

PROLOGUE

Juhwang Sebin, Cadet, 1728-99746.

Name, rank, and serial number. That's all I'm supposed to say if I'm captured.

Every member of the Thousand Worlds Space Forces knows that, even one as junior as I am.

It's a little ludicrous to worry about that, though, because the few people still active on this ship know who I am and what I've done. And those who put me here are my comrades. *You're nothing but a traitor* was the last thing Min said to me as she left me locked up in this cell.

The others don't need to be told what my name is, or any of that. They're perfectly aware that I'm a tiger spirit from the Juhwang Clan on the world of Yonggi, and that I'm responsible for the pickle we're all in.

Beyond that, there are more complications. I'm a prisoner on my own ship, the battle cruiser *Haetae*. We're still in transit through a Gate, and I don't know how much more time we have until we emerge on the other end.

I have, however, had ample opportunity to inspect the brig. The cell is approximately three meters square. Walls of bland

gray metal, toilet and sink in the corner, physical bars instead of a force field. A smart precaution, considering that the last time I checked, half the power systems on the *Haetae* were knocked out.

In this cell there's a strip of faint lights running on backup power. I don't know how long they'll last. At least, as a tiger spirit, I have good vision even in dim illumination. I hope it's enough.

Just in case, though, I've memorized the layout of everything I can see, and I tried my best to memorize the maps of the ship that I was shown earlier, which included the restricted areas. I might be able to use that information—if only I can get out.

The other cells in this row are empty. Even if I couldn't see into them, my senses of smell and hearing would have told me that. It's almost a relief that it's just me here and not some additional unfortunates as well.

Besides, having to free other people would slow me down. Not a nice thing to think about, but everything has crystallized into hard practicalities. After all, if I don't stop the people who have fallen under the evil spell of a monster we all thought extinct, everyone on this ship is doomed.

I test the bars. They're specially reinforced to hold supernaturals like me. Goblins and dragons, to say nothing of tigers, are all stronger than the ordinary humans who make up the greatest part of the Thousand Worlds' population.

Brute-forcing my way out of this cell isn't going to work, even if I changed from my human form into my native tiger shape. There's enough space for me as a tiger, barely, but claws wouldn't put a dent in this metal.

People have always seen my kind as excellent fighters. There's some truth to that. My family emphasized training and discipline when I was growing up.

But tigers aren't *just* fighters. In the oldest stories, we're known for our cunning, too. Some of us are more cunning than others. If I'd been smarter, maybe I could have avoided getting trapped in here by the people I thought were my friends. Who might yet be my friends, if I can free them from the monster . . .

There's only one person I can count on now, assuming he finds me before the monster subverts him—or returns for me.

While I'm trapped, I suppose I ought to reflect on how this all began, and how I started on the path that led to this cell. . . .



ONE

When the mail arrived, it should have been the best day of my life.

Mail—physical mail—came once a week at best. The Juhwang Clan of tiger spirits had made our home on the world of Yonggi for the past several centuries. Our ties to the land dated back to the steaders who settled this planet back when traveling between stars took decades, or even centuries. My grandmother, the Matriarch of the clan, claimed she could remember what the world had looked like before it was terraformed, when it was a ball of mud and toxic sludge. “Back then there *was* no mail,” she always said, her tail swishing ominously. “No food, no medical supplies, no fuel—nothing. That was before the Thousand Worlds came together, and you couldn’t ever rely on anyone but family.”

But when our home security system announced that the mail had been dropped off, all I cared about was whether there was anything for me. I’d been obsessed with the mail for the past three months, ever since I’d applied to the Space Forces Cadet Program.

Normally you could only join the Space Forces at the age of fifteen, but due to raids at the Thousand Worlds' borders, they'd started recruiting younger cadets to accustom them—*me*, I hoped—to the rigors of space travel at an earlier age. They especially welcomed applicants with supernatural natures suited to the service, such as goblins, celestials, and tigers, like me. Even if I hadn't already been eager to join, the Matriarch would have encouraged it. *It's important for us to build our power base*, she'd said mysteriously.

Every time the mail arrived, I hovered over it in hopes of the coveted response, maybe even an acceptance letter. And every time the response failed to arrive, I consoled myself by reading more of the Space Forces handbook so I would be ready the next day, just in case.

