart crumbled like sand, and in its place, an icy chill crept through her. Now she knew what she must do, but she felt not the slightest enthusiasm for it. With her eyes still averted from his, she said, "I am afraid that that is impossible."

Damiya's face stiffened. "What?"

"I am the only one who can wield the Art that controls the Beasts." When her voice ceased, the pattering of the rain came rushing back, and, for several moments, they stood listening to the sound.

Finally, Damiya shook his head slowly. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes. If you doubt me, I can prove it," Elin said quietly.

Damiya raised his eyebrows. "Prove it?"

"Yes. When the rain stops, please bring your most skilled Beast Handler to Leelan's stable. I will teach him the skills I use, and he can try it for himself. If you think that Leelan is too used to me, then any other Beast will do. If anyone can acquire these skills, then any Beast should respond to the person who plays the same notes that I do."

Damiya gazed at her wordlessly. She relaxed and gazed back at him with eyes as fathomless as the sea. Finally, he shrugged. "All right, then, let's try it and see." He clapped his hands. The door opened and a servant appeared. "Take this woman to the Flower Room. See that she gets bathed, fed, and rested."

The servant bowed and waited for Elin, but she did not move.

"I have two requests," she said.

“What are they?”

“Please free Esalu immediately, and make sure that her position and her reputation have not been damaged in any way.”

Damiya watched her steadily. “Does this mean that you agree to obey my command?”

Elin nodded and continued in a steady voice. “My second request is that you let me care for Leelan and the other two Beasts. They are being cared for by the Handlers of Lazalu, but I’m sure they won’t have eaten any of the food that has been given to them.”

Staring into the green eyes that looked up at him, Damiya nodded. “So be it. You shall care for Leelan and the others.”

4

THE DEVIL-BITTEN CHILD

It rained all night, finally clearing at dawn. The Royal Beasts went out into the fields after the sun had risen higher, but even then, the grass was still damp. The three Beasts from Kazalumu at first seemed puzzled by the different smells of the land. They sniffed the air repeatedly and were wary of the other Beasts scattered about the meadow. As they bathed in the bright summer sun, however, they began to relax, and each one eventually chose a spot to doze.

Wrapped in the thick scent of grass, Elin stood and watched them. Leelan’s fur shone brightly in the fresh, clear light, and the sight of her majestic figure brought back the memory of Elin’s first encounter with Royal Beasts in the wild. The same awe she had experienced then welled up inside her. What beautiful, fearsome creatures.

Royal Beasts must never be tamed ...

This thought penetrated her mind. They were meant to be gazed upon in wonder from afar. Although she had longed for coexistence without any need

of the Silent Whistle, that had just been a sweet fantasy. To control beasts of such dreadful power, the whistle was indispensable. Yet Beasts raised that way became empty shells, devoid of spirit.

No matter how she might protest the cruelty of it, Leelan and the other Beasts raised in captivity could never live in the wild. Anger rose inside her ... at the royal family for perpetuating this brutal impossibility, and at herself for meekly submitting to their will.

What on earth am I doing here, when all I wanted was to let Beasts born in the wild live as nature intended?

Fingering the thick bandage binding her left hand, she stared at Leelan.

It was almost noon when Damiya arrived at Lazalu Beast Sanctuary accompanied by a single Se Zan. By then, the clouds had parted, and the sun was beating down. Stifling grass fumes rose from the meadow as they crossed it. With a high whine, a mosquito zeroed in on Damiya's earlobe. He smacked it, and his guide, Ohooli, looked apologetic.

"My lord, you honor us by deigning to visit a place so plagued with mosquitoes," he said.

Damiya chuckled. "It's not your fault that I'm being eaten alive. Never mind."

The Royal Beasts were probably never bothered by mosquitoes, he thought. Not with their coats of fur. He could see them dotted about the field, soaking up the sun.

"There she is," Ohooli said, pointing, and Damiya squinted his eyes. The two adult Beasts stood with their cub, just as he remembered them at Kazalumu, and beside them was a small figure.

"She's an odd woman," Ohooli remarked. "She spent the entire night with them."

Damiya started walking toward her. Ohooli hurried after him, hastily grabbing the whistle hanging around his neck and holding it ready to blow at any moment. When he was close enough for his voice to reach her, Damiya stopped and called out, "Elin! Come here."

The fur rose on the necks of the Royal Beasts, and they growled threateningly, but when Elin spoke to them, they lowered their voices. She walked toward Damiya, carrying her strange harp crooked under her left arm. She looked calm, but her skin was even pastier than the day before.

“Are you all right?” Damiya asked.

Elin looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“I mean your health. You look awful.”

A smile touched her eyes. “I didn’t get much sleep last night ... But it won’t affect my ability to control the Beasts. If you’re ready, then let’s get started.” She shifted her gaze to Ohooli. “Are you the one who’s going to test it?”

His eyes froze.

“There’s no need for you to push yourself,” Damiya said mildly. “If there’s anyone else who is skilled at handling the Beasts, have them do it.”

Ohooli shrugged. “I’m the best Handler here. Let me try it.” Then he added, “But I wonder about using these particular Beasts. They have a special bond with Elin. If we really want to test her method, it would make more sense to choose a Beast she has never handled before.”

Elin nodded. “You’re right. Let’s pick one that you’ve raised yourself from infancy. The results will be more reliable that way. Which one shall we use?”

Ohooli looked surprised that she had agreed so readily, but he pointed to a large male Beast on the south side of the meadow. “How about Sawan? I raised him with my own hands. He’s the largest and most magnificent of the Beasts here.”

Elin looked to where he pointed. It was true that the Beast was far bigger than any of the others, but the luster of his fur came nowhere near Eku’s and could not even compare to Leelan’s.

Perhaps Ohooli noticed her expression, for the blue veins in his temples bulged. “Is there something wrong with the Beasts at Lazalu?”

Startled by the depth of animosity in his voice, Elin looked at him. “No, not particularly.”

Damiya reached out a hand and grasped her shoulder. The tension that had suddenly sprung up between them was instantly defused. "So what are you going to do?" he said calmly.

He's very sharp, Elin thought. "Let me teach him how to feed the Beasts."

They both looked at her questioningly, as if they were having difficulty understanding her words.

"How to feed the Beasts?"

"Yes, I will show him how to feed a Beast without using a Silent Whistle."

The expression on Ohooli's face changed. "You can't be serious. You mean you're going to get close enough to that Beast to feed it without using the Silent Whistle?"

Elin nodded.

Ohooli stared at her. "You'd do that? Despite having caused such a horrific accident?"

She returned his gaze, her expression dark and sad. "Yes ... As long as we protect one another by holding our Silent Whistles ready, we don't need to worry about any accidents. Are you willing to try it?"

Ohooli's face grew tense, and he said nothing for some moments. Finally, however, he nodded reluctantly.

Elin nodded in return. "All right. I'll go first. If I succeed, I'll show you how it's done, and then you can try it."

She began walking in the general direction of the Beast, as if she had no particular interest in him. Royal Beasts kept a certain distance from each other. This boundary had meaning, and they were wary of anyone who crossed it. Although Elin appeared to be walking casually, she was actually testing that distance. The Beast named Sawan watched her steadily as she approached. When she came within ten paces, he rose and spread his wings.

Elin stopped and took one step back, then faced him. The moment her gaze met the eyes of the huge Beast, fear rose from the pit of her stomach to her chest. She breathed deeply several times until it passed. An invisible wall

seemed to have reared up between them. She began to stroke the harp, as if stroking that wall, plucking the sound that made the Beast feel contented and sleepy.

The moment he heard the harp, Sawan pulled back his head, then remained motionless. After a short time, he began to emit a much higher note. The tension flowed out of Elin's shoulders as she mimicked the same sound on her harp, like a greeting.

Ohooli gasped.

Still playing the harp, Elin walked toward the Beast. When she had come close enough to touch him, she threw him a chunk of meat. "That woman is a sorceress," Ohooli murmured.

Damiya glanced at him. "If you're scared, bring someone else. There's no point in testing this on you if you're just going to be paralyzed by fear."

Ohooli shook his head. His face was transfigured, almost feverish. "I wouldn't dream of giving up this opportunity ... Of course I'm afraid. But I definitely want to try it."

Damiya smiled. They waited silently as Elin walked back toward them. Brushing back her windswept hair, she began methodically teaching Ohooli how to hold the harp and which strings to pluck. She made him practice until he could produce exactly the same notes as she, and then taught him the distance at which Sawan would begin to feel threatened.

"Are you ready?" she asked. Ohooli nodded, his expression intent. "Whatever you do, don't push yourself. Even if it doesn't work the first time, it may work if you try it repeatedly. If you feel yourself in any danger, run. The whole effort will have been pointless if you're injured. I'll be right behind you with my whistle ready."

"All right." He took a deep breath and began walking. Just as before, Sawan watched him approach. Following Elin's instructions, Ohooli carefully tested for the boundary beyond which Sawan felt threatened. When the Beast spread his wings, he stopped. Holding his breath, he stretched his stiff fingers gently and then plucked the harp as Elin had taught him.

Sawan listened intently to the sounds, the same way he had with Elin. But no matter how long he played, Sawan did not make the high-pitched sound he had made for Elin. Ohooli played and played, sweat beading his forehead, but still Sawan did not respond. Feeling the eyes of Elin and Damiya on his back, Ohooli lost his patience and took one step forward.

“Oh no,” Elin whispered. She ran forward just as Sawan roared and charged at Ohooli. His arms flew up as he threw the harp away. Putting the whistle to her lips, Elin blew. Sawan pitched over, as though he had hit an invisible barrier, collided with Ohooli, and fell like a statue to the ground. Elin raced up and grabbed Ohooli’s arm with her right hand to help him out from under the Beast.

“Are you all right?”

Pale-faced, he nodded. “Y-your harp ... I threw it...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it later.” She slipped her shoulders under one of his arms and helped him to rise. Unable to put weight on his right leg, he gritted his teeth and hopped on one foot, leaning on Elin the whole way back to Damiya. Just as they reached him, Sawan shook himself and got up.

“Is there any chance he’ll attack?” Damiya asked, but both Elin and Ohooli shook their heads. Although Sawan gnawed at himself in agitation for a while, in the end, he settled back down on the ground. Having made sure of the Beast, Damiya returned his gaze to Elin. “Why? Why didn’t he respond to Ohooli’s harp playing?”

Elin shook her head. “I’m not sure. But the same thing happened at Kazalumu when both my friend and Esalu tried it. They played the harp just like me, but the Beasts did not respond.”

She helped Ohooli sit down on the grass. “Would you roll up your trouser leg for me?” she said.

Nodding, he pulled it up past his knee, exposing an ugly purple bruise. As she explored it gently for broken bones, she said, “Lord Damiya, have you ever heard of Akun Meh Chai?”

Damiya’s brow furrowed slightly. “Of course, but what of it?”

Her hands went still, and she looked up at him. “I am Akun Meh Chai, a devil-

bitten child. When I was young, I often heard people talking about how I should never have been born. I hated the expression, but now I think there is some truth in it.” She dropped her eyes back to Ohooli’s knee and murmured, “I should never have been born.”

