

KAWANIES, COLONY

by Ching-In Chen

PROLOGUE

Bee

In the time of the open sun, we bathed in air and gathered what we needed from the thick soup of the sky. The first sign was the piling dirt in all directions. We argued amongst ourselves as to what it meant. Some thought it was a warning of impending disaster; others that it might be the response to the dry times. Because we did not agree and not much made sense to the diviners in those first days, we did nothing to prepare ourselves in either direction. Instead, we observed the fast to obtain clarity.

The sky grew thicker. Eventually, our duties forced us to break fast although we hadn't reached enough of a critical mass to begin the rituals. We did not fast again.

In time, the piling dirt told its own stories. Reeking of death, theirs and ours. These stories frightened us, enough to make us all feel sure that those newly roaming were bound to discover what they hadn't yet.

"Hai!" is the warning cry sounding in low places. We wait for now. "Hai!"

PART I

Claudia

Smelling of the basil she collects each night, she usually sleeps most of the sunlight away. She did not want to undertake the journey, but her family's debt is now almost paid in full.

The first night, she volunteered to collect mending herbs with the other women in the early evenings. She had wanted to keep as busy as she could and outside the cabin when the Captain was back from his daytime duties. He said that everybody had to contribute, but grumbled the first night she left with her shawl tightly wrapped around her nose and mouth. "Against infection," she told him.

The wives tolerated her presence, but gave her the worst job -- to collect the plant to ensure a safe journey for the already-dead into the next life. As soon as she returned, he grabbed her thin wrists and pulled her to him, bade her to undo the buttons of her dress.

Each night, she has charted the progress of the enterprise through the desires of the

Captain's body. On the night when dynamite blew up an entire cell of diggers, the Captain entered the cabin long after midnight. Gripping the threads of her unruly hair, he pushed her face into the pillow and took her like a dog.

Another night, triumphant and drunk from absinthe, he did not return until almost sunrise. His men threw open the door, dragged his heavy frame across the room and deposited him with difficulty in the bed. As they left, he laughed and ordered her to bed. He had an itch he needed her to scratch immediately, the sooner the better, he said loudly in the direction of his officers' retreating backs. She ignored his cackling, slowly removing his soaked shirt and her own dress before blowing out the light.

Last night, he was not drunk. He requested that she keep the light on; he wanted to watch her face. He stopped moving every time he noticed that her eyes were closed; he wanted her to look at him. He wanted her to sing to him in that voice, the one which only came out in the thick husk of night. He wanted her to touch him, there, there, and here.

When the Captain closes the door gently behind him, she leaves her eyes shut. She listens to the silence for a minute, then stretches her sore arms slowly over her head. She searches the Captain's drawer when he goes below.

Rifka

Along the spidery path, Rifka adjusts the sharpened knife against the rope of his left leg, waiting for Platt to move forward. Only Platt knows the plan of action from those above ground -- to discourage leaks if any of them are captured by the numbers.

"Or so he says," one of the grumblers had said derisively, while they repaired damage done to the two bunkers next to the tunnel they had just flushed out. Platt had gone up above for his orders and the men felt free to talk shit about their leader's fuck-ups with Platt's second-in-command freely participating.

"They caught 'em over there on that ridge, with the map of the installment."

"That's a rumor and we only know that shit because Platt told us. Up there getting his fill of sun while we're stuck here."

Rifka had focused his attention on packing the soil tightly into the wall of the bunker, saying nothing.

When the soldiers had first arrived, they believed their discipline would see them through what needed to be done. They had been trained; they had protocol to follow. But down in the tunnels, each mission could last for weeks before the men resurfaced. Platt kept fucking up, ignoring the growing malaise of his men -- the grumblings, the weeks, the mutters, the days, the dynamite blasts everybody could hear, the whispers from nowhere, the rumbling, the dirt walls, the shaking, the rotting hands in the walls, the damn rodents, the

dirt, the cascade when the walls collapsed, the shouting, the orders, the noise, the orders above all else, above leaving your man down who is not dead yet, anything to follow those damn orders. Anything could happen as long as there was a reasonable explanation for those in charge above. As long as there was one clear story, a collective voice agreeing to the chain of events.

The rumbling in the walls again, unintelligible voices coming from up ahead, the cramped heat, but Platt persists! He insists that orders are to move forward, to gain ground. Impatient, he steps forward, expecting his men to follow.

They do not.

Two of the grumblers, one on each side of the motionless pack, move towards Platt.