My aunt Sooni was the only one who didn't laugh at the way I was fixated on the mail. *Aunt* was approximate—she was at least a hundred years older than me. (Tiger spirits don't age the same way humans do.) Aunt Sooni's understanding was the only thing that made it bearable to be the youngest in the clan.

We were in the middle of some martial arts exercises that involved shifting between human and tiger form to dodge attacks when the mail drop arrived. Aunt Sooni was an orange-and-black blur as a tiger, and a gray one as a human. I, too, was an orange tiger, unlike my favorite relative, Uncle Hwan, who visited when he could. *He* was a rare white tiger, and I often wished I had been born that color. It was because of Uncle Hwan that I longed to be accepted by the Space Forces—to someday become a battle cruiser captain just like him.

"Focus, Sebin!" Aunt Sooni called when I stopped in mid-exercise and turned toward the mailbox in my eagerness to

pounce on the mail. “Remember discipline. Discipline is the most important thing. You have to finish the set.”

I mock-snarled at her. She cuffed me lightly on the shoulder, not hard enough to hurt, but with enough force to remind me of her supernatural strength. Even in her human form, that of a short, stocky woman with touches of frost in her hair, she could wrangle a fellow tiger. I’d learned that the hard way.

With a growl, I condensed back into my human shape. At thirteen I was already taller than she was, if only by a mere inch. (Half inch, according to her. I always said we should round up, and she only shook her head.)

“All right,” I said, resigned, because I knew Aunt Sooni was perfectly capable of snatching the mail and hiding it from me until I had performed my exercises to her satisfaction.

“Just for that,” she said, and this time I knew to suppress my groan, “we’ll add some high kicks. Go!”

Approximately four million kicks later, my legs burned with the exertion and Aunt Sooni declared herself satisfied with my efforts. “You know it’s important to stay in shape,” she said. “We have standards to uphold.”

I wasn’t so much concerned with the Space Forces’ standards as my own family’s expectations. We were the Juhwang Clan of Yonggi, after all, and, as the Matriarch liked to remind us, we had to be prepared in case our enemies moved against us, even if I’d never so much as witnessed an attack on the estate. Right now, that meant making sure I did all the exercises as perfectly as possible.

As much as my body hurt, I ached to sprint to the mailbox. My family had indulged me by letting me check the mail for the last month. *Normally I don’t reward moping*, my mother’s

nonbinary mate, my nini, had said in their usual dry tone, *but perhaps a little is understandable under the circumstances.*

Still, I didn't want Aunt Sooni to think of me as an irresponsible tiger cub, so I walked at her side. It was a good chance to recover my breath, anyway. If I was accepted, I'd have to do more than just make a good impression on my family. I was determined to excel in the Space Forces, maybe even outshine Uncle Hwan someday.

To reach the mailbox, we had to cross the estate's outer courtyard. Both the inner and outer courtyards, each spacious enough for tigers to roam in, were bright with flowers, cultivated by my parents and some of the others from time to time. You wouldn't think that tigers would care about gardening. But, as my mother liked to tell me, we thrived in nature, whether that meant overgrown groves of bamboo or the graceful sweep of willow branches. The art of gardening consisted of arranging plants so they looked like they had grown in the wild, except more picturesque.

I appreciated the gardens, but I yearned to leave the planet and see other worlds. I could watch the holo programs, which depicted everything from fantastical ruins to the extreme temperatures on tidally locked planets in other systems, where one hemisphere was in eternal day and the other in eternal night. But it would be so much better to visit those places myself! And my best chance of doing that was getting into the Space Forces.

"Here we are," Aunt Sooni called as the mailbox came into sight. It was shaped like a miniature pagoda whose roof came off if you worked a cunningly hidden latch. I loved everything about it, even its absurdity.

More intriguingly, someone had left a package at its base.

That couldn't be for me, but I was curious about it anyhow.

Aunt Sooni, taking advantage of my distraction, added, "Race you!" and shimmered into her tiger form as she sprang into action. I did likewise, reveling in the fact that I became stronger and swifter in my native shape. As a tiger, you couldn't tell I was thirteen years old. I looked almost adult, complete with a fine orange pelt and deep black stripes, and a long, long tail.

