

When the elders first foretold of the massacre, the entire village had laughed.

Kari remembered the night well. The village had been gathered around the massive firepit that sat squarely in the center of the recently erected circle of elk-skin huts. Though winter was upon them, the Ookami had followed the elk down the mountain into the grassy valley, where both they and the elk grew fat upon the abundance of new food. The prairie grass made for excellent kindling, and the fire roared several lengths upwards towards the moonless night sky, where the gods were making their nightly rounds overhead.

The village had listened in rapt silence as the elders spoke of the prophecy they had received from the gods in the Moonpool. Normally they spoke of famine and drought, but tonight was different. Tonight, their trembling voices were tinged with fear as they recounted what the gods had shown them in the moonlight, that the no-spirits were marching from the south to burn the Ookami lands to ash.

There was a brief moment of silence where Kari could hear nothing but the crackling flames. Then, every man, woman, and child in the village broke into laughter all at once, for the mere idea of the no-spirits coming to declare war on *them*, the mighty wolves, was so absurd. The spiritless upstarts barely eked out a living in the most fertile portion of Midgardia, while the Ookami had thrived upon the harsh mountain slopes for thousands of years, fending off the cougar and bear spirit clans in the constant war for territory. They were warriors, and the no-spirits were pups playing war.

The laughter dwindled as Shirota rose to his full height and held up a hand, and all fell silent at the alpha's command. Kari watched her father's hazel eyes glitter in the orange glare from the fire as he spoke. "It is too early to laugh. They may come, and if they do..." He paused before baring his teeth in a canine grin. "...we will destroy them." The village broke into cheers

as he took his seat, many jumping to their feet to pump their fists wildly and scream insults so loudly that perhaps the no-spirits could hear them, thousands of miles away. And before long, the entire village had transformed into their spirit forms, great wolves of many shapes and colors, to sing of their strength and warrior's might to the night sky, and soon, it seemed as if the entire mountain was harmonizing in a chorus to the gods. Kari stopped her own song for a moment just to listen to the valley ring with sound, and was overcome with rapture and a sense of invincibility all at once. This was the song of her birthright, her soul; the song that played with every beat of her heart. To forget its melody would be equivalent to death.

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But as winter melted into spring, and the snowmelt from the mountains swelled the rivers and streams with fresh water, so too did the no-spirits come with a force stronger than the most treacherous rapids. For what they lacked in spirit, it seemed, they had made up for with strange weaponry, the likes of which the Ookami could barely even conceive of. Hollow metal sticks that pierced their pelts with stinging pellets; poisonous mist that blinded them in seconds; huge copper tubes that launched small boulders at them. The Ookami were strong, and the Ookami were many, but they fought with their teeth and claws and wits - no match for these sticks that could take down a charging wolf from a herd's length away. Such had been the fate of Shiota's pack, leaving Kari the de facto leader of the dwindling remains of her village. She wished, more often than not, that she had died with him, for the hungry eyes of her people now looked to her for guidance that she did not know how to provide.

On the third moon of battle, Kari called for a retreat to the Spiritpool, and arranged for an emergency meeting with the pack leaders and the elders. Deep in the mountain forests and untraversable on two feet, the Spiritpool and its surrounding caves were the perfect place for the

children, the elderly, and the wounded to take refuge. Kari sat cross-legged at the edge of the water, acutely aware of the many eyes upon her. She felt like a child in the midst of the battle-worn pack leaders and grizzled elders; she had only been leading her own pack for a year, and had seen half as many winters as some of those who sat before her. And yet, she knew she commanded their respect, for her father had been a great warrior, and she had proven herself as his rightful heir in many a hunt. This was the only thing that gave her confidence for what she was about to say.

Taking a deep breath and looking each pack leader squarely in the eyes, she said, “Our hunting strategies will not work here, nor will our battle tactics. If the no-spirits can spot us at all, then we are lost. We cannot win against those fire sticks. The only way to win is to strike from behind.”

