



BRIGHTSTONES

R.D. VILLAM

Embracing the Clouds



THE DREAMS AND ADVENTURES OF CHILDREN
FROM THE BOWL WORLD ~ BOOK ONE

R.D. VILLAM

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*The Dreams and Adventures of Children from the Bowl
World ~ Book One*

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The Bowl World

“**T**he world is like a bowl that you usually use to eat and drink from. All of you who live in this valley is like living at its base, and the rocky mountains that surround you are its walls.”

That’s the lesson from Grandpa today.

A lesson that immediately made the children stunned and scrambling to ask questions. “The world is like a bowl? What kind of bowl? Why is it like a bowl?”

Hearing all these questions, Grandpa laughed.

He let them continue screaming, then said, “I’ll explain, then you can ask anything.”

So all the inhabitants of the valley, comprising thirty-three children, sat neatly on the grass, staring at Grandpa’s face without blinking.

Grandpa was a figure who used to appear by the river shortly after the morning light, on a flat rock beside the caramunt tree.

From that shady tree, every morning a soft whistle drifts. It was just the sound of twigs and leaves rubbing against each other, but to the children, it meant a call from Grandpa.

They quickly got up, grabbed the vines hanging beside their treehouse, and rushed down. They raced together to the river-bank and waited there.

The flat stone surface emitted a white light. The fine powder was flying, swirling above it. Then, after the round stopped, Grandpa's face appeared in the fog. The mist was lumpy like a cloud around the edges but bright in the center.

To the children, Grandpa's face looked just like them. The face has a pair of eyes to see, a nose to breathe and a mouth to speak, but it also looked different. Thick white hair stretched over Grandpa's eyes and lips.

Similar thick hair stuck to his chin, long and thick that covered his neck. Maybe even longer, if only the children could see his whole body down to his ankles.

In the past, when they first saw Grandpa's face, the children were frightened. There were no other creatures living in the valley apart from the thirty-three children, so naturally, they were surprised. Grandpa's face looked so terrifying to them that when he first appeared, no one dared to look at him. For hundreds of days, they also never asked why he had white hair that long.

But one day, when the children got older, they finally got up the courage to ask. "Grandpa, why do you have hair on your face?"

Hearing their questions, Grandpa laughed.

"That's why I'm called 'Grandpa'," he said.

The children looked at each other in confusion. They didn't understand what grandpa meant.

Grandpa continued with a chuckle, "One day, the boys will also have beards like this."

Some children immediately laughed out loud, especially the

girls. While the others screamed in terror.

One child exclaimed, "I don't want it! I prefer my hair black, not white!"

Those who were laughing said, "But the hairy chin is cute too!"

Another one replied, "No way!"

They still preferred their current face, which were clean and hairless.

However, after a while, they also enjoyed watching Grandpa as he stroked his long hair.

As he was currently doing. His wrinkled hands appeared from below, in the mist, as he stroked his hair.

He asked, "Which of you brought the bowl?"

Children love to eat fruits mixed with honey, and also like to drink. Almost all of them carry a bowl with them wherever they go. Without a doubt, they were brandishing their bowls. "I do! I do! I do!"

Grandpa looked around.

Then he gazed in one direction.

"Piri," he called, "come here."

Piri's body was small and partially covered by his friends' larger bodies in front. Even so, Grandpa could see it!

Maybe it's because of the bowl. Piri always believed he had to eat more so that his body could be bigger than the other kids. That's why his bowl was bigger than the others. Maybe that's why Grandpa recognized him.

Piri stood up, ran forward, and sat down beside a boulder.

Grandpa asked him to turn to face the other kids.

"Take these seeds, put them in your bowl," Grandpa said as Piri glanced down.

Piri noticed several caramunt seeds the size of the tip of a

finger nail scattered on the ground. He took it and put it in the bowl.

Tero, a friend who has a big body, and when he's excited, his voice can be heard across the river, laughed. "That tastes bitter! Should Piri eat it?"

The children laughed, and Piri laughed too.

"Why not? Maybe Piri will like it." Grandpa said.

Then he explained, "Listen, I just wanted to show you all. Just like the little seed in the center of the big bowl, you too exist in the middle of a vast world, which is shaped like a bowl."

The children stared, still unable to understand what it meant.

Everyone was waiting for Grandpa's explanation, but he still kept quiet, as if letting each child think further.

One girl said, "But, Grandpa, we've walked to the foot of the mountains this way, across the river, and it's not that far."

Her name was Yara. Her eyes were bright and her face was pretty. She was a child who never hesitated to speak.

Yara pointed in the opposite direction, far to the end of the valley. "So the distance to the foot of the mountains across the valley should not be far, either. Our world is not wide at all. Like a bowl, our world is small."

She was always good at imitating Grandpa's words, or turning them around so that the other children were confused.

Grandpa smiled and immediately gave her a question. "According to you, Yara, how far is it to the mountains across the valley?"

"Five days," Yara answered confidently. "It could be faster if we keep walking non-stop."

"Walking non-stop? I don't want to go on walking without sleep," Tero retorted in a loud voice, "or without eating and drinking."

“Yes!” others shouted. “Who wants to do that?”

“What? That’s not what I meant!” Yara exclaimed with annoyance. “You ...”

“Piri, what do you think?” Grandpa asked.

Piri was stunned. For years, he was better known for his skill in climbing trees, so other children often asked him to help fetch fruit. But that shouldn’t be what Grandpa asked. Maybe he asked because Piri rarely talks, but when he talks he is often right, and often it’s different from Yara’s opinion.

He asked back, “You mean Grandpa, do I want to walk without sleep? No, I don’t.”

“That’s not the question, Piri!” Yara exclaimed. “It’s about the distance to the mountains from this place. That is the question!”

Piri smirked. Of course, he understood Grandpa’s question. He answered like that because he wanted to make Yara annoyed.

“It’s about two days from here to the Black Tower,” Piri answered. “So ...”

His words stopped as soon as he turned his head and stared at the tall, black tree-shaped building in the distance. The building was in the middle of the valley and towered high, as if clawing at the clouds. When Piri saw it, immediately his grin died down.

Inevitably, all the children turned in the same direction and got goosebumps. Grandpa always said they had nothing to worry about from the Black Tower, but they knew there was something strange in that building that always scared them.

Do You Believe?

Piri didn't want the image of the Black Tower to linger in his mind, so he hastily added, "The tower is in the middle of the valley, so Yara might be right. If we travel from here to the mountains across the valley, it will take us at least five days."

It was an answer that seemed to please Yara, as it was quite rare for Piri to agree with the girl. She gave him a sweet smile.

"But who wants to go to the other side of the mountains?" Tero retorted. "What's in there?"

"Star butterfly!" Yara surprised everyone. "You've always wanted to look for them, haven't you? I think there's a lot of them there."

Her smile broadened. Again, it looked very cute on her pretty face.

However, for Piri, there seemed to be something hidden behind that smile. Yara was probably thinking of a plan. And if she makes plans, it's usually something out of the ordinary.

But Tero didn't seem to think that far. He smiled too. "You're right! Star butterflies always fly there."

He glanced, looked at some of the surrounding boys, then they all laughed.

Weird laughs. Piri was sure they must plan something weird too!

Piri sensed something. After Grandpa described this bowl world, now Yara and Tero both have a plan! And it was not just them. Almost all the children were now whispering to their friends nearby, creating a noisy atmosphere.

“Children!”

The children turned around when they heard Grandpa’s voice.

“Children,” he softened his tone. “You are all smart kids. I just told you about the caramunt seeds in the bowl today, and it turns out you’re thinking further. That’s good. However, just because you’re smart doesn’t mean you can do everything you want. Once you know about something, you must choose. Is that thing good for you or not?”

Seeing that the children still didn’t seem to understand, Grandpa continued with a nod. “I guess that’s enough for today’s lesson. Previously, I wanted to teach you how to plant and care for allumint trees. I know all of you like its fruit the most. But now I think I’d better teach you tomorrow.”

He glanced, as if studying the expressions on each child’s face, before ending his sentence, “See you.”

Slowly his face faded in the mist that surrounded him, then disappeared among the luminous fine powders. With one shock, the powders in the air were attracted to a point in the middle of the mist. Its bright sparkle made all the children close their eyes.

It was grandpa’s typical farewell to the children, yet it still surprised them.

When the children’s eyes opened, only the stone remained at

the foot of the tree.

The wonderful rustling of twigs and leaves was heard once again, along with the gurgle of the river's water.

The day's lesson has over.

The children dispersed. They rushed back and forth as they wanted. Some children then looked for fruit or played in their favorite spots. Some ran in the meadow, swam in the river, played in the mud, or jumped at the foot of the cliff.

In an instant, they all seemed to have forgotten the story of the Bowl World.

However, Piri was sure that in between each game or activity, there must be times when small talks or conversations were made about what they had just learned today. There's no way they will forget something as interesting as the Bowl World at once.

Because that's what happened when Piri and his friends were hanging on the branches of the allumint tree.

Piri was trying to climb higher. While below him, on a lower branch, short fat Buro sat leaning against a tree trunk while chewing fruits. Three allumints were enough to make the round-faced boy's teeth turn purple. Meanwhile, Jiro, another of Piri's friends, who was tall and slender, was hanging from a distinct branch.

Then came Yara's voice.

Piri turned his head, watching the girl below him who had just arrived. The girl looked up with her hands crossed.

Behind Yara were two other girls, Sera and Nere. Sera who was small in stature, smiled at Piri, while Nere at Jiro.

"What do you think?" Yara asked the boys.

"What do you mean?" Jiro asked back.

"About Grandpa's words, that our world is small and shaped

like a bowl.”

“No,” Buro corrected her words, still chewing. “He said our world is wide, and it is shaped like a bowl.”

“No, it’s not what he meant. Don’t you get it?” Yara replied quickly. This time, Piri wasn’t sure if she was asking or if she was annoyed.

“Grandpa said we are smart,” Yara continued. “That means he wants us to think. He said about the Bowl World, but he doesn’t want us to just believe it.” Her eyes sparkled. “He wants us to understand that the world is bigger than we think.”

Her words made Piri stop climbing.

The fat Buro even rolled down from his branch and fell right in front of Yara before he hastily stood up to stare at the girl.

“What... what did you just say?” asked Buro.

“Grandpa said we are—” Yara stopped her sentence. She glared, seeming to think Buro was only meant to mock her, rather than genuinely confused.

“Yara, you’re indeed strange,” Jiro said. He lifted his legs and clamped on a tree branch. He hung himself upside down. “You are always strange.”

“What exactly do you want, Yara?” Buro asked her. “Go to the mountains across the valley and find out if the distance is further than we thought? Then what do you want once you know that?”

“As Yara said, maybe we can find a star butterfly there,” Jiro grimaced. His body was still upside down, swaying with both feet clamped on a tree branch. “Or kamio bird?”

“Yeah...” Buro nodded doubtfully. “But what’s the use of that?”

“At least we know there’s something there.” Jiro laughed.

“Is that what you want, Yara?” Buro repeated his question.

“Answer my question first,” Yara replied. “Do you believe our world is only as big as these mountains and valleys?”

“Why shouldn’t we believe it?” Buro said. “What kind of world, and how wide, do you want it to be?”

