

VALI: THE LOST STORY OF TAIWAN

風暴之子

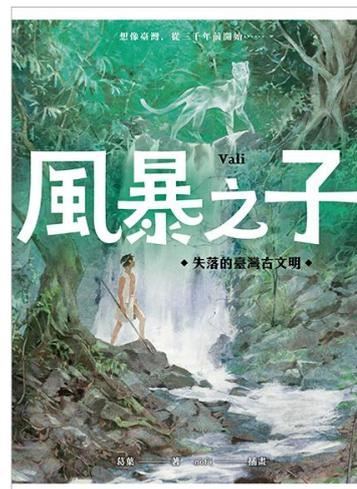
* A cooperation work with National Museum of Prehistory of Taiwan

A young boy, starved and unconscious, washes up on the rocky shores of a village. Though his first words upon waking are in a foreign tongue, yet he claims to be the long-lost son of a village elder. Yet no one expects that this adopted “native son” will be the villagers’ key only hope against destruction.

Kuzuha’s breakout fantasy novel instills a page-turning story of resilience and community resistance with allegorical weight as the “adopted” child of a village must risk his life to combat environmentally destructive evil.

Although the hunting people of Hacying live beside the ocean, they fear it for its destructive power. Master hunter Yafo knows this well, having lost his grandson, Vali, to an ocean storm. When a young boy, starved and unconscious, washes up on the rocky shore in a dugout canoe, Yafo risks his life to save him. Imagine his surprise when this strange boy is found to be clutching his grandson’s jade pendant in his hand, and, after shouting his first words in a foreign language, later claims in Yafo’s own tongue to be the long-lost Vali.

Little does Yafo – or anyone else in the village – know that the boy who claims to be Vali will play a crucial role in the entire village’s fight against environmental destruction. A horde of the undead – the spirits of rapacious early colonizers – has awakened deep in the island, and now moves outward. They kill everything they touch. Only jadeite appears to stop them. Vali joins Yafo’s elite group of hunters in order to procure the jadeite and fresh water needed to ward off this creeping death – a decision that will require trust and sacrifice.



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Novelist Kuzuha enriches this deeply engaging story with intensive research on Taiwanese archaeology and prehistoric ecology. This deeply localized world of *Vali: The Lost Story of Taiwan* grows around the reader like the tropical forests of Taiwan.

Kuzuha 葛葉

Kuzuha is a fantasy novelist. *Vali: The Lost Story of Taiwan* is her first YA fantasy work.

VALI: THE LOST STORY OF TAIWAN

By Kuzuha

Translated by Timothy Smith

Prologue

The scorching sun stood high overhead, its rays seeming to swallow up everything in sight. Azure sky. Puffy clouds. Ocean expanse, and a dugout canoe rhythmically moving with the crest and trough of each wave.

In the dugout canoe lay a small boy. His life force was seeping away from him drip by drip, like dew drops evaporating from blades of grass.

The boy was lying down. He looked like a piece of driftwood. Even with the sun directly overhead, the boy had no more water in him to leave as sweat through his pores. He couldn't even feel the heat, he was so numbed. Not even the festering wound on his forehead caused him a shred of pain. The boy was gripping tightly onto an oar.

The problem was the only thing around him – vast ocean. He had no clue in which direction he should paddle.

He was desperate to escape with his life. He just wasn't sure which direction would lead to his death.

The boy closed his eyes and drifted into a deep slumber. He wasn't the type of person to just curl up in defeat and die. He was just exhausted from drifting on the ocean for days on end.

After an indefinite period of time, a voice arose next to the boy's ears.

"Do you want to keep on living?"

"..."

The boy's eyes opened wide: somehow, dusk had already fallen. The blue sky was covered by a thick blanket of clouds. There were sporadic gaps in the clouds where the light seeped through, giving some sign that the day hadn't yet come to an end.

"Is this a fantasy?"

"It's not a fantasy."

The voice from nowhere caused the boy to straighten up. Sitting up, he came face-to-face with the being that was speaking to him.

It was a strange, monstrous beast with a beautifully striped pelt lying at his feet.

"You...you...you can speak?!"

There was a slight tremor in the boy's voice. He thought of something his father once told him, that malevolent spirits of the ocean could shapeshift and harass fishermen, drawing them into the abyssal depths below.

But the boy had never heard of malevolent spirits shapeshifting into something like the beast that sat in front of him. This type of beast often resided in the forests near his village. It preferred to eat children who strayed alone into the woods.

The beast didn't respond to the boy's doubts. It just laid there, licking and cleaning its claws. It turned its head out towards the great ocean. *"Do you see it?"* The beast countered with a question of his own.

The boy lifted his head and looked out towards the horizon. Just as he looked in the direction the beast was facing, there was a group of massive cumulus clouds slowly pressing in towards the dugout canoe.

