

THE  
BEAST  
PLAYER

NAHOKO UEHASHI

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JEH

SHEEMIYA

HUSBAND

MEEMIYA

WIFE

YOUNGER  
BROTHER

DAMIYA

THE DIVINE KINGDOM OF LYOZA

HUSBAND

HALUMIYA

HUSBAND

DAUGHTER

HUSBAND

SEIMIYA

THE YOJEH FAMILY TREE

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*For my mother*

PART ONE

# THE TODA

## PROLOGUE

# SOHYON'S FINGER FLUTE



## THE TODA'S LAMENT

Elin woke to the sound of the door opening. It was not yet dawn. In the blackness outside, the rain drummed incessantly on the shingled roof. Elin could vaguely make out the shape of her mother as she washed her hands in the dirt-floored kitchen, then turned and trod softly to the sleeping area. As she slid under the covers, she brought with her the scent of rain and of Toda, the huge water serpents that bore men to battle. Toda Warriors were easily identified by the distinctive musk-like odor of the membrane coating the Toda's scales. It clung to them wherever they went, and to Elin's mother, too; it was a sweet, familiar scent that had surrounded Elin from the moment she was born.

"Mother, was that thunder?"

"It's a long way off. Don't worry. The storm's over the mountains, not here. Now go to sleep."

With a deep sigh, Elin closed her eyes. The image of her mother's white hand slowly, cautiously caressing the Toda hovered in her mind. She loved

the stillness of her mother's face as she gazed at the enormous beasts. Her mother was in charge of not just any Toda, but the strongest—the Kiba or “fangs.” These formed the vanguard of the Toda forces. Not even the fathers of her best friends, Saju and Chok, were entrusted with the care of the Stone Chambers reserved for the Kiba. Elin's heart filled with pride when she thought of how highly the Toda Stewards regarded her mother's skill as a beast doctor.

She followed her mother to the Chambers whenever she could, even if it meant she had to sew, haul water, or do other chores later. But although she longed to stroke the serpents' hides, her mother had warned her never to try. “The Toda are fearsome creatures,” she had said calmly, her eyes following their gliding forms where they churned the surface of the deep, dark pool. “If you got too near, they would sense you instantly and snap you in two, then swallow you in a single bite. You've seen me touch them so often you think it must be easy, but don't let that fool you. The Toda will never be tamed . . . They aren't meant to be tamed. Toda Stewards like me, and even the Riders, wouldn't dare touch them without a Silent Whistle to immobilize them.” She opened her palm to reveal a small whistle.

Elin had often seen her raise it to her mouth. She had also seen the Warriors blow such whistles in unison so that they could swiftly saddle and mount the Toda while they lay as stiff as logs. Once perched on a Toda's back and grasping the two long horns protruding from its head, a Warrior could prevent it from thrusting its head underwater and move it as he willed. On land, the Toda resembled dragons and could outrun a horse on their sharp-clawed feet. But in their true element, water, they slithered like snakes, with their legs tucked close to their bodies. Ferocious beasts, with hides impervious to arrows, they could rend a horse and rider asunder with a snap of their jaws, decimating enemy troops.

During the spawning season, the Stewards crept into wild Toda nests and stole one or two eggs from the many that had been laid. As soon as the eggs hatched, a flap-like scale over the hatchlings' ears was partially removed. Elin had watched her mother do this once. “It's to keep them from shutting out the Silent Whistle,” she had explained. Once astride their mounts, the



Warriors placed covers fashioned from Toda scales over the ear holes to block out enemy whistles.

Elin's mother's eyes had grown dark and sad as she gazed at the Toda swimming around the pond. Rolling the whistle absently in her palm, she had said, "If you still want to touch them when you become a woman at fifteen, then we'll see." Disturbed by the hollowness of her voice, Elin had pressed her no further. But how, she wondered, was she to wait five whole years until she reached fifteen? How, when all she could think about was what it would feel like to touch those shimmering, iridescent scales?

Her friends, Saju and Chok, told her she was strange to even want to. Girls, it seemed, were afraid to go anywhere near the Toda. Elin could understand to some extent; she, too, found them frightening. When they plunged to the bottom of the deep pool and slithered back up to the surface, cloaked in black water, it made her skin crawl, and yet she could not take her eyes off them. For some reason, they made her forget everything else. She could have spent all day just watching.

Often she wondered if they slept at night, but she had never managed to join her mother on the midnight patrol. Every time she heard her mother preparing to leave, she tried to force herself awake and get out of bed. But her eyes remained glued shut.

Tonight, yet again, Elin sank back into slumber before her mother began breathing peacefully beside her.

An earsplitting noise rent the air, startling Elin awake. It sounded like wind whistling full force through a cracked pipe.

How long had she slept?

Her mother flung aside the covers. It must be dawn already because Elin could see her more clearly now. The keening sound went on and on, setting her teeth on edge. She covered her ears.

"Mother! What is that?"

Without responding, her mother threw on some clothes and slipped her feet into straw sandals rather than her boots, which would take too long to pull on. "Stay here," she said as she raced outside. But Elin could not possibly stay behind with that noise echoing all around her. She had to know

what was going on. Flinging a coat on over her pajamas, she hurried after her mother.

The rain had stopped but the ground was sodden and her sandals slipped in the mud, slowing her down. The doors of the neighbors' homes flew open and other Toda Stewards rushed out into the street. Their families followed and soon a crowd was surging toward the eastern bluff, deep inside of which were carved the Toda Chambers. It was from this direction that the shrill wailing came.

A huge fissure ran up the gray rock face, almost as if the cliff had been wrenched open by giant hands. At the bottom where it met the ground, it was wide enough for several adults to walk abreast. The guards posted at this entrance to forestall enemy raids were peering anxiously inside, unsettled by the eerie sound, but they stepped aside with relief when they saw the Toda Stewards approaching with Elin's mother at their head.

Torches burned in the walls every thirty paces, illuminating the tunnel and making the damp rock glisten. The tunnel opened into a large cavern known as the Hall, beyond which branched many smaller tunnels. These led to the Stone Chambers, a series of huge individual caverns built three centuries before by the Stewards' ancestors. Each was equipped with its own pool, or Pond. How they had been dug so deep, no one knew, but there were countless underground Ponds, each separate from the others to prevent the fiercely territorial Toda from killing each other. No more than ten could occupy a single Pond without fighting. Channels known as Toda Ways connected the Ponds but were kept sealed by gates of thick oak, raised only when the Warriors rode the Toda out for training or to battle.

Now the caverns shook with a cacophony that rose from every Pond, bouncing off the walls and reverberating through the Chambers. People clapped their hands against their ears and gritted their teeth as they entered the cliff. Though the walkways that ran alongside the channels were only dimly lit, Elin's mother raced unerringly down the one that led to the Kiba Chambers, without even bothering to cover her ears.

By the time Elin caught up with her, most of the Toda Stewards were already there, standing like frozen statues in one of the Chambers. Pushing

her way through, she was greeted by a strange sight. Giant logs glowed dimly on the surface of the Pond. Her mother, chest deep in water, reached out to touch them. Elin gasped as she realized what they were. The Kiba! She started toward her mother but someone grabbed her shoulder. Looking up, she saw that it was her grandfather. He was staring at her mother, his face rigid.

“Are they dead?” he asked.

Her mother nodded.

“All five of them?”

Again her mother nodded.

Elin suddenly realized that the eerie whistling had ceased. The ensuing silence was broken by the sound of running footsteps. Three men burst into the cave.

“The Kiba in the next Chamber are dead, too!” one of them shouted.

A gasp rose from those assembled and Elin felt her grandfather’s hand tighten painfully on her shoulder. “What about the others?” he asked.

“The Trunk and Tail units are all fine . . . They’ve stopped whistling in mourning. They’re still agitated and swimming in circles, but they seem all right.”

Elin’s grandfather looked around at the Stewards. “Go to the Chambers under your charge,” he said sternly. “I don’t want any Toda injuring themselves against the rock walls of the Ponds. We must not lose any more!”

The Stewards nodded and hurried from the cave. After watching them leave, Elin’s grandfather walked toward the pool. “Why did this happen?”

Elin’s mother kept her eyes on the rigid Toda, lifting their scales to peer underneath. “I don’t know yet,” she responded.

“Did they suffocate on these washu?” He gestured at a thick swarm of glowing insects.

“No. Their gills are clean. These glow bugs must have gathered after they died.”

“Did you administer tokujisui, the herbal potion reserved for the Kiba? Surely you must have noticed something wrong during your midnight rounds.” But Elin’s mother just shook her head wordlessly. He glared at her

for a moment, then said grimly, "That you could let all the Kiba die . . . It's unforgivable. When the inspector comes, you will be interrogated and punished for this crime."

Elin's mother turned her head slowly and looked up at him. "I know. I am ready."

He clenched his fists. "Really? You're ready, are you? Sohyon. You know that I, too, must be ready. As chief of the Toda Stewards, as your father-in-law, I, too, will be questioned. They will want to know why I let you, an Ahlyo, take care of the Kiba, the priceless gems of the Aluhan." His voice shook with anger, then dropped to a murmur. "Were it not for Asson . . . If you had not been heavy with his child . . ." He shook his head. "No, that's not the only reason. Your skill as a beast doctor is outstanding. That's why I defied everyone's protests and obeyed my son's wishes. But if I had known it would come to this . . ." He almost spat out the last words and, wheeling away from her, left the cave.

Elin's knees were shaking so hard she had to drop to a crouch. "Mother . . ." she whispered. "Mother . . ." She looked up into her face, but Sohyon just stared at her blankly. Gradually, however, a glint of life returned to her eyes, and she smiled faintly.

"It'll be all right," she said.

"But he said it's unforgivable, a crime."

Her mother caressed the flank of a dead Toda. "That's what your grandfather says, but you know, the Kiba have been wiped out like this before, in his father's time. They're bigger and stronger than any other Toda, but they're also more susceptible to disease. Everyone knows that." She stood looking at the Toda, apparently oblivious to everything else, even the frigid water. Her eyes held more than sorrow, as if she was concealing a deep anguish inside.

For a long time, Elin stood with her mother looking at the dead Toda and listening to the indistinct voices of the Stewards reverberating along the rocks from other Chambers. Glowing insects swarmed around the torches that had been thrust into holes drilled in the rock. Many more hovered around the corpses in the water. Watching them, Elin suddenly said, "Mother,

do Toda smell differently when they die? Or did their smell change because they were sick?"

Her mother's head jerked up as if she had been lashed with a whip, startling Elin. "Why do you say that?" she asked, her eyes boring into her daughter.

Elin blinked. "It's just . . . their smell seems different than usual. So I thought that might be what drew all these bugs . . ." Her voice dwindled away. Her mother stood rooted to the spot, staring at Elin with a stunned expression.