Damiya sighed and shook his head slowly. “Elin, why would you think that? Do you despise using the Royal Beasts so much that you would call yourself Akun Meh Chai?”

She stared at the ground without replying.

Damiya said quietly, “I think it’s strange that someone as intelligent as you can’t see how performing a miracle on Tahai Azeh would actually save the Royal Beasts.”

She frowned up at him, unable to grasp the meaning of his words.

“Don’t you understand? The Aluhan is a Toda Rider. His power depends solely on the Toda. When he and his Riders see your Royal Beast effortlessly overpower their serpents, surely you can guess what they will think.”

Elin’s eyes widened. Oh ...

Seeing her expression, he smiled. “Now do you see? The survival of you and your Royal Beast depends upon our victory.” He pressed his point home. “Never forget that, Elin. The perpetuation of our rule is crucial for you and the Royal Beasts, too.”

But Elin did not hear. Her blood pounded in her veins, and her mind was stunned by the possibility that had suddenly presented itself. If other nations knew that a single Beast could subdue countless Toda, it would jeopardize the future of the Aluhan’s army. If the Aluhan became ruler of this land, not only would he do away with Elin and Leelan, he would surely also seek to bury all knowledge of training Royal Beasts before any other country learned of it. And that would change everything.

If a Toda Rider rules, he will seal away the Art of controlling the Beasts forever ...

As she gazed at Ohooli’s bruised and swollen knee, this thought, and this thought alone, filled her mind.

DISCOVERED

“You summoned me, my lord,” lalü said with a low bow.

Damiya nodded. “Take a seat. There’s something I want to ask you.”

The sun had long since set, and the light from a large candelabra shimmered on the gold fittings adorning the furniture. When lalü had sat on the chair indicated, Damiya picked up a flask made of dark green glass from a round table. Removing the stopper, he poured an amber liquid into two goblets, passed one to lalü, and then raised the other slightly. “Don’t worry, it’s not wine. It’s halaku, an herbal infusion flavored with molasses ... Let us drink in honor of my aunt. Even if it’s just one mouthful, drink with me.”

Seeing Damiya drain his glass, lalü took a sip. A pungent herbal fragrance pierced his nostrils, and a bitter tang within the sweetness pricked his tongue.

Damiya placed his goblet on the table and sank deeply into a chair. “Did you hear what happened today?”

“Today?”

“The test Elin performed for us.”

lalü nodded. “Yes, I heard about that.”

Damiya poured himself another glass and said, “Of course, we can’t judge for certain just from today’s results. Perhaps if we tried again after raising a Beast the same way that Elin did, it might be different. But that would take years. For the moment, Elin is the only person capable of manipulating the Beasts.” He smiled slightly and looked at lalü. “That girl is strangely attractive, but she’s too serious, wouldn’t you say? She’s the only one in the world who wields such awesome power, yet she looks so grim.”

His smile vanished. “That’s why I summoned you. Tell me, what did she say to my aunt? And why did she tell her, but not me?”

lalü responded quietly. “Please forgive me, but that is not for me to say. I am

sure that if she feels it is necessary, she will tell you herself.”

Damiya sighed. “You’re too stiff and rigid, lalu. Try standing in my shoes. If using the Beasts might result in some kind of trouble, I need to know. Otherwise I might make a mistake, you see.”

lalu gazed at Damiya. “Is there any possibility that you might choose not to use the Royal Beasts?” he asked.

A cynical smile touched Damiya’s eyes. He leaned forward and said, “No, not a chance. How could there be?” He paused, then added, “A man will commit even the most reckless of deeds to protect his land and his spouse. Isn’t that so, lalu?”

lalu’s face froze. He felt as if he had been slammed in the chest.

Damiya looked almost bashful. “We are not able to make it public at this time because of the current circumstances, but just before you arrived, the Yojuh accepted my offer of marriage.”

lalu stared at Damiya for a few moments and then bowed his head. “Congratulations, my lord.”

Damiya laughed gaily. “Yes, I must admit that I am not only happy but also relieved. The country will now be safe.”

Raising his head, lalu was startled by the look on Damiya’s face. Despite his smile, a cold light shone in his eyes.

“Swift-footed lalu,” he said mockingly. “Such a sharp-witted man. You saved my aunt’s life countless times. I’m sure you keep far more hidden inside than you ever show. While you offer me your congratulations, I can see that you’re thinking something else. I believe, however, that you misjudge me.” His eyes were fixed unwaveringly on lalu’s. “I did not seek this marriage out of personal ambition ... Think about it. Other than Seimiya, the blood of the Yojuh runs thickest in my veins. Our union is the best thing that could happen to this country. Instead of watering down the sacred blood, we can strengthen it and purify the land.

“For three hundred years, the divine Yojuh has ruled, pure and stainless, and the Aluhan has guarded her from defilement, by accepting it in her stead. It’s a

perfect system of governance, one not found in any other country, wouldn't you agree?"

There was no trace of his usual bantering tone. "The fissures in this country are caused by people losing faith in the Yojuh. You heard what the Aluhan's son proposed, didn't you? What a perfect demonstration of the disease that afflicts this land. He himself is the root cause. Yet, in one sense, his very existence is fortunate for us. What could more obviously demonstrate divine will than for the source of that disease to be punished?"

Sweat trickled down Ialu's back. Chills ran in waves through his body, and he struggled to control them. Damiya's voice sounded like distant thunder. "On Tahai Azeh, the Aluhan will witness a miracle and know that the Yojuh is a god."

He stood and pointed to the door. "You may go now, Ialu. Soon you shall be released from your onerous task."

As Ialu stepped into the corridor, the Se Zan standing guard outside handed him a small envelope. "A servant brought this a short time ago. He said that he had heard you were here."

Ialu took it with a nod and began walking down the broad roofed passageway that led to the Yojuh's quarters. It was empty, and the stillness of the summer evening hung heavy in the air. He stopped and leaned against the handrail as he opened the letter, then stared at his fingers. They were trembling.

Surely not ... He had been plagued by chills during his interview with Damiya, but now he broke into a cold sweat. There must have been something in the halaku. He closed his eyes. So he knows ...

Opening his eyes, he tore the letter open with his teeth and spread it out with shaking fingers. It was from the man he had ordered to investigate Damiya. The message said only that he was waiting in the east stable.

Shoving the letter into his robe, Ialu stepped through an opening in the rails and entered the garden. His ears seemed to be plugged with throbbing metal. A dull ringing swelled slowly in his brain. With his left hand, he pulled off the decorative sash that hung around his shoulders while with his right, he removed the dagger from the sheath at his back. He wrapped his right fist, dagger and all, with the sash and, clamping one end between his teeth, tied it tightly. He let

that arm hang loosely at his side and began cutting through the forest to the stables. Although he tried to move quietly, twigs and branches caught at his arms and legs, cracking noisily. The trembling must be making me stagger, he thought.

The moon was full. The thin shadows of the trees cast a dark net on the ground through which Ialu walked doggedly. At last he came to a break in the trees and stumbled out into a wide grassy area. He had reached the east stable. The moonlight gave the night sky a yellowish tinge and cast a pale glow over the grassy field, as if it were covered with frost. The stable roof was fringed with light, while the building beneath it sank into blackness.

The scene seemed to warp and waver in Ialu's eyes. The ringing in his head intensified, interfering with his ability to discern the presence of any enemies. All he could hear was the incessant stomping of the horses in their stalls.

Breathing shallowly, he placed his hand on the door and pulled it open, leaning his weight against it. In the light of the moon shining through the stable window, he glimpsed a man lying facedown on the floor with his hands tied behind his back.

As he stepped across the threshold, Ialu swung his right hand out suddenly. A scream erupted from a man who had been lurking beside the door. The man's blood spurted across Ialu's back as he dropped to one knee to evade a sword blow from the left. Swinging his right arm in a horizontal arc, he slashed open the thigh of the man wielding the sword. Though roaring with pain, the man swung the sword upward. Ialu could see the blow coming but could not avoid it. He barely managed to turn his head as the blade pierced his chest between his collarbone and his shoulder. There was a thud as it struck his collarbone, and the impact shuddered through him, followed seconds later by searing pain.

Still on one knee, Ialu fell forward, thrusting his dagger into the man's belly. There was a sickening sensation in his hand as his blade pierced the man's clothing and sank deep into his flesh. Without uttering a sound, the man dropped his sword and fell, grasping Ialu's sword arm in both hands. Ialu fell with him, eyes closed and nostrils filled with the stench of blood and entrails, which spilled from the twitching body.

When the man finally lay still, Ialu opened his eyes. His breath came in shallow gasps as he pulled his dagger from the man's stomach. Then he dragged himself over to his fallen comrade. He was still alive. A slit of eye glittered as he raised his swollen lids. Through cracked and bleeding lips, he croaked, "I'm ... sorry..."

Breathing raggedly, Ialu sawed at the ropes, his blade sticky with blood. "No," he whispered, "I'm sorry." He pushed himself against the man to turn him faceup. "Can you get up by yourself?"

The man nodded. He raised himself and hunched over, cradling his abdomen.

"Take a minute to rest. Then get out of here ... Find somewhere to hide, and don't move until you're sure it's safe." Ialu placed his left hand on the man's shoulder and, clenching his teeth, stood up. Using his teeth and one hand, he removed the sash wrapped around his right fist and shook the dagger from his hand. Then he untied the sash at his waist.

Perhaps because of the drug, he felt the pain of his wound only dully, as if he were numb, but blood flowed down his side and soaked his clothes. He took the letter he had received from inside his robe, folded it in half, and pressed it against the wound. Then, using the same method as before, he wound his belt around his shoulders to tie the paper securely in place. Staggering to one of the stalls, he slipped inside. The horse reared away from him, eyes wide with fright, but he spoke softly until it settled. He was shaking so badly he could not saddle it, but he managed to clamber astride, using an upturned tub retrieved from a corner of the stall to stand on.

"Where will you go?" his comrade asked hoarsely, but he did not answer. It was all he could do to wrench himself back from the brink of oblivion. He turned his horse's head north as he left the stable. There was only one place he could think of where someone might take him in, although he doubted that he would be able to make it even that far ... It was half a toh away, but right now it seemed like it would take forever. At this time of night, if he followed the forest around the palace, he might make it without being seen. Pain jolted his body with every step. Using this to keep him conscious, he clung to his horse and vanished into the moonlit forest.

THE FUGITIVE

Alu's eyes glittered in the light of the lantern that hung from the post. Unlike Leelan and Eku, who were already sleeping, he was wide awake and appeared still ready to play. He had shot up in height and was now as tall as Leelan when Elin had first met her. He was also at the peak of his need for affection and attention. He just could not stay still, even while Elin was combing his fur with a horse brush. Being with Alu brought back the warm bond she had once shared with Leelan. Even though she told herself it was just an illusion, his affectionate behavior warmed her heart.

"Be still, will you? The brush will get caught in the tangles." As she chided Alu in a hushed voice, Eku suddenly raised his head. Leelan looked up, too, and stared at the stable entrance. Turning, Elin saw someone leaning against the doorframe. In the dim light of the lantern, she recognized his face and gasped.

"Ialu?"