Perhaps it wasn't strictly fair that Aunt Sooni had started the race before I'd had a chance to shift. But one thing my family emphasized was the importance of being adaptable. I remembered the last time I'd complained about the conditions of a training exercise being unfair. My mother had looked at me with disappointment and then explained that in time of war, *everything* might be "unfair." The enemy wouldn't give their opponent a fair chance, so a true warrior dealt with the situation instead of griping about it. From then on I'd kept my mouth shut and redoubled my efforts.

Spurred by the memory, I gathered myself for one great leap as we neared the mailbox. Even so, Aunt Sooni's own was more powerful than mine, and she arrived a second before I did. Her momentum carried her past the mailbox, and she swung back around, resuming her human form as she did so.

I changed back as well, trailing in her wake. "I almost had you!" I said, knowing that she wouldn't hear it as a challenge the way the rest of my relatives would.

"You did indeed," Aunt Sooni agreed. "Well done."

I ducked my head, trying not to let her see how much the words of praise meant to me. The rest of my family rarely gave out compliments. That didn't distract me from my purpose,

however. I wanted to rise on my toes and reach for the mailbox, but I knew I had to await permission. Even Aunt Sooni had her stern side.

“Very good,” she said, acknowledging my patience. “You may get the mail.”

I had to restrain myself from lunging forward and picking up the package to shake it. The box was larger than I had realized, no more than a foot wide and only six inches deep, but almost half as long as I was. Aunt Sooni might not mind, but the other tigers would disapprove. *It's probably something completely unrelated*, I told myself as my heart pounded. I couldn't let Aunt Sooni see my hope—or my dread.

From time to time we got curios from Uncle Hwan, accompanied by brief but exquisitely calligraphed notes on expensive mulberry paper. More often the Matriarch received cryptic little parcels, which I wasn't allowed to ask about or show interest in. The Matriarch had made it especially clear that I was never to mention the existence of those parcels to any outsider who might happen to show up at the estate. I assumed this larger package, too, had to be kept secret.

I made myself step forward and calmly work the catch of the mailbox as though it were an ordinary task, as opposed to the one thing standing between me and my lifelong dream. The catch did its trick, and the roof of the miniature pagoda sprang open on its hinge. Inside was a letter, which I picked up as decorously as I could manage. I sucked in a breath when I turned it over and saw that it was addressed to one Juhwang Sebin and stamped in red ink with the seal of the Space Forces. A letter for me! I was in an agony of suspense wondering if it contained good news or bad.

Aunt Sooni's reaction took me by surprise. "Check to see if there's another one in there?" I could smell her own dread, as if she expected bad news. She could have nudged me aside and reached into the mailbox herself, but she was allowing me to save face.

I peered into the mailbox. She was right. I'd been so excited to find a letter for me that I hadn't thought to look for anything else.

"Huh" was all I could think to say when I drew out the second letter. It *also* bore the red seal of the Space Forces. But unlike my letter, *mine*, it was addressed in formal calligraphy to the Matriarch of the Juhwang Tiger Clan.

Then I knew. I should have figured it out sooner. The box contained a sword—an officer's sword. Like the one Uncle Hwan always wore on his visits. That, plus the letter, meant—No. It couldn't be.

I could only think of one reason why the Space Forces would return a captain's sword: because he was dead. My eyes stung. It wasn't the first time a member of the Juhwang Tiger Clan had died in service, but I'd hoped to follow in Uncle Hwan's footsteps and make him proud.

Not Uncle Hwan! I thought in dismay. The uncle who had always made sure to bring me something special every time he visited, whether it was a knife of my own or a cinnamon candy. The uncle who had told me stories about his adventures as an officer, fighting off pirates or saving his comrades from the Thousand Worlds' enemies.

"We must take this to the Matriarch right away," Aunt Sooni said. She pursed her lips as she regarded the package, her expression grim.

A memory flashed before me of the last time Uncle Hwan had visited the estate. He'd been resplendent in his Space Forces uniform, dark blue with shining gold braid, and along with his blaster he'd had a sword belted at his side. He'd let me look at the sword up close and then draw it from its sheath for a magical moment.

It was a masterwork, that sword. Even its sheath was finely ornamented, with gold scrollwork and symbols pieced together from mother-of-pearl. The hilt was wrapped in oiled leather, and a blue silk tassel hung from its pommel. I'd been disappointed to discover that the blade itself was blunt, and the corner of my uncle's mouth had crooked upward in amusement.

