

THE CANDYMAKER'S SON

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They killed my mother while I was busy serving breakfast. I hadn't seen her in seven years, since I was a young boy. But when I saw her swinging from the calibus tree and looked past the brokenness of her death, she was as I remembered—tall with long black hair pulled back in a tight bun. I felt like I was looking at a memory, a sketch of who she was.

Her death pulled at my sentimentality. But I reminded myself, she was a foolish woman, never selling anything at market with her useless crafts while my father risked his life on the sea trying to provide for our family. When the Balator military showed up on the island, saving us from a life of fish and trees, of poverty and weakness, I decided to join up and pull my own weight.

I had hoped to be something better, but she forbade me to go, trying to keep me for hers and hers alone. While she went off to help the babbling elderly of our town, I left, the only reminder of her my eyes, these bright green eyes. They shone like leaves under the sun just after a rain.

"Another forester hung," Ander said beside me, breaking me out of my trance. "She snuck into the camp last night. Boris and Gatter found her."



Ander was a forester, but his eyes were a muted green, like moss. I was envious that his eyes didn't betray him as quickly as mine did. He came from the far side of the island. He was a runner for the camp, delivering messages.

"What was she trying to do?" I asked.

He didn't know she was my mother. Ander couldn't keep a secret to save his life. If anyone knew that the woman trying to sneak into the camp was my mother, I'd probably be swinging beside her.

"Don't know. She just snuck in and was going from cabin to cabin. She made a run for it. The stable boy found her and turned her in. Now the lucky bastard is going to the capital." He paused and said, "Did you put in for a transfer again?"

I turned away from the tree and said, "Yeah, but they aren't going to take me." I pointed to my eyes. "You?"

He nodded. "I guess we just wait for our denial."

I wanted to become a chef for the emperor, and Ander hoped to be an engineer—worlds that had the potential to be ours if we could prove ourselves. Worlds we wanted to be a part of instead of this gods-forsaken island. Once all the trees were cut down, we'd go to the capital, but Ander and I would be old men by then. I'd be serving rabbit stew with gnarled hands. The capital was our path.

A scream rang through the camp.

We ran to the training yard and saw one of our foresters holding a sword, keeping two of the Balator soldiers at bay.

"That's Ebb—the stable boy. What in gods is he doing?" Ander asked.

I knew him. He grew up in a village next to mine. He wanted to be a wood-carver like his father.

"Just set the sword down," one of the soldiers said.

"Never," Ebb said with steel in his voice.

The Balator soldier swung his sword, but Ebb blocked it. The other rushed in but underestimated Ebb's skill. Ebb lunged forward, thrusting his sword through the soldier. He grinned with teeth and lips stained black as he pulled the sword out of him.

The other Balator soldier swung rapidly in succession, and Ebb blocked each one with a face full of rage. He kicked the soldier in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Ebb lifted up his sword, and I felt like he was looking at me when he screamed in the old forester tongue—something terrible.

Before he could plunge his sword down, a blur rushed behind him and sent a slash through the air, cutting off Ebb's head.

My mind detached, and I felt vomit rise to my throat.

A large Balator man dismounted from his horse in one smooth motion. "Can someone explain to me what is going on?" Commander Aiko yelled. He was a muscular build, like an ancient thunder tree with white hair like new snow—just like all of the capital-born Balator soldiers.

The soldier saluted and said, "The stable boy was attempting to desert."

A murmur of astonishment went through the crowd. Deserting was unheard of—a spit in the eye of those who rescued us.

"He drew on us. We had no choice but to put the filthy frog-eyed cretin down," the soldier continued.

Frog-eyed cretin. I'd heard worse.

Without warning, Aiko backhanded the soldier hard, causing him to stagger back like he'd been hit by lightning.

"You had a choice to be better swordsmen. But you chose to be bested by a..." He caught a word but chose differently. "Stable boy." He handed him the reins to his horse. "You're the new stable boy now. Go take care of my horse." The new stable boy did as he was told.

Aiko went over to Ebb and searched through his bag, dumping it out, and then he dug through his pockets to see if he was stealing any coin to get off the island another way.

He pulled out a black pouch made of folded paper. When I saw it, something in my chest lurched, but I pushed it down—way down.

Instead of carefully unfolding the package, he tore it open. Inside was a handful of small, black soft discs. He smelled them and took a bite. He spat it out immediately as if he'd tasted something unpleasant and bitter. I saw the small stain on his teeth and lips—black like Ebb's.

"Can anyone tell me what this is?" Commander Aiko asked addressing the crowd.