The sight startled her. It was as if the man who had battled the Toda on the ship had leaped through time to appear at her door. Once her confusion had passed, however, the oddness of his appearance hit her. Sweat plastered his hair to his head, and his clothes were wet with blood. His face was ghastly pale, and his eyes were glazed.

Elin dropped the brush and ran to him. His eyes were open, but she could tell that they saw nothing. As she put an arm around him, he crumpled, as though a string had been cut. His knees buckled, and his head knocked against her shoulder. She almost fell as his full weight bore down upon her. Holding him up, she staggered toward the wall, where she laid him gently down on the wool blanket she had spread out for her bed.

He did not open his eyes, even when she lowered him to the floor. He had used his belt as a tourniquet, and his robe fell open, exposing his abdomen. Elin undid the strings that held his collar closed and carefully explored for wounds. Despite his blood-drenched clothes, his only injury was the one he had

bandaged himself. Elin bit her lip.

If she were at Kazalumu, she would have had everything she needed to treat him, but here, she did not yet know her way around. And she hesitated to ask anyone for help. Why had he come here if he was this badly hurt?

She sighed. It would do no good to waste time thinking. She had better treat him as best she could under the circumstances. Using her fingernails, she slowly pried loose the piece of paper, which was now as stiff as a thin board. Ialu groaned, and Elin stopped, but he did not open his eyes. She began again, gently peeling back the paper to reveal an ugly gash. He must have been stabbed with a very sharp blade, for the single stroke had penetrated deeply. It had missed any large veins, but had it struck only a fraction to the right, it would have severed the artery in his neck, and he would not have survived. He was a lucky man.

But the wound would not heal on its own. It would need stitches. She frowned. She could probably get a needle and thread, but how was she to sterilize the wound?

Leelan, probably disturbed by the smell of blood, began to growl. The sound sparked an idea in Elin's mind. Of course! Tokujisui ...

Tokujisui contained atsune root, which acted as a disinfectant. As this was a Royal Beast sanctuary, each stable was bound to have the ingredients on hand. She rose and went to the sleeping quarters, where she asked the caretaker for a needle and thread. Then she returned to the stable and found a bottle of atsune root extract on a shelf in the shed outside. Bearing these, she hurried back to Ialu's side.

The atsune extract must have stung, because when she poured it over his wound, Ialu cried and swung out his arm, barely missing her nose. She grasped his right hand. "Ialu," she said. "Don't move!"

Pressing his arm down with her knee, she slapped his cheek. He opened his eyes slightly, but they were unfocused. "Can you hear me?" Elin asked. "Don't move! It's dangerous." His eyes slowly came into focus, and she saw a light gleam within. "Ialu, do you hear me? Answer me if you can."

He blinked as though with a great effort. She brought her face close to his ear

and said slowly and clearly, "I'm going to sew up your wound. It will hurt, but please don't move ... Do you understand? Nod your head if you do." He gave the barest of nods.

She sterilized the needle and thread, and began to sew. With only one hand, it was much harder than she had expected and seemed to take forever. Yet Ialu gritted his teeth and bore it without a whimper. Stitching up a man was very different from stitching up a Beast; the whole time she worried about how much pain she was causing him.

She must have been holding her breath, because when she finished, her forehead was beaded with sweat, and silver specks of light flickered before her eyes. Realizing that she was about to faint, she put her head between her knees and stayed still for some time. When the ringing in her ears had faded and her dizziness had passed, Ialu was lying limply with his eyes closed, unresponsive to her voice.

She took his pulse, then relaxed. His heart was beating regularly. A wave of relief washed through her, followed quickly by a rush of fatigue. Perhaps because she had slept so little the night before, it took a supreme effort just to stay sitting. It was as if her body were being sucked down into the bowels of the earth. She forced herself to reach out and cover Ialu with the blanket. Then she lay down beside him and instantly fell asleep, unaware that she had even closed her eyes.

Ialu woke abruptly, just as the night was paling to dawn. The pain, which had never left him even while he slept, became acute. For a moment, he did not know where he was or why he hurt so badly, but as he gazed up at the pale blue glow beyond the window near the ceiling, the events of the previous night came back, one by one.

He heard someone breathing gently in his ear. Turning his head slowly, he saw Elin's sleeping face next to his. Although in the dim predawn light he could make out neither eyes nor mouth, the touch of her breath upon his cheek sent a sharp sadness through his chest—a pang of the agonizing grief that he had locked away at the age of fifteen or sixteen when he had first understood the cruel meaning of the oath he had been forced to swear as a child. Before he could stop them, tears pricked his eyes and welled from the corners. For a long

time, he lay staring at the vague outline of Elin's face.

Elin sat up, startled by the menacing growls of the adult Beasts. Leaping to her feet, she went and peered out the door. Several figures were moving through the morning mist, heading purposefully toward the stable.

"Have they come after me?" lalu whispered, sitting up.

"Yes." She ran back to his side and, grabbing his arm, helped him to his feet. If he tried to escape, they would surely catch him. But there was no place for him to hide in the stable either, and the bloodstains on the blanket made it impossible to deny that he had been here. She turned and looked at Leelan, then made up her mind.

"Leelan, hide him!"

A light gleamed in Leelan's eyes, as if she were remembering something.

With her left hand useless, Elin could not support lalu and still use her Silent Whistle, but that was a risk she would have to take. There was no time to lose.

"Trust me," she whispered. "And don't make a sound." With one hand she opened the stall gate, then she half carried lalu between the Beasts. Eku and Leelan raised their hackles, but moved to one side and let them through. As soon as she had lowered lalu gently to the floor and covered his body with straw, the Beasts sat back down where they had been before.

Elin was stroking Alu, who was mewling anxiously, when she heard the sound of running feet. Several men appeared at the doorway. Behind them came Damiya. The first man through turned to him with a triumphant expression, like a hound who has caught the scent of its prey. "There's blood on this blanket!"

Damiya strolled inside, glanced at the blanket, and then looked at Elin. "Where's lalu?"

Elin stared at him, her face bloodless. Her chest felt as stiff as a board and it was hard to breathe. "I don't know," she answered finally.

Damiya smiled. "There's no use hiding him. It's all too obvious that he was here."

Breathing shallowly, Elin kept silent, watching the men as they searched every

corner of the stable. At last they said, "He's not here."

"Search outside," Damiya ordered. "He can't have gone far." The men left, but Damiya remained behind. He stared at Elin, though he gave no clue as to what he was thinking.

Unable to stand the silence any longer, she whispered, "What did he do?"

"He killed two gatekeepers," Damiya said, without moving his gaze from her face. His voice hit her like a shock of cold water.

"Why would he do that?" she murmured.

He shrugged. "That's why we're looking for him. To find out. If you would answer truthfully, you could save us a lot of trouble, you know."

Elin was not a good liar, and Damiya was very shrewd. She did not think she could lie to him and get away with it. Terrified that even this thought might show on her face, she remained silent.

Damiya continued to regard her carefully, but finally he smiled again. "Do you like him, then?"

He ignored her failure to respond and continued in a quiet voice. "It's of no consequence really. If you wish to protect him, go ahead. It just means I have one more chain with which to bind you. There's nothing more that he can do now anyway." He rested a hand on a post and sighed. "The poor man. Not even I am made privy to where each Se Zan comes from, so I don't know his origins. But I do know that all of them were sold by their parents for a bag full of gold. That's the kind of family he comes from.

"He was sworn to solitude before he was old enough to understand, and he has lived solely to shield the Yojeh ever since. That's the only life he knows. It's the kind of job no man could bear without at least seeking solace among the prostitutes, yet he's so serious, they say he never dallies with women." He raised his eyes to look outside the window. "It would not do for a man like that to look at the narrowness of his world, and especially not for someone as smart as he. Once he did, he'd no longer be able to endure the suffocating closeness."

His smile faded, and his expression turned serious. "Elin, you're an intelligent girl. If you but chose, you could see the structure of this world in its entirety,

couldn't you? Then do so. So that you can judge what can and cannot be, and accept your fate accordingly."

With that, he turned and left.

7

WINDY NIGHT

Elin slipped her arm under Ialu and helped him to a sitting position.

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry to cause you so much trouble."

She shook her head and brushed the straw from his hair and clothes, then helped him over to her blanket.

Little by little, he told her what had happened the previous night. It did not surprise her to learn that Damiya was likely behind the attack on the Yojeh Halumiya; the knowledge merely increased the cold revulsion she already felt for him. But she wished that she had never heard of the plot conceived by those in power. When she thought of how it had twisted the lives of herself and so many others, she felt sick with anger.

Ialu's clothes were so stained with blood they seemed to be coated in glue. She helped him undress and wrapped him in her blanket, then placed his clothes in a tub and filled it with water.

"I'll go get some breakfast," she said. Ialu nodded, and she added suddenly, "Please don't try to leave here out of concern for me."

"I won't. Damiya is probably having the stable watched. He seems to have hired his own private army."

Elin nodded and left.

For the rest of the day, armed men patrolled the area around the stable. None of them, however, attempted to enter, perhaps under Damiya's orders. The Beast Handlers of Lazalu were somewhat wary of Elin, and they did not interfere when she chose to take her meals to the stable and even sleep there

with the Beasts. Thus, Ialu was able to spend the entire day resting in the stable.

He lay alone in the muggy building from early afternoon when Leelan and the others went out to nap in the sun. Smoke from a mosquito smudge drifted lazily in the air. His sleep was disturbed by feverish dreams, but by the evening, he was feeling much better and shared Elin's supper of gravy and fahko, the unleavened bread made with mixed grains.

As soon as she had finished eating, Elin rose and began feeding the Beasts. Watching her, Ialu was struck by how much thinner and more careworn she looked than he remembered. It was not so long since they had met in Kazalumu, yet she seemed like a different person. He had heard that Leelan had bitten her left hand, which she cradled as she fed the Beasts, and the expression on her face was that of someone who had left her soul behind.

"You still feed them by going inside the cage, then, do you?" he murmured.

She turned, as if startled by the sound of his voice. "I have my Silent Whistle."

"Even so, the other Handlers never feed them like that. And the Beasts seem completely relaxed with you."

Her eyes shone, but she said nothing.

"Deep inside, they must trust you ... I still can't believe they actually hid me."

At that, her smile deepened. "When I was a student, there was one teacher I just couldn't stand. Whenever I saw him coming, I used to get Leelan to hide me like that."

Ialu smiled. "Even so, I'm amazed that they accepted me. They didn't even growl, despite the fact that they don't know me."

"They didn't growl at you because..." Elin paused and glanced at the Beasts. "They could see that I trusted you. Royal Beasts are able to sense human emotions to a frightening degree."

Eku and Leelan began grooming their fur. Elin and Ialu watched them silently for some time in the dim candlelight. Finally Ialu spoke in a soft voice. "Is that why the Royal Beast didn't respond to Ohooli's harp? Did it sense his fear?"

Elin turned to him with a look of surprise. “You knew about that?”

“The Se Zan who guarded Damiya told me.”

“I see...” She returned her gaze to the Beasts. “That may have been part of it ... But I think the main reason was that Ohooli was the one who raised him.”