"This sword represents my honor," he'd said. "It is my honor that gives it its edge, not the metal itself."

I'd said I understood, although I didn't. Honor was all very well, but what good was a blunt sword against pirates or raiders from the Jeweled Worlds?

Now, as I looked down at the box, I trembled. Surely it couldn't contain Uncle Hwan's sword. "It can't be," I said to myself.

"That's not for us to find out," Aunt Sooni said briskly. Still, that acrid worry-smell came from her again. She hoisted the box with ease. "You can come with me, since I'm sure the Matriarch will want to hear your news, too."

We padded solemnly through the courtyard and to the separate building where the Matriarch kept her residence. From the outside, it resembled the mailbox pagoda with its peaked roof and decorations in the traditional five colors of black, red, green, yellow, and blue. Someone's idea of a joke, although I had a hard time imagining the Matriarch had a sense of humor.

We stopped by the profusely blooming azalea bushes whose magenta blossoms masked the entrance to the pagoda. I craned my head back to squint at one of the thoroughly modern windows above us. I glimpsed a shadow moving behind it. The Matriarch liked to keep an eye on all the approaches.

“Matriarch,” Aunt Sooni called out, “we have a package addressed to you, and a letter from the Space Force.” She used the most deferential language, on account of the Matriarch being the head of the family, and the oldest one here.

The wind rustled the azalea blossoms and their glossy leaves. For a moment, I wondered if the Matriarch had heard us. Even if she hadn’t, we’d have to wait here until she acknowledged us. It was her way.

Then a hoarse voice with a hint of a growl in it said from above, “Come in, Sooni, and bring the cub with you.”

I hated being called *cub* as if I were still a child, but the fact remained that I was the youngest tiger spirit in the family. Besides, I knew better than to object. I followed Aunt Sooni up the stairs to the foyer, where we both took off our shoes before continuing up the stairs into the pagoda proper.

The Matriarch sat cross-legged on an embroidered floor cushion, her back straight. Her long white hair had a single black streak remaining in it, and she had yellow eyes, which made her look impossibly tigerish even in human form. I had never seen her in anything but a hanbok, the old-fashioned dress of the Thousand Worlds. The jogori, or jacket, was a faded orange with subtle gold embroidery, and her chima, or skirt, was an equally faded black.

We bowed deeply. I was impressed by how Aunt Sooni managed it without dropping the box on her toes.

“Bring it here, Sooni,” the Matriarch said in her growling voice.

Aunt Sooni did.

“Open it.”

Aunt Sooni kept her fingernails sharp, as did all the elders in the family. Or maybe she’d turned them partway into claws. I wasn’t sure which. I didn’t have that kind of fine-grained control over my shape-shifting; most tigers didn’t. She sliced the package’s tape and opened the lid.

My breath caught when I recognized the sword.

“It’s Hwan’s,” Aunt Sooni said.

The Matriarch’s eyes flicked to me, sharp as a knife-cut. “So it is.”

The Matriarch noticed my distress. Instead of rebuking me directly, she said to Aunt Sooni, “Sebin is disgracing themself.”

I knew she’d meant for me to hear. I immediately lowered my gaze, flushing in shame.

The Matriarch opened the letter that Aunt Sooni gave her. Her eyes flickered. Then she looked at the two of us.

“Space Forces Command informs us,” the Matriarch said, “that Hwan of the Juhwang Tiger Clan stands accused of treason and has disgraced his uniform. There is a warrant out for his arrest. He will be court-martialed upon his capture.”

That can’t be right! I wanted to cry out. Even though I was relieved that Hwan wasn’t dead, this was almost worse. Uncle Hwan was the one who’d taught me about honor. He couldn’t have *deserted*.

And if Uncle Hwan had been branded a traitor, what did that mean for me? Had my dream of serving among the stars just evaporated with the arrival of Uncle Hwan’s arrest warrant?



TWO

The Matriarch had other things on her mind. “The Space Forces have insulted the clan’s honor and threatened one of my agents. If I suffer them to cast out Hwan like this, the rest of my supporters will be next. This cannot be allowed to stand.”

My heart almost seized. Did she mean I wouldn’t be allowed to go, even if I got into the cadet program? Then I felt like a traitor myself for the thought. Shouldn’t I care more about the clan’s honor than my petty personal ambition to fight pirates and invaders?