"Go on," she urged.

Elin blinked again and said, "I know that washu live near water, but I've never seen them in the Toda Pond before. You know how you told me that different types of flowers attract different insects because of their distinctive fragrances? Well, I thought that the washu might have been attracted to the Pond because the Toda's scent had changed."

"You . . ." her mother began and then stopped. There was admiration in her voice but her expression remained unreadable. She shook her head. "Elin," she said quietly. "You must not tell anyone what you think."

"Why?"

Her mother smiled. "Some people are naturally suspicious. If they thought you had made that story up to help me, you might get into trouble."

Elin frowned. She felt like she was missing something. Her mother seemed to have evaded her question, yet she could not figure out why she would do so.

Sohyon waded wearily to the edge of the Pond, placed her hands on the stone floor of the cave, and hauled herself up. Elin ran over and grabbed her robe, pulling on it to help her out. Her skin was as cold as ice. "Thank you," she whispered, stroking Elin's hair tenderly. Then, turning toward the Pond where the dead Toda floated, she knelt on the stone and bowed her forehead to the ground. She remained that way for a long time. Water from her sodden garments spread slowly around her in a dark pool.

## 2

### THE AHLYO, PEOPLE OF THE MIST

By the time Elin and her mother left the communal bathhouse, the setting sun was gilding the mountain slopes.

It had been a very long day. After seeing that the Toda corpses were borne to the great stone hall and laid out on straw mats for easy inspection the following day, Elin's mother had spent hours closeted with the other Stewards in the gathering hall. Elin felt sick with worry. When her mother did not return for lunch, Saju's mother, who lived next door, fed her. Sohyon and the others finally exited the hall very late in the afternoon, looking exhausted. Elin was waiting outside the door, and her mother took her by the hand without a word and led her home to get a change of clothes. Then they had headed to the bathhouse.

Because the Stewards spent much of the day immersed in the icy waters of the Ponds, a communal bathhouse was a necessity for Toda villages. Copious amounts of wood were burned to heat the large pool of water, and the bathhouse was located on the western edge of the village to reduce the risk of fire. Elin and her mother always entered the baths last, after the Stewards and the women, and used the leftover hot water. It had been this way ever since Elin could remember, and she had never given it a second thought. Today, however, as the two of them soaked in the empty bathhouse, she began to wonder why her mother always chose to come when no one was there.

Although nobody said so, Elin had always sensed that there was a gap between them and the other villagers. Now things she had noticed from time to time suddenly began to fall into place, taking on new meaning. She thought of her friend Saju and the way Saju's grandparents always treated their granddaughter with affectionate kindness. They even lived together under the same roof, and Saju's cousins often dropped by to visit. Elin, on the other hand, had never lived with her grandparents. Her grandfather, the

Chief Steward, had always intimidated her, and her grandmother never smiled at Elin or her mother, even though she shared rice cakes with them when they visited on New Year's Day or other special occasions. Nor was Elin close to any of her uncles, aunts, or cousins. She often wondered why her grandparents chatted comfortably with the rest of her kin but not with her, yet she had never voiced this question, not even to her mother. Something warned her not to.

Sohyon was different. She was taller than any of the village women. Walking beside her now, Elin wondered when she had first realized that the shape of her face and the color of her eyes were different. It was probably the day Saju had said, "Elin, your eyes are green, like your mother's. Do all Ahlyo have green eyes?" Then, lowering her voice, she had asked, "Can you do magic, too, Elin? Were you bitten by a devil? Everyone says it's wrong to make children with an Ahlyo. They call them Akun Meh Chai, 'devil-bitten child.'" Elin had smiled blankly without answering. Somehow she had known that it was safer to dull her mind and let such comments pass over her. Instinct told her that if she played dumb and didn't ask questions, she and her mother would suffer less grief.

As they stood watching the sunset clouds skirting the mountain ridges, Elin snuck a peek at her mother. Do you belong to the Ahlyo, the People of the Mist, Mother? What was Father like? Am I Akun Meh Chai? She burned to ask these questions, but no words came to her. Turning, her mother looked down at her, perhaps sensing her gaze. "You must be tired," she murmured. Then she smiled. "How about some wild boar for supper tonight?"

"Really?" Elin exclaimed. Wild boar cured in miso was a special treat reserved for celebrations or festivals. "We're really going to have boar for supper?"

"We sure are. A delicious meal is just what we need to chase away fatigue and make us strong for tomorrow."

When they reached home, her mother told her to light the fire and went into the back room. She returned with a small package.

"What's that?" Elin asked.

Ignoring her question, her mother said, "The rice has been washed

already. Could you put it on to cook? I'll be back by the time it's ready." Then she went next door to Saju's house. She was gone for such a long time that Elin wondered what on earth they could be talking about. Just as the fragrance of steamed rice began to fill the room, her mother finally returned. She knelt before the stove and checked the fire.

"That smells great, Elin . . . You must be hungry. I'll start cooking the meat." But she showed no sign of moving. After staring at the flames for a long moment, she drew the whistle from her robe and cast it into the fire.

"Mother!" Elin exclaimed.

Sohyon stood up and drew her close. "I'm sorry," she said hoarsely. "What I've done will make life so much harder for you . . . Yet to be honest, I'm glad that I'll never have to use that thing again."

Elin looked at her in surprise. "Why? Don't you like taking care of the Toda?"

Her mother shook her head. "It's not taking care of the Toda that I mind . . . It's that whistle. I've always hated using it." Stroking Elin's hair, she spoke in a low murmur, as if she were talking to herself. "I hate watching the Toda freeze whenever I blow it . . . To see beasts controlled by humans is a miserable thing. In the wild, they would be masters of their own destiny. I can't bear watching them grow steadily weaker when they live among men . . ."

"Is it bad for the Toda to be raised by humans?" Elin asked. "I thought that special potion, the tokujisui, was supposed to make them stronger."

"It makes their fangs harder and their bones larger than Toda in the wild. But at the expense of other parts."

"What parts?"

Sohyon rested her hand on Elin's head and thought for a while. There was regret in her voice when she finally spoke. "I've told you much more than I should have. Forget what I said. None of the other Stewards have noticed, and if you told them, it would only cause trouble. Promise me you won't tell anyone."

Elin frowned. This was not the first time her mother had made her vow



to keep silent. "All right. I promise. But in return, tell me the answer. Please. What gets weaker?"

Her mother smiled. "Think about it. What can Toda in the wild do naturally that Toda raised in the Ponds can't? I'm sure you'll find the answer for yourself one day. But when you do, don't tell anyone. Not until you understand why you shouldn't tell them what you know." She ruffled Elin's hair and then gently drew her hand away. "Go on, now," she said. "Get some meat out of that jar."

While Elin took out the meat and scraped off the miso, her mother made a hollow in the ashes inside the oven and spread a large lacos leaf on top. Elin's eyes grew round as she watched. "What're you doing?"

Her mother laughed. "Watch and see." Taking the lump of meat from Elin, she placed it on top of the leaf and spread the sweet, shredded flesh of the lacos fruit on top. Over this she sprinkled a little spicy miso called toi. Quickly tucking the leaf around the meat and fruit, she covered the entire parcel in hot ashes. After that, they waited for what seemed like forever. Just when Elin thought she could bear her hunger no longer, her mother removed the parcel from the ashes and placed it on a large unglazed plate. As she unwrapped the leaf, a cloud of steam rose, giving off a delicious aroma.

The sweetness of the fruit and the spiciness of the toi had permeated the tender steamed boar, filling Elin's mouth with a deliciously complex flavor. She began devouring the meal, oblivious of all else. "It's good, isn't it?" her mother asked. When Elin nodded, she laughed. "Try pouring the juice over the rice." Elin obediently poured the liquid remaining in the leaf over her rice and took a large mouthful. This, too, was delicious. "Lacos trees keep their leaves year-round, even in winter. You can find them easily if you look along mountain slopes exposed to the sun. I used to cook with them just like this when I wandered through the mountains. They're a good substitute for a pot and they also take away the odor of meat and give it a very pleasant aroma."

Elin put down her chopsticks to listen. Her mother's face looked so peaceful. Elin had never heard her talk about the past like this before. Now, she

sensed, was the time to ask her questions. Her heart beat a little faster. “You mean, you didn’t grow up in the village? Where did you live?”

Her mother searched her face, as if noting the tension in it. “We traveled from one place to another. I never told you about myself, did I? You never asked either . . . Did you think you shouldn’t?”

Elin nodded and her mother nodded back. “You’re old enough to understand much more now,” she said. “Tonight let me tell you about myself and about your father.” She rested her plate on her knees. “You heard your grandfather call me an Ahlyo today, right? What do you think of when you hear that word? The villagers call us Ahlyo, ‘People of the Mist,’ because they see us as tall and mysterious, appearing out of the mist and vanishing back into it. They see us as peddlers of effective remedies who excel at the healing arts. But they also see the Ahlyo as outlandish strangers, followers of unfamiliar gods. Is that how you see them?”

Elin gave a small nod. A smile touched her mother’s eyes. “To outsiders, that’s probably what we would look like . . . After all, we don’t settle in one place or live with other people, and we have protected our own way of life. But Ahlyo is not our real name. The first people who met us heard it wrong, and the sound of it, ‘Ah’ meaning ‘mist’ and ‘Lyo’ meaning ‘people,’ probably fit the image of what they saw. But our true name is Ao-Loh, ‘Ao’ meaning ‘oath’ and ‘Loh’ meaning ‘guardian’ or ‘protector.’”

“Oath?”

“We swore an oath to protect ourselves from repeating a terrible, terrible mistake made long ago. My mother taught me that the Oath was more important than my own life or the lives of my family. Because we dedicated our lives to obeying the Oath, we called ourselves the Ao-Loh.”

“What mistake?”

Her mother remained silent for some time, as if searching for words. “It was disastrous—a gross violation that brought men and beasts to the brink of extinction. My ancestors vowed that they would never allow that to happen again and they became wanderers who lived in the wild and served neither the Yojeh, the True Ruler, nor the Aluhan, the Grand Duke. Since that time, every Ao-Loh, from the moment of birth, is strictly raised to

adhere to the Law . . . They are forbidden to marry outside their people and they must never settle down in one place.” A sad smile touched her lips. “Elin, I broke the Oath. The moment I met your father and chose to live in this village, I ceased to be an Ao-Loh.”

Elin blinked. “But . . . what about your parents? Where are they now?”

“My father died young . . . And I suppose my mother must be living the life of a wanderer still.”

Not knowing what to say, Elin could only stare at her. She could not grasp the idea of this Oath or the Law. Why was it wrong for her mother to love her father and live in this village? Why would anyone forbid her to see her family just for that? She frowned as she mulled over these questions in her mind.