The Squall—

The boy nervously gripped onto the oar and paddled incessantly, trying to reorient the bow of the canoe. The beast hadn't bothered with the boy's behavior, but still stared at him with a bored gaze.

"Right now, you have just two choices – the first is to try to flee. If you do, you're going to starve to death."

Hearing the beast's words, the boy stopped his rowing.

"Your other choice is to continue on in your current direction. Although the storm will hit you, it will bring you to land."

"There's land here?"

The boy stood up and looked out in every direction.

The sky darkened and the clouds grew denser. The boy's line of sight was almost fully obscured, but he held onto his determination not to perish. Finally, he saw the shadowy specter of land far off on the horizon.

He hollered with glee at the sight, and once more picked up his oar and aimed the bow of his canoe towards that sliver of solid land.

"It looks like you've made your decision. Very well. Open up your palms."

The beast got up on all fours and brushed by the boy's hands with its head. It wanted him to open his hands. Despite his fears of being tricked, he noted how the beast didn't seem to have had any intention of hurting him up to this point, and so the boy opened up the palms of his hands.

Something fell into the boy's cupped hands, and he was startled. He stared at the object that appeared out of nowhere while the beast's voice reverberated all around the boy's head. It spoke in several low, basal tones.

It was a language the boy had never heard before.

The boy turned, wanting to ask the beast what the words had meant, but the beast had already disappeared into the ether.

All alone upon the vast ocean waves, the boy headed stroke by stroke closer to dry land.

Chapter 1: The Village by the Sea

1

The ravaging storm bore down upon the village by the sea. Each of the structures, each of the rafters and pillars, each of the windows, the doors, and the screens were menaced by the massive wailing sounds coming from the ocean. The cutting winds sounded like the wily enticements of demons. The winds were piercing screams and lowly rumbling roars, stabbing through the crevices in the walls of the structures as if they were sharp claws.

The hunter Yafo was sitting in front of the fire. He was roasting a bundle of bamboo arrow shafts back and forth over the flames until they were dried and heated to a certain point, then he could straighten the shafts ever so slightly, using a moist cloth heated up in a ceramic jar by the fire to wipe away at the accumulating soot on the bamboo shafts. He used this method to quickly lower the temperature of the shafts so they would set more easily.

“If you want to figure out whether a hunter is first-rate or shoddy, all you have to do is look at whether the arrows are straight or not.”

Yafo had once heard his father say these words. He took them to heart and used them to hone his own skills. He was the greatest hunter and the bravest warrior here in the village of Hacying. He was the leader of their hunting party.

Putting the final arrow down after working the shaft, Yafo drew a long sigh. He propped himself up along the stone base at the bottom of the central column in his house. This type of pillar was employed as the foundation for all the structures the tribe built. This one was so deeply entrenched that it could not be moved, no matter how bad the weather was.

This house was built for Yafo when he was a newlywed. Whenever a new house was planned, all the villagers pitched in to raise it. The people responsible for helping gather a stone pillar base for the central pillar in his house were his neighbors. To thank Yafo’s father for often giving them cuts of game meat whenever he came back from hunting trips, they gave Yafo two gigantic stones for the pillar bases. This also made Yafo’s house the biggest structure in the entire village. The only other house that could compare belonged to the chief, Kataw.

Perhaps now, though, it was a bit too large. After his wife passed away, Yafo never remarried. His daughter had already been married off. He felt like the large abode seemed to highlight the loneliness in his heart.

Once he’d finished straightening the arrow shafts, Yafo picked up an earthenware jar. He poured some water into the jar and then placed it over the fire brazier.

“Tai, once you’re done with your shafts, come over and I’ll make you some tea.” Yafo piped up.

His line of vision was focused out towards the side of the window, where there was an impish figure sitting. It was a girl of only ten. She was using her adept fingers to work diligently with fletching ramie cord around the nocks at the ends of the arrows. From the concentrated look on her face, Yafo’s comments didn’t seem to have fazed her at all.

After three successive breaths, Yafo gave a sigh and stood up. He tied up a bundle of bamboo piled up on the floor. He walked up to just before the window and used a hand to lightly shake the girl's head and then he stopped.

The girl applied a paste to the top of the fibrous cord she had just wound around the nocks. It was a glue made from a mixture of different tree saps. Once it was applied to the ramie cord, she would harden the sap by lightly heating the arrow ends over a fire so the glue would cure and harden.

Having completed her charge, the girl relinquished her finished arrows to Yafo. The front endpoints of the arrow shafts were flint arrowheads that had been polished shiny and sharp. The tail ends were fletched with feathers, which were affixed tightly with string made from ramie fibers. Yafo couldn't find one flaw in any of them.

This child is amazingly skilled at this.... Such shame that she was born a girl.... He looked at the proud but innocent smile on the girl's face. Yafo could do nothing but sigh internally.