Platt, turning back, sees the first, quickly draws his gun. Shoots down the man on the left, but the other the other advancing unstoppable delivering the fatal shot like a crack of daylight blowing open the leader's head.

But he does not win. The second man goes down immediately, shot in the back.

The group, stunned, looks towards the shooter. Rifka.

The men move in his direction. "Set the order right. Shot the killer without hesitation."

Above their murmurs, Rifka's commanding voice -- "We won't survive by backstabbing and disorderly conduct. You have a choice -- whoever wants to leave should do so now; otherwise, my word stands."

The men gather around him.

Essex

Lugger of equipment. Last son of a failing farmer. Last son of a dead farmer and a whore. There is a new man in his father's fields, one he will never know, except for his red cough and his mouth like a pelican beak slurping up the mother's porridge.

Since he is the one who leaves. "High-stakes gambler. Seasick sailor. Wooden boy orphan," says the mother in parting.

The end of the line of groaning men sledging into the obelisk rock. Obstinate tunnel.

"Wrong time of year, before the rains," the men, the ones who did not sign up to go underground, grumble down the line. "Better to be above ground and laboring like a mule than underground with the enemy," they tell him when they come to take their drink.

Thin carrier of dreams and oblivion. Holder of the bag which empties each hour as the men rotate position, come to take their allotted drink and urinate on the cracks of their afternoon labor.

Elizabeth

The brittle papers she slid under her shirt rough against her skin as she hurries towards the angry sea. She imagines the singing of the women drifting towards her out of the ground. The language she cannot comprehend, but has already dreamed about.

"What are you saying," her husband has asked her, shaking her awake.

"I don't know," she replies each time, pretending to go back to sleep so he won't question her anymore.

But she understands the essence of the songs -- desire for a clear day, the return of a lover, an excised heart to forget what has been left behind. This Elizabeth had motioned to the woman the last time.

Elizabeth waits against the shelter, watching for any movement and listening to the wind. Born to a fisher family, she is drawn to water. The sky has only harbored the crying wind these past two weeks and she has not been able to return.

She will be missed by the others if she does not return by the time the sun dips its molten head into the sea. She only has this time because her husband requested it, citing her need to rest. She is a grieving woman, after all, saying hello and goodbye to the first bundle, a little terror of a not-quite-baby born into a new world, so they allow her a few hours in the late afternoons to herself.

She only slips out here every so often, even less now that the Captain has assigned her a sentry to check up on her occasionally. She suspects that the time allotted to her for grief is almost up, and she will be expected to return to the duties assigned to her.

Elizabeth smells the woman first. Seasalt and citrus, light as spring. The woman's body is compact and sturdy, a brown a shade darker than the dirt under her feet. It is the third time Elizabeth has been here, waiting for her counterpart, counting her breaths and listening to the sky.

At the moment the woman emerges from the head of the tunnel, Elizabeth grips her loose outer garment with one hand and slides the other up along her prickly skin. In one fluid motion, Elizabeth unearths the precious cargo and reaches towards the tunnel woman. The woman's smile wafts across her face, and she is gone in the intake of a breath.

Westport

The Captain's execution order -- flick of his fingers light against his throat. He knows the Captain well enough to interpret these signs, a map for the day's action unfurling with the sun. No incriminating words floating in the air between them.

He had come upon the Captain's apprentice rifling through the Captain's wooden chest. She simply stopped and stared at him, calm as a red-throated diver. It took him a moment to move into the room where, voice sweet, she asked if he was going to report her to the Captain. He backed away from the door, shaking his head wordlessly.

Two weeks before, her glistening hair in the line of inspection. He didn't dare to look too long, but nodded sternly at her. She tilted her head back as if to look more fully at him, then gathered herself up and swept past him indoors.

After that first inspection, he listened for her bronze laugh and her clear voice across the room. He made a habit upon entering a room to scan for her dark head or to look out when the women foraged, hoping to catch sight of her graceful hands plucking the basil.

Claudia was careful to not be caught again and treated him no differently than she had before -- not exactly ignoring him, but not acknowledging him either. In the winter, he had watched with concern when her hair grew thin and light and she missed several gatherings with the other women. His wife Elizabeth had been summoned to attend to her, but she didn't talk about what transpired in the Captain's cabin. He didn't ask, but was satisfied to see her in the evening out with the women again when the weather warmed.

The rumors started with Elizabeth's missing silver clasp, then some disappeared maps. The most recent loss, a large case of dynamite.

The Captain did not make any public announcements, but changed the schedules of the sentries and implemented random searches.