“Was my story hard to understand?” her mother asked.

“Mmm.”

“I suppose it would be . . . Wait until you grow up then, Elin. When you’ve become a woman, remember what I just told you and think it over carefully. By then, I’m sure you’ll understand it much better.” She beckoned Elin to her. Setting down her plate, Elin walked over and sat on her mother’s lap. Sohyon wrapped her arms around her, just as she had done when Elin was small. “I met your father on the rocks of Samock. I was looking for chachimo, the purple flower that helps digestion, but instead I found a man lying halfway down the cliff.”

“That was Father?”

“Yes . . . He had lost his footing while out hunting deer.”

“Was he hurt?”

“He’d hit his head, and his leg was broken.”

“So you helped him, didn’t you?”

Her mother smiled and gently rocked her. “That’s right. That was how I met your father. Asson . . . He was a kind and gentle man, not at all like your grandmother or your grandfather. He didn’t talk a lot, but when he laughed, it was like a ray of sunshine bursting through the clouds. It brightened up everything. You’re just like him, you know . . . You warm my heart just by being here.” She hugged Elin close.

# 3

## SOHYON'S FINGER FLUTE

Elin stood among the women, taut with anxiety as she watched the approaching horsemen. They rode in single file, flanked by grim-faced foot soldiers bearing spears. Most of the villagers, their faces somber, had gathered in front of the meeting hall to greet the Chief Inspector and his troop. Elin's mother was there, too, standing with the Toda Stewards, one pace in front of the crowd.

The inspector, robed in red with an ornate sash and black coronet, did not deign to dismount. He glared down at the assembled Stewards. "Is it true that you let all ten of the Aluhan's precious Kiba die?"

Elin's grandfather stepped forward and bowed deeply. "It is true. We beg your pardon."

The skin around the inspector's temple twitched violently. "Who was in charge of the Kiba?" he shouted. "Step forward!"

Elin started. She saw her mother step toward him and bow respectfully, her palms pressed together before her chest. "I cared for the Kiba."

The inspector's eyes widened. "What? . . . You can't be . . . An Ahlyo?" Eyes flashing, he turned to Elin's grandfather, the Chief Steward, and roared in a dreadful voice, "You! What were you thinking? How could you let an Ahlyo wench care for the priceless gems of the Aluhan!"

The Chief Steward's face was rigid. "Forgive me, your honor, but this woman has outstanding skill as a healer—"

Raising his whip, the inspector lashed out. Blood spurted from the Chief Steward's brow. He pressed a hand against the wound but did not retreat. He continued to bow low before the inspector.

"'Outstanding skill!' Of course she has outstanding skill, you fool! She's an Ahlyo. It's in their blood. But listen carefully! Being skilled in medicine is not enough. The most important qualification for the care of the Toda is

unwavering loyalty to the Aluhan! How can you call yourself Chief Steward and be ignorant of that!"

Elin's grandfather raised his head. "I beg your forgiveness. This woman was cast out of the Ahlyo more than ten years ago. She married my son and became one of us. She no longer obeys the Law of the Ahlyo and has sworn fealty to the Aluhan."

The inspector snorted. "So you say, but for the Ahlyo, the Law supersedes all else. They will kill even their own children for breaking it." He glared at Elin's mother. "Tell me. Why did all the Kiba in your care die? If you are so skilled in medicine, then surely you know what caused their deaths. Answer me!"

"Please allow me to explain," Elin's mother said. Her voice was hard. "The cause of death was poisoning."

A hush fell over the assemblage. The inspector frowned. "What? Poison! What do you mean by that? Are you saying that you fed them poison?"

Elin's mother shook her head. "No . . . The tokujisui that we give the Toda has some very powerful ingredients. All the Stewards know this. But the mucous film that covers the Toda's scales has protective properties. If the tokujisui mingles with this as it is being consumed, no adverse effects occur and only the beneficial properties remain. Yesterday morning, however, I noticed thin patches in the mucous film. As I had seen no evidence of this the previous night before when I made my midnight rounds, I administered the tokujisui as usual."

The inspector's eyes narrowed. "You mean this change occurred within the space of just a few hours? Why?"

Elin's mother looked up at him and shook her head. "I don't know."

A heavy silence fell over the square. The inspector turned abruptly to the soldiers behind him. "Seize her!" he barked. "She will be questioned and then punished."

Elin began to shake. Pain stabbed her heart. "Mother!" she cried, but before she could run to her, Saju's mother grabbed her from behind and held her.

“You must stay here!” she whispered, clamping a beefy hand over Elin’s mouth to smother her wails. She was a large woman and strong. Though she fought wildly, Elin could not escape the arms that held her. She watched through tear-blurred eyes as her mother was bound with ropes and marched away.

Of the next three days, Elin remembered almost nothing. Apparently, her mother had asked Saju’s parents to care for her and had given them a large sum of money saved from her earnings. They took Elin home and treated her with kindness. Although the logical people to care for her should have been her grandparents, her mother and Saju’s parents knew all too well how they would feel about that. Saju and her parents tried to comfort her, but Elin’s mind was consumed with grief and fear, and she only registered their voices as sounds far off in the distance.

On the night of the third day after her mother was arrested, Elin woke from her slumber and went to the outhouse at the far end of the garden. As she was returning to the house, Saju’s mother’s voice rose shrilly inside, and Elin froze in her tracks.

“You mean they sentenced her to the Judgment of the Toda? Tomorrow at dawn?”

“Shh! Not so loud! What if you wake the children?”

Saju’s mother dropped her voice, but as she was a naturally boisterous person, Elin could still hear her from the garden. “But how could they? Regardless of the crime, how could they do that to her? It’s far too cruel a punishment . . .” Her husband said something so quietly Elin could not hear, but then Saju’s mother spoke again. “Ah . . . So that’s it. The Aluhan will hold the inspector responsible if he can’t explain their deaths. So he’s going to blame it all on Sohyon. But to let the wild Toda devour her, that’s terrible . . .”

Elin did not stay to hear more. Taking care to tread quietly, she set off at a run. Guided by the light of the moon, she slipped behind Saju’s house and through the trees to her own home. Cold hands seemed to grip her throat, strangling the breath from her. She must help her mother. She must, or her mother would be killed at dawn—by the Toda.

The Judgment of the Toda: a punishment reserved for informers and traitors of the Aluhan. Elin had heard the villagers speak of it with dread. Bound hand and foot and weighted with stones, the accused were thrown into Lagoh Marsh, where the wild Toda swarmed. She stood trembling on the cold earthen floor of her house. She must leave quickly, before Saju's parents realized she was gone. If they found her, they would bring her back and keep her inside until the execution was over.

Elin knew where Lagoh Marsh was. It was a long way from the village, but there was still time before dawn. If she traveled as fast as she could, she should make it before the execution started. She grabbed her mother's dagger from where it hung on the wall. Surprised by the weight of it, she almost dropped it. The blade was keen and sharp. If it could cut through tough Toda scales, it should be able to cut the ropes that bound her mother. She would hide along the banks of the marsh until they threw her mother in, then swim out and cut her bonds with this dagger.

Slipping it inside her shirt, she pulled a lantern off the shelf. The hearth had long since grown cold. Even the embers buried in the ashes had ceased to glow. Elin hastily struck a spark from a flint and lit the lantern. Then she exchanged her straw sandals for leather boots and ran outside. The spring moon glowed hazily against the indigo sky, and the trees and grasses slept peacefully, dark shadows in the night.

Pressing her lips firmly together, Elin set off for the marsh.

It was a long night. Though she walked and walked, the mountain road went on endlessly. Occasionally she heard unidentifiable creatures darting through the underbrush, rustling the leaves. "Mother, Mother," she whispered over and over again, forcing herself to go on. She focused all her thoughts on the future. Once I've saved her, we'll leave the village and wander the mountains together, just like Mother used to do when she was young. She pictured the two of them walking through the wilderness, taking shelter in towns along the way. She recalled the taste of roasted boar and her mother's warmth. And as she did so, the dark mountain road grew less frightening.

By the time the trees thinned to reveal a field of reeds stretching out before her, the dark sky had paled to blue and then to a red-tinged gray as

night turned to dawn. She had just begun pushing through the reeds when the thunder of drums filled the air. She could feel them reverberating in her stomach. *Boom. Boom.* A startled flock of birds rose from the marsh. The drums rolled on.

The thick reeds were far too tall for her to see the drums, but she was certain that wherever they were, that was where her mother must be. A terrible thought seized her. What if the drumming was the signal for the execution to begin? Maybe they were going to throw her mother into the marsh as soon as it stopped. Her heart began to race and her chest tightened. She tried to run toward the sound but the mud sucked at her feet so that she could barely walk. Stumbling, she grabbed the reeds for balance and the sharp stalks sliced her hand. Still she kept on, doggedly heading toward the drums. She must reach her mother before they stopped!

The sun rose, and the world around her brightened. The reeds ended abruptly, giving way to steel-gray water that spread far into the distance. Elin's mother had once told her that the marsh was a series of swamps and lakes connected by rivers that led as far as the Yojeh's territory to the west. Along the bank Elin saw a temporary camp. Huge drums had been erected on stands, and Warriors beat upon them with large sticks. Others carried a boat down to the shore, watched by a small crowd. Elin could make out the inspector astride his horse. There were more than just Warriors gathered on the shore. All the higher-ranked Stewards were there, too, including her grandfather.

Just then, her mother was dragged from a tent. Elin gasped, and a chill spread through her body. Her mother was drenched in blood, and her hands were bound behind her. Two Warriors gripped her under the arms and half lifted, half dragged her toward the boat. Clenching her teeth, Elin desperately choked back her sobs. But it was rage, not grief, that churned inside her. Thick ropes bound her mother's legs, and to these was tied a heavy stone. When they loaded her into the boat, Elin drew the dagger and discarded the sheath. The boat bearing her mother was pushed into the water.

Can I make it? Elin wondered. It looked very far, but she was sure she



could swim that distance. Crouching down among the reeds, she yanked off her boots. She was just about to wade into the water when she realized that she couldn't swim with the dagger in her hand. She thought of stuffing it back inside her top, but what if it fell out? With every moment of indecision, the boat moved farther out into the marsh. There was no choice. Clamping the dagger between her teeth, she slid into the water and felt its frigid grip envelop her. The dagger in her mouth forced her to keep her head up, and she struggled desperately to suck air through her nose and mouth. Her jaw was soon numb from the weight.

*Boom!* With a thunderous drumroll, her mother was tossed from the boat. The rowers watched her plunge into the water and then turned the boat back toward the shore. Sohyon disappeared for a moment but then her head broke the surface. Elin swam doggedly toward her, defying the weight of the dagger, which threatened to drag her underwater.

"What's that?" one of the Warriors said. "Is it a pup?"