Tai – full name Tailas, was a young woman. She was the daughter of Kataw, the chief of the village. She was also Yafo's student. She was likely Yafo's most brilliant and promising student of the bunch.

According to tradition, hunting was a skill passed down from father to son, but Yafo never had any sons of his own. It was a shame that he hadn't continued his lineage. So, he taught his ways of hunting and other knowledge to the children in the village.

The majority of his students were male, but occasionally a girl like Tai would show up. Yafo never refused new students. It didn't matter how obviously talented a girl was in the ways of the hunt, they would eventually have to go home to a life of sewing and cooking. How could he force her into preparing for a domesticated life of marriage? How could he envision this girl plying and stringing a hunting bow only for it to hang from a corner rafter collecting dust and dry rotting away?

Not every piece of knowledge he bestowed on his students was lost. At the very least, the martial arts were something his female students remembered well, especially those who would later quarrel often with their husbands. Oftentimes, their fighting skills would be better after marriage.

Yafo put down an arrow shaft and returned to the fireside. He fetched out a small sun-dried orange jasmine blossom from a sack and placed it into a clay pot of freshly boiled water. As soon as the flower petals dropped into the water, their aroma diffused into the room along the wafts of steam.

Tai tossed two taro roots into the embers and prodded them around with a wooden stick so that they wouldn't be scorched. Yafo ladled out some the tea, pouring two full scoops into a bamboo cup, which he then gave to Tai.

"You ought to make your way back home." Yafo said. He was a laconic individual by nature, yet he had said this sentence at least twenty times today.

Tai shrugged and didn't bother lifting her head up to acknowledge Yafo. "The wind outside is so strong. I'm afraid."

How are you afraid at all? Yafo asked rhetorically in an inner monologue. *Even if I were to scour the earth for something to frighten her, I think I'd end up empty-handed.*

"No need to worry. I'll take you back. Kataw will be worried otherwise."

“Agh, wasn’t it granny who often said that the spirits will protect every wholesome person in the home when the raging winds come? And in any case, it’s not the first time I’ve ever spent the night here. My father won’t worry. He still says that Grandfather Yafo’s house is the sturdiest in the village, even if ten mountain boars were to attack at the same time, they wouldn’t be able to do any damage to it. Even if the house were to actually be struck and damaged...”

“What do you mean struck?” Yafo asked curiously.

Tai lifted up her head and looked at him with her big eyes. In tone of awe she said: “I mean, if it were actually run into and struck. Grandfather Yafo, you would beat those boars to death and then use their bones to fix your house.”

“Ridiculous.”

A deep laugh Yafo couldn’t hold back escaped his lips. Tai also giggled, lowering her head to sip the tea still swirling around in her cup. She won another of these little games against the stoic Yafo.

In all truth, Yafo didn’t really want to force Tai to go back home. Perhaps it could even be said that without Tai, Yafo probably wouldn’t have been able to bear his loss from this year.

It was about this time a year ago that his son-in-law and grandson fell into a river and were taken away by a sudden surge in the waters.

His son-in-law’s corpse was discovered by the shore; but his grandson, Vali, was never found.

The painful loss incurred mired his daughter, Pana, in sorrow so deep it eventually drove her mad. She refused to accept that Vali had died. She became a shut-in, babbling and muttering to herself, refusing to see anyone who came to pay her a visit. Her once beautiful and enticing visage was somehow now transformed into a ravaged, haggardly shell of her former self.

Yafo stared blankly at the jade cylinder hanging at Tai’s chest by a slender string tied at the back of her neck. The tribespeople of Hacying village liked to adorn themselves in jade jewelry. The length of the jade cylinders Tai wore were less than half the normal length, not much longer than her pinky finger.

This jade piece originally belonged to Yafo.

Tai and Vali were born on the same day. The very day they were born, the jade pipe cylinder Yafo was wearing inexplicably broke in half. It just so happened to break down the middle along the dark crack that used to run there, splitting the piece into two. The break was perfectly clean, without any jagged edges, like it had been polished by a jade carver’s tools. Yafo decided to gift one half each to both of the children as birthday presents.

It’s not certain whether it was for this reason or not, but Tai and Vali were very close to each other. From the time they were little, they liked very much to run over to Yafo’s house.

But now, the jade piece Tai wore was a verdant green, but Vali’s half disappeared along with him.

This year, Yafo thought he had almost forgotten the smile of that child who would fall asleep in his embrace.

Maybe forgetting would be better.

Yafo took a full gulp of the orange jasmine tea. The freshly boiled liquid seized his throat. It was so painful that a couple of tears flowed out from his eyes.

The men of Hacying thought that crying was a sign of weakness, and Yafo quickly wiped the tears away, but it didn't seem to matter. Tai was still looking down into her bamboo cup, blowing at the rising steam. It was as if she hadn't even noticed his wincing in pain.