Ialu looked at her questioningly. Elin picked up an empty tub and stepped out of the stall. “If Ohooli raised that Beast, he must have used the Silent Whistle on him many times. The Beasts hate what it does to them ... Would you lower your guard if someone who had beaten you repeatedly suddenly switched to a coaxing tone? I’m sure that that’s how the Beasts would feel. They would have a hard time opening their hearts to someone who had used the whistle to control them.”

She took Ialu’s clothes off the railing where she had draped them and pressed them against her cheek to test whether they were dry; then she sat down beside him and helped him dress. Her smile was gone. Holding his robe to make it easier for him to slip his arm into his sleeve, she said quietly, “When we use the Silent Whistle to raise Royal Beasts, we build a cold wall between them and us—cold but necessary.” She uttered these last words as if speaking to herself.

Watching her face, so close to his own, Ialu suddenly said, “Are you planning to die?” He plowed on before she could answer. “Do you plan to die and take with you the knowledge of how to control the Royal Beasts, so that you can seal it away forever?”

Elin shook her head. “Until a short while ago, yes...” she whispered. “I planned to do that. But now, no, I don’t.”

The wind must have picked up. Ialu could hear the rustling of the leaves in the trees beside the stable.

“For a long time,” Elin said in a low voice, “I believed I could always avert a catastrophe if I died—that I must never cross that line beyond which a disaster could no longer be prevented. I didn’t want to use the Silent Whistle or tokujisui to raise Leelan or the others, and so I did as I pleased, regardless of what anyone said. In return, when the time came, I planned to take responsibility for this choice. But after hearing you describe Damiya’s scheme ... I just don’t care anymore.

“If that’s the way people think and the path they choose, then let them. If it’s simply human nature to maintain the status quo by killing each other, then even if I sacrifice my life and bury the Art with me, someday the same thing is bound to happen all over again. If humans are just going to destroy themselves anyway, why not let them...”

This savage thought must have lurked deep inside her for a long time, because when she voiced it, she knew it came from the core of her being. Yet even voicing it did not ease the fury she felt in her heart. A warm breeze blew through the open window, making the lantern flicker.

“But I don’t want to make the Royal Beasts fight the Toda,” she said. “Not ever.” The thought that her dream, everything she had aimed for, should be twisted and exploited in such a despicable way made her burn inside. She gazed at Ialu. “There’s something I wanted to ask you, if we ever met again.”

Ialu blinked. “Me?”

“Yes. I want to know your thoughts. If I performed this so-called miracle, do you think it could actually right the imbalance in this country?”

Ialu hesitated for a moment. Gazing up through the window at the indigo sky, he said in a low voice, “To be honest, until now I have avoided thinking about what would be best for this country. Having taken an oath as a Se Zan, my paramount duty was to protect the Yojeah. If I thought about the consequences of protecting her, it would cause me to doubt my actions. In that sense, Damiya hit the mark. I have deliberately avoided looking at the narrowness of the world in which I live.”

Thoughts unexpectedly thrust themselves into his mind and fell from his mouth. “He spoke of my family with scorn, but my father was a skilled carpenter. If he had not been crushed beneath a building in an earthquake, my mother would never have sold me. If my father had lived, I would have become a carpenter like him. My hand would have held a chisel, not a weapon meant for killing.”

His mouth crooked in a smile, and he looked at Elin. “I enjoy working with wood. When I’m off duty, I like to make furniture. I find it much more relaxing to throw myself into a project like that than to spend time with prostitutes, who

hide their brutal sorrow behind a mask.”

His face glowed indistinctly in the wavering light. In her mind, Elin could see his hands caressing the results of his handiwork. She was suddenly reminded of the Toda. Captured as hatchlings, they had their ear flaps removed and were kept only to fight. Now she could understand why her mother had watched them with such sorrow in her eyes.

“Still, I have seen the workings of government close at hand,” he continued, “which is something I would never have done if I were a carpenter. And I’m human. No matter how hard I may try to control my mind, I can’t help thinking about the meaning of what I see and hear.

“When Shunan, the Aluhan’s eldest son, visited the Yojuh the other day, his words moved me. I thought that what he said made sense. And when the Yojuh said that she had no warriors to protect her, I confess, my heart went cold. I could not help wondering what my existence meant to her.”

He told her briefly what Shunan had said and done. As she listened to him describe Shunan’s character, a light kindled in her eyes. “I see,” she murmured when he was done. “So the Aluhan’s eldest son is someone who cares.”

Ialu nodded. “If he had wanted, he could have forced her to yield. The fact that he chose a different method suggests he has compassion. He also has resolve. If he marries Seimiya, he will certainly try to show her the reality of this land, something she has never confronted before.”

He took a deep breath. “I have killed many men. I slew my first assassin the year I turned eighteen. All winter, whether waking or sleeping, his death throes flashed before my eyes. Even now, the men I have killed come to me in my dreams. The smell of their blood still clings to my nostrils. I expect that I’ll be haunted by such apparitions for the rest of my life, but I have no intention of trying to escape that fate. That’s what it means to kill. Those soldiers who have defended this country for generations through bloody wars must have experienced the same thing.”

He wiped his face with one large hand and said, “I can’t believe that it is right for the ruler not to know this truth.”

The wind must have died down a little, for the sound of the branches scraping

against the wall grew fainter. “It would be presumptuous of me to assume that I understood her mind, but I feel Lady Seimiya would not want to remain ignorant. While the facts about Damiya and about her own bloodline seem very cruel, I think that she should be told ... I do not think it should be allowed to go on like this.”

Quiet filled the stable when he finished speaking. Elin sat for some moments thinking, her face down. Finally, she raised her head and looked at him. “Is there any way of speaking to Her Highness without Damiya intruding?”

Ialu’s eyes widened.

She gazed back at him, unblinking. “I want to tell her ... all of it. I don’t know if that will change anything, but I must try.”

Ialu stroked his chin and thought. After what seemed a very long time, he returned his gaze to Elin. “There is a way ... For you, it might work.”

8

ORIGINS

The natural rock cavern was always filled with steam from a hot spring deep inside. Unglazed clay pipes carried hot water from the spring to a large bathing pool built of smooth stones.

The bathing hour was the one time of day when Seimiya could truly relax. Garbed in a single light robe, she sank into the hot pool and gazed at the glistening rock surface, which reflected the hazy glow of the light through the mist. Soaking in the hot water like this always brought back the peace she had once felt in her mother’s arms.

During winter, powdery flakes of snow would stray through the hole in the ceiling where it widened, but thanks to the hot steam, she never felt cold. Her favorite times were those evenings when she could see the full moon through the hole, which she liked to call the “skylight,” and when it was covered on rainy days, she felt like something was missing.

The steam gathering above the pool rose like a shimmering white pillar through the opening. She was gazing at it, mesmerized, when suddenly it broke and scattered, as if blown by a strong wind. Seeking the cause, she lifted her eyes and saw a huge dark shape swoop down from the skylight. With each beat of its great wings, the mist rolled back and waves rippled across the milky water of the pool, far back into the cave.

A Royal Beast landed and folded its wings. As a small figure slipped from its back, the cave echoed with the frightened screams of the maidservants.

A woman's voice rang through the mist. "Your Highness, Yojeh Seimiya! Forgive me this impertinence. I mean you no harm. I had no choice but to come like this in order to speak with you."

Seimiya heard the voices of the Se Zan at the entrance to the cave asking what was wrong. They must have heard her servants' cries. With her eyes still on the Royal Beast, she said sternly, "Cease your noise. Tell the Se Zan to remain outside."

Then she sat up straight and called out to the figure who knelt on the other side of the mist. "Are you the beast doctor they call Elin?"

"Yes, I am Elin. I beg you to pardon my rudeness."

"You may approach."

The shadowy figure touched her forehead to the floor and then stood up. Turning to the Beast, she said something in a quiet voice, and then walked around the bathing pool toward Seimiya. The light of a lantern set in the rock wall fell upon her face, and Seimiya stared at her with open curiosity.

"So your eyes really are green." The words must have fallen from her mouth involuntarily, for she spoke like a little girl, without formality.

Elin knelt down before her and bowed low once again. "I had to speak with Your Highness. That is why I came."

Having recovered from her initial surprise, Seimiya softened her expression. "I hear that you have been blessed by the Afon with a rare gift. Damiya told me that the Afon sent you to rescue me from this crisis. I intended to summon you very soon to meet me. You would have been granted an audience easily. There

was no need to go to such lengths as this.”

Elin raised her head. “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but I was forbidden explicitly by Lord Damiya to seek an audience with you. That is why I had no other way of meeting you.”

Seimiya’s eyes widened slightly. “By my uncle? But why?”

Elin gazed at her. “I believe he did so because he feared that I would share with you the wishes of the late Yojeh Halumiya.”

Seimiya’s eyes froze. Hard as stone, they were fixed on Elin, but they did not see her. After a long silence, she said, “You wish to convey to me the words of my grandmother, is that it?”

“Yes, but that is not all. Forgive me, Your Highness, but are you aware of the promise that Her Majesty Halumiya made to me?”

“No, I do not know. What is it that she promised you?”

Elin answered quietly. “She told me that I need not use the Royal Beast to protect her. Even though she knew she might be attacked again by Toda Riders.”

It was clear from Seimiya’s expression that this statement had caught her completely off guard. Elin guessed that she must have been expecting a very different answer. “She refused the protection of the Royal Beast?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I believe because she judged my tale to be true.”

“What tale?”

“The tale engraved on the hearts of my mother’s people and passed down from one generation to the next. Her Highness Halumiya accepted it as the history of her ancestor that was lost in the fire.” Taking a deep breath, Elin continued. “It is a tale that took place far beyond the Afon Noah and that must cause one to despair of the human race. It is the story of your ancestor, too, Your Highness. Are you willing to listen?”

Seimiya stared at Elin with a frown before she finally spoke. “Tell me,” she said.

Elin nodded, and began the tale told to her in that winter forest by the man who had come from her mother’s people, a story from long, long ago.

Once, there were many ancient kingdoms that flourished far beyond the white peaks of the Afon Noah. One of these was the land called Ofahlon. Although small, it was blessed with a good port and prospered as a strategic trading post between the surrounding kingdoms and the lands that lay beyond the sea. Its people never went hungry.

One day, however, rumors reached the king’s ears that the ruler of a neighboring kingdom was planning to invade, to gain control over this profitable trade. While Ofahlon was prosperous, it was small. It might not survive even three months in the face of such an invasion. As the king pondered what to do to save his land, Sakolu, a senior advisor responsible for the diverse ethnic groups in the kingdom, suggested that he ask the Toga mi Lyo for help.

The Toga mi Lyo, the Green-Eyed Ones, had originally come from across the sea. Driven from their own land after losing a struggle for power, they had found their way to Ofahlon with only three ships. As they excelled at handling and healing beasts, the kings of previous generations had showered their favors upon them, granting them land within the capital to build their own community. Sakolu informed the king that they had been taming wild Toda and training them for battle. While the king doubted that Toda could be of much help, he was desperate, and so he asked the Toga mi Lyo to protect the country’s borders.