Westport and the Captain's other lieutenants received extra overnight shifts where they watched the sentries roaming the compound like forlorn ghosts. He never saw her during these night haunts though he often posted outside the Captain's door heavysset against all sound and light.

Week after week, the sentries reported to duty and switched out with their replacements, settling into a drowsy rhythm.

He matches the key to the lock and opens the door to the Captain's room. She sits on the bed and continues to look at the wall ahead. His head, he feels like he's been in action, but the day has just begun. She looks as if she has been waiting for him for some time. He looks at her black bullet eyes and sleek head and forces himself to march over and loosen her bindings. She does not release her breath. Taking hold of her wrists, he pulls her quickly to her feet. She does not cry out even though he is purposefully rough. She looks straight ahead with her metal eyes, past his solitary body, out the door.

He leads her outside, past the tramped-down green towards the summer trees, towards the singing river, towards the long and lonely mountains.

INTERMISSION

Ess

Yes, we fled. The breaking of the soil. The warning of the swarming bees. The first of the guards. The alarm set up for this purpose.

Yes, we settle into our skin for the winter. Yes, let the ice form over the old cisterns.

PART II

Four

Sharp-nosed, pointy-eared, toasted firecracker skin. The tunnel rats come upon him, a shadowy slump in the pocket of the cave. The first rat leads the others, a rope firm around his waist, a dagger in one hand, a flashlight in the other. The ones behind him carry grenades and gallons of petricide.

They felt the rumble through the dirt walls and moved carefully towards the direction where it might have come from. Everything here is booby-trapped; every step a possible last. It is an odd war where the combatants do not come out in the open. A war of attrition.

He is not such an unfamiliar creature. He looks like he could be a son back home, not yet old enough to join the army, instead of underground, setting a mis-armed explosive. Yet their first impulse is to dissect and study him. His right arm, halfway to free. Jagged bone and blood escaping skin. An eye missing its twin.

Their medics arrive next, as they always have through each of these wars.

Eight

Eight will remember if she calms down, enough to breathe and loosen her back from the cool ceiling of packed dirt. Many couriers do not come back, but she has always managed to complete her assignments. Her long body, used to limited food and rest, has not met the sun in days. But she saw Four go down before her, heard the soft sigh of his sinking body and resisted the urge to move toward him. That would be against the regulations everyone agreed to before training together.

She did not expect to see it happen in front of her.

"For your protection," she hears the voice from the training manual repeat. The missing slice at the top of her right pinkie a binding oath. Reminder of her duty to all who shed their birth names and accepted the law of the numbers. Now her fingers pressed against the damp dirt, against that feeling which creeps upon her with no warning -- of everything collapsing, advancing upon, no way out, no breath, nothing but void, black.

"Stop, this is not helping." She coaches herself through the relaxing exercises which should have been instinctive, according to training. "One." Not him, don't think of him. Just breathe. "Two." Breathe. No, not him, not him, please, not him. "Three." Breathe. "Four. Don't think of it, focus now." She knows these tunnels better than the explorers, the outsiders with dynamite on their side. Exhale out.

Eighty-Six

Built like a plank, Eighty-Six has grown pliant over the years. He has not desired to be divining rod or compass, yet the young ones have all sought him out at one time or another during their training and have wanted to listen to what spills forth from his cracked lips. Because they seem to desire it, he speaks in cryptic, undecipherable messages which they ascertain as wise advice from an experienced healer.

He senses that he would have better enjoyed and taken advantage of this type of devotion and respect in his younger days. They continue to come and visit, bringing him little gifts and snacks he has never tasted before and grown fond of. He allows the visits even though he has nothing to give. Without surprise, he knows today nothing will speak through him to the nervous girl, Eight, kneeling in front of him.

So he asks her questions instead.

Order? Yes.

Trouble? Seen.

Who? Four.

Tunnel? Northwest.

Rat? Yes.

Seen? No.

Ah.

New? Maybe.

Not sure.

Oh. Oh.

And?

When the old man senses what is troubling her, he responds with non-committal prophecies which he hopes will help ease her path.

"It is as it is. Death a beginning. A hovering body will come and say goodbye. Let it go."

The rumor among them -- he is one of the few left who remembers the last time. At first, he denied this. When they ignored his protestations, he changed his reply to -- it is true that he was alive the last time, but he does not remember enough to be of much use. They come regardless.

These days, he cannot guarantee what will come to him; what does come must be false, the things in the flame that frighten him.