After many minutes, the scent of roasting taro finally wafted over from the fire. Tai put down her bamboo cup and, picking up the stick, punctured one of the taro roots where it had been scorched pitch-black. Then she used a couple bamboo skewers to pull it out of the fire, to check whether it was ready.

After being put on the floor to cool off for a bit, Tai slowly peeled the roasted skin back and handed the taro to Yafo. Then she took her own taro root and peeled it. Popping a piece in her mouth in one bite, she made a sort of pouting grimace.

"I'm beginning to think Kasiu's roasted taro is better. Mine is too dry...."

Kasiu was the nephew of Yafo's late wife. He was older than Tai by a year, and he was also learning how to hunt from Yafo. Yafo took another bite, and then thought it was indeed a tad dry. He patted Tai on the head and then stood up. He walked over to the other corner of the house, opposite from where they were and then fished out another clay jar. He pulled out the stopper to the jar, and then poured out a little bit of this yellow liquid onto a clay plate.

Tai raised her head and seeing Yafo nursing a small plate in his hand, her eyes lit up like embers and sparks.

"Honey!"

No matter how dry or mealy a taro root was, if you dipped it into honey, it would always be transformed into a delicacy.

"I wanted to find a beehive the last time I went out, but I searched for a while and came back empty-handed." Tai said this as she was polishing off her taro root, using her fingers to wipe up the remaining bits of honey and then licking her sweetened fingertips.

"Foraging for a beehive? By yourself?" Yafo furrowed his brows.

"Yeah, because Kasiu didn't want anyone else know his secret recipe for cooking taro, so I wanted to trade him some honey for it."

"Kasiu said he wanted some honey for it?"

"No, it's just something I thought up on my own. After all, it is honey, right? I thought for sure that he'd bite."

"Well of course. But it's very dangerous to go out foraging for beehives. Don't go it alone next time, do you understand me?"

"Ack!" Tai shouted with a dissatisfied look on her face, but she saw that Yafo was looking at her cold and sternly. She resigned herself to his order and just nodded her head in assent.

"Good. Later on, if you want to have honey, just come here. Wait until you're older and I'll teach you how to collect it. As for trading honey with Kasiu, I can give this to you first—"

He hadn't finished the sentence yet when Tai suddenly shook her head: "No. I don't want to take any of your honey. I want to rely on myself to get it."

“Then...you can ask Kasiu. Aside from honey, what else does he want? Maybe a bowstring? Maybe a bamboo flute...”

“I asked him already, but he doesn’t want anything else. Though, he did tell me something kinda weird.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he’d teach me the secret to roasting taro, but I’d have to cook taro for him every day afterward.”

Yafo roared with laughter, so hard that he spat out a mouthful of his tea in surprise. He looked at this little girl of ten in front of him and it seemed to be the first time he had ever really paid attention to her appearance.

Both her eyes were clearer than the most biting and frigid of mountain streams. Her delicate oval face was like a flower that was just beginning to blossom. Though she hadn’t yet shed the air of naivete about her, and she lacked the finesse of a woman, it would be just a matter of a few years before boys might dare to fight each other for her hand.

“So, what did you tell him?”

“Of course not!”

“Why?”

“Even if he could, why would he want to eat taro for every single meal? Kasiu just doesn’t have any common sense.” Her total sincerity brought a grin to Yafo’s face.

It seemed it wouldn’t matter whether he taught her how to collect honey because Kasiu didn’t really want something as simple as that.

As the pair finished off their tea, the sound of whipping wind and hurling rain seemed to have petered off for a bit. Yafo looked out at the world outside between slits in the window shade: The sky had brightened up considerably, but it was just a mirage. Judging from the experiences of past storms, the raging winds and deluge of rain would just come back again and continue pelting them until the morning of the next day.

Just as Yafo was thinking of tossing some wood onto the fire and picking up his work where he had left off, a series of panicked knocks erupted on the door.

“Uncle!... Tai!... It’s me! Open up the door, hurry!”

Yafo and Tai lifted their heads at the same time.

“It’s my dad!” Tai yelled out. She looked at Yafo and he nodded his head in response. Tai untethered the rope securing the doors shut.

A brawny man pushed the doors inwards. He was soaked through and through by the rain, beads of rainwater dripping from his deerskin cape onto the floor. It was obvious he had left home before the rain started to let up.

Long, rectangular-shaped earrings hung from his earlobes. They were similar to the ones Yafo had in his own ears, but bigger. A long jade tube also hung at his neck, showing his position in the community.

“Kataw, what’s happened?” Yafo shouted out the chieftain’s name. This was about as intimate as they could be with one another.

He wouldn't brave the elements and put himself into such a state during a massive storm just to collect his daughter. Certainly, there was some larger issue afoot. It was just a matter of someone's house having been blown away, right?