“Don’t you all want to know... where are we came from?”

The children were stunned.

Piri stared at the girl. This was another strange question from Yara! What was she thinking?

“We are from this place...” Sera, the little girl beside Yara said timidly. She turned to the tall girl beside her who was dreaming. “Isn’t that right, Nere?”

“What?” Nere woke up. “Eh... yes, that’s right. From here. Grandpa said so.”

“And you all believe that?” Yara replied.

“Why not believe it?” Buro said.

“Because... the bigger we are now, the smarter we should be!” Yara said. “We have to ask more questions to ourselves, and find out if everything that’s been told to us is true or not.” She smiled broadly, satisfied with her own words.

“Everything Grandpa said is true,” Buro replied. “Grandpa has always been kind to us. He taught us all things, and they are all true. He couldn’t be lying.”

“I didn’t say Grandpa wasn’t kind or lying to us! I’m just saying he wants us to think. He wants to know if we are smart. Are we big enough to understand or not?”

Yara’s last sentence made all the children pensive.

Big.

Yes, as time goes on their bodies do get bigger, although Piri believed no one remembered how small they were in the early days. The kids never thought about it. They preferred to enjoy every day and night that comes and goes. Running, playing,

DO YOU BELIEVE?

eating, sleeping, laughing. All the fun stuff.

So why should they think about things that can give them a headache?

Yara's Dream

Piri understood it was impossible to equate the thoughts of every child. Yara had always been a different one. She was clever, always wondered, and Piri was sure the girl had been thinking about this for a long time. She spoke and let out all the things that were bothering her must have been because of Grandpa's lesson this morning.

"Maybe you're right," Piri said to Yara from the top of the tree, "but you still haven't mentioned what you want."

"Yara wants to go to the mountains." Jiro jumped to the ground. "To find out whether there's a way out to another world!"

"Yara, it's a long way from here to the mountains across the valley," Piri said. "Five days is not a short time, and it may be longer." He and the girl exchanged glances from above and below the tree.

"I'm aware. That's why I'm not going that route."

Piri was relieved to hear Yara's response. However, the girl smiled and looked behind her. She turned her gaze to the mountains that loomed closer over the river, beyond the grove

of allumint trees.

"I don't have to trek all the way out there to the distant mountains," Yara explained. "I just need to climb to the top of *this mountain* to find a way to another, bigger world."

That's it. Yara never ceases to amaze the other children. Does she want to climb the mountains? To look for a bigger world?

No. Piri couldn't believe she would leave. It was the same as before when Yara had said that she would go into the dark cave where the river came out, or even to the Black Tower to find out what was in there.

In fact, all of Yara's intentions were just words. She never left. And no one blamed her, because it would take tremendous courage just to get close to the grounds of the Black Tower, and Piri wasn't sure Yara had that kind of courage.

The same goes for climbing to the top of these mountains. Was Yara brave enough? Probably not.

"Yara, these mountains are very high," Sera said. "We can't even see the peak. Clouds always cover it."

"Maybe it doesn't even have a peak, because it's so high," Nere muttered as she continued to look up at the mountains.

"You mean high to the sky?" Buro said.

"Yes," replied Nere with a nod. "Maybe like that."

"Have you forgotten what Grandpa said about these mountains being like bowl walls?" Yara asked. "Of course, there has to be a limit up there!"

"But you mentioned before to us not to trust Grandpa's words," Jiro countered. "You now believe it yourself."

"Okay, let's just say that our world is like a bowl," Buro said, "and you want to climb this mountain to its peak? Then what are you going to do up there?"

"I don't know... Just laugh. Maybe that's all I want. Haha-

haha!” Yara showed her laughter.

“I can be happy because it turns out I was right,” Yara continued. “Then I can see how wide our world really is. When I’m satisfied with what I see, I’ll come down again and tell all of you.”

“You went up, only to come down again?” Piri asked from above.

“Like you, always going up a tree, only to come down again,” Yara said.

Piri laughed, Yara laughed, and the laughter spread to the others.

After that, everyone fell silent, looking at each other.

Piri believes that every child now has thoughts in their heads, considering whether climbing to the top of the mountains is possible.

Frankly, that is indeed an interesting thought.

Piri jumped down from the tree and asked, “What do you think you will see there?”

Yara fell silent, before answering dreamily, “There... I’ll sit on the highest rock. The highest place in the entire world. Beneath it was a thick, clumpy white cloud. Smooth. Which I can grab and play with my fingers, and I can blow it too. The little cloud flies away. But that’s okay because I can take another cloud. So I pick up another lump of cloud with both hands. This time I will hug the cloud tightly.”

Her eyes closed, and Yara held her chest with both hands. She smiled again.

The most beautiful smile Piri has ever seen.

Around her, all the children held their breaths, perhaps imagining themselves at the top of the mountains.

“It’s beautiful,” Sera said softly. Her eyes are glassy.

"But..." Nere mused, "can you really hold the cloud?"

"Probably it's like mud," Jiro guessed. "Or sand."

"Or water," Piri replied.

"If it's mud or water, it should have fallen," Buro said, "not floating up there."

"It might not fall," Jiro said, "if it hangs like a leaf."

"I hope the cloud isn't like mud," Yara replied. "Yes, of course not! It's white, not brown like mud."

"Yes, yes." All the children agreed.

"What else do you see, Yara?" Jiro asked.

"What about the bowl cover?" Buro replied.

"The bowl cover?" Yara's brow furrowed, surprised.

"I mean, maybe later you can see what makes the sky always change from light to dark," Buro explained. "Do you understand? Like if we cover the bowl with our hands. There must be a giant leaf or something closing up there."

"The sky turns dark because at night the sun comes down from the sky and disappears!" Jiro said. "Don't you understand this yet?"

"I know! But come to think of it, why does it disappear?" Buro asked insistently. "Someone must have closed or pulled it!"

"If the sky is closed, then how come we can still see the stars?" Jiro asked back.

"Maybe the star stuck to the cover of the bowl!" Buro replied. "Or the cover has a hole in it, so the sun's rays from above can still enter!"

"I don't think it works that way..." Jiro grumbled.

"Whatever it is, I can see all that later," Yara said.

"Then what about the wide world?" Piri asked.

"The wide world?"

"The bigger world."

Yara was silent before answering. "I don't know."

Jiro laughed at her. "Come on, just say it, Yara. What do you think? I know you're thinking about something."

"Well... up there, I can see only white clouds below," Yara replied. "To see further, I have to descend from the summit, down the other side of the mountain."

Piri grinned widely. "Like down from the lip of the bowl?"

"Yes, but not coming back down here. I must descend to the other side, through the white clouds there, to see another world."

"What will you see?" Jiro asked.

"Perhaps... valleys, trees, and forests, and rivers again. Like where we are now. But much wider."

"Why must you travel so far if all you want to see are trees and rivers?" Buro asked. "Everything is already here."

"Maybe there will be something else," Yara said, suddenly she looked annoyed again.

"Or maybe," Nere muttered under her breath, half humming. "... nothing else. There are only clouds, clouds, and clouds. You go up, up and up, then down, down and down, and there's nothing there but rock and rock and rock..."

"Like a bowl," Sera said quietly.

The children looked at her.

"I mean... as Grandpa said," Sera added timidly. "Our world only exists in this bowl. There's nothing out there. Empty." Her eyes then widened. "That... I think it's terrible! What if Grandpa was right, that the world is like a bowl, and the peaks of the mountains are thin like the lips of a bowl? You could fall out there, Yara, to the outside, to the emptiness, and not be able to go home!"

Making a Plan

Falling from the top of the mountain to the emptiness on the other side, then disappear to nowhere. That is really terrible!

All the children fell silent when they heard Sera's words.

But instead of thinking about something scary, Piri was thinking about something else. "Hey, what if out there... turns out there are other bowls?"

All eyes now looked at him doubtfully.

"There are other worlds," Piri made his point clear.

Yara nodded, excited again. "Are there other children, too?"

"Are there any other Grandpa too?" Jiro replied, then smirked.

They all laughed at hearing that.

"And there's another Black Tower too..." Piri said slowly to scare Sera. "With his pair of yellow eyes, which keep staring at us at night. Staring at you, Sera."

Sera screamed. "Stop it!"

Piri laughed, then looked at the sparkling eyes girl. "Do you think we can go there?"

Yara answered, "Of course. But we have to climb first."

“But what if Grandpa is right?” Sera persisted. “We could fall up there!”

“I’ll go up, Sera,” Yara replied.

“Grandpa will be angry if you don’t follow his words!”

“Grandfather forbids nothing, so I do nothing wrong.” Yara nodded her head, pleased with her own words.

The girl then stood up straight with her hands on her hips, challenging everyone. “So, anyone wants to come along?”

“Do you really want to go?” Jiro asked back. “When?”

“Now.”

“Now?”

“Yes,” Yara answered. “That’s the only thing I want to do right now, so why should I wait or do something else?”

Piri was stunned. Apparently, his prediction was wrong. Yara was determined to go.

“Yara, the mountain is very high,” Jiro said. “Do you know how long you will walk?”

“Climbing, not just walking,” Buro said.

Yara shrugged. “A few days. Look, it looks like the clouds aren’t that far compared to the mountains across the valley.”

“Not that it’s closer,” Buro said. “That’s just what it looks like!”

“Oh, so how far do you think it is?” Yara asked.

“Further than to the mountains across the valley. Longer than five days!”

“Then no problem. I can leave now and come back here in ten days.”

Piri gaped. Yara said it as if it was an easy and ordinary thing!

“Yara, are you serious?” Piri asked carefully.

“Why do you think I’m not serious?”

Piri sighed slowly. “Fine. But that means you have to bring a

lot of supplies. How many allumint fruits do you want to bring?"

"For me, one bag. For you, if you want to come with me, take two bags. If you dare to come along, of course."

"I'm coming with you," Jiro suddenly said.

Then Buro, who never wants to lose to Jiro, said, "I will go too."

"You, Piri?" Yara asked.

Piri felt that, compared to Jiro and Buro, Yara was expecting him to come with her, no matter how often the two of them had different opinions.

Piri stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "Alright."

Yara smiled, then asked Sera and Nere. "You two?"

The two girls looked at each other.

"We... we're coming," Sera answered quietly, while Nere just nodded without an expression.

"Good!" Yara clapped her hands excitedly. "That means we can get ready. First, we have to collect allumint fruits. We should bring as much as possible. There has to be a way—"

"Hey! Where are you all going?" A loud voice came suddenly.

The dashing Tero came with quick steps. His eyes shone with curiosity.

"All of you want to go to the other side of the mountains, don't you?" he asked in a loud voice. "You dare to go without me?"

"What? Of course not," Piri said quickly, glancing at Yara. Suddenly, he got an idea. "We'll take you too."

Yara looked back at Piri, wondered for a moment, then nodded. "That's right, Tero. You're looking for a star butterfly, right? Come on, then. But maybe it's not like what you thought. I saw the butterfly flying the other way."

"Huh? Where? Where to?"

"To the top of these mountains. Closer, right? Do you want to

come?”

Tero scratched his head in confusion while looking at the slopes of the mountains across the river. “Is that true? They went here too?”