Murmurs went through, and I could see they were mostly foresters mumbling. They all knew but didn't want to say. But they were cowards. They didn't want to help and be honorable. They still thought like frog-eyes.

I raised my hand and said, "I do, sir."

Commander Aiko took three strides to get to me. "What is it, soldier?"

"It's jan-joh. It's forester candy. Old people eat it."

Commander Aiko looked me up and down.

"How long have you been at this camp?"

"I joined when I was eleven, sir."

"Joined, yes," he said with an eyebrow raised.

"You're the cook here."

"Yes, sir," I said, feeling proud that he recognized me.

"You're the one who cured the soldiers of food poisoning when they ate the wrong fish. Your name?"

"Yes, sir. Low Private Kio, sir," I said. I felt my chest puff out a bit more. They ate tabio fish, but the Balator chef cooked it too long. My father taught me that if you cook it wrong, it will make you terribly ill, and only ginger tea will cure you.

He turned to Ander and said, "Low Private Ander, what did that traitor yell right before I separated his head from his neck?"

Ander stammered, and before he could find the courage to say it, Commander Aiko struck him hard across the face. Ander staggered back like he'd been hit by a massive wave. I felt my chest burn in fear.

He turned to me. "What did he yell, Low Private Kio?"

I readied myself for his blow. "Death to the invaders, sir."

Commander Aiko glared, and I felt his hot breath on my face.

I felt a spark in me. "I know where that's made." Pointing to the jan-joh. "It's a village close to where the stable boy lived." I looked over, and his eyes went wide.

"It's a village called Endabo."

I hadn't spoken that name in a long time. It felt foreign and clumsy on my tongue.

Commander Aiko gave a tiny grin with the stain still there. "Well done. This poison has become a nuisance. Other camps have reported your people deserting and telling the tale of a woman who sets people free. She's been taken care of, but I need to make sure jan-joh can't find its way back to us." He stepped closer to us and said, "Go and find where this is made and burn everything connected to this woman to the ground. I never want to see this again." He handed me the torn package. "So you know what you are looking for."

Commander Aiko spoke again, but his tone was covered in frost. "If you can find this poison, I will approve both of your applications for the capital. Do you think you can handle this simple task?"

My eyes went wide. I could go to the capital, become a chef, and work with real ingredients from around the world instead of the smatterings of options here.

"Yes, Commander Aiko," we said in unison.

"Do not fail me in this," he said with steel in his voice.

We saluted, and he walked off.

"Why did you lie?" Ander mumbled, rubbing his welted face. "Death to the invaders? Are you trying to get killed?"

"I gave us a way off this island. Didn't I?"

Ander laughed. "You're right about that. I will find you in the dark, Itzaoki. Nonsense, anyway. What do you think it means?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't want to give my mother any company.