Kataw leaned on the doorway, trying to catch his breath.

"It's Pana..."

Yafo's heart sank as soon as he heard his daughter's name.

"...She's nowhere to be found. I went with her at first to Va'ao's but she slipped away through the window while Va'ao was napping this afternoon."

How could she do that?

Yafo's face paled. After a moment, he asked: "Did you see where she went off to?"

Kataw shook his head. "I'm sorry, Uncle. I already called on the other hunters to group up. With their help, we ought to be able to..."

"No! Tell them to go back home. Tell them to remain in their homes and not to come out. The storm still rages."

Yafo picked up a long cloth from next to the fire and tied it around his head and brow and then turning, grabbed a spear propped up next to the door.

"Uncle, let me help, please." Kataw said in a distraught tone.

"You're the leader of Hacying. You should be making sure the whole tribe is safe, not going out in the middle of a storm to search for a madwoman who's run off," Yafo growled. "Take Tai home, boil some water, prepare some medicinal herbs and food. If you want to help me, you can do that, and I'll be greatly appreciative of it."

Kataw still had something he wanted to say but he felt his wrists being pulled lightly away. He looked down and saw it was Tai. She was shaking her head towards him. Kataw hesitated for a second and then he realized Tai had moved towards the door, then faced Yafo and said:

"Understood. I'll be waiting for you."

2

The rain made his line of sight blurry. Yafo wiped away at the water as it pelted his face while he ran. Truly, he had no clue why Pana would have run off, and he was stumped as to where she would have gone off to.

Yet, Yafo was a hunter, and hunters are good at tracking.

At first, he went to the side of Pana's house and found traces of where she had leapt from the window opening, and then he followed along where her footprints began leaving the village.... She was headed eastward.

That way lead to the coast.

His spear, soaked by rainwater, felt heavier in his hands. His breath came ragged. He no longer had the strength he once had in the prime of his youth, and the only thing keeping him racing forward was his sense of responsibility.

That and a sense of guilt.

Alongside Pana's tracks in the grass, already nearly washed away by the rain, he found a scattering of other, different markings. Those were made when she was running, because they showed her slipping and falling as she was landed her steps. They were chaotic and looked as if she was scrambling to get back up to her feet.

It looked like Pana was running for her life.

But why exactly?

Yafo wasn't sure why. Pana, shrouded in grief, was a like a lonely spirit. Why would she suddenly run away like this? Finally, Yafo got lucky. Before the next wave of wind and rain came, he reached a small hillock next to the beach.

Though the name of the village was Hacying, or "village by the sea", the tribe members were all terrified of the sea, almost fanatically so. Not even someone as brave as Yafo would intentionally come this close to the water's edge.

Pana's footprints went on straight from the hillock to the water, but Yafo stopped in his tracks and instead stood up on his toes. He put a hand up to his brow to block the rain just a little bit to get a better view, looking straight out.

I've found you!

Yafo went barreling down the hillside, the slippery, drenched grass and rushes causing him to lose balance as he kept moving downwards, forcing him to use his spear to stay upright and stabilize himself in his rushed descent. And then he continued forward at a furious pace.

The wind was howling next to his ears. Yafo was running even faster now, nearly expending the remaining energy of his life force. He didn't bother looking at the ground for footprints as he was racing by. He was just focused on locking down on the black dot he saw at the bottom of the hill.

As he drew closer, the image of the black dot grew clearer: a woman, her disheveled hair flying in the wind as she ran towards the water.

"Panaaaaaa—"

Yafo shouted. But Pana kept going.

Yafo threw down his spear and inhaling deeply, sprinted forward with all his might, charging forward like an angry wild boar.

He was only about ten strides away from the massive surf when he finally caught up to her, stopping her in her tracks with one leap, his arms around her waist. The two collapsed into the sand.

Yafo struggled to stand up. He held tightly to Pana and dragged her back from the waves. After several paces, Yafo let go of her.

"What the hell are you doing?! Are you *trying* to kill yourself?!"

Yafo was enraged beyond placation. He was so angry he wanted to slap her across the face but right as he was lifting up his hand to strike her, he looked at Pana's face and was stopped mid-motion.

Of course, she wanted to die. She didn't care anymore whether she was a wife or a mother. Those days were gone. Yafo knew he asked a question that cut deep. This entire year, Yafo could

do nothing in his sleep but battle nightmares. He dreamt he was embracing Pana's ice-cold corpse, but though Pana was distraught, she had never before decided to do something as crazy as this – that is, until today.

Pana stared back at him with widened eyes. Her brows were carved deep with the scars of depression. With quivering lips she repeated: "He's come back... He's come back..."

"Who's come back?"

"Father...he's come back... I have to save him!"

As she spoke Pana shifted her body in an attempt to run to the water's edge, but Yafo immediately pulled her back.