He then grinned widely. “Well, that’s that then. Let’s go!”

Tero answered without thinking!

“Yes, let’s go.” Yara’s eyes lit up. “But before that, since it’s going to be a long journey, can you help us out a bit?”

Tero seemed to just believe in Yara’s words. Without saying much, the boy climbed up the allumint tree to pick up the fruits.

Piri, Buro, and Jiro were picking on the tree next to them. Below, Yara, Sera, and Nere weaved the broad leaves of the caramunt tree.

From the thick leaves, the girls made head-sized pouches. Twisted roots were tied at both ends, so the pouches could be draped over the shoulder or wrapped around the waist.

Skilled Sera could make the best bags that were not easily damaged.

Nere’s work was fine too, but the girl was always daydreaming or humming more than weaving, so she made little.

Meanwhile, Yara, who was impatient, could only make two bags at most.

“Piri,” Buro called from the lowest branch, whispering, “How long can we hide this from Tero?”

Piri was still climbing. The biggest and tastiest allumint fruit was always at the top, and when he was hunting, he didn’t want to think about anything else.

So it was Jiro who replied, “Until we reach the top of the mountains!” The skinny boy laughed.

“He must have asked straight away on the first day,” Buro said. “One of us definitely can not keep the secret and just tell

him about Yara's actual plans."

"It must be you," Jiro mocked him. "You are the most chatty."

"What? I'm not like that!" Buro denied.

He then glanced at Tero who was climbing on the next tree, afraid that his voice would reach there.

"You know, I don't enjoy talking to him," Buro whispered. "When he was talking and laughing, his voice was very loud. Noisy. And he likes to hit us on the back, laughing too."

"He didn't hit us," Jiro replied. "He just likes to pat us on the back. That's his habit when he's greeting."

"Well, that's a bad way of greeting. He's rude. I don't understand why Piri and Yara took him along." Buro held the allumint fruit in his hand. Uncontrollably, the hand lifted, and the fruit dropped into his mouth.

While chewing, he looked up. "Hey Piri, did you hear what we were talking about?"

"Yes," Piri answered casually.

He was trying to find branches strong enough to step on. The higher he got, the more careful he had to be. But he heard everything.

"Can you explain why did you invite Tero?" Buro asked.

Piri clung to a branch above his head, then lifted his body. "Just ask Yara. She's smarter than me and likes to explain things when she's happy."

Buro sneered. His annoyance was vented by biting the allumint fruit in his mouth.

Jiro laughed. "Buro would never want to ask Yara because he was afraid of looking stupid!"

"You wouldn't dare either, even though you don't know the reason either!"

"Who said I didn't know? I know!" Jiro exclaimed. "Tero was

invited because if he didn't, he would make a lot of noise, telling all the other children about our plan."

"But what's wrong with them knowing?" Buro said.

"If everyone knew where we were going, it wouldn't be fun!" Jiro replied.

Starting the Journey

Buro frowned upon hearing Jiro's answer. "Wouldn't be fun? What's that mean?"

"If all the children find out where we're going to, we won't have anything to tell later! Besides, Tero's strength could be of use to us up there." Jiro laughed, but this time he quickly stopped as soon as he realized something.

"Hey, Buro!" he shouted in annoyance. "Why did you eat all the fruit?"

"I didn't! I only ate one! Or two. Or three. Hurry, then! Throw one more. If I wait too long, I'll get hungry."

"You always make excuses!" Jiro said curtly.

"Catch this!" Piri threw one fruit from above.

With a movement that was quite nimble for a child as fat as himself, Buro caught the fruit. He then placed it next to the branch where he was sitting.

"This too." Jiro also threw.

The fruit slid swiftly, this time escaping Buro's catch. The fruit fell onto the grass, close to where the girls were sitting.

"Your pitch is bad." Buro sneered.

Jiro laughed instead. He was actually happy because he could make the girls below the tree turn to look at him.

“What are you doing?” Yara exclaimed, looking annoyed again. “Buro, why are you just sitting around and not picking fruit?”

Jiro chimed in. “That’s right, Buro. If you’re too lazy to climb, it’s better to just go down and catch from the bottom.”

“And help us make these bags,” Nere said.

“But that’s your job.” Buro dodged.

“Oh, look!” Sera pointed up. Her eyes sparkled. “Piri has reached the highest branch!”

On the highest branch he could step on, Piri stretched out his arms as high as he could. His fingers reached for an allumint fruit, and without hesitation, plucked it.

He smiled widely at the children below him. The three girls stood up, while Jiro and Buro were still perched on the branches.

Piri held the purple-brown-skinned fruit in his hand. He considered whether he better keep the fruit in his pocket, or just eat it now.

The choice he made was neither.

“Get ready!” He released the fruit.

The three girls screamed cheerfully as they spread their arms.

The allumint fruit rushed past Jiro, then Buro. The fat boy shouted in annoyance.

The tall Nere looked like she was about to catch the fruit, but the excited Yara jumped in front of her. Unfortunately, the fruit slipped from her hand and fell onto the grass.

In the end, little Sera was the lucky one to get it.

She cheered. “Thank you, Piri!”

Piri laughed, ignoring Yara, who was now frowning.

“Get another one for me, Piri!” Yara exclaimed. “Yes, that

one! I'm sure it's no less delicious than before.”

Piri moved to another branch and took the next fruit. He threw all the fruit one by one down and spent his time on the tree.

He always loved every moment he spent in the tree. He'd almost certainly be there until dark if Yara hadn't told him they had quite a lot of fruit.

Piri went down after Jiro and Buro. Tero has also joined. They surrounded the fully filled caramunt leaf bags.

“Can we go now?” Tero exclaimed. “I've also brought my butterfly net. I am ready!”

Yara nodded. “We're leaving!”

Starting something is actually always the most difficult thing. Piri knew that because he had felt it the first time he had to climb an allumint tree when he was very young.

In the past, compared to his friends, his body was weak. While the other children could walk, he still had to crawl.

Then one day, while playing alone at the top of the hill, he tumbled into the valley.

He might have crawled back up, but something that had fallen nearby caught his attention. It was the size of a fistful and was purple-brown.

He looked up at the large tree beside him, which he later recognized as the allumint tree. It was the fruit from that tree.

Piri took the fruit, kissed it for a while, then ate it.

It tasted sweet. It was the best food he had ever eaten, surpassing the deliciousness of the nuts or long tuirrints that were found creeping along the riverbanks.

He hurriedly looked for other fruit, combing every blade of grass around him. But he couldn't find any.

Finally, he waited expectantly, gazing at the tall trees and their hanging fruit. All night he waited, but no more fruit followed the fall.

Exhausted, he then fell asleep.

The next day he waited again, but still got nothing.

He had the desire to climb the tree to get the fruit, but he was too afraid to try. The allumint tree was tall, with hard trunks and smooth bark, and too big for him to hold in his tiny hands.

Therefore, before going to sleep, he decided tomorrow it would be better for him to just go home and forget the taste of allumint fruit.

But when morning came, when he woke up hungry, the desire came back. This time, without thinking, Piri climbed up the allumint tree.

He gripped the tree trunk with both hands, then pulled himself up. His feet searched for a foothold. Sweat dripped down his body, pain and fatigue wracked his muscles.

Driven by vigor, he continued to climb, one or two times his height, only to fall again.

But slowly, a new spirit grew inside him. He was sure that he could eventually climb higher, for there was one thing he had just realized: the tree trunk was no longer hard, slippery, or bulky, once his fingers and toes had gotten used to it.

By nightfall, after ten failures, he came to the first branch, which was about ten times his height from the ground.

He picked his first allumint fruit. It tasted so good, just like the first time he tasted it. But in his heart, he felt something more pleasant. He had done things that were previously unimaginable.

After that day, when he had become the only child capable of climbing before walking, climbing any tall tree was no longer a

problem for him.

He had concluded. If he had the intention and dared to do something, nothing would be too difficult. What makes it difficult is if he allows his fears and doubts to arise. If he never starts something, he will never know whether it will succeed or fail.

That experience came to Piri's mind when he and his six friends were now frozen at the foot of the mountains and looking up. Although previously excited, once they saw what they had to go through, they became doubtful.

"It's very high," Sera said. "Can we get to the top?"

Piri immediately replied, "Yes, you can!" He smiled widely as he looked at all his friends. "We certainly can."

Yara's eyes sparkled again. "Of course."

Tero replied, no less enthusiastic. "Come on! Let me go first. You all come along!"

With wide strides, he walked without waiting for an answer.

Behind him, Buro and Jiro looked at each other. Buro looked annoyed to see Tero seize the lead on the trip.

But Yara just nodded and didn't mind it. Hence, in return for Buro's resentful stare, Jiro just gave him a wide grin.

First Night

The children started their journey by crossing the river. The river was neither swift nor wide, nor deep, but they had to be careful when crossing the slippery and sharp rocks that connected the two sides of the river.

On the other side of the river, they turned and began to climb the slippery grass. Weeds were blocking the way.

Big trees were also waiting on their right, on their left, and in front of them too, but so far it wasn't a big deal.

On a fairly flat slope, they stopped. They rested while eating allumint fruit, laughing and watching the yellow-leafed trees far below where they had been living.

From the slopes of the mountains where Piri and his friends were, the other children gathered down there were now only as big as fingernails.

Piri and her friends' laughter died down. They were silent.

Nere looked up at the sky. "It's going to be dark soon. Usually, at this time we have dinner with them."

"Yara," Sera called. "Aren't they going to look for us?"

"They will," Yara replied.

“They are certainly worried,” Sera said.

Nere nodded. “Anxious.”

“Before leaving, we should have told them where we were going,” Sera said ruefully.

Yara shook her head. “If we tell them, they’ll make a fuss!”

“A fuss?” Sera’s thin eyebrows rose.

“And then everyone will come with us!” Yara continued.

“So what if everyone comes along?” Buro asked.

“The journey will be more difficult if there are too many of us.”

“More difficult how?” Nere and Sera asked at the same time.

“Well... it’s just difficult!” Yara said.

“Why don’t you explain, Yara?” Jiro asked.

“I’m too lazy to explain at the moment!”

“You always do that if you don’t have an answer,” Buro said.

Yara glared. “I have an answer!”

She will always be more stubborn if pressed. Yara was now looking at Piri, waiting for the next attack, but Piri just shrugged. He didn’t want to annoy her even more.

“Hey!” Tero shouted. “I also prefer to look for star butterflies if we are few. If there are too many of us, it becomes a hassle! Everyone will be noisy. The butterfly will get scared and we will get nothing!”

Yara grinned. “That’s the answer!”

“But we’re not looking for—” Buro’s words stopped as soon as Jiro elbowed his arm. The two of them looked at each other, and Buro’s face turned red as he looked back at Tero. “Em, yes... yes, you are right, Tero. Well, that’s the answer.”

Tero laughed. Piri and the other kids glanced at each other.

So far, it was safe. Tero still believed that they went to the mountains to look for star butterflies.

“Hey, look!” Piri pointed deep down the valley. “All of our friends have gathered.”

“That’s right.” Sera nodded while biting her lip nervously. “As we always do. Collect fruits, vegetables, or nuts. We sit in a circle. All food belongs together, and everything is divided equally.”