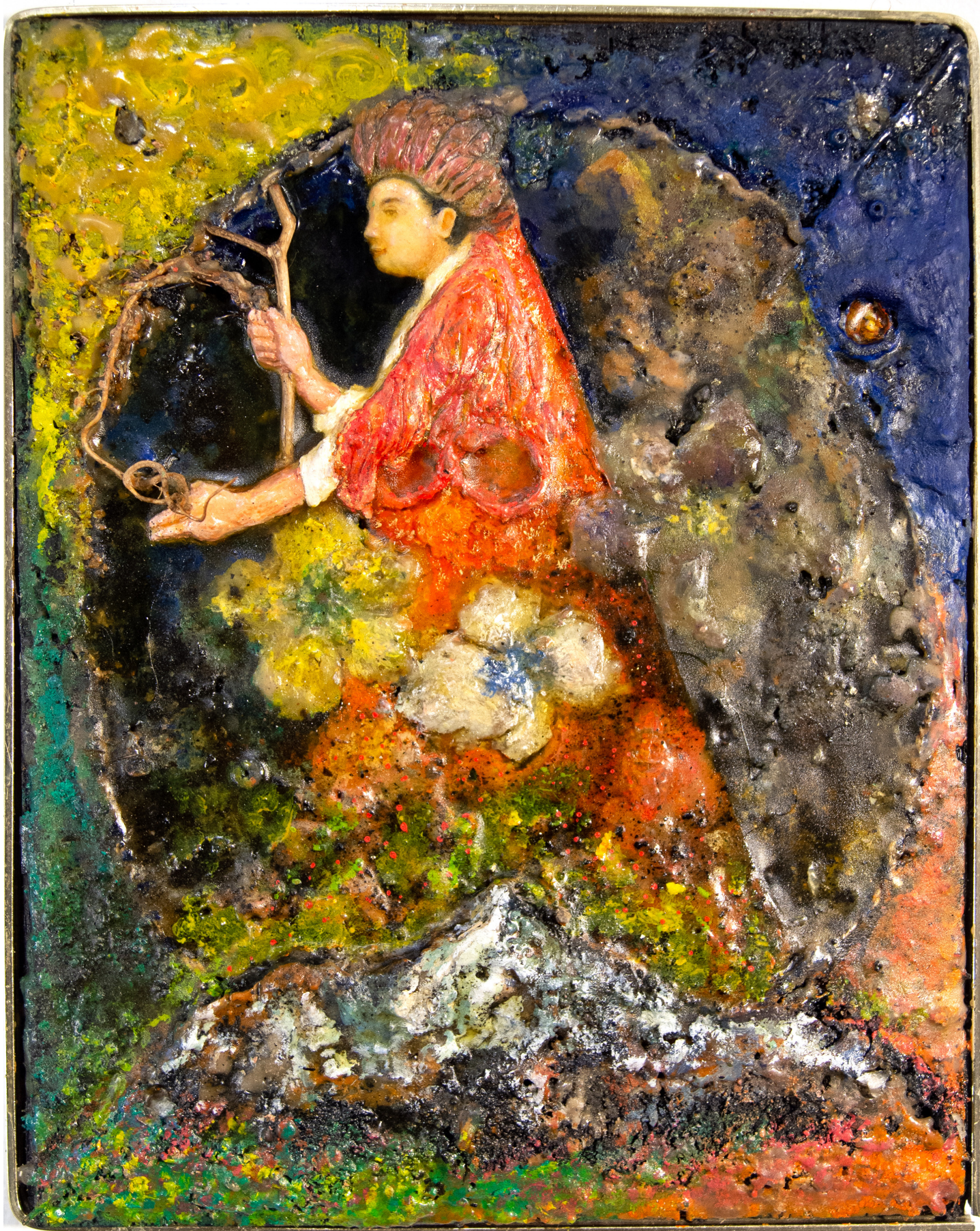
Ander and I spent our time riding talking about our plans when we arrived at the capital—the sights we'd see. I wanted to visit the White Spires, and he wanted to see how the capital used the river alongside it to power most of the city. Our dreams now had finer points to them, and they felt closer to the ground.

When we camped, Ander would practice his sword work and I would gather herbs, find wild vegetables growing, and catch rabbits. As I wandered the forest the first day, I found myself alone, and I couldn't remember the last time I had that. When I looked up, I would see my mother hanging there in the trees. Part of me wanted to climb up and cut her down, and part of me felt a surge of anger at her. Nothing was to be done. I hadn't climbed a tree in a long time, and she wasn't really there. I decided to spend less time alone.

Ander scoffed at the yet again meal of rabbit stew, but what else was there? However, once he tried it, he fell in love with it. I could make anything ordinary into something wonderful. At night while we tried to sleep, we didn't talk about the jan-joh, and he didn't bring up what the soldier yelled. I guess we were just enjoying our time together before we left for the capital, perhaps going our different ways.

After four days of riding on an empty supply cart, we came to Endabo, a small fishing village along the sea with tiny huts. The huts looked weather worn with holes in the roof, the thatching falling apart. The village was quiet—not the bustling place I remembered.

We drove into the center of the village, and I saw where my father used to sell his fish. People from other villages would come for his catches, ignoring the other fishermen who brought in the typical and ordinary.



He would tell me that the key to being a fisherman was not to let the big fish escape once you had them on your hook. He told me the big fish would tell the other fish. And the fish would laugh at you. Then you would go for the other fish, the smaller ones, the weaker ones, the easy catch.

He'd then point at the other fishermen selling the common fish and say, "We aren't like them. We don't let anyone get away. Do we, Kio?"

And I'd shake my head vehemently.

Then he would spend the day in the tavern buying drinks for his friends. When I'd ask to join him, he'd pat me on the head and say, "Someday, little one."

Then my mother would pull me away, back to the house to help her make jan-joh while my father sang bawdy songs and made his friends laugh.

"The village is quiet," Ander said.

We passed the houses, and I expected at least someone to come out and greet us and offer to take our horses. No one came out.

I found my old home, a small hut. I tried the door, but it was locked.

"Why do you think this is it?" Ander said, a line of suspicion in his voice.

I paused and pointed to the roof. "It's well-maintained, unlike the others."