"Let me go, father! He's come back!"

Pana let out a shrill scream and flailed her arms, but Yafo held her immobile.

Struggling for a moment, Pana realized she'd never break free from her father's grasp, and she stopped wailing. Instead, she now turned towards Yafo and begged him, "Father...please...I need to save the boy.... He's out there. Don't you see him?"

Pana lifted a hand and pointed out towards the waves. Yafo was drawn into where her finger was pointing, but all he could see were the menacing waves coming in, set by set, smashing against the reef, sending foam and seawater high into the air.

It was just a glimpse, but he caught sight of "the boy" Pana was talking about: a dugout canoe wedged precariously between two jutting outcroppings in the reef, a small body tightly clinging to the boat.

"How is it possible?" Yafo gasped. He looked at Pana, who was still desperately begging him. Lacerations and bruises covered her arms and legs; the rain was washing away fresh blood as it seeped from her wounds.

Yafo didn't think too long before he made his decision.

He stroked Pana's face with one hand, then said, "Wait here for me. I'm going to bring him back."

His words had their affect. Pana stopped struggling and begging. Happiness shone clearly in her eyes – it was the first time she'd looked elated in over a year. "Will you really?" She asked her father.

Yafo nodded, though he was by no means sure he could do it.

He commanded Pana to move back to a safer distance and wait for him to return.

This stretch of coast was littered with reefs and shoals. Anyone who wasn't careful and fell into the water would likely be churned up in the waves and undertow. Once you hit your head on the reef rocks, you'd be a goner. Yafo was very cognizant of the dangers of the expanse in front of him.

In the end, Yafo decided he'd leap on some of the larger rocks jutting out of the water and make a zigzagging towards the canoe stuck on the reef. The rocks were sharp and jagged, and there weren't many safe holds for one's footing. A few leaps between rocks along the reef shredded the soles of Yafo's feet pretty badly; the choppy water around him was tinged with crimson.

The towering crests of incoming waves continued to batter the beached canoe.

Yafo jumped down onto the reef next to the canoe. This area was a bit deep, though, and the undulations of the waves were just mere meters away.

Yafo pushed himself down, collapsing onto his stomach as a wave moved along overhead. He began feeling around with his hands. Then, he managed to grab hold of the child and pull him from the canoe.

It was a boy. Yafo let out an exhalation. He put the palms of his hands squarely on the boy's chest, but felt no body heat. His skin was icy as the waters of an alpine stream. Yet Yafo still felt a heartbeat, and he knew the boy was still alive, just unconscious.

It wasn't a surprise the boy had passed out. He was nothing more than skin and bones. Even if he hadn't spent all his energy, or was injured, he would be delirious from starvation.

The boy wasn't Vali, even though he looked to be around the same age. There was nothing remotely similar about his form or face to that of his lost grandson.

Yafo looked back towards the shore. The bigger question was – how do we get back alive?

Even though they were no more than twenty paces from shore, and it would be a breeze to just swim back along a calm ocean surface, today was a day of raging winds and savage rain. Jumping straight into the water would be a death sentence.

And yet they had to make a decision. The storm was only getting worse.

The crazed winds and rain from this morning were just the vanguard. Right now, they were inside the mild "eye" of the storm. The eye was the calmest part, but it was extremely brief and didn't last long. After the heart had passed over, the next part would be the worst of all – the "tail". If one couldn't find stable refuge, they'd be destroyed by the winds and rain.

Yafo hoisted the boy up onto one shoulder and looked back toward where Pana was standing. He took one gigantic breath, and then plunged into the water.

For a moment, the whole world around him was swallowed up in a swirl of ocean waves.

It was worse than he'd imagined. Yafo struggled with all his might to tread water, but it was only too easy for him to be bogged down, and as soon as he lifted his head above the water to catch his breath, an incoming wave would crash down and swallow him whole again.

During one particularly violent barrel, he felt a piercing pain as his head struck something. He was in so much pain he began to see stars. Bubbles of precious air began to escape from his mouth.

Is this the end? Yafo wondered.

Yafo held the boy tightly and continued to kick his feet with all the strength he could muster, but his lungs just couldn't keep holding in air. His strength quickly depleted with each and every kick.

It was just at this moment that Yafo suddenly heard a howl: two short and one long, rhythmic, and forceful. The war-shout of the Hacying villagers.

An arrow pierced the crashing whiteness of the surf and passed by the top of Yafo's head. There was a ramie cord tied to the tail end of the arrow.

Yafo extended his free hand and fought with everything he could to grasp tightly onto the ramie rope. He wrapped the cord around his shoulder and gave it a great tug. The war cries once

more resounded. Accompanying each shout was a massive pulling sensation that dragged Yafo and the boy out of the surf and onto dry land.