Eat, then tell each other, Piri said in his heart. Then ask each other. The children will surely ask why seven children are missing among them.

Piri glanced at her friends. They must have thought the same. Except for Buro, who seemed to have other thoughts.

“Uh!” The fat boy rubbed his stomach. “I’m hungry again!”

“You’ve eaten your rations today,” Jiro said. “Are you going to finish the rest and not eat anything else tomorrow?”

“Aren’t there allumint trees on this mountain?” Buro asked.

“Nothing along the way,” Tero replied.

“That I can see too!” Buro replied with annoyance.

“Then what do you want?” Jiro asked. “Looking for that tree tomorrow?”

“Why not?” Buro asked back.

Everyone looked at him.

Jiro nodded. “Yeah, that’s right. What if our fruit runs out? But... where should we look for it?”

Tero immediately exclaimed, “Hey, we came here to look for star butterflies! Not looking for an allumint tree!”

“What we are looking for is the fruit, not the tree,” Sera said innocently.

Nere giggled, trying not to laugh.

“The fruit, the tree, it’s all the same!” Tero grumbled.

“You still need the fruit on your journey,” Jiro said.

“Later, after we get the star butterfly!”

“Can you search for your butterfly if you are hungry?”

“How long are we going to make this trip?” Tero’s voice rose.

The others were silent, looking at each other.

Piri grinned widely. “No one knows.”

Tero was stunned. Suddenly he laughed. “Yes, it’s true! Right now we are carrying allumint fruit for ten days, but who knows...”

“We can do it at once,” Buro said. “Looking for the star butterfly, and also the allumint tree.”

“That’s enough. We’ll think about it tomorrow.” Yara got up from her seat, then walked away under the tree and sat there again. “I want to sleep. You better too. Tomorrow’s journey will be long.”

That’s what she said, but Piri was sure Yara was actually trying to throw tonight’s matter into tomorrow when she had fresh energy to argue.

But Yara was right. The journey will be more difficult if there are many of them. Seven heads like today could create a fight, let alone thirty-three.

All the children took a sleeping position. Tero was on his back in the middle of the slope, snoring. Sera and Nere huddled beside the boulder, as far away from the snoring as possible. Between them, Jiro and Buro were sleeping near the bushes.

Meanwhile, Yara had been sleeping with Sera and Nere, but at night, she suddenly woke up. She looked annoyed at Buro, whose snoring was no less loud than Tero’s. Yara turned to the foot of the tree on higher ground. There, Piri gave her a big smile.

The girl came closer, then plopped herself down beside Piri.

“I want to sleep well, but I can’t!” Yara grumbled.

She lay down and closed her eyes, but her mouth was pouting.

Piri leaned back, thinking Yara was going to sleep soon, but the girl opened her eyes again.

“You can’t sleep too?” Yara asked.

“I was asleep earlier, for a while,” Piri replied.

“Aren’t you used to hearing their snoring?”

“Of course.” Piri grimaced. “But that’s not what bothers me.”

Yara turned, her gaze sharpened. “You must think about the other children down there.”

“And you don’t? We’ve all been together all this time. Normally, if one child was about to leave, he would tell the others.”

“In the past, there were children who went without telling,” Yara denied. “They came back the next day and we’re all fine with it.”

“But they were only gone one night. As for us now, will be gone for over ten nights!”

“Calm down,” Yara said. “Everything will be fine.”

“Grandpa will be angry if he sees us leaving without telling the others. He always teaches us to share our thoughts with all children. Of course, that includes this plan.”

“Piri, Grandpa knows we will eventually leave, and probably don’t have time to tell the others. He won’t be angry.”

That’s nonsense. How could Yara know Grandpa wouldn’t be angry?

But Piri was reluctant to argue further. After all, there is no point in discussing something they haven’t done, or have done. It’s more useful to talk about what they can do tomorrow.

But even talking about that now was not the right time. They were already sleepy.

Piri yawned and relaxed his body, then lay down beside Yara. His gaze pierced the branches and leaves into the dark sky. As soon as the sound of Yara’s regular breathing was heard, Piri

closed his eyelids and fell asleep.

Yellow Eyes

Piri had been asleep for quite a while, when suddenly he felt someone wake him up forcefully, shaking his shoulder as she called out.

“Piri! Piri!”

The whisper was loud enough to make Piri’s eyes open.

Sera’s frightened face appeared in the shadows of the trees. Beside her sat Yara and Nere. Nere looked restless, while Yara was still half asleep.

“Piri!”

“Shhh, Sera, don’t be so loud!” Nere whispered.

Piri’s sleepiness disappeared. “What is it?”

“Yellow Eyes! Yellow Eyes appears again!”

Piri immediately sat up.

Yellow Eyes. It was the term children used to describe the pair of yellow light points that usually appeared from the top of the Black Tower.

The light is not visible every night. It appears at will, no one can predict when it will come.

Some children do not consider it important, because the light

has never harmed or bothered them. It glared here and there before turning off. The other children responded with fear. They believed the Yellow Eyes appeared because a creature within the Black Tower was angry and looking for something.

Sera and Nere were among those who were always afraid. Sera even shivered while gripping Piri's arm, then pointed behind her. "Look!"

In the middle of the valley, right in the center of the Bowl World, on top of the Black Tower as high as the clouds, were two yellow dots of light that shone down to the valley.

The gazes of the Yellow Eyes stopped in one place for a moment, then moved slowly towards the other, stopped there, then moved again to another place.

"Has he looked this way?" Piri asked.

"I think not yet. But soon he will surely turn around and see us!" Sera replied.

"We have to wake the others," Nere whispered frantically while looking at Jiro, Buro, and Tero, who were still asleep.

"What for?" Yara asked flatly, still half asleep. "Let them sleep. Let me sleep too."

"Aren't you afraid he'll see us here?" Sera asked.

"Yes, we are out in the open!" Nere's whisper grew louder. "We have to hide! Behind the tree, or the bush!"

"So what if he sees us?" Yara said. "He's always been able to see us, and there's never been a problem."

"That's because he always sees us at the bottom of the valley!" Sera replied. "Around our treehouse! What would happen if he saw us here?"

"Nothing will happen!"

"How can you be sure?"

"Shhh, Sera, don't be so loud!" Nere whispered again.

“Yeah, don’t be so loud.” Piri felt a little annoyed. “Maybe you two need to explain. Why did you choose to wake me up and let them stay asleep?” he said, pointing at Jiro, Buro, and Tero.

“That’s because Sera trusts you more—”

“Watch out!” Sera let out a muffled scream, interrupting Nere’s words. “He’s coming!” Her grip on Piri’s arm tightened.

It forced Piri to follow the girl’s worries. He invited Sera, Nere, and Yara to hide behind a tree, which clearly could not hide their bodies.

It was also certain that Yellow Eyes will see Jiro, Buro, and Tero, who were still sleeping on the grass. So why did they bother hiding?

The answer, Piri thought, was probably because he had to respect Sera and Nere’s fear.

Yara, Nere, and Sera huddled behind Piri. The four held their breath as Yellow Eyes shone upon them, piercing the darkness of the night.

The two circular rays stopped as they stared at Jiro, Buro, and Tero. It was long enough to make the other four children feel uneasy.

“W—what... is he doing? Does he want to take them?”

“Ssshhh, Sera!”

“We should have asked them to hide!”

“Shut up!” Yara whispered curtly. “If you want to hide, why are you making a fuss?”

She sounded just as tense now as the other two girls. It could be because she also felt something different, that Yellow Eyes really didn’t enjoy seeing them on this slope.

Piri waited with a pounding heart while peeking from behind the tree. Yellow Eyes took its eyes off Jiro, Buro and Tero. The beam of light moved away to the other side of the valley.

The children were still waiting, until finally the two rays of light from the top of the Black Tower dimmed, then disappeared, returning the night to its former darkness.

“He’s gone,” Piri muttered.

Although he didn’t believe that Yellow Eyes was something to be afraid of, he was also quite relieved that nothing had happened to them. He showed his smile to Sera, who was still shivering behind him.

“See?” he said. “Nothing happened, right?”

“But he’s looking for something!” Sera said.

“Maybe, but we’re not what he’s looking for,” Yara replied. “He doesn’t care about us. So we don’t have to be afraid.”

“Maybe he cares. Maybe...” Nere held his breath, “he is watching us.”

“And we don’t know why,” Sera continued dramatically.

“Even if that’s true, nothing’s going to happen anyway,” Piri said.

Sera and Nere looked at each other.

Seeing the two looking doubtful, Yara turned fierce, “What? Suddenly, you are hesitant to continue our journey?”

“It’s not like that,” Nere said. “We just...”

Yara looked upset, but before she could express her annoyance, Piri quickly said, “Never mind, let’s just sleep again.”

“But—” Sera held back. She still looked doubtful, before continuing, “Yellow Eyes told me in a dream!”

“What?” Piri looked at her with a furrowed brow.

Yara was also stunned, while Nere nodded.

“Are you sure? What did he say?” Piri asked.

“I... forget...” Sera said, confused.

“Forget?”

“I don’t know! His voice was muffled incoherently.”

“Then how do you know he talked to you?” Yara asked. “Or know that he’s the one talking to you.”

“Because that’s how it feels! Because of his voice, I woke up and saw him. He was staring in that direction. He accidentally entered my dream, and woke me up!”

“Why would he do that?” Yara asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know!”

This time, Sera’s voice was loud enough that Tero, who was still asleep, seemed to hear it. The big boy squirmed, looking like he was about to wake up, but then the snoring continued. Meanwhile, Jiro and Buro were completely unaffected, staying asleep.

Piri scratched his head. “Sera, I don’t understand about your dream. So I can’t explain what it means.”

“I...” Sera lowered her head. “I just...”

“I want to sleep,” Yara said. “Go ahead if you want to keep talking.”

The girl stood up, returned to where she was lying, and threw herself down.

Nere also took Sera’s arm, who was still looking down in confusion. “Come on, Sera, let’s sleep too. See you tomorrow morning, Piri.”

“Yes,” Piri replied with a mumble.

He watched the two girls get up and walk away from him. It wasn’t long before they both fell asleep. Piri knew because once again he was the last child to sleep in that place.

Allumint Tree

“**H**urray! A beautiful morning!”

Tero spread his arms and jumped up, starting the day in high spirits and full of energy.

However, among all his friends, only Jiro and Buro looked fresh. Sera and Nere were silent, while Yara could not cover her haggard face due to lack of sleep.

“Can’t we sleep again?” Piri asked, half asleep.

“Wake up, slacker!” Tero said. We have to leave before night comes. Isn’t that right, Yara?”

“The night is still far away,” Yara responded, “But you’re right, let’s walk again.”

“We can eat first, right?” Buro said.

Everyone agreed, including Piri, who got rid of his sleepiness. Seeing yesterday’s experience, this morning he promised, tonight he must sleep early.

Hopefully, Yellow Eyes doesn’t come back to bother him.

While eating, Tero talked a lot about the various butterflies that live in his small garden. The possibility of him bringing home the star butterfly made his face glow. He laughed, enough

to make all the children's spirits come alive again.

Tero's presence in their group turned out to provide an unexpected benefit.