The Matriarch harrumphed. “I can’t believe Hasun allowed this to happen. I must have words with them.”

I swallowed. My uncle, Rear Admiral Hasun, was one of the Matriarch’s distant cousins. I wasn’t sure of the exact relationship, as our family tree had unexpected branches on other worlds. Hasun was also the highest-ranking relative I had in the Space Forces, but the Matriarch outranked them within the clan. I didn’t want their job, which sounded like sitting around strategizing and filling out paperwork. I hoped to have

a starship of my own someday, maybe even a battle cruiser like Uncle Hwan's *Pale Lightning*. Then I realized that Uncle Hwan didn't have a ship anymore—there was no way Space Forces Command would allow a captain who'd been branded a traitor to keep one—and I felt worse than before.

Earlier, I'd wondered from time to time if people would say that I hadn't earned my cadet posting on my own, that my relatives had pulled strings to get me in. Now I faced the opposite problem. How would anyone take me seriously if they knew I was related to an alleged traitor? It wasn't the kind of thing I could keep hidden. The moment people discovered my clan, they would make the connection to Admiral Hasun, and now to Uncle Hwan.

"We will have to call a family council," the Matriarch declared. My heart sank, only to lift, cautiously, when she added, "The cub will attend."

Not for the first time, I wished she would address me directly instead of referring to me as *the cub* as though I were a peculiarly ambulatory statue. Or maybe an artifact someone had left behind from the days of the planet's colonization, kept out of obligation rather than any real affection.

Aunt Sooni, who could guess my thoughts, coughed politely. "Sebin is right here, Matriarch."

Then the Matriarch's words penetrated. I'd never attended a council before. They'd always been for the adults. She might call me *cub*, but perhaps she finally thought I was ready for more adult responsibilities—and a say in my own fate.

To summon the council, the Matriarch rang a bell that she kept in the pagoda. It had a low tone, not overly loud, but I'd heard it throughout the house and beyond in times past. For a

human household it might have made more sense to summon everyone by paging their data-slates, but with our family, various members might be in tiger form, or sparring, or otherwise away from their slates at any given time. The bell, though old-fashioned, got the job done.

The ringing awoke foreboding in me. As a cub, I'd often wondered if the elders were discussing some terrible fate for me. When I'd confessed my fear to my mother and Nini, the two of them had ruffled my hair, then said soberly that if I was the source of the trouble, I'd know it. Their words hadn't reassured me much.

Despite the Matriarch's insistence on honor above all things, I had grown up with folktales of tiger warriors who lured their prey closer through tricks. One that nagged at me was about a wicked tiger who had disguised herself as someone's grandmother in order to gobble them down. It was at odds with all the family stories of stern, brave tiger warriors who'd been celebrated by the Thousand Worlds. I'd never dared to ask about the disparity, sensing it would get me into trouble.

Aunt Sooni nudged me out of my reverie and guided me toward a seat near the door. "This is your place," she said, "since you're the youngest. Don't speak unless spoken to."

Her warning wasn't necessary. I had no intention of opening my mouth in a gathering of full-fledged tiger spirits. Clutching my envelope, I sat.

It didn't take long for my mother and Nini to arrive. They must have been training in the nearby gardens. I sometimes wondered what they were training *for*. My family always talked about the nebulous enemy as though they might attack at any moment, something I had never experienced. But I reminded

myself that it was our family's duty to be prepared for any eventuality, even an unlikely raid on the planet.

My parents glanced at me with surprise before bowing to the Matriarch and taking their seats in front of me. I took the opportunity to study them as they passed. I'd gotten my sturdy build from my mother. My pale amber eyes and snub nose came from Nini. Like Nini, I wore my hair shaved at the sides, with bangs. I wished I could run to them for reassurance, but they would have chided me for weakness.

The rest of the family traipsed in, paying their respects to the Matriarch. There was Great-Uncle Myung, who had an artificial leg replacing the one he'd lost in the Space Forces. He'd served another eight years before retiring. Great-Uncle Chin-Mae accompanied him everywhere. And Great-Aunt Jung-Soo, who was the Matriarch's right hand, and who wore a hanbok similar to hers, except in simple blue and white.

