

Lasef

“Akan, how are you feeling?” Raja knelt on the soft earth beside his friend. Now that they were out of the cave he could see clearly that Akan’s face was ashen, his skin clammy and eyelids droopy.

“Oh, he doesn’t look good.” Mima peered over Akan’s face clucking her tongue and wringing her small hands. “Lima, will you just look at his colorless cheeks.”

“Oh, dear.” Lima stood over Akan’s blackening toes. “He does have bloodless feet, just like you said, Mima.”

“Cheeks...I said cheek...” Mima halted her response with a slight gasp as she caught sight of Akan’s foot. “The poison is spreading fast.”

“Damien, where is the vial?” Raja was searching his own pocket.

“There’s only drops left.” Damien held up the seemingly empty vial.

“I think we’re losing him, we have to use what’s left.” Raja attempted again to revive Akan by shaking him gently. Akan’s face stayed lifeless and his eyelids motionless. Damien dropped the last few drops of the elixir into Akan’s parted lips. Akan’s cheeks grew slightly pink and his eyelid fluttered, then relaxed. Raja’s eyes met Damien’s.

“Where’s Larry or whoever he is?” Damien turned and asked the armadillos who were staring at the snake bite. Mima looked up.

“It’s Lasef and I suggest you get going. He’ll find you as you move.”

Raja and Damien gathered their load and retrieved the compass.

Walking through dense trees, the men stayed silent and alert. The only sound was the crunching of branches beneath their feet. An occasional moan from Akan left both of them seeking to focus deeper on hope and away from fear. They knew the bite would worsen if they gave in to the thick foreboding surrounding them, threatening to close in on them all. The sun grew hotter. Their breaks became more frequent.

Suddenly, a darting movement caught the men’s attention followed by a squeak and rustling leaves.

Raja’s head jerked to Damien. “That’s an odd sound.” He whispered.

Damien’s sweat glimmered on his forehead and his eyes darted to the direction of the noise. Just then, a small vampire bat swooped to Alan’s foot, landed and bit a small chunk of the wounded part. Akan, moaned and the other men stood speechless. Two more darted from a hidden place in the treetops, swooping towards the wounded Akan.

Instinctively, Raja began to back away, dragging Akan, and Damien followed suit. Without warning a dark flash plunged out of the sky and tangled with the swooping predators. The bat wings jerked and jabbed as the struggle ensued. First one, then the other bat was lifted into the air, dropped, pecked and jabbed. The struggle stopped and the bird feasted for some moments as the men, still holding Akan, stared.

“Good morning, Raja and Damien.” The bird flew closer to them and landed easily in a neighboring tree. The two men glanced at each other and back to the blood stained beak.

“What was that!?” Damien blurted out.

“It was a wonderful dinner, that’s what it was.” The bird responded matter-of-factly.

“Who are you?” Raja interjected.

“I am Lasef.”

“Lasef!?” Damien sputtered. Isn’t he supposed to be a healer?” He jerked his thumb at the bird while imploring a stunned Raja. “How does what we just watched have anything to do with healing!”

“Actually, my good man, I’m actually not the healer, but I know the healer, and I teach people how to *focus* on her.” His gaze pierced into Damien’s eyes as Damien’s mouth tightened in a grimace.

“Humph, I bet. Well, we need some healing pretty quick.” He jabbed his finger at the bird and then at Akan’s lifeless looking body.

“Oh, yes. That is certain.” The bird darted upward as swiftly as he’d come. Damien squinted to watch the bird’s departure. When he couldn’t see anything else, he repositioned Akan and encouraged Raja to begin walking again. No sooner had he taken a step forward, a piercing and mournful cry filled the sultry air. A welcome breeze brushed his face and the men looked up.

“It’s Inrock!” Raja spoke breathlessly as he watched the eagle circle above. He grinned, then looked down absently toward Akan. Akan’s eyes were open, gazing placidly upward.

“Akan! Damien, he’s awake!” They both strained to lay Akan down on the ground.

“Good to see those eyes opened, buddy.” Damien managed to comment as he unloaded his burden, relief beaming from his face.