The young feasting on the flesh of the old. The women cutting out the tender pieces of other women to boil. The men sinking themselves into rotting bodies for pleasure. The sacrifice of the he-shes. The baby bonfire the size of the waterfall by the cisterns above. Roasting of tongues. Mounds of fingers. Eyeless heads. Chunks. The insects. Himself flayed and nailed to his own dirt wall.

These only come to him in bed. They must be what he feeds himself all day -- the words, the memories, the problems of the young that he has to think hard on. What does come must be false, the things in the flame that frighten him.

Sixteen

The days she visits the writers' rooms don't happen often since the requests have taken on a high-pitched frenzy of intensity. Sixteen and the other painters, the writers and the singers are the frontlines in the war of ideas. The new prophets in the war against frustration and disappointment. Against the dismantling of family homes for reinforcements of these subterranean and cold rooms. Against not seeing daylight and feeling like the only ones left to shrink into the earth and dissolve in the nights. Against the missing ones. Against the rats and cockroaches and ants, their many-legged undergods.

Sixteen's red and gold banners. The people's song ending in high notes sung throughout the tunnels by the women. Eighteen's poems easing the distance.

For the ones around them, these prophets are forever suspended in acts of creation, separate from the grief and anger, the dull blues Sixteen avoids though she sometimes has no choice. Treasures of the people, the special ones.

They have formed their own family -- to be able to pore over their dissatisfactions and disillusionments without censoring or worrying about the effect they will have on morale. And because most of them are far away from their own families, weeks passing between each missive.

The others are not always happy at the risks they take to hold these special meetings. In deference to these concerns, the painters have stayed in their quarters these past two weeks.

The second day after the last visit, Sixteen sent a small scroll, the word for Woman

splashed like fire across the bark of the paper. What Eighteen had sent back, Sixteen had shown no one, but inhaled into her mouth, listening to the sticky words smeared against her lips, jumping into the stream of tea that kept her awake and painting. Extra treats for the couriers to take in the morning to the friend she cannot see in person – Sixteen imagines the pleasure of unwrapping spines of sea urchin transformed into a small stream of stars, a wisp of her long-past sister, the juice of an invented purple flower spread on the precious paper.

The couriers were the only ones who were able to travel through the tunnels during the Silent Times, bringing news of recent captures and collapses, which meant that movement was limited between tunnel networks.

But today, after the hours stored up, days ticked by, Eight brings word that permission is granted for a creative meeting, tucking Sixteen's new painted scrolls into the lining of the pocket of her pants. She will deliver them to the next compound, where they will be passed along reverently to the next, then the next if all goes well. In the early days, the scrolls had made the return journey back to Sixteen, with words from her brother and mother scribbled in the fold. But she has not heard from them in a long time.

Eighteen has a special treat, sunflower seeds hidden among her stacks of paper. Sixteen, Eight and the others crack the seeds, extricating the pale bodies and tossing the hulls in the tiny bowls Eighteen has placed besides them.

They murmur, content to have these small moments of pleasure, brief moments of rest.

Forty-Four

She is running out of water, but she cannot leave yet. Four is due back from his mission anytime with the new coordinates for the next location. She busies herself by boiling the last of it for rice and tea which he will need for their final night. There's not much left in the bin. He won't eat it unless it's there ready and she'll tell him it will go to waste if he doesn't. He needs to grow himself; he has sacrificed enough for her old lady body already.

A week ago, they had allotted just enough to last until the move. Four had moved the grain, pickled vegetables, smoked meat, fermented sweet rice drink, water stored as evaporated pills and remaining firesticks to their secret bunker. What he did not have to say - it was also the new headquarters for the couriers and storage place for the batch of dynamite Four and a few others intercepted two days ago on the surface. A big win for them, she gathered.

She has been disinfecting. Now the last dregs of the biting spoiled liquid glare up at her through the bucket.

He is often late, and she cannot know why.

Fifty-One

The Couriers drag Seventy onto the makeshift operating table. He motions to Fifteen, who lifts the nut-oil lamp from its place on the wall and brings it close to the limp body of the old woman. The lamp illuminates her pale-ghost limbs. A sprouting red crater where Seventy's left breast should have been.

Eleven's practiced hand sponges the area with a damp rag. She knows what to do without being told from the training drills Fifty-One ran in the early days when The Cave was only a holding station for the injured. When the Couriers still stayed down below in The Silent Times, hiding when the Free Worlders roamed above within ear and smoke range.