There were seven tiger spirits here, including me. It made for a crowd. If we had shifted to tiger form, there wouldn't have been enough room in the pagoda for all of us. The clan included other members, but these were the ones with the right to sit in council. I knew that my presence was an exception to the usual state of affairs.

"Acceptable response time," the Matriarch said, looking at a clock on its stand. Its appearance was deceptive: it resembled a traditional water clock, but its bowls were empty of any liquid, and it sported an ordinary holo panel that told the time. Less than five minutes had elapsed since she'd rung the bell.

Everyone in the room stiffened. I did too, by reflex. The Matriarch meant those words as a criticism. She had expected better, and the family had failed.

“But I have a more important matter to discuss with you all,” she went on.

Everyone stiffened even more, which I hadn’t thought possible. I held myself like a soldier at attention. My back ached from the tension. I reminded myself that I had to endure.

The Matriarch’s description of Uncle Hwan’s disgrace met with immediate growls, especially from Great-Aunt, who had been particularly close to him. “Hwan must have made powerful enemies,” she said. “It’s the only explanation.”

“Hwan would never do anything to disgrace the family’s honor,” Great-Uncle Myung agreed, although his mouth twisted in distaste. He and Uncle Hwan didn’t usually get along.

A snarl of outrage on Hwan’s behalf started up in the back of my throat as well, and I hastily bit my tongue. Still, it was heartening to know that the family all agreed there had been some miscarriage of justice.

“Surely we can appeal to Space Forces Command,” Great-Aunt said. “Admiral Hasun—”

“I will call Hasun right now,” the Matriarch said, “and make it clear that they are to answer immediately.”

I bit my tongue again. Hasun didn’t serve in the field, despite their high rank, so perhaps they’d be available. By mysterious means, the Matriarch had arranged for Hasun to take a post on a starbase in-system, close enough that we could talk to them directly instead of relying on the couriers for faster-than-light communications. Hasun had apparently objected to this, calling it “high-handed,” but the Matriarch’s connections—whatever they were—were too powerful to be denied.

Hasun did something in logistics, making sure that troops were sent where they were needed, along with all the

necessary supplies. I'd always expected the Matriarch to find the admiral's lack of a more warlike role disappointing, given the family's glorification of war. Instead, she made cryptic comments about how useful Hasun's position was for her schemes. For my part, I couldn't imagine wanting to work away from the front lines and the action, no matter how crucial logistics were. My family liked to emphasize the job's importance, even if it wasn't as *fun*.

Great-Aunt checked her slate. "It's 0300 hours where the admiral is," she noted, her voice neutral.

Ugh, three in the morning! Even my family didn't make me train at that hour. At least not often.

"Then Hasun is unlikely to have other engagements and will be available to take my call," the Matriarch said firmly.

Like everything the Matriarch owned, her slate had been embellished to give it a more traditional flair. She kept hers in a case that resembled a bronze-backed mirror, complete with etched ornaments in the shapes of clouds and various symbols for good luck and long life. It even had a faint green patina, although it didn't smell like real bronze but some kind of plastic.

The entire room fell into a hush as the Matriarch said in her imperious voice, "Connect me to Admiral Hasun of the Juhwang Tiger Clan."

"Your will, Matriarch," the tablet responded. My grandmother had always preferred a verbal interface. As for me, Aunt Sooni had taught me to set my tablet to vibration mode or simple visual alerts so I didn't disturb any of the elders. But then, the Matriarch ruled the clan. It was a different situation.

I kept still, thinking furiously. I'd only met Hasun in person once, before their promotion to rear admiral. They'd visited

the estate and had a spectacular quarrel with the Matriarch. I wasn't sure why they'd argued, but their relationship had been frosty ever since. Hasun had never visited again.

The tablet chimed once. And again. And kept chiming. The Matriarch's expression didn't change, but I could smell her growing anger. It's hard to hide any strong emotion, especially from a room full of tigers.

Then a holo image blazed into life above the slate. I'd only seen their visage a handful of times, but I recognized Rear Admiral Hasun, if only because they had the family's deep-set eyes and flat nose. *Tiger nose*, Aunt Sooni liked to call it. Right now those eyes, a darker amber than mine, were bleary from lack of sleep. Hasun appeared in the blue Space Forces uniform, only slightly rumpled. I guessed that Hasun had changed into it for the call, since I couldn't imagine that they slept in it. For some reason, the fact that half their collar was sticking up made me like them more—that small evidence of imperfection, so little tolerated in my home.