“There’s healing in her wings.” Akan’s words were brief. Another cry pierced the air. The men gazed collectively, intently upward as Inrock’s glowing, sprawling wingspan disappeared beyond their sight. No one spoke for moments as they strained to catch a last glimpse.

“I feel sort of stronger myself.” Damien breathed in deeply, refreshed.

“Me too!” Raja noted, “Look, Damien!” Damien followed Raja’s eye to Akan’s leg and feet. There were no fang punctures. The foot was pink and healthy. Akan involuntarily stretched.

“I feel like a new man! Wow, take a look at my new foot and leg!” He scrambled to his feet, starting to laugh and jump around. “Look at me, my friends! I’m healed, I’m free!!

It is said that relief is among the highest of sensations and all three men gave way to all the relieving emotions of the moment. Hugging and jumping around with laughter and rejoicing, the tension of the prior days melting away like frost under the warmth of the sun. Akan was finally out of danger.

Fireside Stories

Akan led the way, jumping fallen logs and assisting in the carrying of supplies. He was the first to spot a prepared area complete with a tent, food, and water. That night he was the most energetic in gathering wood for a fire and after eating, the men settled in beside the fire. With Akan well again, the group felt jovial and grateful.

At a lull in the conversation, rustling among the bushes caused the men to glance in the direction of the sound. Quicker than any of them could discern, again, a flash of black dove to the source and the Peregrine Falcon was back, squeezing and devouring a small unfortunate mouse that had been foolish enough to escape the cover of the brush.

The men looked on with disgusted curiosity.

“Hello gents!” The falcon swooped to join them after their meal. “Ah, Akan, I see you are recovered. Apparently you were wise to laser focus on the healer of all these lands.” He made a sweeping motion with one of his wings.

Raja straightened and leaned toward the bird. “Lasef, what do you mean, the healer of all these lands? Are you saying that Inrock heals all of these lands?”

“Why yes! Did you not know this? She holds all things together with the integrity of her being. She is in complete alignment, completely Who she really is. All things obey her because she is Integrity on the Rock. The Eagle on the Rock. She holds it all together. I teach all to laser focus only to someday laser upon her example. Because she is the only one who has traversed these islands in full integrity, she is the only one who can teach complete integrity.” He flew to Akan’s outstretched leg and tapped it with his claw. “Didn’t you see how Akan came into integrity when he gazed upon the healing in her wings?”

Raja looked deeper into Lasef’s eyes with more questioning than before. “How did she do it?”

“I’ll tell you. Relax and listen.”

“Back before the Land of Yalwuna was inhabited, Inrock, not so beautiful as she is now, traversed these islands. General Far accompanied her as a friend, but in the end, betrayed her. He was jealous of Inrock’s integrity and beauty and could not bear it. A terrible battle ensued. General Far fled to Yalwuna where he could operate in darkness. The darkness overcame him until he became no more than a phantom - yet still he rages, seeking to steal the hearts of the family of man. Inrock grew lighter and stronger and eventually could soar to the heights. Ever since that day, both of them have been seeking to gain followers, one to lead them on the journey to freedom, the other to gain power and control - to make them as miserable as he is. You have seen Yalwuna, and what it has become, but Inrock still guides all who desire to traverse these islands, eventually leading them to Cowra where she is a queen.” He winked at the men.

“What was the battle like?” Raja asked intently.

“It was very much like the battle you yourself are fighting Raja... right now. It was a battle of the heart, a battle of the mind.” Lasef sighed deeply. Inrock was always the strongest of the two, but General Far felt he himself should lead all the lands. He challenged Inrock to 3

tests. The first was a test of appetite. You will all face this test. Will you choose well what to desire and what to partake. The second was a test of the demonstration of power. Far knew if he could persuade Inrock to use her growing power in foolishness, Inrock would fall out of alignment and her power would diminish. Imagine his surprise when Inrock did not fall for it!" Lasef hooted with laughter. Even Damien couldn't help but chuckle with him.