The results far surpassed even the expectations of the Toga mi Lyo. Although they rode only a few score Toda to battle against thousands of horsemen, they decimated the enemy troops and slew their general. The king was overjoyed at this victory. He awarded the Toga mi Lyo a large tract of land and ample gold. He commanded them to increase the number of Toda and appointed Sakolu general of the Toda troops. This was the beginning of the tragedy to come.

Tens of thousands of Toda were trained, and with this overpowering force, the king soon conquered the surrounding lands. His power had reached its

zenith, but the discontent of the conquered who now lived within this expanded kingdom grew. The king, who had never ruled such a large territory, had no idea how to govern it. He tried to suppress his subjects by force alone, which was like trying to seal a seething bog of rot and decay under a thick metal plate.

When they saw the miserable condition of the people, Sakolu and the Toga mi Lyo were overcome with remorse. They had used the Toda to save the king, but the country that had once welcomed people of all races had vanished, replaced by an empire founded on tyranny and oppression. Sakolu, with the Toga mi Lyo, lit the beacon of rebellion.

The king did not stand a chance against an army that could bend the Toda to its will. Protected by a few vassals, he fled with his family and close kin, deep into the rugged ravines of the Afon Noah, narrowly escaping the pursuing Toda. The fugitives, who were only about two hundred strong, spent the next decade hiding in the mountains. Having amassed the world's wealth and become accustomed to the height of luxury, this sudden fall to a life of destitution and exile, where not even their next meal was certain, sowed a bitterness in their hearts. Resentment served as the bread that sustained them through ten long years of cruel cold and hunger.

When they first ventured into the mountains, they came upon a race of hunters—tall, stately people who lived in the mountain ravines and hunted with huge winged beasts. Their leader was a man, but their spiritual guide was a young woman. One day, the son of the exiled king witnessed an incredible sight. Winged beasts fell upon a pack of Toda, ripped them apart with their claws, and devoured them as if they were no more than sacrificial offerings. When he heard this tale, the king visited the head of the hunters with a proposal.

“If you raise an army of winged beasts and help us regain our country, I will make you rulers over that land.” His hatred ran so deep that he was willing to trade his sovereignty to avenge the loss of his kingdom.

The head of the hunters rejected this offer. “We are content with what we have,” he said. “We do not need a kingdom.”

The priestess, however, thought differently. She was still very young. Here

was the chance to be freed from spending half the year snowbound in the mountains, a chance to live in Ofahlon, a great and shining land of which they had only heard stories ... Perhaps it was not greed but a dream that drove her. Still, the choice she made set the stage for a great catastrophe.

The king's offer, she claimed, was a sign from the gods. She gathered the young people around her to train the Royal Beasts, so named by the king of Ofahlon. Within a decade, they had created an army two thousand strong.

In the deep midwinter, when snow clouds darkened the heavens, two thousand Royal Beasts flew concealed within the clouds, each bearing a golden-eyed warrior dreaming of a kingdom in the sun, or a member of the royal family with hatred carved in his bones. Over the mountains they flew and fell upon Ofahlon.

The battle between Toda and Royal Beast was indeed a massacre. Once the slaughter began, the Toda and the Royal Beasts, natural foes, became so crazed with blood that they ignored the commands of their riders and, in a frenzy of tooth and claw, trampled over field, shore, and hill, through the villages and towns, until nothing was left but a blood-soaked wasteland. The slaughter did not end until the capital had been engulfed in a sea of flame, and everything had been utterly destroyed.

When the battle ended, all that lay before the young woman, who had dreamed of a kingdom filled with glorious sunshine, was the sight of the torn limbs and members of countless corpses stretching as far as the eye could see, and the burning, crumbling city belching black smoke into the air. No trace of the kingdom remained. If it had been an ordinary battle, only soldiers would have died. But with the addition of two thousand Royal Beasts and tens of thousands of Toda, an entire empire had been reduced to ashes.

Thus was the kingdom that flourished far beyond the Afon Noah destroyed. The land, contaminated by the blood and gore of countless dead, was cursed. No country ever prospered there again, and it remained covered by a thick forest where no man dared to venture.

Elin finished speaking. For a long while after, Seimiya and her maids sat as if in a daze. Seimiya had come out of the water to sit on a stone at the edge of the

pool. Now she shivered suddenly, as if with a chill, and slipped back into the hot water. Elin shifted her knees, trying to ease her body, and said, “The few who survived scattered in all directions. The Toga Mi Lyo sealed away their knowledge of how to control the beasts, believing that it would only bring disaster. They chose to wander in exile to the end of time, living by a strict set of laws so that this tragedy would never be repeated. These are my mother’s people, the Ao-Loh, the People of the Law, who are known as the Ahlyo.”

Hugging her thin shoulders, Seimiya whispered, “And my ancestor?...”

Looking straight into her eyes, Elin said quietly, “The tall hunters with the golden eyes, tamers of the Royal Beasts, refused to let the young woman who had led her people to such terrible destruction return to her homeland in the ravines ... Her name was Jeh. She was your ancestor, the one who crossed the Afon Noah to become the divine ancestor of this land.”

The maidservants paled at the implication of what they had just heard, but Seimiya did not appear to be surprised. In fact, she was gazing at Elin with a puzzled look. “Do you expect me to believe that?” she asked quietly.

“You don’t?”

Seimiya burst out laughing. “Of course not. I think it rather incredible that my grandmother would believe it either.”

Elin remained silent, staring at her. Her skin, which was as smooth as porcelain, had a delicate flush, perhaps from the warmth of the bath. She’s so young, Elin thought. She had heard that Seimiya was two years older than her, but she did not look anywhere near older than twenty. She could understand Damiya’s desire to protect the kingdom’s sovereignty by keeping her ignorant, as if wrapping her in silk floss.

But I think he’s underestimating her ... Elin was almost sure that she was not as fragile as she appeared. Deep within her round, childlike eyes, Elin could see a mature and objective gaze.

“Why would I need to make up such a story?” Elin asked.

Seimiya smiled coldly. “That is exactly what I have been trying to decide. If, for example, you were in league with Ialu, and if he, in turn, were in league with

the Aluhan, then it would make sense.”

Elin was startled. That was, she realized, one possible interpretation.

Seimiya’s smile deepened. She had not missed the slight quiver in Elin’s eyes. “Who told you that you could meet me if you came when I was having my bath?... Who else could have but Ialu?”

Angered by her accusing tone and cold smile, Elin opened her mouth to protest, but at that moment, she heard the hard sound of claws scraping against stone. Seimiya and her maids looked past her with startled expressions and half rose to their feet. Turning, Elin saw Leelan poised to enter the pool.

“Leelan! No!” she said sharply. Leelan stopped with one paw hovering over the water. “It’s hot, not cold.” She said it again. Leelan brought her snout close to the edge of the pool and then gave up trying to get in.

Seimiya shook her head and laughed. “Amazing. She responds to you just like a child.”

Still looking at Leelan, Elin said, “Sometimes her behavior does appear childlike, but Royal Beasts are fearsome creatures with much deeper intelligence than a child.”

Seimiya looked at her. “She understands what you say, doesn’t she? How much can you understand one another?”

“We can tell each other what we want,” Elin said, her fathomless gaze still on the Beast. “But ... even if we can communicate what we want, there is still a gap between us that we can never, ever bridge. The world we see, what we feel, are completely different. For Leelan, there is only the present. I was never able to convey to her the concept of ‘tomorrow.’ In addition...” Leelan must have sensed that Elin was talking about her, for she was watching her intently. “Leelan thinks nothing of slaughtering Toda. For her, it is merely a natural impulse to kill those creatures that try to steal her young.”

Slowly, she turned her eyes to Seimiya. “But I do not want to use Leelan as a tool to kill Toda. I did not spend all these years raising her and nurturing this bond by which we communicate in order for her to become a convenient tool.

“I hate seeing the Royal Beasts bound by the Silent Whistle and living as if

their souls have been snatched away. A Beast that is given to the Yojeh can never return to the wild. Even so, I hoped at least to set them free from the invisible chains that bind them. Yet instead...”

Rage surged inside her, and she gripped her knees tightly, staring at Seimiya. “If I make Leelan perform a miracle on Tahai Azeh, far from freeing the Beasts, I will be binding them with even thicker chains. If my teacher had not been taken hostage, I would never have consented to this farce, even on pain of death.”

Shock ran through Seimiya’s eyes. “What did you say? Your teacher?”

“Lord Damiya told me that if I refused to play the part of a divine miracle, he would kill my teacher.” Elin’s voice was rough with anger. “I was not sent to you by the Afon. I am forced to be here by a dirty threat.”

The blood drained from Seimiya’s face. An emotion akin to sorrow stirred in Elin’s breast at the sight, and her face twisted, but still she plowed on. “Even if I use her as a weapon to slaughter the Toda, I doubt that Leelan will feel any pain at all. It is I, not Leelan, who will suffer.”

The light from the candles in the rock wall wavered in a puff of warm air. “The reason I hate using the Royal Beasts in this way has nothing to do with the tale I told you. It is not for the sake of my mother’s people, nor for the sake of this country. It is just that I can see, as plain as day, the net woven by the actions of men, a net that Leelan can neither see nor feel ... And being forced to play a role within this treacherous plot makes me sick.”

Something fierce crossed Seimiya’s pale face. Wordlessly, she stared at Elin, who returned her gaze steadily.

Seimiya felt something within her fade to ashes and begin to crumble. Something that must not crumble, something that, should it disintegrate, could never be retrieved and would vanish forever. Yet, despite the hollow emptiness within, she was still the ruler. Feeling a deep lethargy sink into her bones, she gazed blankly into space.

“I, too...” she whispered. “I, too, can see the mesh of that net woven by the actions of men. Yet I will never, ever be permitted to say that being forced to play a role within it is so repulsive it makes me ill.” Elin stared at her, as if stunned. “If what you say is true, Jeh was a foolish woman.” Seimiya smiled

thinly. “Even though she was expelled from her homeland, she couldn’t give up her ambition to rule the world.”

Her lips trembled, and Elin averted her gaze. “It was a long time ago,” Elin said. “Who can guess what it was like to arrive in this strange land after leaving her home far behind? But, personally, I think that she was sincerely searching, walking a tightrope through her pain and doubt, to build a nation where neither men nor beasts would suffer.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because, while on the one hand she used the Royal Beasts as a symbol of sovereignty, on the other, she wrote the Royal Beast Canon.” Elin shifted her gaze to Leelan. “My Lady Seimiya, is not Leelan very different from the other Beasts?”

Seimiya’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Leelan. The Beast’s wings, damp with steam, sparkled in the glow of the lantern.

“Well, yes. In fact, I have never seen a Royal Beast as beautiful. And isn’t she the one that bore a cub? A miracle in itself.”

“Yes.” Elin nodded. “The Royal Beasts raised in the sanctuary never fly, never mate, and never bear young.”

Seimiya frowned and looked at her. She knew this, yet hearing it said like that, she suddenly realized just how unnatural it was. “Why?”

“Because they were raised in accordance with the Beast Canon. Surely you know that it was your ancestor who wrote the Canon. Those who raise the Beasts are strictly required to follow its tenets. But Leelan here...”