Ander seemed to accept that answer.

I needed to be better at this. I couldn't risk him knowing.

"We can just burn it down if that's the house and get back. We can be at the capital by next week," Ander said.

Something shook loose from me. "Ander, you aren't thinking! If we burn down the whole village, if we are wrong and we don't make sure that the jan-joh is gone..."

"Why are you acting like this? Just light it on fire, and we can say it's gone!"

I took him by the collar of his tunic. "We get one chance at this, Ander. One." I shoved my finger in his face. "We get off this island and start new lives. It's easier for you with your dim eyes, the ones that don't almost glow in the dark. But you aren't going to ruin this for me because you're in a hurry!"

I shoved him down. I felt like giving him a beating, but I didn't want to explain why he was coming back to camp with a face full of bruises. Ander got up and dusted himself off.

"Are you here for the market?" a voice asked.

We turned and saw an elderly woman standing there. Her hair was pepper gray with jade-like eyes—not as bright as mine but bright. She was wrapped in a multi-fold gray robe, a small wooden carving knife sheathed at her side.

"I think it's closed today. No one is there." She pointed toward the empty square. It appeared there hadn't been a market in a long time.

I said, "No. We are here to—"

"The market is only open on rest days. Is today a rest day?" she said.

Ander threw up his hands in frustration. "We are looking for jan-joh, old woman. Do you know where it is?" He talked to her like she was an insolent child.

She looked at him and squinted. “You are much too young for that. And Itza isn’t here. She’s gone, but she said she is coming back. I hope she is coming back soon.”

Itza, my mother, wasn’t coming back soon.

From here I could see the sea and wondered what my father thought after I joined up, if he wondered what became of me. I pushed that down as soon as I thought about it.

“And that’s her house?” Ander pointed.

The woman nodded.

“That’s enough proof. Isn’t it? That the jan-joh is in there?” he said.

I shook my head, and Ander looked furious. He wanted to get to his dream as fast as he could.

The old woman looked out into the distance. “I hope she comes back soon. Some of us are drifting now. Drifting... drifting. We just need a taste.”

Ander and I exchanged a look. I took out the package of jan-joh. “This? This is what she gave you?” Something came to the surface of my mind, my mother packing up the jan-joh. I would help her as my father braved the sea or gulped down a beer. There was more. I shoved it all down.

The old woman looked at the black jan-joh and almost recoiled. “No, no. Ours is blue. And green on Creation Day. That’s for someone else.”

“Maybe this Itza left some of the jan-joh in the house,” I said.

Her eyes lit up a bit.

“Maybe we could go in and help find it?” I continued.

“Yes,” she said, clapping her hands. “We just need a bit. Zarra just sings now. She’s drifting far. If we drift for too long, it’s hard to come back. We forget to eat. We forget to do other things besides sleep. We drift along. We just need a taste.”

Ander looked at me with impatience. I held up a hand.

“Let us help you find it. Do you have a key for Itza’s house?” I asked.

“Yes, but only if it’s important.” I found her staring at me more, looking like she misplaced something, and my face would tell her where to find it.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her “It’s important! We are trying to help you find the jan-joh, and then we will leave!” I said.

“I will get the key. Don’t hurt me, Itzaoki,” she cried.

I felt my heart split in two, hearing the name my mother called me when I would awake in the dark with nightmares as a child.

Ander’s eyes went wide, and his face went red. “I will find you in the dark, Itzaoki.”

He put his hand on his sword. “Itzaoki. Son of Itza.” His eyes were lit with fury.

I placed my hands up. “If I had told Commander Aiko the truth, he would have run me through. But now we can be heroes, Ander. Let’s just find the jan-joh, burn it all down, and head to the capital.”

Ander took a step back. “He’ll never send the son of a traitor.” He drew his sword. “Or one who helped him.” He lunged at me.

I jumped back and drew mine.

“Don’t do this, Ander,” I said, blocking his blows but just barely. “We can go.”

He swung hard, and my arm quivered under the blow. He saw my weakness and kept his attack coming. I staggered back and lost my footing. I fell on my back, and my sword fell out of my hand, too far to reach.

Ander pinned me down and said, “The commander will be pleased. I will think of you when I reach the capital, Kio. But not for long.”

He lifted up his sword, but before I could scream, his eyes suddenly went wide. He opened his mouth to say something, but blood poured out as he slumped over to one side. The old woman pulled the small carving knife out of his head and then wiped it on her robes as if she’d done it a hundred times.