"No. It looks more like a child." This caused a stir among those assembled.

"It's a girl. And she's got something in her mouth."

"A dagger? Is she trying to rescue that criminal?"

One of the Warriors notched an arrow to his bow and looked up at the inspector. "Shall I shoot?"

Still astride his horse, the inspector shielded his eyes with one hand and stared at the small figure struggling to stay afloat. He snorted. "That won't be necessary . . . Look."

Ripples disturbed the water's surface, circling in a wide ring around the condemned prisoner. Large shadows twisted and turned sinuously beneath the water. "The drums have woken the Toda. They've found the live bait we threw in."

Elin's grandfather watched the scene unfold, his lips parted. The girl was his granddaughter, just ten years old, trying to save her mother. What a pitiful sight. No, he chided himself. It's better this way. After all, she's Akun Meh Chai. She'll be better off dying with her mother. The child was unclean,

the product of a union with an outsider. She should never have been born; she was a mistake that must be corrected, erased. Like this. It was fate. So he told himself, but when he saw the black forms of the Toda slowly break the surface behind her, his flesh crawled.

Sohyon struggled to keep her face out of the water. Although the marsh was not very deep, her feet did not reach the ground. The stone tied to her legs, however, appeared to be resting on the bottom, and she was no longer weighed down. Blood gushed from a deep wound in her midriff, made purposely to attract the Toda. With it, she felt her life slowly ebbing away. She opened her eyes with great effort, prying open lids swollen from repeated beatings. The sight that greeted her left her stunned. Elin. Elin swimming. Toward her . . . What's that in her mouth? My dagger! A hot lump rose in her throat as she grasped what the child intended to do. Tears blurred her vision.

"Elin!" She kicked frantically with her bound legs, trying to reach her daughter. Elin looked like she would drown any minute. The dagger was too heavy. Sohyon could hear her throat rattle as she struggled to breathe through the saliva pooling in her mouth. Finally she grabbed the dagger with her right hand and swam with her left.

"Elin, here! Grab my shoulder!" It was only when she felt Elin's small hand fasten onto her shoulder that she saw the wave of water behind her. The Toda! Countless Toda, swimming in an ever-tightening circle. As they circled, the beasts eyed each other. Sohyon had seen them do this before when stalking large prey. They were testing each other to see who was the strongest. Once this had been decided, the most powerful Toda would attack first.

"Mo-mother," Elin spluttered. "The . . . rope . . ."

Sohyon twisted her body and shoved her hands toward Elin. Still gasping, Elin took a deep breath, puffed out her cheeks, and dived under the water. The ropes were thick and saturated but Sohyon pulled them taut, making them easier to cut. The dagger was sharp enough that after repeated attempts, Elin was able to make a large rent in the ropes. Feeling them begin to fray, Sohyon gritted her teeth and pulled her hands apart with all her

strength, tearing the bonds. Then she grabbed Elin and dragged her up, raising her head from the water. Elin coughed and gasped for air.

Sohyon hugged her in a fierce embrace and pressed her face against her daughter's cheek. "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Mother, the ropes, on your feet . . ."

"It's all right. I can do it myself. Give me the dagger." But as Elin passed her the knife, Sohyon felt a subtle change in the Toda's movements. The test of strength was over. There would be no time to cut the ropes. In moments, the first Toda would begin the attack. She knew that with the deep wound in her belly she had never had any chance of escape. But for Elin, there was a way . . . There was a way, but she had been taught that she must never, ever use it, not even to save the life of her daughter. This Oath had been ingrained within her marrow from the time she was born. If she broke it now, in front of all these people, she could precipitate a disaster for which she could never atone, not even by laying down her life.

Sohyon looked at the little child before her, her face wet with tears and marsh water. The turmoil gripping her heart burst and vanished. Hugging her daughter close, she whispered, "Elin, you must never do what I am going to do now. To do so is to commit a mortal sin."

Elin stared back at her, uncomprehending. Sohyon smiled and held her head with one hand. "I want you to survive. And to find happiness." She threw the dagger aside, put her fingers to her mouth and blew. A high, modulated whistle split the air. The Toda stopped immediately and the churning water grew still. But they were not frozen. Rather, they waited quietly, heads poised as they stared at Sohyon.

The inspector narrowed his eyes. "What's going on? What's that woman up to?" he demanded.

Elin's grandfather shook his head. "I don't know. She appears to be whistling . . ."

"But the Toda have stopped moving. How can a finger whistle have that much power?"

Elin's grandfather paled. "But that's impossible," he said. "Not even the Silent Whistle can immobilize wild Toda."

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Sohyon's whistle traversed the scale from high to low, ending with a strange and powerful modulation. The Toda had been listening intently, like hounds to a hunting whistle, but at this they instantly swept en masse toward her. Elin screamed. Enormous Toda heads converged on her in a spray of water. The seaweed-like mane of one touched her cheek, and she was overwhelmed by the fishy smell of their breath and the cloying musk of their membranes.

Suddenly, she felt herself thrust into the air. Her mother was hoisting her up beneath her armpits. "Elin, grab onto the horns. Climb onto the Toda's back!" Elin stretched out her arms and, grasping its horns, dragged herself up onto its back, which was sticky with mucous. "Grip hard with both legs," her mother yelled. "And don't let go of the horns!" Then she put her fingers to her mouth and whistled again. Instantly, the Toda began to swim, moving with incredible speed. Clinging to the horns and pressing her knees tight against its hide, Elin turned to look back.

"Mother!"

"Go!" her mother shouted. "Don't look back! Go!" Then the Toda surged toward her, and she vanished in their midst.

"Mother! Mother!" The spray snatched Elin's cries away. She tried to slide off the Toda's back, but the mucous clung to her clothes like glue and she could not move. The Toda snaked through the marsh water in a cloud of spray. West it traveled, always west, at great speed.

Behind her, everything Elin knew—her mother, her home—vanished, while before her stretched an endless expanse of slate-gray water.

## 4

### THE SPIRIT BEAST

The stars were beginning to twinkle in the evening sky, framed by the silhouettes of slender branches. A young woman walked quickly along the forest path, her arms filled with brushwood for the cooking fire. Garbed in

a cloak of greenish gray that hooded her face, she was almost invisible, blending into the forest shadows like a wild creature.

Suddenly, she heard a tinkling sound and halted abruptly. Tiny green lights, like flickering fireflies, gathered in the air above her and took shape.

A Spirit Bird!

The apparition of light drifted down between the trees and came to rest on a dark shoulder. What had until that moment appeared to be nothing more than the shadow of a tree was now faintly revealed as human in form. The luminescent Spirit Bird burst into myriad green lights that flitted like shining leafhoppers about the figure, then reassembled once again, alighting between two branch-like horns on its head, and finally dissolved inside it. As it did so, the figure began to glow firefly-green. Although it resembled a human, its legs were most definitely nonhuman. Opening its golden eyes, the beast stared unblinkingly at the girl.

Shaking, she lowered her bundle of kindling and knelt on the ground. She closed her eyes, calmed her ragged breathing, and listened.

The beast opened its mouth and the air vibrated with high tinkling sounds, like little bells jingling. The vibrations merged into a single resonance, similar to the sound of human speech. Holding her breath, the girl strained to hear. Finally, the humming sound ceased, and countless lights scattered from the beast's head. In the blink of an eye, it had melted back into the darkness. Sweat beaded the girl's brow. Forgetting her bundle of brushwood, she sped through the trees, repeating the words she had just heard, over and over.

Deep in the forest, where not even hunters came, a cave had been carved midway down a cliff overhanging a gorge. The entrance was small and so well hidden by a profusion of vines and shrubs that it was invisible even from close at hand. Inside, however, lay a surprisingly large cavern. Except that it was completely dry, it resembled a Toda Chamber. There were seventeen openings in the walls, each covered with a thick curtain. Behind each of these was another cave as spacious as a house, their floors covered by thick carpets so finely woven that they even repelled water. Lit by candles, the caves formed comfortable living spaces.

The girl, gasping for breath, burst through the entrance and stood in the center of the hall. She placed her fingers to her mouth and blew, making a sound like a bird warbling. As it echoed through the stone caves, seventeen curtains were flung aside, and people of all ages spilled out into the cavern. All were slender and green-eyed.

The chief elder, a white-haired woman, stepped forward, accompanied by a man. "What happened?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"I—I met a Spirit Beast . . . I think . . . It took the form of a horned beast and spoke."

At this, the crowd gasped. "It can't be," someone exclaimed. "Could there really be Spirit Beasts left in this forest? I thought they had all died out . . ."

Silencing the speaker with a glance, the chief elder urged the girl to continue. "What did it tell you?"

Her face pale and tense, the girl clenched her fists as if to keep herself from trembling. "I have no experience. Perhaps I didn't understand properly . . . but I will tell you what I heard. It said, 'The Handler's Art has been used. Someone has whistled to the Toda.'"

The chief elder's face froze. She turned to the man beside her, and he beckoned the other elders to come forward.

"Was that all it said?"

"Yes, that was all."

The chief elder nodded. "You listened well . . . You may leave now." Then she turned to face the crowd. "The elders will consult. When we have finished, we will let you know what we have discussed. Please return to your homes until then." Bowing, the people left the hall.

The elders sat in a circle on the carpet. "It was the Toda Whistle that was used. That means it could only have been Sohyon," the chief elder said. At these words, a woman of about sixty tensed and bowed her forehead to the floor.

"I beg your forgiveness for raising such a daughter. This is all my fault." She remained motionless under their gaze, her head bowed to the ground.

Finally, the chief elder said gently, "She was a clever girl, with a kind

heart . . . And a strong will, too. I would never have thought she would use the Art."

Another elder spoke up. "We should send a scout to find out what happened. We must know the circumstances in which the Toda Whistle was used." The others nodded.

"And we must hurry," another said, his expression dark. "If it was used in front of others, if anyone saw that we can control the Toda, the news will surely reach the Aluhan's ears. And if that should happen, he will seek us out and try to force us to share our secret." Once again, everyone nodded.

"We must tell our people, all of them, and warn them to hide," the chief elder said. "Until we find out what happened, we must exercise extreme caution. No one is to visit the villages below."

The young scout sent to investigate Sohyon's village returned four days after the appearance of the Spirit Beast. After hearing his report, the elders sat frowning in silence for some time. Finally, the chief elder spoke. "So, Sohyon has already been executed."

His head bowed, the scout forced the words out between clenched teeth. "Yes . . . It was . . . horrible. The way she died . . . The inspector feared he would be punished for his carelessness. He accused Sohyon of killing the Toda in an act of deliberate treachery and ordered her execution. But . . ." He raised his head. "Ironically, Sohyon was directly involved in their deaths. I managed to view the carcasses, and a change in the mucous membrane was clearly evident. They had reached the breeding season."