As she expected, there was an immediate chorus of protest from the pack leaders. “You ask us to fight like cowards?” growled Garoka, his mouth twitching in the beginnings of a snarl. He was just three winters older than Kari, young and hot-headed - she had expected nothing less from him. But to her dismay, some of the older pack leaders murmured consent, staring her down with hostility. “Garoka is right,” Kilia said gravely, her hawk-like eyes boring straight into Kari’s soul. “This is not the wolf’s way. The gods will curse us with drought and famine for such dishonorable transgressions.”

Privately, Kari thought this ridiculous. Here was an army poised to wipe out their entire race, and the pack leaders were worried about a future famine? They would all be dead *before* the famine.

Next to speak was her father's brother, Kuroda. "Kari, child," he began, and Kari had to grit her teeth at his patronizing tone. "What you say is understandable, but our packs will not agree with it. It is not our way - "

At this, Kari finally lost her temper, and rose to her full height, silencing the discontented murmurs. Although her spirit form was considerably more intimidating, on two feet she still towered over most of the village, and knew fully well that she evoked a spitting image of her father, with the same elaborately braided mane of dark hair and piercing amber eyes. "You speak of the wolf's way," she said, struggling to keep her voice measured. "We are the ones who keep that code alive. Yet if we are all massacred, then it will die with us." She paused, scanning the expressions of those who sat before her, those who she had been raised to look up to. "This will not save our people. We will die with honor, but we will still die. Is this what you propose?"

She had spoken truly, and she could see it in the eyes of the pack leaders, although they remained silent, with mutinous looks darkening their visages. "We have never faced an enemy like this before," she continued, taking a deep breath to keep her tone calm. "These no-spirits are not our sister clans, nor are they fellow spirit people. They know nothing of honor, and they fight with no honor. We must do the same, or we will return to the stars with fire stones lodged in our hearts and stinging mist in our lungs."

An uncomfortable silence was left in the void of Kari's words, but in the end, they had to do as she commanded. "In two moons is the night of moonless sky. Tomorrow, send your scouts to determine the positions of their camps. And then, we will strike as they sleep. They will stumble about like blind children in the dark. They will fall, and we will triumph!" Her voice grew louder with every word, and the euphoria of battle swelled in her heart. It was contagious; [name's] hazel eyes glowed with bloodlust, and her uncle was nodding approval as a sharp smile

pulled the corners of his lips upwards. “Stand now, and rally your packs. Comfort the elderly and the young. Tell them that we will not let our lands be soiled by foreign magic, and that we will fight tooth and nail to protect what is ours. Go!”

The pack leaders stood and bowed, their newfound respect for Kari evident in their eyes. She did not know if she deserved it; it had been a speech straight from her father’s mouth, certainly, but in her heart, she did not know if she could believe her own words so readily.

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The night of the siege came shrouded in a thick fog, the likes of which Kari had never seen. “It is a good omen from the gods,” Elder Alaksha had said, and the fighting packs had all set off down the mountain in high spirits. Kari hoped with all her heart that it was true, and that the no-spirits had no more strange magic tricks that they could perform in fog so thick that she herself could barely see her paws as she plodded onwards, using only her nose and her memory to guide the warriors through the thick forest.

But as they approached the camp, the foreign stench of no-spirits clogging her senses, Kari could not help but feel as if something was amiss. The ground, which she had trodden upon her entire life, felt strange and lumpy under her paws, and there was a strange smell in the air which overpowered that of the no-spirits. It was as if the entire earth was covered in flint and was emitting dark black smoke and ash into grey skies. She glanced back over her shoulder and was met with apprehensive eyes, twitching ears and tails, and soft huffs of displeasure; the entire pack sensed something was wrong. Every ancient instinct within her was screaming at her, telling her to turn back, but this was their one chance, and they could not waste it.

Flicking her tail, she gestured for the pack to move forwards, and broke into a soft trot. And for a minute, the night was silent as she gained speed, adrenaline rushing through her veins.

Then she heard the first earth-shaking boom and high-pitched yelps, and before she could even take a breath, the world exploded into orange and the earth disappeared from beneath her paws as she sailed through the air. And as she hit the ground hard, ears ringing as loose earth rained down upon her, she knew that she had led her people into a trap, and that the days of the wolf would end as such - in fire and in blood.