“I’m glad you came back, Kio. You are Itza’s son. I am...” She paused. “Rigana. My name is Rigana.” She handed me the key to my mother’s home and wandered back to her hut.

The hut was just as I had left it. The one room had a small stove and large wooden table with bowls and spoons on it along with her rolling pin. The small larder had various jars of sugars and spices. In the corner was my mother’s bed, neatly made.

It didn’t take me long to search the hut. There wasn’t any jan-joh.

I was going to come back empty-handed, and Ander was dead. Maybe I could explain that away by saying he ate the jan-joh and ran, but I didn’t believe the story no matter how many times I told it to myself. I felt my dreams of going to the capital break apart, and the pebble in my chest started to burn. My mother

came looking for me and ruined everything I’d built up in the seven years since I’d joined the Balator.

I took the rolling pin and smashed it into the wooden table over and over. I felt my arms give out, so I sat on the floor and wept. Why did she have to go into the camp and ruin my life? What was she hoping to do? Turn me into a deserter?

I pushed away the questions that didn’t serve me and made a decision. I’d just burn down the hut and tell Commander Aiko what happened. I’d most likely hang, but I’d die telling the truth with a chance of mercy.

I reached in my pocket for matches and found the package of black jan-joh instead.

I held a piece of it between my fingers and put it against my nose. I could already smell some of the herbs she used. It wasn’t a danger to me now. I knew there was no hope outside of the army, and there were no soldiers for me to attack. But if I could recreate this and make it a weapon or useful tool for the Balator, I might find myself on the shore of the capital instead of the end of a rope.

I closed my eyes for a second and put the piece of jan-joh in my mouth. It was rich and sweet on my tongue. I touched my lip and drew back a black stain. I chewed and held it in my mouth, tasting every ingredient, making notes in my head.

I sat down at the table. I thought about getting a drink of water. My throat was suddenly parched and my head light. I was hot but equally cold. Before I could stand up, the world melted away.

The taste in my mouth is bitter, so bitter.

Then I smell the sea, the salt in the water.

I am on the shore. I can still hear the Balator in the village. My younger self is standing with my mother and clutching his belongings. He is crying hysterically. My father is standing in front of his boat. I can see the not small sack of coins along with enough food to last him weeks. The coins have the Balator insignia on them.

“You have to take him, or they will, Kathuo!” my mother screams at my father.

“I won’t,” he says.

She shoves me toward him. “Please! He will not survive! They will come for him. And you brought them here. You went out too far, past the boundary, and they found us.”

He points at my younger self with rage. “You think this boy can survive out there? With those eyes you cursed him with?”

I forgot how dark my father’s eyes were.

He shoves my younger self down and strikes my mother hard across the face. She staggers back but returns with a face of steel.

“I hope they find you, Kathuo. I hope everyone sees your eyes and calls you coward and betrayer.” She spits in his face.

I hear a storm coming. My mouth burns.

I see my mother hold on to me as the soldiers come. They pry her from me. I cry for her—and a soldier says the crying is over. I am a man now. I have joined the Balator army. I’m placed in a wagon along with the other children. One child tries to wake herself up as if this was a dream, but the wagon rolls on and on, farther and farther away. My mother chases the wagon as long as she can. Everything fades except her cry:

Itzaoki! Abakai-tao! Abakai-tao!

Kio. Son of Itza! I will find you in the dark!

I see her alone making jan-joh, but this time it is black like a funeral flower. It is filled with all that the Balator took from us. And she takes out a small blade and slices the jan-joh with precision.

I suddenly came to and felt the hot tears on my face. I felt my life unraveling, the lies unspooling. I lost count of them from my father to the Balator. My mother was what I was hunting for. She was what imbued the jan-joh. She kept the elderly from drifting and helped them remember. She was gone now, hung from a tree trying to find me, wanting me to remember the truth of it all. The grief took me like a riptide, out far into the sea of it.

After a while, after tears ran out, I went to the wooden sink and washed my face. I looked in the small mirror and saw my eyes. How they glowed. I felt the pebble in my chest burn white hot. I would go to the capital. I would go and burn it to the ground.

I went to the pantry, got out the ingredients, and started measuring.

It’s said that the Balator hung the Silver Mother from a tree. Her children with silver smiles crept into the camps and placed the sacred jan-joh in the hands of others, waking them up, helping them remember the sounds of the sea and the shade of the trees. They hung the Balator from every tree branch they could, poisoning their food with the forbidden herbs of the forest, and took their ships for their own. And the Silver Son, the Itzaoki, is said to still wander the forest, making his jan-joh of every color. For that we are grateful.