They departed after each of them had eaten two allumints. They walked down the slopes, continuing up the mountains. The road they were on was getting narrower and steeper. Thickets and thick trees flanked the path on one side and a gaping ravine on the other.

No one knew the way, but Yara said if they kept going uphill, they'd reach the top of the mountains someday.

Tero, who was walking in the front, stopped. He shouted, "Hey! I saw an allumint tree!"

"Where? Where?" Buro shouted as well.

"That one!"

They were on an uphill path. It seemed the road was leading nowhere. Ahead, there was only a chasm, but there was another incline to the left of the cliff when they got closer. The tree that Tero pointed to was behind the cliff on the right. If they hadn't reached the edge of the cliff, they could only see the top.

"Piri, what do you think?" Yara asked.

"What do you mean?" Piri asked back.

"Can you climb the tree?" Jiro said.

At first, Piri wanted to ask, "Why don't you?" But that would sound unkind, and they all seemed to expect him so much. So he gave another answer, "Maybe."

"It looks dangerous," Sera said.

"Yes," Nere said. "The tree is tall and sloping down. To get there, you must go down the cliff, then climb down the trunk. But the ground and rock around it were slippery and steep. If you're not careful, you can slip and fall into the abyss."

"That's right, it's dangerous," Yara said. "I think we'd better

forget about it. We'd better go on. There will be another allumint tree whose fruit is easier to pick up."

"It was the first allumint tree we saw, and the last," Buro said.

"That's the first allumint tree in this mountain, and there will be the second, the third, and so on!" Jiro replied.

"What if there isn't one?" Buro said, "And we've already walked a long way?"

"That means we should have brought more fruits yesterday."

"So? Do you want us to go down again and take more fruits?"

"No, we're not going down again!" Yara replied.

"Hey, don't fight. If Piri isn't sure, then let me climb this tree!" Tero said.

"Can you do it?" Yara asked.

"Of course I can!"

"I thought you'd rather look for butterflies than climb an allumint tree," Jiro said.

Tero smirked. "I enjoy climbing too."

"Piri?" Yara looked back at Piri.

"Well, let Tero climb... if he's sure," Piri said.

Tero nodded happily. He looked confident when he left the bag containing allumint fruit and his butterfly net. "I'd better throw the fruit later," he said. "If I use a bag, it will fall. All of you take it easy. My throws are always good."

Tero held on to the rocks embedded in the cliff wall, then crept down.

"Careful!" was the only word that could come out of the mouths of the children, because after that they all could only look on worriedly.

Every time Tero put his feet on the ground or rocks, the children held their breath, hoping that Tero wouldn't slip. But after a while, Tero finally descended the cliff to the base of the

allumint tree trunk, which was ten times his height from the edge of the cliff. There he looked up, holding out his fist.

“See! It’s not that hard, is it?” he exclaimed.

The children breathed a sigh of relief.

“Good!” Buro, who previously disliked Tero, was now the happiest one.

But Tero was only halfway. He still had to climb the allumint tree.

From the edge of the cliff, Piri watched the shade of the tree. There were quite a few fruits hanging from the branches, but Tero had to climb quite high to the first branch, and then climb two or three higher branches to reach the bunch.

Tero started climbing, and Piri admitted, the boy was indeed brave. Tero seemed not afraid to fall. He was not afraid that he would roll down the steep slope of the ground. Yet down there, at the bottom of the valley, should be full of sharp stones.

Fortunately, Tero managed to climb onto the first branch, then he climbed again to the second branch, and finally to the third branch.

Once again, Tero smiled broadly as he raised his hand.

“See!” he exclaimed. “It’s easy!”

Holding on to the branch above his head, he walked on the branch he stepped on. Two steps. His other hand stretched out, trying to reach the hanging fruit. One leg was shaking.

Piri was terrified now. Tero looked tired. He should have rested there for a while!

The children cried out in alarm, “Careful!”

But again, Tero has succeeded. His hand reached for a fruit, and he plucked it. He smiled widely again.

But just then, as he was preparing to throw, suddenly a loud creaking sound was heard. The branch he stepped on broke.

“Watch out!” All the children screamed.

Tero quickly let go of the fruit in his hand and held the branch above him with both hands. The branch below wasn't completely broken, but it clearly couldn't be used as a foothold anymore.

Tero lifted his body, trying to hug the branch.

“Don't look down, Tero!” Yara exclaimed.

“Piri! What should we do?” Sera cried.

“We have to help him!” Nere said. “As soon as possible!”

Jiro and Buro were confused and looked at Piri worriedly.

Without a second thought, Piri left his allumint bag with Jiro, then quickly approached the cliff to creep down.

The children were screaming, but none of their words caught Piri's mind. His mind was completely on Tero.

Regret rose in his heart. He should be the one climbing the allumint tree, not Tero! He was more agile, and his body was lighter than Tero. Then why had he let Tero go when he should have done it?

At the Bottom of the Valley

Piri descended the cliff quickly. He had slipped several times, and sharp stones scratched his feet here and there. Luckily, he could still hang on to his hands, so he finally got to the tree safely.

Under the tree, he looked up, staring at Tero, who was still hanging from one branch. “Can you reach the trunk?”

“Just a minute...” Tero answered between breaths. One hand stretched toward the trunk, then pulled again quickly. He shook his head.

“Still too far!” he exclaimed. “I have to move a little more!”

“Hang on! I’m going up!”

Piri climbed as fast as he could. He saw what Tero didn’t realize: the branch Tero was hanging on was smaller than the branch that had been broken, and it might have broken, too.

The allumint trees in these mountains seemed to be a little different from the similar trees in the valleys they usually climbed. The branches were more fragile.

Piri reached the first branch, then climbed again to the second branch. He caught his breath. His eyes searched for another

branch to step on so he could reach Tero's body above him, but he heard the creaking sound again.

His fear confirmed. The branch Tero was holding bent and finally broke.

He heard Tero's long scream. It all happened so fast.

Piri did not have time to react. For a moment, Tero could still support his weight by holding on to a broken branch, but in the end, he fell onto Piri.

The two of them sped off, hitting the bottom branch.

Piri's chest and stomach hurt. He survived because he managed to hug the last branch.

But the next disaster came. Tero released his grip, and his other hand grabbed Piri's body instead. Piri tried to hold on but was not strong enough. His grip slipped, and the two fell.

Tero landed first with one foot, and now it was Piri's turn. The two of them rolled down on the ground, which fell sharply.

The world spins like it's endless.

The moment Piri lost consciousness, the spinning still didn't stop.

The moans were the first to reach Piri's ears when he came to his senses before he felt the bruises all over his body. He held his forehead and was silent for a while. His head was throbbing, it hurt unbelievably.

The next sound forced him to open his eyes. "Piri..."

It's not Tero's voice! It's the voice of... Yara?

Piri blinked his eyes in disbelief. His vision was still blurry, but he could recognize the figure of a girl nearby. Why is Yara here?

And where are they now?

Piri squirmed. Yara sat on his left, and on his right was Tero, leaning against a large rock.

They were in a dimly lit place with steep earthen walls all around them. The distance between the walls was quite far, but it's not very clear what shape it looked like. The sky's rays only came from the elongated cavity, above which was the same width as the river.

Frightened and confused, Piri got goosebumps and took turns looking at Tero and Yara. "Where are we?"

"At the bottom of the valley, perhaps," Yara replied.

"In the abyss." Tero grimaced while stroking his right ankle. His voice was no longer as loud as usual.

"What's wrong with your leg?" Piri asked.

"I sprained after falling from that tree, and it seems like it hurts more when we fall here. I can't stand up."

Piri grabbed Tero's swollen ankle. It seemed pretty bad, and if Tero couldn't stand up, it was a big problem.

"What about you, Yara? Why did you fall too?"

The girl shrugged. She looked more annoyed than scared. "When I saw the two of you fall, I rushed down the cliff, but I slipped near the tree. And I fell into this place too!"

"Are you alright?"

"I am alright. How about you?" Yara asked back.

Slowly, Piri stood up. The pain from the bruises on his head, chest, and stomach was still there, but there was no significant pain in his hands and feet.

That's good. Hands and feet are what he needs the most.

"I'm fine," he replied.

Yara nodded slowly. "Now we just have to figure out how to get out of this place."

"We fell from there." Tero pointed to the dirt wall behind him,

which was relatively gentle when compared to the other walls.

“Slide, half roll.”

“That means, if we want to go out, we have to climb up,” Yara said.

“That’s right. But my leg...” Tero winced again.

“We’ll find a way,” Piri said. “Don’t worry.”

However, he wasn’t really sure. How to climb the slippery steep ground? How far do they have to climb? The edge of the cliff and the aluminum tree where they had fallen were completely invisible.

“Are the other children all right?” Piri asked.

Yara nodded. “They should still be up there.”

“Maybe we can call them.”

Tero shook his head. “I’ve been screaming loudly since earlier, but there’s no answer. They’re a long way up there.”

“You’ve been shouting since earlier?” Piri was surprised.

“Yes, and you didn’t hear.”

“Good thing your head is fine, Piri,” Yara said. “We were scared that you can’t wake up...”

Piri just nodded, trying to show that his head was okay.

He felt the ground in front of him, then looked up, once again asking himself how they got to the top.

It’s too difficult. This wall is too steep to climb.

“It’s going to be night soon,” Tero sighed. “This place will be really dark later.”

“The same darkness as when we close our eyes to sleep every night?” Piri was trying to joke. “That’s not a problem, is it?”

Of course, the problem is not in the dark, but in hunger and thirst. The three of them knew that. The three of them left their allumint fruit on the cliff. How many days can they survive here without eating?

But Piri then remembered his childhood experience, when he was hungry, waiting under the allumint tree. He used to survive hunger, so why not now?

Every experience has meaning, he thought. He believes there are always lessons to be learned. Piri had already used that experience yesterday while pumping his passion for climbing.

He could use it again now. However difficult this steep ground to climb does not mean it is impossible. He can definitely do this!

“I’m going up,” he finally said.

Yara and Tero looked at him, doubtful.

Yara answered softly, “You might, but we can’t.... But it’s true, if you climb up, you can search for strong tree roots, and summon the other children to help....”

“Then I can come down again, binding your bodies with those roots. Together, all the children can pull us up!”

“Can you do it?” Tero smiled broadly, but not for long. “But that means we’ll be left here.”

Piri was stunned. He looked at Tero and Yara. He could feel their anxiety. If he was in Tero’s position now, who couldn’t walk, he wouldn’t be happy to be left in a place like this either. If only there was another way...

“How long?” Tero asked.

“What do you mean?”

“How long you will leave me and Yara?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to take too long either!”

“Don’t be angry, Piri,” Yara said.

“I am not angry.”

“But you shouted.”

“I’m not—” Piri took a breath. “Sorry. I’m just confused.”

The three of them fell silent. They looked around, then at each

other.

In silence, Yara finally said. "We'll both be fine."

"Maybe you can climb too," Tero said to Yara.

Yara shook her head. "I will accompany you here."

Tero smiled. "Thank you."

"Then, if you two agree, I'll start climbing," Piri said.

Star Butterfly

Piri gathered his spirits, then approached the dirt wall, which was the least steep and most likely to be climbed. He looked for small holes to slip through his fingers and also gaps to be at the base of his feet. He tried to forget the pain and slowly crept up.