They had finally been rescued. Yafo let go of his grip on the boy, and he knelt down on the sand. He coughed out several lungfuls of seawater.

It was no small feat to stop the fits of coughing, and Yafo kept hacking away and more and more water came out of his lungs. All he could perceive was the weakness of his muscles and body.

Yet he couldn't let himself rest for a second.... The boy had certainly drunk his full of seawater and needed attention. Yafo lifted his head and realized he was being surrounded by everyone.

The members of the village hunting group stood around Yafo on all sides. Over half of them were men he himself had taught how to hunt.

There was worry all over their faces. They couldn't stop making great gestures and speaking in hushed tones to one another.

Right then, there was a small girl standing in the middle of them. She was carrying a bow slung over one shoulder, with not a single shred of happiness to her face.

"Tai...was it you who shot the arrow?"

Slap

Her reply came not in words, but with the palm of one hand and a sudden shout as she struck him.

"You're an idiot, grandfather! Why did you think you could rush into the waves like that? Why didn't you wait for us to get here before you jumped in?" Tai screamed at him. The corners of her eyes were filled with tears. Her cheeks were red and puffed with anger.

"I'm sorry...I thought you would have heeded my word and stayed at home..."

"You knew we would come! Of course, we'd lie to you and tell you we'd stay put at home, but that would have been pointless. How could we just let you come out here alone? Grandfather, you really weren't thinking. You're such a stupid pig. You're a deer's ass!"

The more Tai yelled, the angrier she became and then she began to wail loudly. Yafo reached out to embrace her in his arms, and just when he was about to apologize to her, he felt someone else's palm resting on his shoulder.

It was Kataw. He was watching the sky with concern.

"Uncle, the wind and rain are about to pick up again. We need to get back to the village. Can you walk?"

Yafo nodded and turned to search for the boy he just pulled from the reef.

"The boy is fine, but we need to get him to vomit up all the seawater he swallowed. We'll get someone to go ahead and carry him back to the village. Pana will go with him."

"Did Pana...did she see the child's face?"

"She saw him, but I don't know what to make of it. All she did was keep shouting at the boy, calling him Vali."

Hearing Kataw's words, Yafo was stupefied. What did it mean?

Yafo had more questions, but the sky was gradually darkening, and the thunder continued to rattle the eardrums of everyone standing around on the beach.

“Let’s go back now.”

A look of worry flickered over the faces of the brave members of the hunting party surrounding him, and Yafo suddenly realized that he had put everyone in danger with his actions.

He began his march back to the village, propped up under Kataw’s shoulder while holding onto Tai’s hand.

3

The abode of Kataw, the chieftain of Hacying village, was situated at the center of the settlement, and its entrance faced a great open space.

In the spacious interior, several people were sitting around a fire, and on top of the blaze were piled several earthenware jars being used to boil water. Two women were constantly scooping boiling water into another clay pot.

Yafo was stretched out on a reed placemat. Kataw’s wife, Va’ao, was using a needle made of bone to stitch up the wounds on Yafo’s forehead. As a disciple of the village shaman, Va’ao was taught to heal people as one of the main responsibilities of her profession.

Yafo’s wound wasn’t a bruise but a gash, which stretched in a line from his forehead through his eyebrows and to his cheekbones. He must have been cut by the jagged rock fragments or sliced up by barnacles when his head struck the reef.

Pana sat at Yafo’s side. Initially covered in mud and fresh scars, she had already been cleaned up with hot water and given a change of fresh, dry garments. Although her eyes still flitted everywhere around her, she had definitely calmed down a lot. Much of this change was due to Tai who kept talking to Pana. Tai seemed to have an innate sense of magical powers to her and was able to calm down everyone next to here.

Tai was holding onto an earthenware pot filled the leaves of a Japanese climbing fern. After they were mashed up and turned to a pulp, the mash was slathered onto Pana’s wounds and they were able to seal up, helping her to avoid infection.

The rescued boy was lying in the corner of the house. One side was being warmed up by the fire, and a heated deerskin was draped over him for warmth. An elderly woman with pure white hair sat at the boy’s side. She held a piece of cloth and was soaking one end in a bamboo cup filled with millet wine. She then took the cloth and placed it over the boy’s lips, pressing lightly.

The boy began coughing uncontrollably. While he was still unconscious, the woman used this method to at least give the boy a bit of moisture and sustenance. By the time the millet wine in the cup had slowly receded to the last few drops, the color in the boy’s face gradually grew rosier.

A small smile graced the woman's face. She put the cloth back the cup and set the cup on the floor. Reaching out a hand, she touched the boy's forehead. A shadow appeared and the woman lifted her head up to see what it was.

She could barely make out that Yafo had moved closer to the fire. His face startled some of the people sitting around, owing to the deep frown his eyebrows made now that his wound was stitched up.