First, the un-salvageable arrived -- the wreckage of half-arms, the white-gray flecks of bone embedded in the stew of rotting red meat, the white maggots, the round and limbless mass of flesh, the rusty fragments of water bottles and dried meal packs.

Fifty-One ordered Fifteen, Eleven, and Thirty-One to dig small niches in the tunnel-ways leading from the outer entrance down to the hidden backside of The Cave. Then, they would pack the remains of the day into the pliant and sticky clay, dragging the stinking blocks back down the dirt corridors to the spaces they dug.

When the Couriers began to find the carelessly discarded Free Worldeer ammo cans, Fifty-One decided these would be better barriers against the fetid odors that began to emanate from the walls of the dead. His crew filled up the gray containers for burial and passed smoke over each one.

Everyone is still careful during The Regular Times, lest unnecessary noises or cooking bring on extra Silent Times. These are harder for those not allowed above, festering in the quiet spaces of the mind.

The bodies come in waves. Even when the skies are silent, as they have been recently, Fifty-One and his small team take shifts so there is always somebody waiting in the still dank cavern.

When all is ready, Fifty-One gestures towards where Fifteen, Eleven and Thirty-One stand at attention in a semi-circle a few feet from the operating table. Thirty-One positions an empty ammo can underneath the edge of the table to catch the fluid from Seventy's open body.

He then cuts through the walls of Seventy's chest, creating a cavity for his careful hands. He enters her, probing for the shrapnel bullet. His skilled hands find what they are looking for and surface with the lethal pebble.

"What about the patient?" All the hands out searching. There is a body; there is a pulse.

Nine

Flashes. Only the fermented rice in her old water container can damp her terror. Anything stronger is precious; the bartering price has shot up in the last weeks. But even this old remedy must be rationed out -- even rice can come up short.

Steady. She needs to finish so she can rest before the next one.

All the lighted torches have burned out in this section. She grips the slimy wall sucking on her palms. One more step is all she needs. Another. Okay, another. And another. Another, then rest, move. Again. Repeat the steps until

Echoes of something falling into water.

-- "pleasepleaseplease"

Seven up against the piled dirt again. Her flashing eyes, the dim torch. The arm of Nine's lucky shirt rips --

-- Earlier that morning?, in

Seven's ear, "for me, so I can be next to your body, no matter where you are." Seven had smiled, her dimple winking before disappearing underneath Nine's lucky shirt for a moment. She hadn't needed to say anything in response; her face an open map, sweet curve. Then, they had said goodbye as always, rocking back and forth on their heels, Seven's small back cradled against Nine's lean body, crooning "my baby, my sweet sweet baby."

"Ach!!" Seven's vicious

leg hits her target. Twist twist left kick.

-- Last prayer. "please

goddess please please" The gray shirts pile on the weight. She can't ... there's no ... Her leg, they wrench it, her last weapon. They pin down, they rip. Nine's lucky shirt. Ripped open. Parts --

Nine can't explain where these visions come from. Seven has been missing for three days. No body. Flashes of old fright. Sometimes she feels her own body is being ripped apart.

Breathing hard, she stumbles into a ventricle where the torch, burned down to its grits, is not out yet. Flash of red. Her lucky shirt. "Seven! Seven!"

But it isn't.

A tattered red cloth on the head of a gray shirt lying face down. A slow burning like firing coals. Nine grips Gray Shirt's shoulders. "Where is she?" She shakes him back and forth. Gray Shirt moans. "Where? Where? Where!" Small Gray Shirt movements. "Where! Where! Where!" rain down. Breathing body. "WHERE! WHERE! WHERE!" Now nothing.

Just breath. -- pleasepleaseplease -- Shake shake shake. Breath breath breath. --
pleasepleaseplease -- WHHHEEERRRREE!!!!!!

She takes ahold of the red cloth and pulls it free. His head drops into the mud. She
rips off the gray shirt. She sinks her nails into his pale fish back. He does not move. But he's
still breathing. Like blowing on coals. He is ignoring her. The Stupid Gray Shirt is ignoring
her. She shakes him again. And again. Again! "Now!"

Gray pants too. They come off. His whole pale fish body. Thin where Seven was
plump. When they first met, before the rations. -- pleasepleaseplease --

Nine opens her satchel and takes out one dynamite stick. Her hands rough over his
still-whole body until she finds it. She takes the stick -- pleasepleaseplease -- the coals deep in
her belly they flare she pushes it in. Crams it in the way his mouth is crammed. Shut. Open.
Cram Again. please And again. please Again Again Again and Again. The coals. Fire.
Light.