But several times he kept slipping and finally dropped back down to where he had been.

In the dark, Yara said beside him, “Perhaps you should rest first. It’s going to be night soon after all.”

Piri nodded. Yara was right. If he dared to climb in the dark, especially if her head was still dizzy, he might slip and fall and suffer fatal injuries. What can he do? He’d better rest first.

He sat between Yara and Tero, then the three of them lay down.

They looked at the sky that was getting darker. When the sky changed from light to dark, or dark to light, it had always been the most amazing moment for them. It was something that never lost its beauty, even though it happened every day. But this time, for Piri and his two friends, anxiety and fear masked the beauty. Maybe the same fear that Sera used to experience

when she saw Yellow Eyes.

“What do you think will happen to us?” Tero muttered.

“Don’t think about it!” Yara said.

But how could you not think about it? Piri thought. There’s no way Yara didn’t think about it either.

“If only we didn’t go to the mountains,” Tero said, “if only I didn’t take your word to look for the star butterfly in this place...”

Yara was immediately angry to hear that. “You don’t really need to come with us. You’re the one who insisted! It’s your fault, anyway. If you don’t force your way up that allumint tree, if you don’t break the branches, if you don’t fall, we’ll all be fine!”

“Still, if we hadn’t gone up the mountains, this wouldn’t have happened! That was the start of all this trouble!” Tero replied insistently.

Yara sat up, ready to vent her anger again.

Piri quickly said, “Yara, earlier you didn’t like me to shout at you, so why are you shouting now? Please lie down again. You too, Tero. What’s the use of talking ‘if only’? This has already happened.”

Yara pouted as she threw her body on the ground.

The three of them fell silent. Piri just let them. Silence for a moment will make them calmer.

But then Tero said again, “I still have one question, Piri. For you, Yara. Did you really see a star butterfly in these mountains?”

“Yeah, I saw it,” Yara replied, and Piri knew it wasn’t true. Yara used to use that excuse just to make Tero go with them with little protest.

“Is that true?” Tero asked louder.

“Yes! I’ve seen them!”

“Where?”

“At the foot of the mountains, by the river!” Yara exclaimed.

“When?” Tero asked.

“T—two days... yes, two days ago!”

Tero shook his head. “Earlier you said the star butterfly was in the mountains across the valley, then you said it was in this mountain. Which one is true? Or maybe nothing is true?”

Yara sat up angrily. “Do you accuse me of lying?”

“Are you lying?” Tero sat down.

“I am not lying!” Yara screamed.

“Em... Yara,” Piri said doubtfully, “maybe you should—”

“I’m not lying, Piri!”

“I mean, shouldn’t we—”

“My words are true, Piri! My words are true! Why don’t you believe it?” Yara’s words were firm, and her eyes were piercing, angry, mixed with... disappointment?

Piri was stunned and doubted. Is what Yara said true?

A moment later, he saw a yellow dot of light fly around not far above their heads.

He looked up and caught his breath.

It is ...

“Star butterfly!” Yara exclaimed cheerfully. “See! It’s a star butterfly! Now, do you believe?”

“Star butterfly!” Tero shouted.

Piri laughed loudly and so did Tero. Both of them were happy because what appeared above them was not just one, but a bunch of these amazing little animals.

The star butterfly has broad, golden wings. During the day, the wings are yellow with black stripes and they look like ordinary butterflies, but at night a bright light shines from the wings, and

when they fly, the golden powder seems to be scattered across the sky.

Children rarely see it. The animal appears only occasionally at night, almost never seen during the day. Grandpa used to say that the star butterfly loses its light during the day, making it difficult to distinguish it from other butterflies. But according to Tero, even at night, he could never find the creature.

Now, who would have thought that there could be so many of them in this place? They came from nowhere and turned the dark cavity almost as bright as day!

Tero stood up, seemed for a moment forgetting all the misfortune and pain in his legs, then raised his hands to greet the beautiful creatures.

“The star butterfly I’ve been looking for is here!”

His smile beamed as he looked at Yara. “I’m sorry, I should have trusted you.”

Yara smiled too. “That’s okay.”

Piri was sure, like himself, Yara and Tero must also have a lot of questions about how the star butterfly got to this place, then whether this was really their nest, and so on.

But perhaps those questions don’t need to be answered. They better enjoy this beauty, because who knows, the butterfly will only appear for a moment.

The three children watched all the butterflies swirling above them. There were so many of them that the sound was roaring, louder than the swirling wind blowing the trees that children often heard. But after a while, suddenly each of them landed on the dirt wall.

Silence. The three children looked at each other.

“Does this mean we’re going to sleep illuminated by their light?” Piri chuckled.

“You mean they did it to us on purpose?” Yara asked. “They are so nice!”

Tero grinned. “When I see this many star butterflies, how can I sleep?”

“I’m going to sleep, and Piri too. It’s up to you if you don’t want to.” Yara then turned around. “Isn’t that so, Piri? Hey, why?”

Piri stared at one corner of the earthen wall above him, which was covered by hundreds of star butterflies. Yara and Tero followed his gaze.

“Do you see?” Piri asked. “That hole?”

“Hole?” Tero shook his head. “No, I didn’t see it.”

“That one, the one covered by the butterflies!”

“The butterflies covered all these walls!”

“It’s just an ordinary cavity in the cave wall,” Yara said. “Not a hole.”

“I saw some butterflies that went in there and didn’t come out again,” Piri said. “There’s a hole there, maybe some kind of passageway leading somewhere!”

“Where to?” Yara asked doubtfully.

“Out of the cave! Maybe there is a way out there!”

“Our way out is over this wall, not in that hole,” Tero said.

“That’s if it’s a hole,” Yara said. “I think it’s just an ordinary cavity. The butterfly that you saw earlier did not enter the cave passage, it just perched for a while in the cavity and then was covered by other butterflies.”

“What if I’m right?” Piri said.

In a long silence, Yara nodded. “Good, if that’s the case.”

“So, why are you protesting?”

Inside the Cavity

“**W**e’re not protesting, we’re just saying!” Yara exclaimed in annoyance.

Piri nodded. “Sorry. I just don’t want us to lose spirit. I just felt... you, Yara, aren’t as excited as when you were about to reach for the clouds. You too, Tero, are not as excited as when you are about to catch a star butterfly. I can understand because all the butterflies are here now.”

“I didn’t lose my spirit!” Tero shouted angrily.

“Neither did I!” Yara denied. “I was just saying my opinion! Can’t I do that?”

“Em... but, Piri,” Tero scratched his head. “You said Yara was going to reach for the clouds? What does it mean?”

“It is nothing!” Yara tried to dodge.

“Yes.” Piri nodded. “It’s nothing.”

Tero looked suspiciously at the two. Then the three fell silent.

After a while, Piri took a deep breath. “Sorry, I was wrong earlier, assuming the two of you lost your spirits. Never mind, I’m going up to the cave cavity. There’s no harm in trying.”

“Now?” Yara’s thin eyebrows drew closer.

“If we wait until tomorrow, these butterflies will probably leave first, and the place will be darker than it is now.”

“But aren’t you tired?”

Piri didn’t answer. Of course, he was tired, but he didn’t want to think about it. He rubbed his palms together, preparing himself. He looked up at the cracks he could grasp or step on, then climbed.

Because the room was brighter now, he could climb with more confidence. His fingers gripped tighter, and his feet pressed more firmly. Maybe the mind can indeed strengthen the body, he thought.

Little by little, he climbed until he was twice and finally three times his height. He arrived at the ‘hole’, which he believed to be a long hole that could take them out of this place. Hundreds of butterflies that had perched on the wall flew away, then landed again all over his body.

“Now you are really bright!” Tero laughed from below.

“But be careful!” Yara shouted. “What do you see now?”

“A hole, of course! I am right!” Piri replied.

He moved one hand to repel some butterflies that were still perching around the hole. He lifted his body into the cavity. The hole was slightly higher than Piri’s body, so he could stand up straight.

As expected, the hole was long. It was indeed a passage and seemed to lead somewhere. Dozens of star butterflies stuck to the walls of the hall, so he could see a few steps inside.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t see the end yet.

Unless, if that...

“Piri! What is going on over there?!” Yara shouted.

“I told you, this is a cave passage, like the cave in the river, only smaller. I will go in there!”

“No! Please don’t do that!” Yara waved her hand. “Piri! You don’t know what’s in there. Don’t go in!”

“Then what am I supposed to do here? Do nothing?” Piri replied. “Why should I bother going up here if I’m only going to do nothing? I’ll go in, just a moment, to have a look. You don’t have to worry!”

There was actually something Piri was interested in. Inside was a red glow. Similar in color to tuirrint fruit. The light emerged from behind a large rock at the end of the hall.

For a moment he was silent, wondering what the light could be. But he had no answer. He shook off his fear, then stepped forward.

Part of Piri’s body was covered in butterflies, bringing light with him. After ten steps, he came to a large rock that was waist high.

He looked behind the rock. There, on the ground, lay a stone the size of a red fist. Its brightness exceeds that of a star butterfly’s wings.

For Piri, that stone was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his entire life.

Without thinking, Piri reached out his hand, touched and took the red stone.

All the butterflies that landed on Piri’s body immediately flapped their wings.

Piri felt his body warm, but he knew it wasn’t because of the hundreds of butterflies around him, but from the red rock in his hand.

Feeling happy, he shook the object, then smiled. He didn’t know what stone it was, but he knew one benefit. He raised a hand, facing the stone forward, directing the red light.

Another hole turns out to be on the left. A smaller hole, which

had been hidden behind a large rock. Piri hesitated. He had to bow a little to get in there, but then he remembered his own words. What if this passage really could take them out of the cave?

He stepped back. As soon as he stepped into the new hole, something different was felt around him. The air was colder. The warmth in his body lessened, and all the star butterflies that had perched on his body flew away.

“Piri!” Yara’s voice was faintly heard. “Are you alright?”

“I am alright!” he answered. “I’ll be out in a minute!”

Piri bowed and continued on his way, going further into the cave passage. He held up the red stone in front of him. His eyes glanced left and right.

The earthen walls that flanked him now seemed to glow. It seems watery. It was wet.

Piri didn’t understand why it was like that, so he kept walking.

The cave passage he was going through then descended, and muddy, until finally, at some point, Piri slipped. He fell backward.

The slippery road made his body slide fast. Piri screamed. He rolled over and finally landed on soft ground.

Pain gripped his body and made him unable to move for a while. As soon as he regained consciousness, the fear hit him again.

He sat up, brandishing his red stone here and there. The cavern he was in was now much bigger than the passage he had been through. He can see enormous stones from various angles.

In one corner in front of him, Piri saw a pair of green dots of light. This time it’s not a rock. The light flashed.

That thing is alive!

Once again, Piri screamed.

The creature in front of him screamed back with a sharp, slashing shriek, louder than Piri's. Hearing that, Piri screamed again, and in return, the creature screamed even louder.

In the end, the pain in his head from the sound overcame Piri's fear. He stopped screaming and covered his ears.

The creature fell silent, too.

Piri held up his red stone. The creature whimpered in fear, then retreated further into the corner and crouched.