The elders frowned. They all knew what that meant. Nodding sadly, one of them said, "Sohyon would surely have noticed that change. She gave them the tokujisui fully aware of what was happening, knowing that, because of the alteration in the membrane, the tokujisui would be lethal."

"So, in her own way, Sohyon kept the Oath," the chief elder whispered. She looked over at Sohyon's mother, who was weeping silently. "Your daughter did not renounce her allegiance to the Clan. She chose to let the Toda die rather than reveal the meaning of the change that had come over them, even though she knew she might be killed."

Sohyon's mother said nothing, swallowing her sobs.

"But she could not bear to see her child torn to pieces by the Toda," the chief elder continued. "At the very end, she gave in to her emotions . . ."

The elders, their expressions grim, remained silent for some time. Finally the chief elder broke the silence. "What happened to Sohyon's daughter?"

The young scout shook his head. "Nahson is following her trail now, but the channels there crisscross in many places. It will be difficult to find which route the Toda she was riding took. And she's only ten years old. She could not have held on to the Toda forever . . ." He closed his eyes and bowed his head, as did the elders. From somewhere far in the distance, they heard the long, lonely cry of a night bird. When the echo had faded into the stillness of night, the youth spoke again. "I grieve for Sohyon and her daughter. But there is some solace in the knowledge that the inspector is a coward."

With their eyes, the elders urged him to continue. In a firm voice, he said, "He must have been terrified of being held responsible, of having any blemish on his record of service. He commanded the Toda Stewards to remain silent about the fact that Sohyon was an Ahlyo. I overheard the villagers discussing this among themselves."

At this, the faces of the elders relaxed considerably. "Really? That's very good news indeed," the chief elder murmured. "Then no rumors will spread about Sohyon using the Handler's Art."

The youth nodded. "Yes, I believe we don't have to worry about that."

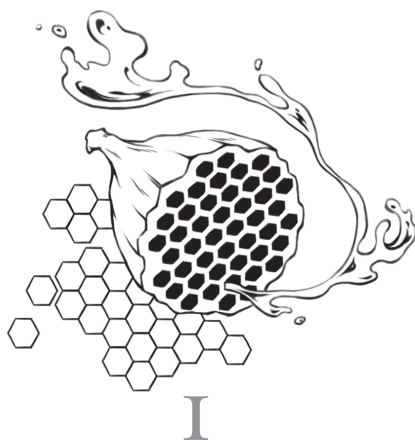
"Thank you for your work," the chief elder said. "Keep scouting carefully. Regardless of why she did it, Sohyon used the Toda whistle, and that could still potentially bring disaster. We must never allow the Art to cause another catastrophe. The souls of our ancestors formed the Spirit Beast to warn us so that the rent we made in the Oath should not unravel the threads that hold its fabric together." Then she added in a soft voice, "Even if no word of this reaches the ears of the Aluhan, the sight of us could spark rumors, and we must avoid that at all costs. Let us leave this land for a while and conceal ourselves in the mountains . . . until the flame of rumor has died out."

The elders nodded in assent.



ONE

## THE BEEKEEPER



I

### WASHED ASHORE

A huge saloh tree stood on the lakeshore, its blossom-laden branches stretching over the water. The soft white petals shimmered like cotton down in the morning light and honeybees flitted back and forth among them. Gazing up, Joeun smiled and rubbed his graying beard. It's going to be a good year. Those bees will make plenty of good-quality honey.

A breeze crossed the lake, rippling the surface and carrying the scent of blossoms. Joeun began walking along the shore to check the other trees but then stopped abruptly, his eyes caught by an odd sight. Little yellow-beaked birds were flocking on the bank, chirping excitedly and pecking at something on the ground. It looked like a mound of mud.

What's that?

He froze as he realized what it must be. A body . . . The unlucky soul must have drowned and been washed ashore. It was small, probably a child. What a lousy way to start the morning. What am I going to do now?

He was too far from any village to get help with a burial. But he could

not bear to leave it lying there, especially if it was a child. Making up his mind, he strode toward it. As he drew near, he noticed a peculiar musk-like odor, strong and sweet. He stopped and glanced apprehensively at the lake. Could there be Toda nearby? But the surface was calm, and there was no sign that anything was about to lunge at him from the water. The odor appeared to be coming from the body. Kneeling down, he examined it closely. The limp form, coated from neck to toe in glue-like mud, looked like a clay doll. The pale face, however, was relatively clean. Joeun grimaced at the sight . . . The poor girl. She's such a little thing . . .

Her face was turned toward him, eyes closed, lips slightly parted. Suddenly, a blade of grass near her mouth fluttered. He bent close and felt her breath brush his cheek. "She's alive!" he exclaimed. He slapped her face and shook her by the shoulder. "Hey! Hey! Wake up! Can you hear me? Wake up!" She groaned weakly and opened her eyes a crack, only to shut them again instantly. "This is serious," Joeun muttered. He slipped an arm beneath her and gently lifted her off the ground. Although completely limp, she was very light.

Elin came to her senses at the sensation of warm water enveloping her body. Her hands and feet stung, as if her skin had been scraped or cut. Someone held her head and washed her hair. Wet cloth clung to her limbs. Had she been put in the bath with her clothes on? Something hard jabbed her in the back. It was a very strange bath.

She opened her eyes and saw a stranger's face looming over her. "Ah, you've come to, have you?" he said. She blinked and tried to feel what was digging into her. It seemed to be a board.

The man laughed. "Sorry if it hurts. Just hang on a little longer. I don't have a bathtub big enough for you so I filled my little punt with hot water. I can't tell if you're injured or not with all this mud on you."

Her body felt like lead, and she could not speak. She closed her eyes and fell back into a deep sleep.

The next time she opened her eyes it was evening. She was lying alone in a silent room. She gazed blankly up at the ceiling. It was a very odd ceiling. It looked like a piece of cloth made from woven twigs. The westering

sun cast an orange glow on the wall, and dust motes danced slowly in the light. Her body was burning. She closed her eyes and was sucked back down into oblivion.

Terrifying dreams, snatches of nightmares, followed her. Spray wet her face. The Toda's sinuous, undulating body moved beneath her. She burned with pain, and her body felt so heavy. Again and again, she heard her mother's voice, her last words. Again and again, she saw her swallowed by the swarm of Toda. Each time she relived that scene, a sharp pain raced from her gut to her chest, as if she were being slashed in two. She could not even weep. Something gnawed away at her insides, causing her such agony that she could barely breathe.

She felt something cold against her forehead. A large hand weighed on the quilt, and another slowly and gently rubbed her back. "It's all right. It's just a dream. You're dreaming. There's nothing to fear." As she listened to that deep, calm voice, the nightmares slowly loosened their grip.

Joeun watched the girl's face as he wiped away the beads of sweat with a damp cloth. Her cheeks were as red as apples, and she was breathing shallowly. She had been crying out, disturbed by dreams, but now she was quiet. A day and a night had already passed, but she had regained consciousness for only a few moments at a time before slipping away again. He had tried to administer a medicinal brew of laoo to bring down her temperature, which was far too high, but she had not been able to swallow it. Perhaps it was too bitter. The only thing he had succeeded in making her drink was the juice of a citrus fruit named kalimu, thinned with cold water and mixed with honey and some very precious tabu chimu, queen bee milk. Considering how much she was sweating, he had better keep administering the juice.

The child could only be about ten, and she was so slight that he feared she might not survive such a high fever. Tabu chimu, however, was potent enough to transform an ordinary larva into a queen bee. He could only pray that it, along with the honey, would be enough to sustain this child's life. It was the sound of her weeping that he found the hardest to bear. She must have been through something horrific. Her cries were those of a child

longing for its mother. They were wrung from her body in wracking sobs that made his throat catch.

What on earth happened to her?

Her clothes were different, resembling those worn by the Wajak, the “mixed blood” people of Aluhan territory far to the east. But it was three days’ journey on horseback to the nearest Aluhan border. How could a little girl like this have traveled so far alone? Where were her parents? And why had she been covered in mud and Toda slime? Her arms, her palms, her legs from the knees down—every inch of skin that had not been protected by clothing had been lacerated.

There was another thing that puzzled him: the color of her eyes. She had only opened them briefly, but he had been startled to see that they were green . . . Could she have Ahlyo blood in her veins? What a troublesome find. This might turn out to be more than he could handle. He sighed. “But now that I’ve taken her in,” he murmured to himself, “I hope she makes it through.”

His greatest fear was tetanus. Wherever the mud had been ground into the gashes, her skin had begun to fester. If her wounds were just infected, he could treat them. But if she had tetanus, there was nothing he could do. Worrying, however, would get him nowhere. It was better to treat the swollen cuts than not. He rested his chin in his hand and thought.

Should I try it or not? It’s an effective cure for inflammations, but it’s also a strong toxin. Even some adults react to it so strongly that they stop breathing. Is it safe to use on a child?

The girl opened her eyes. Her lips moved. She must be thirsty. Joeun slipped a hand under her head and raised her gently. With his other hand, he grasped a bowl and brought it to her lips, pouring a little of the juice into her mouth. She drank it with small gulping noises.

“Is it good?” he asked. She seemed to be lucid. Maybe now she would be able to answer. “Have you ever been stung by a bee?” he asked. She looked up at him with fever-blurred eyes, but then shook her head ever so slightly. “So you’ve never been stung by a bee. You’re sure of that?” She nodded and then closed her eyes. Laying her down again, Joeun made up his mind.

He stood up and walked over to a shelf, from which he took a bamboo tube and a beeswax candle. He lit the candle and walked outside into the chill night air. Bundles of dried hasaku, an oil-rich plant, hung under the eaves. He grabbed a bundle and lit it. Thick smoke curled up from the stalks. Going round the house, he walked over to a grove of trees where a row of beehives stood. He went up to one, knocked on the lid, and opened it. Slowly, he waved the smoldering torch near the opening, wafting smoke over the exposed surface. Once he was sure that the bees swarming around the edges of the nest had grown quiet, he picked up first one and then another and slid them into the bamboo tube.

“Sorry to bother you,” he murmured and, closing the lid, returned to the house with the tube. Inside, he held each bee up to the light and removed its stinger with a pair of bamboo tweezers. He laid the stingers out on a cloth and returned the bees to the tube. Then he clasped his hands in prayer for a moment. Without their stingers, these bees would die. They were only tiny little insects, yet to Joeun each one was a precious treasure. He was sorry, but he could only ask for their forgiveness.

“And now . . .” he whispered. He pulled back the covers and examined the girl’s arms and legs. The worst wounds were on the inside of each knee. He frowned. The saddle on a horse could rub a rider’s legs raw in this very spot, but the wounds on her legs looked more like they had been sliced by something sharp. Joeun gingerly stuck the stinger into the swollen skin next to the open sore and pulled it out again immediately. She jerked slightly and frowned, but then closed her eyes again. He repeated this process for her other wounds, taking care not to insert the needle very far, so as to limit the amount of toxin he injected.