A memory from long ago, of Leelan as a cub, her eyes gleaming in the darkness as she gnawed at her fur, came rushing back. “She was wounded, both physically and emotionally, by the arrow loosed at Her Majesty Halumiya’s birthday celebration. She was taken to the Kazalumu Sanctuary, and by chance, I met her and came to raise her. At the time, I was only fourteen. I knew nothing of the Beast Canon, so I decided to raise her without the Silent Whistle or tokujisui, just like Royal Beasts in the wild.”

A light dawned in Seimiya’s eyes. “I see ... So the Beast that was raised

without following the Canon became this beautiful creature who could fly and bear young.”

“Yes.”

Seimiya looked at Leelan anew. “Why, then, would my ancestor make such rules?”

“I believe that she did not want the Royal Beasts to multiply.” Seimiya glanced at her. It was clear from her eyes that she understood.

“If she was driven by selfish motives to secure her power, she would never have made those rules. I believe that although she accepted the role of ruler to help the people on this side of the Afon Noah, this ironic turn of fate caused her much grief. She didn’t want to repeat the terrible tragedy she had caused, so instead of brute force, she used the Beasts—the appearance of which people considered a miracle—as a symbol of her divine authority to govern...” Elin sighed. “I believe she developed the Canon as a way of raising Royal Beasts without making them into weapons. To prevent them from multiplying, she used tokujisui, which inhibits them from mating, and by having their keepers use the Silent Whistle, she erected an invisible, yet impenetrable, wall between man and Beast ... So that people and Beasts, which are highly communicative by nature, would never be able to share their thoughts.”

For a moment, emotion gripped her throat, and she could not speak. “If I, a fourteen-year-old girl, who knew nothing of the Canon, had not met Leelan by chance—and it really was just by chance—the wishes of your ancestor would still have been followed. And Leelan and I would never have learned to communicate, would never have flown through the sky...”

“... and would never have come here,” Seimiya said, finishing her sentence.

They said nothing for a while. Finally, Seimiya dragged herself out of the pool and sat on the edge, gazing at Leelan.

“Perhaps this, too, is the work of the gods. Don’t you think so?”

Elin bit her lip as she looked at Seimiya’s delicate, doll-like figure. She wished that she could say, “Yes, perhaps you’re right.” She closed her eyes. She did not want to torture her anymore, but she just could not bring herself to lie.

“No, I don’t,” she whispered. “I do not want to believe that our meeting today, which was precipitated by the death of Yojeh Halumiya, is the work of the gods.” Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and said, “To me, it looks like I am here today because of a man who tried to lay the death of Yojeh Halumiya at the Aluhan’s door, a man who has manipulated events all along to create this situation.”

The blood receded from Seimiya’s cheeks. “What are you saying?”

Keeping her eyes fixed steadily on Seimiya’s face, Elin explained why the Toda that attacked Halumiya could not have belonged to the Aluhan. She shared the plot that Ialu had recognized once it was clear the attack could not be the Aluhan’s doing, the facts he had uncovered through years of investigation, and the price he had paid for it. When Elin named the one person to whom all these facts led, Seimiya’s snow-white face did not move. In a low voice, she asked, “Why would he need to kill my grandmother?”

“If Lady Halumiya had lived, would she have allowed you to marry him?”

Seimiya did not even blink at this response ... It was clear that this had already occurred to her long before. Her eyes, which glittered like shards of metal, suddenly blazed fiercely. “It’s true, my grandmother didn’t like him—but for me, he was my father, my brother, the kindest person in the world, one of the most beloved of my kin.” She closed her eyes and hugged herself. The hands with which she gripped her shoulders trembled.

“Your Highness,” one of the maidservants said hesitantly, but she did not respond. For a long time she remained hugging her body. Then, taking a deep breath, she looked up. Rising, she gazed down on Elin with cold eyes.

“When I stand on Tahai Azeh, stand with me, Elin ... You need do nothing but watch. Let me give you that freedom—the freedom that is not mine to choose.”

9

Though the moon had long since set, a faint glow still lingered in the heavens. This appeared to be enough light for Leelan, whose pupils were dilated like a cat's; she showed no sign of searching through the darkness as she flew.

They had flown over the dark forest that encircled the palace, and the Lazalu Beast Sanctuary was about to come into view when a rumbling growl began deep in Leelan's throat. Elin looked up and saw what looked like fireflies whirling beside the Beast's head. She heard a low buzzing, like bees' wings vibrating, a disturbing sound that made her uneasy. The lights gathered together and dropped below. Following their descent, she saw several black shapes standing at the edge of the wood. One of them waved a small light.

The phosphorescent glow faded. For a moment, Elin hesitated, but the people below were obviously summoning her, and she did not feel that she could ignore them. She touched Leelan's cheek and pointed to the light below. Leelan began to descend. Before she had reached the ground, Elin knew who waited for her. Hooded and silent, like forest shadows, her mother's people watched her come.

Leelan growled menacingly as a hooded man raised a Silent Whistle to his lips, but Elin did not try to stop him from blowing. When Leelan did not freeze, he looked surprised.

"I plugged her ears," Elin said. "It would be a disaster if someone blew a Silent Whistle while we were in the air." She removed Leelan's ear flaps and slid to the ground. "Please keep your whistle at the ready, though," she said quietly, and then looked around at the gray-cloaked figures. "What do you want with me?"

One of them stepped toward her, an elder judging by her curved spine. She pushed back her hood, revealing a shock of white hair. Even in the faint light, Elin could see the woman's startling resemblance to her mother.

"Elin, daughter of Sohyon, granddaughter," she said. "We have come to take you home. Come with us."

Elin's skin prickled from her forehead to the nape of her neck. "Where?" she asked hoarsely.

"To where your people are ... If you stay here and go on like this, you'll end up

making a terrible mistake. Come and live with us.”

A quiet chill spread through Elin’s chest, as if the night air were soaking into her skin. Ah ... so that’s it ... she thought. They had come to take her away, away from the circle of people with whom she had spent her entire life, to wander for the rest of her days with them. If she went, she could close the door before she caused a catastrophe. Yet even at that thought, her heart remained cold and unmoved.

She shook her head. “I do not wish to go with you.”

Sorrow and hurt flickered across her grandmother’s face, and Elin felt a stab of pain in her chest. The silent disapproval and fierce disappointment radiating from the gray hoods, the grief of countless ancestral ghosts milling in the darkness, rolled over her in a heavy, aching wave that pulled her skin tight.

“Will you choose the path of sin? Will you open the door to calamity?” her grandmother demanded in a shaking voice. “Is that how you were raised?” Her eyes probed Elin’s, but when it became clear that Elin had no intention of responding, her shoulders fell, and she sighed. “I see ... Sohyon’s spirit must surely regret having saved your life.”

Her words shot through Elin like a lightning bolt. Fixing her eyes on her grandmother’s face, she took a deep breath. “My mother gave her life to save mine. If she were really the type to regret that act, then I would hate you for having raised her that way.” She had to force the words through clenched teeth. Her grandmother cringed, as if she had been slapped. “I know what my mother, and what you, too, call a ‘sin’ ... I can understand that you have made tremendous sacrifices and adhered to the Law to avert disaster. But I despise the way you use the word ‘sin’ to manipulate others.”

Feelings locked deep inside her suddenly rushed from her mouth as if a dam had been broken. “You use that word to paralyze the mind, just like we use the Silent Whistle to freeze the Beasts and Toda. I can’t bear to see people bind others like that.”

A gray-hooded man stepped forward and placed a hand on her grandmother’s shoulder. “Let us go,” he said in a low voice. “There is no saving her. She believes that what she feels is more important. She will not listen, no matter

what you say.”

Elin felt her grandmother’s eyes questioning her. Pain stung her heart, but she kept her face expressionless as a deep despair spread across her grandmother’s features. Silently, she watched as her mother’s people turned away from her with anger and loathing.

The night breeze, warm and humid, blew across the empty field. Elin looked up at the sky. Stars were strewn across it like grains of silver sand. She wept, unable to dislodge the heaviness that stuck like a thick plank in her chest.

Mother ... Do you regret raising me this way? Is the path I am taking so wrong? Unlike Seimiya, I can choose which path to take.

Since the day she had decided not to use the Silent Whistle to control Leelan, she had simply chosen the path that felt right. She had longed to raise these creatures, who were born in the wild, the same way they would have been raised if they had been left in the wild. But she had loved Leelan. She had been thrilled by the bond that grew between them as they crossed the wall that separated beast from man. She knew that she was here, now, as a result of that choice, but she just could not believe that what she had done was a sin worthy of death. Even so, the emptiness that gnawed at her chest did not fade away.

Where would her love for Leelan, the tentative, step-by-step efforts she had made to get closer to her, lead her now? Had it all been for nothing, just self-gratification?

Perhaps.

Esalu had probably been right—the one emotion all living creatures shared was not love, but fear. This, most likely, was the hard truth. Men, beasts, all sentient beings that inhabited the planet, were incapable of trust. Somewhere in their hearts, they would always harbor the fear of others. To ensure their own survival, they would continue to devise ways to dominate and control.

Only by binding each other with force, with laws, with religious precepts ... and with the Silent Whistle, do we finally feel safe ...

No matter how hard I study the nature of living things, in the end, that’s all I will find—just this empty futility.

Even if she returned to Kazalumu safely, how could she ever stand in front of a class to teach? What could she possibly say to her students if the nature of living creatures only made her feel hopeless?

Humans, beasts, bugs—all are but tiny pricks gleaming in the night—a herd of countless points of light, bound in the darkness of distrust.

She gazed up at the star-spangled sky as she listened to Leelan purr contentedly behind her.

NINE

THE BEAST PLAYER



1

DAWN

The wind, which had picked up in the middle of the night, did not abate even at dawn, rattling the tent cloth incessantly. Shunan had woken long ago, but he lay in bed listening to the groaning of the wind. His father, who lay in the tent beside his, must be listening to it, too. It sounded like someone choking back tears.

Flowing as it did between heaven and earth, did the wind voice the wailing of the ghosts scattered on Tahai Azeh so long ago? Or was it the bitter resentment that must lie in the breast of that willowy maiden who would bring to a close the history begun on this field three centuries past?

Shunan took a deep breath and sat up. He had dressed without summoning his servants and stood up to leave when he noticed a slip of paper on the tent

floor. Picking it up, he ran his eyes over the three lines.

We have been waiting long for this day to come. We convey our joy and swear once again our steadfast allegiance. Though we stand in the shadows, we will guard you.

It bore a seal in the shape of a Toda scale—the seal of the Sai Gamulu. He crumpled it in his fist.

A shadow moved outside the tent, and he heard the voice of a loyal retainer. “Are you awake, my lord?”

He went outside to find the retainer standing there with a worried frown.

“What is it?”

“As I reported earlier, my lord, last night the Yojuh’s men erected tents on the hill. I have come to inform you that just before dawn, under cover of darkness, a huge cart was drawn up the hill and taken into one of them.”

Holding back his hair, which was whipped by the wind, Shunan looked up at the hill. The contours of the earth, pregnant with the sun, glowed faintly, and the gentle slope rose black against the sky. On top of the hillock he could see the small shadows of tents.