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When Kari awoke, it took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the dimness. She was still in spirit form, and a dull ache emanated from her ribcage; she had surely fractured a rib. As she tried to shift herself into a sitting position, she realized that she was in a cage.

Panic flooded her veins and she looked around wildly, trying to orient herself. The ground seemed to be moving beneath her although she herself remained stationary, and within the enclosed space, she could see rows of even more cages, all containing unconscious wolves. She tried to curb her panic for a moment and inhaled deeply, trying to see if she could recognize them by scent. But the no-spirit stink hung heavy in the enclosure, and she could not make out familiar figures in the dim light.

“You should stop struggling,” a cold, strangely accented voice said in the Kyoukan tongue. Kari looked up in surprise; she understood the coyote people’s tongue well enough, for it was similar to her own, but had never expected to hear it here. Footsteps approached her cage, and a Kyoukan man appeared in front of her; small and slight, with the delicate features and characteristic dirty brown hair and eyes of his people. And although Kari had felt the tiniest spark of hope at the relative familiarity of the Kyoukan tongue, it immediately dissipated; the man was garbed in the foreign no-spirit attire.

He regarded her coolly, and Kari couldn't help but feel a tinge of humiliation, to be lying at the feet of a coyote. "Return from spirit form and cover yourself with this," he said, shoving a bundle of thin cloth through the bars of her cage. Kari, hesitant, did as he asked, and wrapped herself in the cloth, missing the thick furs that she had left behind before the siege. "What's happening?" Her voice was rusty from disuse. "Where are they taking us?"

"To the capital," the Kyoukan man said. Kari couldn't help but notice the cloth pack over his shoulder which held a fire stick, and shivered. "Why?"

"To fight for the Genjin army." He paused for a moment, seeing the clear look of shock and disgust on Kari's face. "And to live a better life as a result of it."

"Who do you think I am?" Kari bristled with rage, and she glared up at the man with all the hatred she could muster. "I would rather die than fight for them -"

"Then you will die," the man cut her off sharply, and his eyes flashed with a metallic glare. Kari realized, with a sinking feeling in her chest, that perhaps she was speaking to somebody who had seen this fate come to fruition. "And there will be no wolves left to walk the earth, and the Ookami way will die with you."

She felt sick to her stomach; her own words, that she had said to her people not more than a few moons ago, were being echoed back to her now. A dull emptiness was creeping up the sides of her heart, the like of which she had never known. Perhaps she had been wrong before, to assume that her people would die in fire and in blood. This was a much worse way to die.

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The no-spirit capital was unlike anything Kari had ever seen, and she could hardly believe that it was something of this earth. Huge sharp structures of stone and metal rose high into the sky for as far as the eye could see in every direction. Strange masses of metal and rubber

moved on their own volition, as if they were animated by their own spirit. The entire earth seemed to be buzzing with sound, as if new metallic contraptions were constantly being produced.

She quickly learned that in the absence of a spirit form, the no-spirits had been forced to create what they called, in their language, *technology*. Without sharp claws or teeth to bring down prey, or thick pelts to withstand the winter cold, they had devised a number of contraptions to merely survive. The fire-sticks, she learned, were called *guns*, and the stone structure that they brought the imprisoned wolves to was as tall as the tallest trees in the forest, and miraculously warm on the inside, though she could see no fires alight.

The stone structure - *barracks*, in the no-spirits strange and savage tongue - were swarming with no-spirit alphas, but also with spirit people from far and wide, from other lands that the no-spirits had invaded. The lithe panther people from the southeast, from the forests of everlasting color; the diminutive fox people from the eastern mountains; even the large, peaceful moose people that occasionally ventured through Ookami lands. And there were spirit people that Kari had never even heard of before, nor ever laid eyes on. And more would come, surely, for the no-spirits seemed to be determined to plunder every land upon the entire earth for even more metals and wood and spirit people to build their ever expanding empire.