“Well, that’s done . . . I just hope it works.” He wiped the sweat from his brow and, placing a bowl of falan, an antidote for bee poisoning, close at hand, prepared to stay up all night to watch over her. If her fever dropped by morning, she was sure to recover.

Elin woke to the sound of birds warbling. A breeze wafted in from somewhere, bringing with it the scent of morning dew on grass. Her nightmares

had vanished without a trace, and she could see the world around her clearly now.

She turned over slowly and saw a large man sitting cross-legged on the floor beside her bed. He was sound asleep, with his arms folded and his head hanging. The weight of his head pulled his body forward, but when it reached a certain point, he jerked himself upright, eyes still closed. Then, once more, he began to tilt.

Elin watched him lazily. He must be very tired. He drooped further and further forward, then suddenly pitched onto the ground, smacking his head loudly on the floor. He groaned and opened his eyes, then stared around him with a startled look as if wondering what had happened. Elin covered her mouth with her hand. She shouldn't laugh, but she couldn't help it.

The man rose and blinked. "So you can laugh, can you?" he said, then burst out laughing himself. He was a complete stranger, as huge as a bear, with a bushy beard, yet, perhaps because of that laugh, Elin did not feel afraid. He stopped and looked at her again. "Seems like your fever's gone. You look refreshed . . . Do you feel all right?"

Elin nodded.

"Good, then. Let me see those cuts on your knees." He pulled back the covers, and she realized that she was wearing a very large shirt tied at the waist. Although the sleeves had been folded over multiple times, her hands were barely visible. She must be wearing the man's pajama top, but for her it served perfectly as a nightgown.

He examined her knees and looked relieved. "The swelling has gone down a lot since yesterday. You'll be better in no time." He pulled up the covers. "You've got strong luck, you know. You went to the brink of the nether-world but came back again."

At his words, memory flooded her mind. The sight of her mother overrun by a swarm of Toda filled her eyes, and a searing lump of pain rose from her stomach into her throat. She burst into tears. Mother . . . How she longed to see her. Mother, Mother, Mother . . . Curling up into a ball, she began to weep as if the sobs were being wrenched from her chest. The man reached

out and patted her through the covers. She recognized his touch. It was the same hand that had comforted her while she lay dreaming.

"It's all right. Cry as much as you need to," he said. "Tears are the soup of sorrow. The more tears you shed, the more they will wash away your grief. Eventually you'll be able to forget what caused you so much pain."

His words rippled through her mind. Could that be true? If she cried and cried until she had no more tears left, would her sorrow lessen . . . would she gradually forget her mother? She closed her eyes. She did not want to forget her mother. Definitely not.

But the tears kept flowing and would not stop. Hiccupping, she took a deep breath and clenched her teeth, trying to hold back her sobs. Her breath came out in a groan, and she coughed violently.

The man tapped the quilt sharply. "Hey now, don't try to stop. It's better to cry."

Elin shook her head and buried her face in the pillow, squeezing it tightly as she tried to stem the flood of tears.

"What's wrong?" He rested his hand on her back, his voice full of concern.

In a muffled voice, she forced out the words. "I . . . don't . . . want . . . to cry."

"Why?"

But she did not answer, nor did she raise her face from the pillow. Frowning, he stared at her for a few moments, but then rose with a grunt, as if he had decided that it was better to let her be. She listened to him puttering in the dirt-floored kitchen, and her sobs gradually subsided. Lifting her head, she tried to sit up but was overcome by a wave of dizziness and hastily lay back down. She thought that the dizziness would never pass, but gradually it eased. She still felt shaky, however, like an empty shell. Her head ached, and her fingers trembled. Wiping her tearstained face with her hands, she turned her head on the pillow to look toward the kitchen. The man was squatting in front of a clay oven and holding a pair of tongs over the coals. He seemed to be toasting something. White morning light poured through

the open doorway, and a pleasant aroma wafted her way, making her stomach growl. Hunger suddenly gripped her, and her mouth watered.

How long had it been since she had last eaten? . . . She realized with surprise that she had had nothing to eat since supper at Saju's house many days ago. No wonder she was so ravenous.

After working in the kitchen for some time, the man finally brought a steaming bowl to the sleeping room. "Here. Breakfast." He put a hand under her head and slowly raised her up. "Do you think you can sit?" Elin nodded. There was no dizziness now, perhaps because he had moved her so gently. "Good. In that case it's probably better if you feed yourself. Here."

Elin blinked at the contents of the warm, wooden bowl he handed her. Instead of a steaming bowl of rice such as she was used to, she saw what looked like toasted rice cakes covered in milk and thick golden honey. She bit cautiously into one of the toasted cakes, and a deliciously sweet and savory flavor filled her mouth.

"Do you like it?" the man asked. She nodded, her eyes round, and he grinned. "You can't beat my honey! It's the best in the land! My precious little bees worked hard to make it."

As honey was expensive, Elin had never been allowed so much before. It was far richer and more fragrant than any she had ever tasted. She ate greedily and as the food filled her stomach, warmth spread through her. Now that the sharp edge had been taken off her hunger, she was curious. "What's this?" she asked, holding up one of the dried cakes.

At first, the man looked puzzled, but then he said, "That's fahko, unleavened bread made with mixed grains. That's what we always eat. We grind the grain, mix it with water, and bake it. It's good, right? What do you usually eat for breakfast?"

"Rice and soup," Elin said in a small voice.

"Really? You are a Wajak then. The Aluhan's land is far larger than the Yojeh's, where we live. You've got enough land and water to grow plenty of rice."

Elin looked startled. "You mean this isn't Aluhan territory?"

"This is Sanolu County on the eastern edge of the territory ruled by the



Yojeh. It's pretty mountainous, so cereal grains like wheat and barley grow better than rice. That's why we eat fahko." He smiled at her. "You didn't even know where you were, then? Where are your parents?"

Her face clouded. Feeling the tears rising in her throat again, she bit her lip, held her breath, and shook her head. If she opened her mouth to speak, she was afraid only sobs would escape her lips.

"You mean you have no parents, no family at all?" he asked gently. Elin only nodded, keeping her head down. The man frowned. "What happened? How did you wind up lying on the lakeshore covered in mud?"

She did not look up, nor did she answer. For some reason, she was afraid to voice what had happened—her mother's execution, the endless ride on the Toda's back as it plowed through the water, the fact that she had finally fallen off into the lake.

Watching the girl sit in silence with her head bowed, the man sighed. "Never mind then. If you don't want to talk about it, I won't force you. But at least tell me your name. Mine's Joeun. What shall I call you?"

Elin flushed. She hastily returned a piece of fahko to her bowl and knelt formally in front of him. The scrapes on her knees hurt, but she ignored them. How could she have been so rude as to sit gobbling his food without a word of thanks and without even introducing herself? Even though he had saved her life, brought her here, and nursed her. Her face burned with shame. She placed both palms against her chest and lowered her forehead to the floor in the posture of highest deference.

"My name is Elin. Thank you so much for saving me."

Joeun smiled. "Elin, the wild apple that grows in the mountains. What a nice name." As he watched the little girl before him, so prim and proper, questions clamored in his mind. She was obviously not the daughter of some drifter or traveling performer. She must belong to the artisan class, or perhaps an even higher rank. Although the clothes she wore were not the most expensive and were somewhat the worse for wear, they were cut of good cloth. It was true that the Aluhan's territory was richer than that of the Yojeh, but still, only those of middle rank or higher could eat rice for breakfast every day. And her bearing, her manners, her language—they all indicated

that she had been strictly brought up. All artisans, whether Wajak ruled by the Aluhan or Holon ruled by the Yojeh, took great pride in their skill, and although their lifestyle was simple, they had a steady income. If she had been raised among such people, then why had she ended up here?

Even more troubling were her eyes. In the morning light, he could see them clearly. Although almond-shaped like a Wajak's, they were green. Artisans hated drifters. Would one really marry an Ahlyo? No. In the first place, the Ahlyo would never allow it. Marital unions outside their people were forbidden. So what on earth was she? The more he thought about it, the more puzzled he became. I guess I'll just have to wait. It'll become clear in time.

"Lift your head," he said to the girl. "I'm sorry I interrupted your breakfast with questions. You're just recovering from a fever, so you'd better eat up."

Elin raised her face, bowed once again, and then reached for some fahko. The weakness she had felt earlier seemed to have vanished. Joeun picked up his bowl and began wolfing down his breakfast. It was very quiet. She could hear no sounds of people working outside. There was only the sound of two mouths chewing and the warbling of the birds.

When they had both finished eating, Joeun swiftly cleared away the dishes and spread out a thin blanket on the sleeping platform next to Elin. "I was up most of the night, so I'm going to sleep now. You should rest today, too. If you need to use the outhouse, it's to the right when you go out the door." So saying, he rolled himself up in the blanket. In no time at all, Elin heard the sound of muffled snoring.

Lying on her side, she gazed around the house. From somewhere out back, she could hear the lazy bleating of a goat and the squawking of hens. There was no tolling of a bell to summon the Stewards to a gathering, no sound of Saju's younger sister crying, no dogs barking. The sounds and smells of this morning were not at all like home.

Mother . . . she whispered in her mind. What should I do now? But her mother was gone. There was no one to guide her. Even if she went home, her mother would not be there . . .

Fear washed through her at that thought, making it hard to breathe.

Should she ask this man to lend her money and find her way home? Saju's mother was there in the village. Maybe she could live on her own if Saju's mother helped her.

She frowned. She tried to imagine what life would be like, and something sour and bitter rose like bile into her throat. She saw her grandfather's face, the expressions of the Stewards, as they watched her blood-soaked mother being tossed into the swamp. Even though she was one of them, they didn't try to help her. Just the thought of meeting her grandfather made her want to vomit. She could not stand to see his hard, unfriendly face or to listen to his unkind words. Those who had stood by and let her mother die lived in that village . . . not her mother.

Elin threw an arm over her face.

## 2

### THE FLIGHT OF THE QUEEN

"You're looking much better today," Joeun said as he came in from his morning chores. "Yesterday your face looked like a shriveled apple plucked from the pond, but today you've got a rosy glow in your cheeks." He smiled. "Just goes to show, kids get sick quick, but get well even quicker . . . Would you like to try going outside today?"

Elin nodded. She was tired of staying in bed.

"Your clothes are dry. Go ahead and put them on. If you go out in my pajama top, Totchi and Noro will laugh at you."

Elin looked at him in surprise. She had not been aware that anyone else lived in this tiny house. "Totchi and Noro?"