“Matriarch Juhwang,” Admiral Hasun said. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don't pretend you don't know.”

“You will have to be specific,” Hasun said. Despite their deferential speech forms, I was impressed that the admiral hadn't rolled over and shown the Matriarch their belly. I rarely saw anyone stand up to her at home. “For the sake of clarity.”

“For the sake of *clarity*,” the Matriarch said, her voice lowering ominously, “I will ask how you could allow the Space Forces to declare Captain Hwan a traitor, whatever . . . peccadilloes may have been involved. Hwan is *useful* to me, Hasun.”

Peccadilloes? I wondered what that meant. It struck me as

strange that the Matriarch didn't seem surprised by Hwan's disgrace.

Hasun lifted an eyebrow. "Matriarch," they said, "the situation is more serious than you realize."

I couldn't smell Hasun's aggravation through the holo, but I could definitely hear an edge to their voice. I wasn't the only one, either. Great-Uncle Myung's nostrils flared. Even Aunt Sooni, who was normally so cheerful, winced.

"How so?" the Matriarch barked.

I kept myself from shrinking back. *She's family*, I told myself. *She wouldn't do anything to hurt you.* Besides, I wasn't the object of her disapproval. Not at the moment, anyway.

"I wasn't on the board of inquiry that investigated Hwan's record," Hasun said dryly. "But, Matriarch, even in absentia, they found him guilty of high treason. It's not just a simple case of him taking more leave than he was entitled to."

I choked back an incredulous laugh. Uncle Hwan had never struck me as the type to relax, not even when he visited the family. The last time he'd been home, I hadn't been able to keep up with his strict training regimen, though he'd smiled and nodded approval at my fledgling efforts. I'd vowed to myself then that I would do better, and a part of me was disappointed now, however childishly, that I wouldn't get a chance to show him how I'd improved. The absurd image of my uncle swanning off to some pagoda near a carp-filled lake framed by graceful willows, perhaps while sipping a perfectly steeped cup of tea, presented itself to me.

Aunt Sooni must have scented my amusement. Without looking at me, she stepped on my toe. I kept from yelping in protest and forced myself to calm down.

I wasn't the only one who was frozen in place. The Matriarch's face remained a mask of severe dignity, but she stank of barely suppressed fury. Her eyes burned like star-embers, and if she'd turned to me I would have shrunk from her in sheer terror.

"Captain Hwan," the Matriarch said, "is not capable of bringing disgrace upon the *clan*, which is the only standard that really matters. He has served me long and well."

"Former captain," Hasun corrected. "The Space Forces regret that Hwan's actions reflect upon the family, but the board of inquiry's findings were airtight. He abandoned his duty to his crew and his ship to steal a magical artifact."

"If he went after the Dragon Pearl," the Matriarch countered, "he had good reason. He never made a move without my knowing about it."

The Dragon Pearl? Surely she was joking. It was a singular magical artifact, known for the ability to terraform worlds into splendor, or destroy them outright. It had been lost for some time. But wouldn't the Space Forces *want* one of their captains to secure such a valuable item?

I squirmed inside. The family's honor was important. But a member of the Space Forces also had an obligation to their crew and their chain of command. Even an admiral like Hasun ultimately answered to the councilors who ruled in the Pearled Halls. Surely the Matriarch wouldn't act in a way that caused a conflict? I opened my mouth to interject, then thought better of it.

"There's no misunderstanding," Hasun said. "I can't share more details, you understand, but what I saw was quite damning."

“Hasun of the Juhwang Clan,” the Matriarch said, “are you telling me that your cousin is a traitor in the eyes of the Space Forces?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“You will fix this immediately. Hwan’s disgrace will only embolden the clan’s enemies.”

This time my mouth ran away with me. “Matriarch,” I blurted out.

Everyone in the room stared at me like I was a rabbit who had wandered in at dinnertime. My back prickled.

“Speak your piece, cub,” the Matriarch hissed.

“It wouldn’t be proper for an admiral to show favor to the clan,” I said, making sure I spoke calmly and clearly. My heart was beating too quickly, and I knew that everyone in the room could hear it, but there was nothing I could do about that.