“Rumor claims,” the servant continued, “that when Her Highness Halumiya was attacked by Toda, a Royal Beast swooped down from the sky to protect her.”

Shunan stood silent, his gaze fathomless as he looked at the hill.

“If they have brought a Royal Beast here—”

At these words a smile rose to his lips. “Soldiers’ corpses filled the plain and a cry of sorrow rose to the heavens,” he recited in a low voice. “Behold! The golden-eyed goddess descends from far across the Afon Noah. Toda bow their heads to make her path, Royal Beasts soar in the heavens, protecting her...” He looked at his servant.

“We have not come here to do battle. We have come to confirm the will of the gods. Let us stand and witness whether the Royal Beast has indeed come to perform a miracle and save the Yojuh.”

Watching his father emerge from the tent beside his, he said calmly, "The time has come. Prepare the troops."

While Shunan gazed up at the hill, Ialu woke from a light doze. He was perched in an old tree in the wood that covered the southern slope. It was a sturdy tree, with thick roots, but the wind had rocked it all night long, so that slapping branches kept him awake.

If this wind doesn't die down ...

It would severely impair his aim with bow and arrow. Although it was risky, he would have to get closer. As promised, Shunan had gathered his troops at the foot of the hill. He had brought about a third of the entire army, leaving the rest under his younger brother Nugan's command, but it was still an imposing force. That sobering sight should distract the Yojuh's men enough to let one man disguised as a Se Zan pass unnoticed.

Kailu had been worried about Ialu as he knew he had been investigating Damiya for some time. A sense of impending doom hung over the palace, and everything that had once seemed solid now seemed precarious. Walking on shaky ground, where even the meaning of loyalty was no longer clear, Kailu had begun to fear that he would die as the Yojuh's shield on Tahai Azeh. Although he was troubled by his own wavering doubts at this time when loyalty was most in question, he had still brought Ialu a Se Zan uniform, just as he had asked.

"I don't know what you're intending to do," he had said, "but just knowing that you'll be there with us gives me a little courage."

Ialu glanced at the bundle of clothes as he spoke. "In this situation, I'm about as useless as a piece of straw caught in a gigantic wave..." His face sobering, he had added quietly, "But I was picked up and thrown onto this path without any choice. I'd like to at least see how it ends."

That was true. Although he had no idea of what he could do, he wished to see with his own eyes what unfolded today on Tahai Azeh, and to choose his own actions.

The image of the late Halumiya, tall and regal, floated into his mind. When he had first met her, he had been surprised at how tall she was. She had favored him with a gentle smile, but he had remained motionless, head bowed.

Something about her had inspired awe and discouraged familiarity.

His sole purpose in life had been to protect her, but he had failed, and she had died. She must have felt such regret. How bitter it must have been to leave this world so abruptly, foisting such a heavy burden on her granddaughter, who is still so young.

While he knew that affairs of state are never governed by compassion, Ialu found that he could not forgive Damiya for the heartless murder of his own kin.

The sky through the branches above his head slowly turned from ultramarine to pale purple. No matter how this day ended, tomorrow, the dawn would come again. He closed his eyes. Elin must be in the tent on the hillock by now. He wondered how she felt. He stayed there a long time, his eyes closed, listening to the wind.

2

UNEXPECTED MUSIC

“The sun has risen,” said a voice from outside the tent. The cloth covering the entrance was raised and propped up on both sides. As Seimiya stepped through the opening, a swirling gust of wind, fragrant with grass, set her robe fluttering. She gasped at the sight in front of her.

Countless shafts of light burst through the clouds to fall on a plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. Although the clouds were gray and sullen, they glowed dull silver where the sun lay behind them, and trailed across the sky in the wind. She felt as if her soul would ride that wind and be carried across that great expanse.

“There’s no need to weep, Seimiya,” a gentle voice said. Unnoticed, Damiya had come up beside her, where he stood protectively. It was only at his words that she realized tears were streaming down her cheeks. “I admit it’s rather overwhelming to see so many Toda gathered in one spot, but remember, that is your army, Seimiya. You have no need to fear.”

She shook her head. “I was not looking at the Toda.”

It seemed strange that she could have missed them, but until that moment, she had not even noticed the massive army. Row upon row of black-scaled beasts with Warriors astride them, resplendent in their armor, and thousands of banners flapping in the wind—all these had been nothing more than part of the scenery. It was the glory of heaven and earth itself that had moved her heart. The land which she was seeing for the first time in her life, the land in which she had been born, was majestic, beautiful, and, most of all, incredibly vast.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, one by one. How pitiful that she had never been allowed to see the land she ruled. How pathetic the rank of ruler. This knowledge struck her forcibly, and she could not stop the tears from falling.

The wind must have changed direction. The scent of Toda thickened, and Leelan’s hackles rose.

“Calm down,” Elin said. “The Toda are far away.” She frowned as she watched her. Leelan was already saddled, and they were just waiting for the signal to fly, but it might become hard to control her if the Toda came too close.

At that moment, she heard a commotion outside. Quietly, she approached the doorway, where she could hear the guards’ voices.

“What’s going on? Are those reinforcements?”

“That’s Nugan’s flag. I guess he couldn’t stand to stay home and miss this.”

Elin stepped outside, but the guards only glanced at her and made no attempt to stop her. The sight before her was chilling. Toda packed the skirts of the hillock. Unlike in the drills she had watched many times as a child, they were assembled in full battle formation—men and beasts fused together in a single black mass. The guards had stopped talking, and the only sound was the wind. Even the summer birds and insects were silent. Frightened by the sudden appearance of the Toda, they must be hiding.

The Toda troops made so little sound, it was hard to believe how many were there. They massed at the bottom of the hill, shrouded in a heavy silence and brimming with the tension of something about to happen.

A memory came vividly to her mind—the bee swarm long ago, when the whole hive had left their nest and followed the queen bee ... a single black mass. So, she thought, men abandon their old queen in the same way. Except that bees only split the hive, whereas men could not keep themselves from crushing their former ruler.

Elin took a deep breath. The feeling that rose in her chest was akin to sorrow, yet somehow emptier.

Something peculiar was indeed happening on what from her vantage point was the right wing of the assembled troops. New Toda regiments were drawing up alongside, one after the other. She wondered if a flag with the Toda scale pattern was the one the guard had said belonged to Nugan. The newly arrived troops far outnumbered those that had come first.

A messenger on horseback bearing the scale-patterned banner was sent from the newly arrived ranks to two figures in the center front line who wore particularly bright and splendid helmets. They must be the Aluhan and his son Shunan, Elin thought. They sat regally astride their Kiba with a standard-bearer behind them holding aloft the Aluhan's flag.

The messenger passed back and forth between the Aluhan and his younger son several times, but in the end, the new troops did not pull back. Elin looked around her tent, and her eyes fell upon Seimiya and Damiya. They were gazing down at the scene below and conversing quietly when Damiya, perhaps feeling her eyes upon him, glanced her way.

"Elin," he called. "How's Leelan?"

Elin pushed back windswept strands of hair from her eyes. "She's fine."

Damiya smiled. "Good. When it's time, we'll pull the tent down on either side. As soon as you see the sky, hop on Leelan and fly."

Elin turned her eyes to Seimiya without answering. But Seimiya did not look at her. She stood staring at the Toda army as if lost in thought.

The clouds flowed by, and the sun suddenly appeared, illuminating earth and

sky. In that light, the Aluhan raised his right hand, and hundreds of war horns blew. Their high peal seemed to erupt from the earth like the cry of a newborn babe, and, riding the wind, it shook the plain and caused the skin of all those who heard to shiver.

With it came the rumble of scraping earth. The Toda were on the move.

As Seimiya watched the Toda climb the hill like a slow, black wave, a strange thought occurred to her. Does Damiya realize that he let his true intentions show? “That is your army,” he had said. Her lips twitched in a faint smile. The moment I accept it as my army, the Yojeh will vanish from this world. What would vanish was an invisible something that wrapped the hearts of her people. And once broken, it would never be recovered.

She did not want to give up that pure something, guarded for three centuries by generations of Yojeh ... But she could not protect it, even if she were to marry Damiya. She was certain of that now. Watching the approaching army and seeing that it was close enough for her to make out the faces of Shunan and his father, she turned to her maidservant. “Bring me the blue flag.”

Damiya turned to her with a startled expression. “What?”

Seimiya looked up at him and said quietly, “I cannot marry you, Uncle Damiya. Not you who seek to rule this land with a heart that could murder my grandmother.”

All expression was wiped from his face. After a slight pause, he sighed. “Do you remember the craftwork I gave you once?” Seimiya frowned, unable to follow his train of thought. “That miniature palace, it was exquisite, wasn’t it? Seimiya, what counts is the form. If you can make a perfect, unshakeable form, people can settle down comfortably within it and live contentedly.”

She turned her face from Damiya and looked at Shunan as he climbed the hill. “No matter how perfect and beautiful,” she whispered, “I do not want to live in a box that never changes.” With her eyes still on Shunan astride his detestable Toda, she continued, “The children born to Shunan and me will bear not only that which is sacred, but also the defilement of this land ... My children will not be gods but human. And they will see this land with their own eyes, right from the start.”

If she had been looking at Damiya, she would have seen the sorrow that rose in his eyes at that moment. But by the time she noticed anything, he had already moved. Hearing a cry of surprise from her maidservant, she turned to see Damiya grasping the blue flag.

“I won’t let you do this, Seimiya.” He smiled the way he often had when she was little and had done something naughty.

“Give it back!” She held out her hand, but he continued smiling and made no move.

“Se Zan!” she cried. “Seize that flag!”

But not a single Se Zan responded to her call. Half of them had whipped out their daggers and placed them against the throats of the others.

“At times like this, it is foresight that determines one’s fate,” Damiya said calmly. He turned his eyes to Elin. “Come now, Elin. It’s time. Go back to your tent and get on Leelan. You’re a clever girl. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you which Toda to attack first ... Off you go now.”

Elin stared at him and gritted her teeth. Shining with a light as hard as stone, her eyes never wavered. On feet that did not seem to be hers, she moved slowly toward the tent, but as she approached the entrance, she noticed that the Se Zan who had been standing there an instant before was gone. She glanced at the space where he had stood and, at that moment, a black shadow moved by her. Just as it passed, something bright flew from its hand. Turning, she saw a trail of light, and then something sank into Damiya’s right hand. It had taken less than a second, and happened in complete silence. Before blood even began spurting from Damiya’s hand, the running shadow had slipped behind him and wrapped an arm around his neck.

“Elin!” With his voice, sound returned to Elin’s ears. “Grab the flag and give it to Seimiya.”

For a moment, Elin stood frozen, too stunned to move. Even though she understood that it was Ialu holding Damiya, she seemed to have gone numb.

“Hurry!”

At his urging, her body came to life, as if her soul had returned. She ran

toward them and snatched the flag from the ground at Damiya's feet. The grass was red and wet with the blood dripping from his arm. She shook the flag to remove the dirt and then handed it to Seimiya. With a bloodless face, Seimiya took the flag. As if fearing that she would hesitate, she thrust it high above her and waved it at the men surging up the hill.