"My horse and goat." He held out her clothes, which had been hanging on the wall. Elin blushed. Those weren't her clothes—they were her pajamas! She had been running about in pajamas ever since she had overheard Saju's parents talking. She was mortified by the thought.

“What’s the matter?” Joeun asked. He did not seem to realize they were pajamas. Without looking up, she took them wordlessly. She slipped on the trousers and belted her top over them. The faint scent of Toda made her heart lurch, but she pressed her lips firmly together.

“Here, take this,” Joeun said, passing her a hat of woven straw. A thin, net-like cloth was sewn to the brim, and Elin examined it curiously. Joeun picked a pair of gloves off the floor and handed them to her. “Put on the hat and gloves when we go out back. They’ll be too big for you, but better too big than too small.”

“What is this?”

“It’s a shield to protect you from my little treasures. I won’t spoil the surprise by telling you anything more.” He winked and went briskly out the door. Elin followed obediently, hat and gloves in hand. Once outside, she gasped. Mountains so tall they seemed to pierce the sky towered in the distance. Just looking at them made her dizzy. They looked too enormous to be real, a stark contrast to the gentle green hills rolling before her. Against the blue sky, their white-crowned peaks stood out sharply, caressed by wisps of cloud that looked like snow spray.

“Is this your first time to see the Afon Noah, the Mountains of the Gods?” Elin nodded. “That’s the wall that separates the world of the gods from the world of men. It’s said that the ancestors of the Yojeh once lived on the other side.”

Elin stared wordlessly. So that’s the Afon Noah. She could hardly believe it. Here, right before her eyes, was the range built to shut humans away from the world of the fearsome gods that peopled the myths called the Afon Kahlo, tales which her mother had told her so often. So it really existed.

“Your eyes are going to pop out of your head if you keep staring like that.” Joeun laughed. He rested his hand on her shoulder. “They’ve been there since the beginning of the world. They’re not going to disappear just because you take your eyes off them for a moment. You’ll have plenty of chances to look at them all you want. But first, come and see my treasures.”

She followed him behind the house and through a copse until they emerged into a large, sunlit clearing. Beneath the broadleaf trees stood

several boxes resting on brick platforms. Their tops were covered with straw. Bees buzzed around the boxes in the rear, but Elin could not see any around one box that stood in the sunlight. Joeun frowned and stopped. He laid a restraining hand on her arm and said, "Wait here."

The words had no sooner left his mouth than a black, smoke-like cloud rose from the strangely silent box. But it was not smoke. It was bees: tens of thousands of them—an astounding sight. They rose into the air, circling slowly, their wings thrumming.

"Oh no. This is bad . . ." Joeun muttered. "They're swarming! Did I miss a queen cup?"

The cluster circled toward them with a deafening drone. Terrified, Elin was about to fling her arms over her head and crouch down on the ground when Joeun grabbed her elbow. "Don't make any sudden movement. Put your hat on very slowly."

Teeth chattering and hands shaking, Elin raised her hat to her head. Her stomach cramped, and she broke into a cold sweat, certain that the bees would attack her at any moment.

"Don't worry," Joeun whispered. "As long as you stay still, they won't hurt you." Humming loudly, the thick blob hovered over their heads where they stood motionless and then moved on, the air vibrating with the sound of millions of tiny beating wings. Elin's skin crawled. Finally, the lead bees came to rest on a thick tree branch, and the others followed suit. Soon a huge, squirming lump of black and yellow enveloped the branch.

Joeun let out his breath slowly. "It's all right now. You can move, but slowly, okay?" Elin, too, had been holding her breath, and now she let it go. "Once they've landed on a branch like that they'll stay there for at least half a day. As long as there's no aggressive movement nearby."

While she listened to Joeun explain, Elin stared in fascination at the squirming lump. Now that she was no longer afraid of being stung, the huge swarm's strange behavior excited her curiosity.

"Why did they stop on that branch?" she whispered. "Does it have nectar?"

Joeun responded with a smile in his voice, "No. They didn't gather there

to collect nectar. They've discarded their old hive and are traveling with the queen to find a new home."

Elin looked up at him in surprise. "There's a queen in there?"

"You saw the big bee that flew at the back of the swarm, didn't you? That's the queen bee. When the hive becomes overcrowded, she leaves a young queen bee larva in the original hive and takes about half the worker bees with her to find a place to build a new hive."

There was something not just frightening but incredibly powerful about the swarm's perfectly ordered flight. "So will they go on a long journey?" Elin asked.

Joeun laughed quietly. "I certainly hope not, because if they do, I'm going to starve. I clipped the wings of the queen bee to prevent them from getting away. It's not really fair I suppose, but it will keep her from flying very far. Come give me a hand, will you? I have to get a new beehive ready."

Elin followed him back to the west side of the house and noticed a stable and a goat pen. The animals watched with interest as they approached. That must be Totchi and Noro, she thought, although she wasn't sure which was which. Joeun continued around the house to a shed on the north. The uneven coats of thick white plaster on the walls announced the workman to be an amateur. The building was full of tools and equipment, and the shelves on the north wall were lined with clay jars. It was dimly lit by a single window with a raised shutter, and the air inside was cool.

Joeun picked up an empty box and frowned. "Oh, that's right. This is the only usable hive left right now." He gestured with his chin to the back of the shed. "I'm going to carry this box outside. Could you bring that black jar for me?" Elin turned in the direction he indicated and saw that there was, indeed, a small black jar on the shelf. Instead of a lid, it appeared to have handles.

"Is that . . . a sprayer?"

Joeun looked at her in surprise. "Yes, but how did you figure that out?"

Her mother had used one much like this to spray ointment onto the Toda when their hides had been scratched. In her mind, Elin saw her mother's white hand gripping the sprayer. She followed Joeun outside without

answering, carrying the sprayer in both hands. They walked as far as the meadow. There, Joeun rested the hive on the ground and took off the lid. He pulled out many boards, each covered in the same strange pattern. Noticing that Elin was staring at them, Joeun explained, "These are comb frames, where the bees live. Give me that sprayer, please."

She handed him the contraption and he began spraying something onto the frames and into the box. A sweet, slightly fermented fragrance wafted toward her. She had expected it to smell like medicine, and she looked at Joeun in surprise. "It smells good!"

He smiled. "It does, doesn't it? I just hope the bees think so, too."

"Oh! I see! You're scenting this hive so that the bees will want to live in it. Because bees are attracted by the smell of flowers."

He looked at her curiously. "How old are you?"

"What? . . . Oh. Ten."

"You certainly don't talk like a ten-year-old."

She blinked at him. Then she blushed, recalling that Saju had once told her, "You talk like a grown-up."

Seeing her flush, Joeun said, "I wasn't criticizing you for being cheeky or anything, so you don't need to feel bad. To tell the truth, I'm quite impressed." He smiled again and shook the sprayer. "But unfortunately, you guessed wrong. This isn't what will encourage them to live here. It's the sugar water that I'll spray in here after that will draw them in. I applied this particular concoction for a different reason. Can you guess what it is?" Then he laughed. "I'm betting you can't."

Elin stood beside him, holding each frame as he sprayed it, but all the while she was wondering why he needed to spray everything with such a strong scent. Did he want to make them drunk? As she pondered this question, a certain scene leapt into her mind. When an old Toda had died and a young Toda was being moved into the same Pond, her mother and the Stewards had smeared the gluey membrane of the dead Toda onto the young one.

"Uncle Joeun . . ." she murmured.

"Yes?"

“Did another swarm of bees live in this box before?”

Joeun’s hands stilled, and he looked at her. “Why do you ask?”

She said uncertainly, “I thought that perhaps you were trying to erase the scent of other bees with this spray . . .”

He groaned. “I don’t believe it! You guessed it. That’s exactly what it’s for, to erase another smell.”

Elin’s face lit up in a smile. Raising his eyebrows, Joeun grinned back. “Ah. You smiled,” he said as he began spraying the frames again. “You look very happy when you smile, you know.”

“You’re right. Each hive of bees has its own distinctive scent. That’s how they can distinguish members from their own hive. But I’m not erasing the smell of bees. I’m erasing the smell of their bitter enemy. A very stinky toad called a gosu got into this box. By the time I noticed, the bees had already fled. I washed and dried the inside, but bees are very sensitive to smell.” He brought the tip of the sprayer close to her nose so that she could smell it. “This liquid was distilled from nafalan flowers, which honeybees love. Interestingly, it even calms bees down when they’re excited. So I thought I’d try and see if it’ll cover up the smell of the gosu . . . But still, I’m impressed that you guessed what it’s for. Were your family beekeepers?”

Elin shook her head and looked down at the ground. Silently, Joeun chided himself. Idiot. There you go again . . . Just when the sun starts to shine, you go and cast a cloud over it. For this child, any talk of her family was like touching a tender wound. He knew this, but his curiosity kept getting the better of him, making him say one thing too many. That’s a bad habit. I’m too impatient. She was extremely sharp. If he tried to pry, she would notice immediately. The best way to put her at ease was to let it be and forget trying to find out more.

“Right then. It’s time to put the frames back in. Give me a hand, will you?”

Elin nodded.



# 3

## ROYAL JELLY

How on earth is he going to get that swarm into this box? Elin wondered. While she watched with keen interest, Joeun put on the gloves and netted hat that she handed him and carried the box to the tree, placing it under the branch that was now black and swollen with the escaped bees. He had sprayed the inside of the box with sugar water and put some honey in it as well. He went back to the shed once more and this time returned with a large bag, a hatchet, and a step.

“If you want to watch, that’s fine, but don’t come any nearer than this,” he said. Then he walked over to the branch and placed the step beneath it. Stepping onto it, he raised the large bag slowly up toward the squirming mass of bees.

He’s going to put them in that bag! She cringed. Surely that would anger the bees. They might attack him.

Slowly the bag enveloped the black lump. The branch was fairly high, so even when standing on tiptoe, Joeun could not capture the entire mass. This did not seem to concern him, however, for when most of the bees were in the bag, he quickly pulled the mouth closed and raised his hatchet. Bringing it down where the bark was clear of bees, he chopped the branch off and let it slide into the bag. The remaining bees buzzed about excitedly, but Joeun paid no attention. Throwing the hatchet to the ground, he climbed off the step with the bag in his hand and pressed the mouth of it against a small slit near the bottom of the bee box.

From where she was standing, Elin could not see clearly, but it looked like the bees were crawling out of the bag and into the box. Even so, many still buzzed in the air. She shrank back, keeping her eyes on Joeun. For a long time, he stood watching the entrance to the box. Finally, he put the bag down on the ground and walked slowly over to her. “We’re done. Let’s have some lunch.”

“What?” she exclaimed in surprise. Could it really be all right to leave the beehive entrance open? “But won’t they escape?”