"Patay, is this child going to make it?"

Yafo directly addressed the old woman, though they were ten years apart in age, they were considered equals in stature.

Patay was the shaman of Hacying. She was the wife of Yafo's older brother who had passed away long ago. She was also Va'ao's mother and Tai's grandmother.

The shaman was the most important leader in Hacying, her position even higher than that of the chief's. One could tell by looking at Patay's gleaming and delicate head adornments. Encircling her headpiece was a string of small jade bells, and several extremely long feathers hung from the back. A pair of special jade pendants dangled from her ears. The bottoms of the pendants were fashioned into human forms, the upper portions resembling a cloud leopard. The paws of the leopard figures were merged into one with the heads of human figures.

Cloud leopards were considered the protector spirits of Hacying. Anyone wearing jade pendants in this shape was a protector of Hacying.

"Do you care about the boy?"

Yafo gave out an indifferent grunt in response to Patay's question. "No, that's not what I mean. It wouldn't matter if he died. But if he lives, I was to see what we should do with him."

Patay lifted away the deerskin covering the boy, took Yafo's hand, and lightly pressed it to the boy's chest. "You can see for yourself."

The body trembled as chest rose and fell rhythmically. It was obvious that this boy had great strength within. Yafo pulled his hand away, and glared back at Patay, who didn't dare turn around to meet his gaze. Yafo always felt as if Patay's gaze could pierce right through him into the core of his very being. As a child, when he got into fights with the other children in the village, Yafo would never lose or cry out in pain, but Patay could always tell where his injuries were, and she helped him mend.

Just when Yafo was thinking of covering the boy back up with the deerskin, he suddenly realized the boy's right hand was gripped tightly in a fist around something.

Yafo tried bending back the boy's fingers, one by one. The boy's fist was clenched much more tightly than Yafo had expected, and his fingers just wouldn't budge.

"What's he got in his hand? It's like he's hold onto something."

"It's nothing. He's just he's been frightened nearly to death is all. Don't try to force his hand open. If you use too much strength, you'll going to break his hand."

Listening to what Patay was saying, Yafo just gave her a nod and put the boy's hand down. It looked like they would have to wait until the boy regained consciousness.

Just as Yafo was planning turn over and leave, a small voice started to break through the quiet. Yafo lowered his gaze and he saw the boy's eyelids opening just about halfway.

"Patay! He's woken up!" Yafo shouted, but he immediately regretted saying anything, as his own voice was louder than he expected.

Patay heard the shout and turned her head to look. Just as she was about to speak, a shadow came charging over.

"Vali! My child..." Pana squatted down right beside the grass placemat and grabbed the boy's wrist.

"This boy isn't Vali!" Yafo said curtly, holding back a fearsome energy. He swatted at Pana's shoulder. "Give him room to breathe. Let Patay look him over." He wanted to pull Pana up out of her crouched position, but Patay stopped Yafo with a brush of her hand. Laughing, she moved herself over to another side of the grass placemat.

"Don't worry. She's not going to get in the way."

Patay picked up a small jar, dipped a flat segment of bamboo in the jar's liquid contents, then placed it close to the boy's nostrils.

The boy exhaled deeply three times. Then he screamed.

The boy shot straight into a sitting position on the grass mat and started rubbing at his nose. Then he curled up against the wall, shouting in a language no one could understand.

He immediately started to cough violently, almost to the point of throwing up, but not even bile would come up.

"Everything's alright now. This child's going to live a very long life."

Patay threw the piece of bamboo into the fire. Everyone watching her had been instinctively holding their breath. Patay smiled as she fitted a lid back onto the top of the jar and placed it back up on a shelf.

After a long moment, everyone realized that the piece of bamboo hadn't stank as it burned to ashes but released a pleasant aroma instead. But nobody dared to ask Patay what was in the earthenware jar.

Yafo stared at the floor. He was looking intently at the object the boy had flung away in the midst of his shouting, and which happened to land at Yafo's feet. He bent down at the waist to scoop it up.

It was a hollow cylinder of bright green jade, about as long as a child's pinky finger. There was a semi-circular black stripe around the rim of one end of the cylinder.

Yafo knew this jade cylinder because it was the very piece of jade that the chief of a village far away in the valley had given him. It was a piece of jade that Yafo had carved himself.

He remembered every single facet, streak, and striation of this piece of jade, and the traces where it had broken off. He looked disbelieving awe at the boy.

"Child. Just who are you exactly?"

Hearing Yafo's question, the boy looked perplex. Just when Yafo was about to try to use his hands and feet to sign to the boy, the boy suddenly began to let loose several words.

The boy was choking on his words, and his intonation was bewildering. It wasn't at all fluent like the words he was speaking when he regained his consciousness.

But this time when he spoke, there was no mistaking that it was the language spoken in Hacying.

"I...I am...Vali..."