At that moment, the young man beside the Aluhan stopped his Kiba and removed his helmet. He looked as though he could not believe what he saw. In the next instant, a cheer rose from the front line and spread like a wave through the ranks behind. The sound shook the earth. However, it was not taken up by the army's left wing. Oblivious to their silence, the Aluhan and Shunan removed their armor and dismounted. Leaving their Kiba with the standard-bearers, they began walking up the hill.

When they were just twenty or thirty paces from the top, the earth suddenly began to rumble, and the Toda forces broke into disarray. The Toda at the head of the left wing charged after the Aluhan and Shunan with ferocious speed, and the rest followed suit. In no time, the two men were cut off from their troops.

One Toda rider, his banner flying in the wind, raised his sword to the heavens and charged straight at the Aluhan. Fleeter than a horse, his mount charged up the hill as if flying through space and whistled past the Aluhan, who barely had time to draw his sword. When the Toda stopped, blood was spurting from the Aluhan's neck. His knees buckled, and he crumpled facedown on the grass.

"Father!" Shunan cried. He raised him in his arms, but the Aluhan had breathed his last. Covered in his father's blood, Shunan looked up. The Warrior raised his helm, and his face leapt into Shunan's eyes—his own brother, eyes wild and face strangely contorted.

"Nugan..."

"The Aluhan's proper station is that of a faithful vassal!" Nugan shrieked. "I will not let it be sullied by rebellion." Again, he raised his sword, dripping with his father's blood, and pointed it at the heavens.

Troops rushing to the Aluhan's aid collided with Toda Riders who sought to stop them. Cries of "Sai Gamulu! Sai Gamulu!" could be heard among those loyal to the Aluhan. Thus began a fearsome battle of Toda against Toda.

Seimiya and the others stared aghast at the melee of Toda troops. When the Aluhan fell and Nugan turned his blade toward Shunan, Seimiya cried out, "Somebody! Please, please save him!" Her voice shook, and she looked around desperately for help, but there was nothing anyone could do. Finally, she turned, white-faced, to Elin.

"Elin..." Pressing her hands together as if in prayer, she begged. "Elin!"

Her plea washed like a wave through Elin's heart. Should Shunan die, Seimiya would have no choice but to marry Damiya and appoint Nugan as the next Aluhan, even though he had murdered his own father. The calm composure on Damiya's face when she glanced his way was in stark contrast to the distraught Seimiya. Suddenly, she knew. This is exactly how he planned it. In that instant, she made her choice.

Turning to Seimiya, she nodded. "I will save him."

Tears rolled from Seimiya's eyes. "Please! I promise you. If you save Shunan, I will free the Royal Beasts and make sure that the ruler never again uses them as weapons of war."

Elin held her eyes. Then she nodded once more and dashed toward the tent.

If she flew on Leelan in front of this many people, then Seimiya's vow would probably be meaningless. But she no longer hesitated. If a Toda Rider ruled, everything must change. To see that change, she would have to rescue Shunan.

She knew that Leelan could never understand what she felt, even if she tried to share it. She knew her thoughts would only spin around in her own brain, yet she could not help speaking to her in her mind.

So, Leelan, I am using you as a weapon after all.

With each stride, the Silent Whistle bounced, and each time it struck her chest, she felt a pang in her heart and clenched her jaw. When she reached the tent, she stepped across a body that lay upon the ground and pulled the ropes. With a dull sound, the canvas split in two and fell away. Leelan blinked in the sudden brightness. The scent of Toda carried by the wind was so thick it made Elin feel ill. Leelan's nostrils flared, and her fur stood on end with the anticipation of falling upon her natural foe.

Elin quickly unwound the bandage binding her left hand, on which only two fingers remained. Waving it, she looked into Leelan's eyes. "Let me up!" Leelan obediently bent down so that she could climb on. Swiftly, she wound the reins around her left fist and shouted, "Fly!"

She felt the movement of Leelan's wing muscles against her stomach. Leelan dropped into a crouch and then sprang into the sky. "Take me there," she shouted, pointing at Shunan, then, spreading her arms wide, she placed the plugs in Leelan's ears.

A tumult arose from below when people saw the Royal Beast glide through the air, straight for Shunan. A long, high-pitched whistle issued from Leelan's mouth. At the sound, the Toda surrounding Shunan flipped over en masse, exposing their bellies to the sky. Warriors who failed to leap in time from their rolling mounts were crushed beneath them, or sent flying through the air to lie sprawled on the ground, staring up at the sky in bewilderment.

Leelan's claws sank first into Nugan's mount, ripping it to shreds in moments. Splattered with Toda blood and chunks of flesh, Nugan was thrown to the ground. He stared at Leelan with a look of blank astonishment.

Leelan did not stop there. One after another, she ripped the prostrate Toda with her claws. Snarling with rage and crazed with blood, she butchered them until she was covered from head to foot in gore.

As the Warriors regained their senses, they grabbed their bows and shot at Leelan, but she was impervious to their arrows. Before their eyes, the lone Royal Beast slaughtered Toda by the dozens.

"Leelan ... Leelan!" Elin pounded on her back with all her might. Reaching out one arm, she removed an earplug and yelled into her ear, "Stop! That's enough! Enough! Put me down over there!"

But the Beast showed no sign of halting the carnage.

"Leelan! Stop! Now! Or I'll blow the whistle!" Elin shouted. Only then did Leelan reluctantly drop the Toda corpse in her claws and glide a short distance away. Dismembered Toda radiated in a broad circle around her. Beyond them massed those Toda that had remained unaffected by her whistle. Their Riders had, at first, been so overwhelmed, they had failed to grasp what was

happening. Now, however, they began to tighten the circle around Elin and the Royal Beast. They raised their bows, and a hail of arrows whistled toward them.

Elin ducked her head. Sliding off Leelan's back, she ran over to Shunan. "Hurry! Come with me!" She grabbed his arm and half dragged him toward Leelan. "Take him!" she shouted. "Take him over there!" As she shoved him onto the Beast, she felt something thud violently into her back and pitched forward. She choked, unable to breathe, then realized that she had been struck by an arrow.

"You..." Shunan began, but she pushed his chest.

"Get on," she gasped. "Hold on to the reins."

"You, too," he said, grabbing her hand, but she yanked her arm away.

"She can't carry two. Go!" She shoved the plugs into Leelan's ears. "Go!" she yelled again. While Leelan probably could not hear her, she understood Elin's gesture. She flew up into the air and sped off without looking back. Her figure blurred in Elin's eyes. Falling to her knees on the grass, she gazed up at the sky. Leelan's figure, shining in the sun, grew hazy.

Pain coursed through her with every breath, and tears trickled down her cheeks. The Toda drew closer, and their scent overwhelmed her. The thought occurred to her that everything until this moment had been nothing but a dream.

She was with her mother now, about to be eaten by Toda.

In those few moments before the Kiba reached her, she dreamed her whole life.

Faces floated into her mind and out again, like clouds blown by the wind. Joeun, Esalu, Yuyan, Tomura, and Ialu.

Images rose in her mind's eye: Leelan when she had first responded to Elin's harp, her first flight, her shining figure as she mated in the sky.

What a rich dream it was.

She smiled. With shallow gasps, her body crumpled slowly to the ground.

Mother.

She felt the grass caress her cheek, and awareness returned. Ruthlessly, the knowledge that she was about to be devoured by Toda pierced her mind, and an indescribable despair spread through her. Is this how her mother had felt? When she had known that her life, which she had lived so hard, was to end like this, had she, too, felt a desolation that gnawed her very bones?

I don't want to die yet ... This thought hit her with sudden force. I don't want my life to end this way.

Sobbing, she struggled to move. The ground shook as the Toda drew ever nearer. Pressing her left elbow against the earth, she turned to look up at the sky. Tears blurred her vision, and everything seemed very far away.

As her consciousness began to fade, in a corner of her mind, she thought she heard her mother's finger flute. And with that high note came the sound of beating wings. Something huge was gliding toward her.

Leelan! Her eyes widened. But why ...

Breathing like a bellows, her fangs bared in a snarl, and her fur stiff and straight as needles, Leelan dropped from the sky. The shouts and screams of the Toda Riders echoed all around her, and arrows began to fall like rain. Elin could only screw her eyes shut and cover her head with her arms. Something blocked the light of day, plunging her into darkness. The sounds of arrows whistling and people shouting grew distant, and her body was wrapped in stillness, as if she were in the sudden lull of a storm.

Opening her eyes, she saw Leelan's face right before her, fangs bared. She had covered her with her wings. Elin froze, staring at that snarling face.

Suddenly, Leelan shoved her muzzle at her, and butted her in the chest before she could grab the Silent Whistle. Pain seared her back where the arrow had pierced her. Groaning, she uncurled from the protective ball in which she had been huddled. As if waiting for that moment, Leelan snatched her up in her jaws.

Elin screamed, and her muscles went rigid, but for some reason she felt no pain. Instead of the agony of rending fangs, she felt only a dull pressure, as if she were being pressed by thick fingers. Leelan, she realized, must be holding her in the back of her mouth where there were no teeth. She was caught

between her gums. At that moment, she felt something warm and soft move beneath her.

Leelan's tongue. Deftly, she used it to roll Elin's body so that she lay on her side, with nothing touching her wound. Then she kicked the ground with her feet and flew up into the air.

Elin felt her body lift. Wind roared in her ears and whipped at her hair. Her arms were stretched above her, and she rested them against Leelan's muzzle, gazing at her shining fur. Leelan's saliva, still smelling of Toda blood, soaked into her clothes. She closed her eyes.

A hot lump rose from the pit of her chest into her throat. Why?... Why would she do this for me? When I'm not her child, or her parent, or her mate. When I used the Silent Whistle like a whip to make her obey me. Why?

Her feelings for Leelan, which she had locked away deep inside for fear of that sweet delusion, burst forth and shook something awake inside her.

Leelan, I just wanted to know. That's all I ever wanted ... I stood on the edge of that abyss between man and beast and played my harp for you, checking each note, one by one, to see if it would reach you. Because I wanted to know. I wanted to know what you thought.

And you—you spoke to me, one note at a time. We explored each other's incomprehensible minds from across that yawning chasm.

Sometimes we hit the wrong notes like clashing echoes.

Yet sometimes, just by chance, the notes we played for one another made unexpected music, like this.

Her eyes filled with tears.

As long as the life you have given me continues, let me stand on the shore of that great abyss and play. Let me pluck my harp, note by note, and speak to the creatures of earth and sky, so that I may hear music as yet unknown.

Opening her eyes, she turned her head and saw Tahai Azeh stretching far into

the distance. The Toda and their Riders were now so far away that she could no longer distinguish one from the other. They dwindled to tiny black dots, like a swarm of bees, while the earth and sky went on forever, brimming with light.

Elin listened to Leelan purr in encouragement from deep in her chest and gazed, transfixed, at the land below.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nahoko Uehashi is a popular Japanese writer whose works are loved by young and adult readers alike. She has won numerous awards, including the 2014 Hans Christian Andersen Award. She has studied indigenous peoples in Australia and worked for many years as a full-time professor of cultural anthropology, in which she earned a PhD. Recently, she has reduced her teaching responsibilities to devote more time to her writing. She lives near Tokyo, Japan. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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