Joeun laughed. “No need to worry. Come back after lunch and you’ll see. They may be flying about outside right now, but by then they’ll be snug inside the hive.”

Elin looked at the box. Bees were crawling in and out of the hive, and many more were flying about in agitation. They had flown off in search of a new home. Wouldn’t they rather run away than be shut up in a box once again so close by? They might be enjoying the sugar water right now, but once it was gone, wouldn’t they leave?

Joeun put a hand on her shoulder. “If it bothers you that much, why don’t you stay and watch? I’ll go back to the house and call you when lunch is ready. But you’d better come when I call . . . And don’t go near that box.”

Elin nodded. Once he had left, everything seemed suddenly very quiet. There were only the sounds of the breeze rustling the branches and the bees humming. She watched them move. Then suddenly her eyes opened wide. The bees that had been flitting back and forth around the box began to drop toward it, one after the other, as if drawn by a magnet. When they reached the entrance, they folded their wings and streamed inside, as if to say, “We’re home.” Before she knew it, not a bee was left. She stared at the box, spellbound. This, she thought, was true magic. What on earth could they be doing in there? They had set off on a journey to a new land. Were they now consoling each other, saying, “I guess this place will have to do”? And how did that huge black swarm fit in there? She longed to peek inside . . .

Joeun had told her not to go near the hive. But as long as she didn’t touch it, if she just peeked inside that opening without startling the bees, perhaps she could see something. She glanced behind her and then moved stealthily toward the box. It was very quiet. She crouched down and peered inside the long, narrow slit that served as an entrance. It was so dark that she could not see anything. Or maybe she could. Something was moving. Was it bees? She could hear a whirring of wings. What were they doing?

She tilted her head and strained her eyes, trying to see inside, when suddenly someone grabbed her shoulder. Startled, she was about to scream when

a large hand covered her mouth, and she found herself tucked under an arm and carried away. Joeun did not set her down until he reached the house. "I told you not to go near that box!"

Elin bowed her head. "I'm sorry."

"Honeybees rarely sting people, but if they're excited or think you're an invader, they will defend their hive with their lives."

"I'm sorry."

She looked so contrite that Joeun relaxed. "Honestly," he said. "You scared the wits out of me!" Then he asked her gently, "Did it seem so strange that they should all go quietly into the box?"

Elin responded in a small voice, "Yes . . . They left a box just like it because they didn't like being trapped inside. So why did they go into another one as if they were going home?"

Joeun smiled. "That's because it is home. For worker bees, wherever the queen bee decides to live is home."

"Oh!" Elin looked up. "Did you say that we were done because you saw the queen bee go inside?"

"That's right. If the queen bee is content with the box, the other bees will follow. A bee's loyalty is even stronger than ours. They never rebel against their leader. Sometimes it's almost spooky to watch . . . It's as if they're being pulled into the hive by a string, every single one of them."

Elin remembered how they had all flown out together in a single swarm—and how they had all crawled back into the queen bee's box, as if under a spell. "I wonder if the queen bee uses some kind of magic," she said.

Joeun laughed. "She just might. After all, many mothers seem to have supernatural powers."

"Mothers? Is the queen bee a mother?"

"Yup. She's the mother of every single bee in that hive."

"Really?" Elin's eyes widened. "All of them? You mean that queen bee gave birth to all the bees in that box?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it? But it's true. There are tens of thousands of worker bees in there, but every one of them is her daughter. The worker bees

are all female, but they don't lay eggs. They just work the whole time, collecting nectar. Only the queen lays eggs and she does so by the tens of thousands."

Elin stared at him with her mouth open. She felt goosebumps rising on her skin. How incredible! A single queen bee could lay thousands of eggs. The daughters born from those eggs became worker bees and spent their whole lives working. How different the relationship between a mother bee and her children compared to Elin's relationship with her mother. As she imagined the queen bee laying eggs and her daughters emerging from them, she was suddenly puzzled.

"That's strange."

Joeun raised his eyebrows. "What is?"

She looked at him. "If the worker bees are her children, they should be like her, so why aren't they queen bees, too?"

"Hmm." He looked at her for a moment and then gently pushed her shoulder. "Let me show you something." He led her to the same shed where he had stored the box and sprayer. Inside, he lifted up a slatted wooden platform and leaned it against the wall. Beneath it was a trapdoor set into the floor, which he raised, revealing a hole. Lying on his belly, he reached in and pulled out a small black jar. After removing the tightly fitting lid, he beckoned to her.

"Come and look." Peering inside, Elin saw what looked like a thick, slightly yellowish paste. Joeun took a small spoon and scooped out a little. "Taste it."

Elin licked the spoon. At first, she thought it was sweet, but the sourness that followed stung her tongue and throat. "Yuck!" She stuck out her tongue and screwed up her face. An overpowering odor clung to her mouth and nose.

Joeun began to laugh. "Sorry. Was it that strong? Here. Chase it down with this." He took a jar of honey off the shelf and let her lick some off the spoon. It took away the sourness, but the smell, which slightly resembled goat's milk, lingered in her mouth. "This is tabu chimu, or royal jelly. Bee larvae fed on this turn into queen bees." He closed the lid tightly. "When

they think it's time for a new queen bee, the worker bees prepare special receptacles called queen cups. These are the cradles in which queen bee larvae are raised. The queen bee lays eggs in the cups and when they hatch, young worker bees come to give them royal jelly, which they secrete from their own bodies. That's how new queen bees are raised."

He replaced the black jar of royal jelly in the hole and lowered the trapdoor. Then he grinned. "Let me tell you a secret. I can make queen bees."

Elin frowned, wondering what on earth he could mean. His grin deepened.

"This is how it's done. I take some beeswax and press it into a mold that resembles a queen cup. Then I put a frame between the part of the hive where the honey is stored and the part where the queen bee is, so that the queen can't get into the upper part of the hive. The worker bees get quite upset by her absence. When I see that they are so anxious for a new queen bee that they can't stand it anymore . . ." He stood up, went over to the shelf and came back with a slender wooden implement with a tiny scoop on the end. "I use this to extract a worker bee larva and transfer it to the queen cup that I made. As soon as I do that, the workers become very busy. When the egg hatches, they start feeding it royal jelly. A bee larva raised on royal jelly will grow into a splendid queen bee."

Elin frowned. "Really? You mean that the egg of a worker bee is identical to the egg of a queen bee?"

"That's right. The only thing that makes a difference is whether or not the bee is raised on royal jelly. Tabu chimu has a strange, magical power to transform an ordinary worker bee into a queen."

The odor that lingered on her tongue suddenly seemed very strong. Frightened, Elin stuck out her tongue and felt it. "Will my tongue be all right?" she asked. "Nothing strange will happen to it, will it?"

Joeun burst out laughing. "No, no. Relax. Your tongue isn't going to turn into a queen bee. In fact, this is what saved your life. When you were in bed with that high fever, I gave you royal jelly mixed with honey and juice to drink." He waved the little spoon with which he had given her a taste. "You should be grateful. Tabu chimu is a powerful elixir that promotes

longevity, and it's really expensive. How much do you think that little spoonful you licked costs?"

Elin drew in her breath and stared at him. He whispered dramatically, "A whole gold piece."

"Really?" She stared at him in astonishment. "A—a gold piece?" That amount of money would buy three chunks of top-grade beef the size of an adult fist. The amount of royal jelly she ate had only been as large as the tip of her baby finger. How expensive! That meant that Joeun had spent a fortune to make her better. She paled and felt her stomach grow cold. She could not possibly repay him.

"Joeun . . ."

"What is it? Don't you feel well?"

She shook her head. Her face tense, she said almost in a whisper, "Joeun . . . I don't . . . have any money."

He looked at her in surprise. Then his face grew serious and he reached out his arms and grasped her by both shoulders. "I'm so sorry. That was stupid of me. I blabbered away without thinking." He looked her straight in the eyes and spoke slowly and deliberately. "I have no intention of taking any money from you. I would never do something so cruel. I may not be rich, but I'm not poor either. I don't have any family of my own to support. The amount of food you eat or the medicine you need is nothing. Don't worry."

But his words could not reassure her. Elin's mother had given Saju's parents several big silver pieces in return for taking care of her. She knew that it wasn't right to take advantage of someone who wasn't family. But she had no home to return to. If he did not let her stay, she would have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep.

She cast down her eyes, feeling alone and helpless, and her mouth twisted as she forced back the tears that rose in her eyes. Placing both hands before her on the floor, she bowed. "I . . . have no home . . . to go back to. I have no money either." Her voice sounded very distant to her ears. "But I can cook. And I can sew. I can take care of the goat and the horse. I will work hard . . . So please let me stay here."

For a moment, Joeun was at a loss for words and could only stare at the little girl, who trembled as she pressed her hands against the floor. He was amazed that someone so young would think about the need to pay him to take care of her. He had never met a child like her before. There had been plenty of ten-year-olds where he used to live, but they were innocent and carefree, ignorant of the suffering in the world and obviously dependent on the adults around them. Were all children of the artisan class like Elin? If so, they were far more mature than the youth of the nobility or of upper-class professionals. Yet, despite her maturity, she did not seem to intuit what an adult like Joeun really felt. He had already made up his mind to take her in, yet she couldn't see that.

Almost six years had passed since a painful incident had driven him from his family and forced him to live alone as a beekeeper. There had been times when he had found this existence lonely. He had never raised a girl before, but Elin seemed more capable for her age than any of the boys he'd taught, and she was very smart. He was pretty sure he could take care of her—that is, of course, if she really was all alone in the world.

Something very unusual had happened to her. He was sure of that. If he adopted her, it could lead to trouble. Rather than getting carried away by his feelings, he should probably think this over more carefully. But he was already fond of Elin, even though they had only spent three days together. He did not want to let her go. If her parents did show up and take her away, he knew that he would miss her. Yet she seemed unaware of how he felt. She kept a firm distance, seeing him as a stranger and the care he gave her as a debt that must be repaid. Just patting her on the head reassuringly would not ease her mind.

"Elin," he began, and she raised her face. "Do you know how much people pay to stay somewhere overnight when they're traveling?" Elin shook her head, her face tense. "The price is usually a single small piece of silver . . . Do you know how much a child hired as a servant to work in the hall of a noble or a merchant is paid?"

Again Elin shook her head. "The going rate is about fifty copper pieces, or half a small piece of silver. So if you stay and do the housework for me,

you can think of your pay as fifty copper pieces. Now, the cost for lodgings, that's for adults. For children, it's half the price. So if you do the housework, we'd be even, because the amount you would get paid is the same as the amount you would spend to stay overnight. What do you say? Is it a deal?"

Elin's face brightened instantly, and she smiled at him.

"All right, then. That settles it. Once you're completely better, I'll expect you to work hard, okay?"

Elin nodded emphatically.