Piri could see its figure more clearly. The creature has a pair of hands and feet but is bigger than Tero.

It... was like Grandpa. There was long hair around its mouth, but the difference was that it was messy. The hair on its head was long and disheveled, and its eye sockets were sunken, with green eyes.

Those eyes are always trying to avoid the red stone glare.

"Who... who are you?" Piri asked.

The creature didn't answer. Instead, it curled up in a corner of the cave.

"Are you... live here?" Piri asked again.

The creature still didn't answer. Its head was hidden between its knees and was again covered by its hands.

Piri finally understood. The creature was probably more afraid of Piri than the other way around. The cause may be this red stone.

Piri lowered his hand so that the stone red light was no longer aimed at the creature's face. The creature raised its face.

"Well... can you understand my words?" Piri asked.

The creature nodded slightly.

"So who are you?"

The creature's weak voice was heard.

“What...?” Piri asked. “What do you say?”

“Don’t ...”

“What?”

“Don’t ...”

Piri stared warily. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t... take it...” The creature’s lips trembled. “That stone.”

“This? But I have to take it. Otherwise, I can’t see in the dark.”

“Don’t... take the... stone.”

“This place is too dark,” Piri replied. “I must carry this stone to light the way.”

“Don’t... take the... stone.”

Green Eyes

Piri shook his head in confusion. Did this creature not hear what he said? It can't be like that. The creature had nodded earlier when Piri asked it if it understood his words. It should be able to hear and understand what Piri meant.

"I'll keep this stone with me," Piri said. "I need it, and I won't bother you. But first, may I ask a question?"

Piri and the creature looked at each other.

The green-eyed creature hissed. "You... ask?"

"Do you know the way out of this place?"

The creature tilted its head. "Way out?"

"Yes, a way out. I and my two friends fell off a cliff. They were now at the end of the cave passage, over there. We all want to go back to where we came from. Out there."

"Place... trees... and grass..."

"Yes. Outside there are trees, grass, clouds, and sky," Piri said.

"... River."

Piri smiled. "There's a river too."

The creature shook its head. It raised its hand, pointing its index finger far to the left. "River."

"River?" Piri pointed his red stone in the direction the creature was pointing.

The cavern narrowed there, and besides a large rock was another passage, which was still dark. Is there a river there? Is that what the creature meant?

There didn't seem to be any sound, running water, or anything to show that there really was a river.

Piri looked back at the green-eyed creature. "Is that a river?"

The creature pointed again. "River."

"So... there is a river. Then?"

"River... out..."

Piri's brow furrowed. "You mean we can get out of this cave through that river?"

His brain thinks fast. Was it the same river that came out of the mouth of the cave near the caramunt tree? If that was true, then they would all survive!

"Can you help us?" he exclaimed happily. "Can you take us to that river and get us out of here?"

The creature curled up again. "Don't... take the... stone."

"No, I told you I have to take it. So, can you help me or not?"

Piri thought, if this creature really can't help, then there's no other way. He might as well just leave the creature here. But then he thought of Yara and Tero and realized they needed the creature.

Piri said again, "We need your help. Your body is big. You can take my friend with a sore leg to the river, and from there we can get out."

He waited for a response. But the creature did not answer.

"I will hide this stone, so you don't have to be afraid to see its

light. If you want to help, I'd be grateful. I'll help you out later too, if you need anything."

Now the creature nodded. Piri smiled, but couldn't be sure if that meant the creature will help.

He asked, "Do you need anything?"

The creature grinned, revealing a row of dark, dirty teeth. "... Food ..."

"What kind of food?"

"Delicious food."

Piri got goosebumps hearing that. He didn't know why, but maybe it was because the creature's voice sounded strange and scary.

He glanced around him. "Oh, sure, there's definitely no good food in here. I... I don't know what you usually eat. But outside I can give you an allumint fruit, or a tuirrint. Both are delicious. Em... I'll give it to you later, okay?"

The creature nodded.

"Good. I'm glad you can help me. Then we can go to my friend's place," Piri said cheerfully. "You just come with me, okay?"

The road back was difficult to take. The cave passage they had to go through was uphill and slippery. Piri knew the creature wouldn't want to help him by pushing his body up, because the creature preferred to stay behind, not wanting to come close as long as Piri was still holding the red stone.

But Piri didn't want to let go of the stone. He still held it up in front of him as a light. So, like it or not, he had to fight his way up with his own strength. No problem, he thought. After all, he had faced more hard paths before.

He kept climbing. He slipped several times, but finally, he arrived at the cave passage which was flatter. Convinced that

the creature was still following him, Piri walked on.

The cave passage narrows in several corners. Piri knew the creature might have to duck or even crawl to get past it, but Piri was sure it wouldn't be in any trouble. This cave was where the creature lived every day, so it must have passed this passage many times.

Before long, Piri then passed the large rock where he found the red stone, then stopped at the hole where he had previously disappeared from Yara and Tero's sight.

Piri smiled widely at the two of them while waving his hand.

"I'm back!" he exclaimed. "Look what I brought!"

The sheen of the red stone he carried matched the golden light that radiated from the star butterfly's wings.

Yara's scream was heard. "Piri! What took you so long? You scared us! And what is that you brought with you?"

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes!" Yara's smile spread. "It's exquisite! What's that?"

"The red stone. This stone helps me see while I'm in the cave passage. And I'm right! This is our way out! It said at the end of this passage there is a river which will take us out!"

"It said? Who said that?" Yara asked in surprise.

"It..." Piri turned his head into the passage. At first, he saw nothing, but then a pair of green eyes appeared.

"Come here," Piri said. "Let me introduce you to my friends, Yara and Tero. Ah, I forgot, you don't know my name yet. My name is Piri. What's yours?"

There was no answer to the question. Piri could hear only a soft hiss from the creature's mouth.

"Well, maybe later," Piri said. "Can you come here? We go down the cave wall here and after that, you will take my friends up."

“Piri!” Tero shouted. “Who are you talking to?”

“A creature that will help us!” Piri replied. “Which will help you up!”

Yara and Tero were silent. They both looked agitated now.

Piri withdrew his hand and then hid the red stone behind his body. He said to the creature, “You can get out of the corner.”

The creature was silent. Its pair of green eyes were invisible in the dark.

After a few moments, Piri realized the creature was not closing its eyes, but looking down and covering its face with both arms.

Piri looked around him and understood. “You don’t like being in the light, do you?”

“Piri!” Yara shouted. “Why haven’t you come down yet?”

“This creature doesn’t enjoy being in the light.”

“So?” Tero raised his hands, still confused by what Piri meant.

“That means we have to get all these butterflies out of here first.”

“No!” Tero refused. “I love it when they are here! I don’t want to kick them out!”

“But Tero, maybe this is the only way,” Yara said. “According to Piri, only that creature can help us get out of here. Right, Piri? So... we have to follow his will, Tero.”

“Would you like us to be in a dark place?” Tero asked.

“If that’s the only way we can get out... well, I should like it!”

Yara and Tero glared at each other.

Yara then looked up. “Piri! Are you sure?”

“Yes. Don’t worry, I still have this stone. This stone is bright and can help us.”

“Hope you’re right,” Yara retorted. “And hopefully the creature... doesn’t scare us.”

For Yara’s first sentence, Piri also wished the same thing.

Hopefully, they can find a way out of this place soon. He could be wrong, of course. Maybe the creature was wrong, or even lied to him. But it's still better to have hope than nothing at all.

As for the second sentence, Piri was almost completely sure Yara and Tero would be scared, or at least... shocked.

Down the Caves

Yara and Tero picked up a rock, then pounded on the rocky dirt wall near them as hard as they could. They didn't know what was the best way to get rid of the star butterflies, but maybe with a loud noise, the animals would get annoyed and decide to leave.

"Sorry!" Tero said to all the butterflies. "Go now! But we will meet again!"

Thousands of butterflies broke free from the earthen wall. They circled in the air, then moved up, before landing again somewhere far up there. It was possible that they could understand Tero's words.

"They are quite far from us already, Piri!" Yara exclaimed. "Just leave them there. This is their nest, their home. It is not good if we push them further away."

"Yes, it's quite dark in here," Tero said. "That thing can come down."

Piri looked back at the creature. "Follow me."

Slowly, he descended the cave wall.

He had no trouble. In no time, he had jumped beside Yara and

Tero.

He then looked up. The pair of green eyes blinked.

“Get down!” Piri shouted.

“W-what is it, Piri?” Yara asked, a little choked up. “The green ones?”

“Don’t be afraid. He’s just like us.”

“He? You mean, he—?” Tero’s question stopped, because at that moment the creature looked up, revealing strands of coarse hair that covered part of his face.

Yara’s breath caught while Tero gaped.

The creature turned its back to them, then slowly descended the earthen wall. His arms were long, and so were his legs. His skin was dark, as dark as mud.

“What do you mean he is like us, Piri?” Tero frightened. “He’s not! He’s very big!”

“He’s like us,” Piri calmed him down. “Just a little bigger.”

“He has hair on his face,” Yara said with a shudder. “And also on his body!”

“Like Grandpa,” Piri replied.

“And his eyes are green!” Tero said.

“Like...” Piri searched for a suitable word, “Yellow Eyes.”

Tero glared.

Piri grimaced. It’s a perfect match, but it feels bad to say it.

Yara shook her head. “He’s not like us...”

“Hey, up there I was scared too,” Piri said. “But after a while, it feels normal. Yes, he’s different, but he’s harmless.”

“How do you know if he’s harmless?”

“Shhh, Yara!” Tero told her to be quiet.

The creature would arrive beside them in a moment, and suddenly Piri felt his heart skip a beat. Yara was right too, how could Piri be sure that this creature was harmless?

The creature's feet hit the ground, and it slowly turned around. Yara pulled herself behind Piri, hiding. Tero brought his body closer to Piri.

Piri looked up, trying to stay calm.

The creature walked up to the children with a bent body. His eyes narrowed, slowly looking at Yara, then Tero, then back to Piri. Those green eyes felt different now, no longer glowing, unlike when it was in the cave passage.

Is that a good sign? Piri gripped the red stone which he was holding in his left hand and was still hiding behind his back. He would not hesitate to show it again if the creature turned out to be dangerous.

Piri opened his mouth. "Now then—"

"Food... delicious..." the creature hissed.

"What?" Tero whispered in surprise.

"Piri! What does he mean?" Yara asked timidly.

"Hey," Piri spoke to the creature. "You get us out of here first, then I'll give it to you!"

"Piri, what did he mean?" Yara asked again.

Piri whispered to her, "I promise to give him an allumint fruit later if we make it out of here. That's what his words meant."

"Oh... I thought..."

"What?" asked Piri.

Yara shook her head. He and Tero glanced at each other.

"Piri," Tero whispered. "We thought what he meant by that 'delicious food'... was us!"

"What? You? We? Become his food? Don't think like that!" Piri said.

How could Yara and Tero think such a terrible thing?

But... no, no way, Piri tried to convince himself. He was sure that was not what the creature meant.

He looked at the creature in front of him.

“So, can you help us?” he asked.

Silence for a while. The creature then nodded.