The Ookami were given lodging on the high floors of the barracks, in simple quarters with soft cots and water that flowed like a stream. Kari couldn't help but notice that they had been placed higher in the barracks than many of the other spirit people -the foxes, and even the panthers, but lower than the maned and striped cats - and had a lurking feeling that it was perhaps a direct indication of the no-spirit's respect for their fighting skills. She couldn't help but feel somewhat wounded, that her people were not deemed to be the most skilled.



In the first meeting she called with the few dozen Ookami who had been captured alongside her, she tried to convey as much. “They seem to hold us in high regard. If we do not want to suffer, we must maintain and improve upon that sentiment. Perhaps we will even be allowed some agency as a result.”

The remains of her people stared at her with dull, uncomprehending eyes. “What do you mean?” Amaya, once the most vibrant and quick to laugh out of anybody in the village, had completely lost spirit after her sister had died in the siege, and was looking at Kari with a completely blank expression. “Should we not be fighting back? They have taken everything from us, we cannot just lay down like wounded sheep -”

“Then what do you propose?” Raiden, the only remaining member of the pack who Kari could call a friend, cut Amaya off sharply. Green eyes glowed with frustration, and even in human form, the trace of a snarl darkened his face. “There are so few of us, and herds of them. We are surrounded by spirit people under their rule. We cannot win.”

And even though those were exactly the words in Kari’s own mind, it caused her a dull sort of pain even more acute than her healing ribs.

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They were first trained in no-spirit war strategy, if it could be called such; it was less strategy and more brute force. Nothing could withstand the force of the fire-sticks - *guns* - and combined with the underground *explosives* that had eliminated nearly the entirety of the Ookami, it was nigh impossible for any spirit tribe to even have a fighting chance. They were instructed in the no-spirit language as well - strange, guttural sounds that twisted Kari’s tongue as she struggled to force them from her throat. The language reflected its people, perhaps.

Although they interacted almost every day with no-spirits, the Ookami kept their distance from the other spirit people, just as they would have in their regular lives. Very rarely would their tribes have interacted, except to resolve truces or negotiate land terms, but in this situation, they truly had no reason to intermingle. Kari could feel the silent sense of hostility that filled the barracks, and knew that they were all competing to be the best, whether they realized it consciously or not.

She excelled at war strategy, and was given her own *squad* to command after several months of training. It contained the remains of the Ookami, as well as several members from other spirit tribes. A scattering of men from the fox people, and mixed groups from the panther and black bear people. All tribes that had, she assumed, been deemed lower than the Ookami by the no-spirits. Kari herself held no particular love for any of these people; black bears were lazy, foxes were sneaky, and panthers had been known to steal Ookami children in the night. And as she continued to train with them as a squad, it became ever more apparent that she had been right; the bears outright refused to cooperate in trainings, the fox men would never look her straight in the eye, and the panthers would simply stare at her with blunt hostility. And from time to time, she would snap. The case when the foxes had stolen the wolf rations had been particularly memorable; they had claimed that it was because they received less, and she had countered that it was because they were diminutive and needed less food. They had argued until she had simply lost her temper, entered spirit form, and sunk her teeth deep into the leg of the primary offender. They had stayed quiet after that, and she couldn't help but feel a dark sense of satisfaction.

Moons blended into months. Every day in a soldier's life was exactly the same, and the monotony wore on her. But she supposed the Kyoukan general had been right: her people had

never gone hungry, and were never uncomfortable. And it was because of this that every day, she fought off the lurking feeling that something was terribly wrong with this life.

The time came, soon enough, that Kari's unit was to be sent out to fight in the latest no-spirit conquest. She was told that the target were the great white bears who resided upon the ice sheets in the north - a formidable enemy that the Ookami never would have dared go near, but there were only so many gunshots one could take. And as they marched out with the no-spirit army, Kari recalled her own words to her people - that the wolves' lives were what kept the Ookami way alive - and wondered, for the first time, if she might have been wrong, for she may have been alive, but the way of the wolf had never seemed so distant from her actions.

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