The last was the greatest test of all. Far called upon Inrock's pride. Pride in ruling Cowra - he challenged her to take all the lands for herself, to seize them, to grasp them, to "own" them. Inrock did not budge - Far couldn't imagine how a being of power could share it. Inrock does share it, and because of this, all of the islands obey her laws in gratitude. But the battle did not end there, you see. The battle continues in each and every heart...each and every mind." The bird stopped on each word with emphasis. Laser focus, men. Learn to laser on the tasks at hand. Learn to laser on Inrock, your task-giver, for in the doing comes the understanding. Now goodnight, my friends. My brothers!!" With that Lasef took to the skies in a rocket like accent. Against the moon, the men saw him join a larger bird of prey. The call of the eagle and the hawk was heard on the night wind and lasef's laughter followed.

Departure

"What is this?" Damian demanded.

The three men stood outside. Their tent was gone and in its place were three piles of gear. Damian stared at one such pile, pulling items out of the small mountain of baggage. He grabbed a hooded mountaineering suit.

"Where do they think we're going?" he asked.

Raja chuckled as he gathered his items and placed them in the pack. His bag was full, but half of his items remained. He smiled, dumped the contents out and began again, this time rolling and folding each item to conserve space. He smashed the last bag of food into the top of the bag and, after some deliberation, heaved the pack onto his back. He tipped dangerously to the side before righting himself. After a few minutes of practice he adjusted to the new weight. He walked towards Akan who finished tightening the top of his pack. Akan accepted his assistance and was soon outfitted with his own burden.

Damian was still surrounded in a variety of other things. "I'm surprised Respa gave us the wrong packs. He's been aware of what we need in the past, but he's bungled it this time."

Damian began stuffing his pack. Within a few minutes he arose. A few items were left strewn on the ground. Damian marched forward.

"Are you sure-" Raja began.

"Hurry, let's go!" Damian said.

Raja shook his head but retrieved the compass and they began their journey.

Hours passed. The heat increased and the fog persisted. Their packs caused them to tire easily and thirst was acute. With no streams they carefully self-rationed. Progress was slow.

A distinct far-off noise shattered their reverie. It was a woman's laughter! Was there another voice as well?

"Should we follow the voices?" Damian asked with interest.

Raja looked at the compass. The spindles pointed in the same direction to the noises, but he hesitated.

"What do you think, Akan?" Raja asked.

Akan's voice took on a light brush of correction, "We follow the compass."

Raja inwardly wilted but outwardly straightened. "Of course, Akan. That is what we do."

They started walking with vigor. Raja was almost relieved when the voices disappeared. The ground began to slope up, and trees were everywhere. An eerie feeling filled Raja's chest. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a blurred streak come from one of the trees. In a flash a small, dark-haired woman darted forward and pushed him. It was impossible to regain his balance with the heavy pack, and he fell onto his back. The pack held him like an anchor to the ground. The inquisitive dark eyes of the woman stared back at him. He stared back at the woman in disbelief. He heard a groan from Damian and assumed both of his friends were in the same predicament. The woman leaned in closer and jabbered something in a foreign tongue.

"I won't hurt you. I am a friend." He spoke slowly, searching for simple words.

"Ah, you do speak," she said with an accent.

Raja sighed in relief. "Yes, I speak. My friends and I don't want to hurt anyone."

"We thought you were Lowsapa's men, but I see now, you are not tall enough," she said.

Lowsapa's men, thought Raja, then they weren't on his side. That's good!

She called out to her companion. He felt annoyed about her comment about his height. He was plenty tall! Definitely taller than some of those soldiers they met on the last island. With a heave he rolled to his stomach, then stood, attempting to appear limber...and taller. He turned and saw her little frame inches away from him.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"My name is Raja. Raja M. Tanuous. I've traveled here from Yalwuna."

She took another step, staring unblinkingly at his face. He folded his arms, pretending like he didn't feel uncomfortable under her steady gaze.

"Raja, you have a big nose." She pranced off. Raja stared after her, not knowing whether to be insulted or grateful she was one to speak her mind.