“Not openly, no,” the Matriarch said. “Clan business is not for outsiders.” It wasn’t agreement.

“Cub?” Hasun wondered aloud.

There must have been some issue with the viewing angle. The Matriarch tilted her slate.

Hasun nodded. “Ah, I see Sebin. By the way,” the admiral added, their expression softening, “congratulations.”

“S-sir?” I asked, startled into a stammer.

“Courier service claimed the letter had been delivered,” Hasun said. A wrinkle formed between their eyebrows. “Was there an error?”

“No, I received the letter,” I said, aware of everyone staring at me. “I haven’t had a chance to open it yet.” I hadn’t dared to. I didn’t want to draw the Matriarch’s ire down on me.

Too late. Her eyes, burning amber, looked as though they

were ready to reduce me to cinders on the spot. I realized now that the family council meetings were not a privilege, but a trial by fire. “Read us the letter,” she said.

I ducked my head. “Yes, Matriarch.”

The letter had a florid opening. I scarcely recognized *Our esteemed applicant, Sebin of the Zubwang Tiger Clan* as myself. Especially when my name had been calligraphed with such extravagant flair, in contrast to the more restrained style of the handwriting surrounding it.

But the rest of it . . . If my heart had been beating too fast before, now it was fit to burst out of my chest.

“Space Forces Command wishes to inform you of your acceptance to our venerable institution as a cadet. Report to Camp White Pine at Starbase Borasaekbam for orientation and basic training at 0800 local time on the fifth of the tenth month, after which you will receive your first assignment.”

The letter also included a travel warrant to cover the expenses of the journey.

“How interesting that the Space Forces Command rewards one of our clan at the same time that it declares an honorable tiger a traitor,” the Matriarch observed acidly.

“It’s a coincidence,” Admiral Hasun said. “The committee wouldn’t have denied such a sterling candidate.”

I glowed to hear myself spoken of in such terms. It wasn’t often that my family offered praise.

“In any case, I wish you all the best.” Hasun signed off before anyone could get in a word edgewise.

“It does seem like a suspicious ‘coincidence,’” my mother said into the uncomfortable silence, squelching my rush of joy. I wished she would smile at me, or say a word of congratulations.

But it wasn't her way, and I had to resign myself to that fact.

"Regardless," the Matriarch said, "we must make the most of the opportunity."

I didn't understand what she meant by that.

The Matriarch's burning stare returned to me. "You are young for this," she mused, "but you, too, may serve the clan. Stand straighter."

I did. I should have felt honored that she thought of me as useful. Instead, the lump of dread in my belly only grew heavier.

"Hold out your right hand," the Matriarch said.

I did so without question or hesitation. Either would have gotten me ejected from the meeting. I didn't want the Matriarch to think I was defying her.

"I don't know how Hwan could have been so careless as to allow those weaklings to corner him," the Matriarch muttered. "But Hasun has grown overly bold in their time away from the clan. They may send the most delicious hydroponically grown tangerines from their posting, as if I can be *bribed*, but it hasn't escaped my notice that they don't visit."

I wasn't sure what this had to do with me, so I kept my mouth shut. Still, I allowed myself a small mote of hope. If Uncle Hwan wasn't dead, maybe I could help clear his name. Whatever it took.

The Matriarch took up a bronze-handled knife that she kept on her table. I shuddered. I couldn't help it. The knife smelled faintly of blood.

"You will swear to serve the clan in all matters," the Matriarch said. "Swear by the White Tiger of the West."

"By the White Tiger of the West, I swear to serve the clan

in all matters,” I repeated obediently as my family looked on.

I knew this was a deadly serious oath, one that would exact a terrible price if I broke it. Four supernatural animals guarded the cardinal directions: the White Tiger of the West, the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, and the Black Tortoise of the North. When I was younger, I’d asked what accounted for *up* and *down* in space, the axis of a three-dimensional world, and I’d been told not to concern myself with such insolent questions.

While I contemplated the consequences of offending the White Tiger, the Matriarch brought the knife down on my upraised palm, leaving a gash. Blood welled up and dripped down onto the floor. I was keenly aware that I was bleeding amid predators, even if the predators were my own family.

“Remember your oath,” the Matriarch said. “You will go out among the stars, meet comrades great and small, and learn the ways of a warrior. But above all things, the compass that guides you must be the way of the clan.”