“Yara and I can climb, but Tero, his leg hurts. He couldn’t climb the wall. I hope you can carry him. Agree?”

The creature turned its back to the children and crouched down.

Tero still hesitated. “Piri, are you serious?”

“Yeah, get on his back.”

Frightened, Tero slowly wrapped his arms around the creature’s neck, then pulled his body closer. He looked at Piri. Fear was still visible on his face.

“You climb first, Yara. I followed behind you,” Piri continued. “Don’t worry, you can do it. After that, you two.”

Yara started climbing. At first, she looked doubtful, but once her body lifted and found her balance, she climbed with more confidence.

Piri followed beneath her, exclaiming to show which gaps to hold or step on if Yara was confused. The girl’s snort was heard every time she lifted her body.

Soon they both arrived at the hole above safely.

“Your turn!” cried Piri downwards.

The creature understood and climbed. Tero’s pale face appeared behind his back. Piri and Yara looked at each other, worried.

“He’s going to take Tero upstairs, right?” Yara said nervously.

“Y-yes. Yes, of course!”

The creature climbed up with only a few steps and an arms reach. Arriving at the top, Tero immediately smiled broadly.

Piri and Yara breathed a sigh of relief. The children thanked the creature, who simply replied with a blank stare.

The next journey was more difficult. The narrow passage made it impossible for the creature to carry Tero, so the boy had to walk alone, limping under Piri's support. Not a problem for Tero, because he also preferred to walk alone rather than being carried by the creature.

The creature walked briskly, stopping several times to wait for the children, while Yara walked behind. Yara held the red stone. The light was obscured by Piri and Tero's bodies, not radiating forward, and Yara kept whispering how beautiful the stone was.

"Why doesn't he like this stone?" Yara asked. "This is beautiful!"

"He really doesn't like the light?" Tero said, wincing in pain every time he took a step.

"Maybe the light hurts his eyes," Piri replied. "Look, he's helped us so far, so don't aim the stone beam at him."

Yara didn't reply. Piri didn't know if the girl was still fascinated by the red stone, or if she didn't want to answer because she didn't fully trust the green-eyed creature.

They arrived at the descending and slippery surface of the cave where Piri had slipped. This time, Piri was more careful. His left hand hugged Tero's waist, while his right hand held on to the dirt and stone wall beside him.

They came out of the passage and came to the flat ground, which was soft and watery.

"This is where I fell," Piri whispered. "And met the creature."

"This is where he lives?" Tero muttered.

Piri nodded while noticing a pair of green eyes staring at them not far ahead. Unfortunately, Piri couldn't see his face in the dark, so he couldn't tell what the creature might be thinking. The creature then turned and crawled into the next passage, besides the boulder.

Piri, Tero, and Yara looked at each other again.

Piri nodded, then without another word he continued on his way, following the creature into the next dark hole.

A River in Cave

In the dark, Piri noticed the movement of the creature in front of him which was crawling forward nimbly. The passage was getting deeper and narrower, and the creature crept.

Piri crawled along. He felt wet soil in the palm of his hand, and it was getting softer and softer. Does this mean the river is near?

Piri tried to sharpen his hearing. He heard strange voices. Faint, but high-pitched, then louder, quivering, and then gone.

Piri was stunned, then looked back. Yara's confused and scared face was visible thanks to the red stone in the girl's hand.

Tero looked from behind Yara's body. "Piri, did you hear that?"

"What sound is that?" Yara said, her body shaking.

"Maybe... just the sound of the wind."

Yara shook her head. "Maybe we shouldn't be here."

Tero chimed in, "Maybe we should stick to the original plan! You climb up the cliff, and call the other kids, then come back to pick us up!"

“Yara, climbing up is going to be hard, you know that,” Piri replied. “I could try it, but I don’t know how long I can go up, leave, and then come back here. You’ll be waiting too long, and we don’t know what will happen!”

“But this creature might be dangerous!” Yara said. “Maybe he really will... eat us! Maybe it’s true that we’re the ‘delicious food!’”

“Don’t think about it!”

“But it’s possible!” Tero said. “He will eat us like we eat the fruit of allumint!”

“We are not fruits or nuts!” Piri said. “Our bodies are much bigger than that. How is he going to eat us? How do we get into his stomach?”

“But he’s bigger than us!” Tero replied. “He can do that!”

“Stop it!” Piri exclaimed, then looked at Yara and Tero.

“Just think,” he continued, “who knows, maybe this creature really wants to help us, and this is the only way out. We’d better just follow him, but stay alert. We still have the red stone. If he’s an evil creature, we can use the stone against him. Okay?”

Yara nodded. “I’ve been thinking about that a long time ago. Using that stone.”

“But remember, only if it proves to be true,” Piri said. “If he stays good, we can’t hurt him. Agree?”

“Maybe it’s better if you are the one who brings this stone, Piri,” Yara said doubtfully. “I’m afraid I’ll panic too much later. After all, you are at the forefront. It’s more dangerous for you if—”

“You bring it, Yara,” Piri replied. “I’m sure you won’t panic. The Yara I know was never like that. Often angry, but never panic. Right?”

“If no one wants it, I’ll hold it here,” Tero said.

“No, I’ll do it,” Yara finally said. “Piri believes in me, then I will believe in him, too.”

The cave passage they were walking in continued to descend. It was getting waterier, and at the end of the journey, as soon as they were almost out of the mouth of the passage, if that was so, the water’s surface had already reached the chest.

Piri’s hands and feet were already half immersed in the soft ground.

He stopped crawling. This was not mud. The water was clear, and the soil was soft like sand. They should have arrived at the river bank.

But where is the creature? Piri’s eyes squinted, but between the rocks and the earthen wall to his left and right, only darkness was visible.

“So?” Tero asked from behind. “Shall we go on?”

“Crawl, you mean?” Yara corrected.

Shine the stone here, Yara. So it’s not too dark.”

Piri gathered his courage, then crawled forward. The bright light from the rock behind him helped. The darkness he had seen was water. It was the river, which was calm without ripples.

He reached the mouth of the cave passage and tried to advance once more, but collapsed. His head sank into the dark water.

Flustered, panicked, Piri hadn’t had time to take a breath. His hands were trying to find something to hold on to, but it felt like the bottom of the river suddenly plunged.

Fortunately, something pinched his right arm. Before he could think further, someone lifted his body out of the water.

Piri coughed, trying to get the water out of his mouth. He was relieved, but something appeared next to him.

Piri screamed in surprise, and the grip on his arm slipped. Luckily, both of his feet hit the bottom of the river. The surface

of the river was only up to his neck.

Piri regained his composure and could now see the creature sitting crouched on a large rock. The creature crouched down, hiding from the red beam of stone that was coming from behind.

Piri caught his breath. "Thank you ..."

"Careful..." the creature said.

Piri smiled in relief. Those short words were enough to make him sure that the creature had no bad intentions towards him.

"Piri!" Yara shouted. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. Come here. But hide the stone."

Yara complied. She kept her grip on the red rock so that when she crawled; it was sunk in the soft ground. Piri held Yara's arm as she descended into the river. Tero followed with a limp leg.

In the water, the stone shined. Its light gave off a beautiful glow, and Piri was right, the river was clear. The base was rocky, five times the width of the hand. The walls and ceiling were full of smooth, elongated stones sticking up and down.

Piri looked to the end of the river on the right, then to the far left. Both looked similar. It was dark there.

"Where are we going if we want to go out?" he asked.

The creature pointed to the left, then to the right. "Go out ..."

"Yeah, which one?" Piri asked again.

"Go out ..."

"What does that mean?" Tero grumbled. "He just confused us."

"Do you know the direction of the river where there is a caramunt tree outside?" Piri asked the creature again.

His response was just a blank stare.

Maybe the question is just too difficult, Piri thought.

"Let's just follow where this river flows," Yara said to Piri. Her sparkling eyes, long unseen, came back. "You know, right?"

she continued. "At the mouth of the cave near the caramunt tree, the river water flows out, not in."

Tero nodded. "So we just follow the flow of this river?"

"The flow that comes out means..." Piri pointed to the right, "there. That river."

Yara was silent. "So.. we walk in the water?"

"We can swim too," Tero said.

"Your leg is limping, so how can you swim?" Yara replied.

"I can walk. The river is shallow."

"What if it gets deeper?"

"I can hold on to the wall," Tero said. "Huh! Why is this a problem? It doesn't matter what I have to do, the important thing is that I can get out of here as soon as possible!"

"I was only trying to care for you! Why are you angry?" Yara replied.

Tero was silent. After gazing at each other with Yara, he said, "Yeah, sorry. Em... Piri, so how? Shall we go?"

Piri turned towards the green-eyed creature. "You're coming too, right?"

The creature shook its head.

"Why? I will give you an allumint fruit. Delicious food, remember?"

The creature glanced towards the end of the river to Piri's right.

"Delicious food..." he said, then shook his head once more.

"Well, that's that then." Piri finally gave up. "We go. But don't worry, because I promised, when I get out I'll be back, and bring you an allumint fruit."

Not to Be Eaten

Piri no longer counted the time. He didn't know how long they had been walking, nor did he know whether it was day or night. All he knew now that was they were tired and hungry.

The problem was, he still didn't know when they would reach the mouth of the cave. So when they found a large flat rock on the bank of the river, they stopped and rest there.

Tero said, "Piri, you should have asked him what he usually eats here every day."

Piri smirked. "We are his food, right?"

Both laughed, happy to make a joke of it now that they were away from the green-eyed creature.

But Yara didn't laugh. "Don't be too happy yet! He can still follow us here, catch us, then eat us!"

"Uh, I'm tired of thinking about that," Tero said.

"But it's true," Piri said. "I should have asked him what kind of food can we eat here. My guess... maybe that one."

He took a red stone and dipped it into the river.

Several palm-sized animals swam behind the rocks. Its shape

is flat, and its skin glows red, white, and black. They swim by wagging their tails left and right.

Tero was wide-eyed. "Is that what you call a fish? Grandpa told us about this before, right? Fish! We've never seen them in the river near where we live, but he said the fish were on the other side of the river."

"They are so beautiful!" Yara's eyes sparkled in admiration.

"Star butterfly is still better," Tero replied.

"But butterflies can't swim."

"Fish can't fly! Right?"

"Hey, maybe this river in the cave is what Grandpa meant." Piri pulled the red stone. "But that's weird. Why would they just want to swim here and not come out?"

"Like the creature who helped us," Yara muttered. "Have you thought about why he doesn't want to come out with us?"

"Because it's bright out there. He doesn't like it," Tero answered.

"It's dark at night too," Piri said.

"But at night there are Yellow Eyes," Yara answered, who then widened her eyes. "There it is! I think he didn't want to come out because he was afraid of Yellow Eyes. He was the creature that Yellow Eyes had been searching for all this time!"

"Why?" Tero asked doubtfully.

"Maybe..." Yara froze, "... he did something bad out there once, which made Yellow Eyes angry!"

Tero was stunned for a moment, then panicked and quickly jumped into the river. "Then what are we waiting for? We'd better go now! I don't want him to catch me here!"

"Don't you want to sleep?" Piri asked.

"My sleepiness is gone. How can I sleep when I'm scared?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

“Why do you ask that?” Tero asked back, confused.

“Don’t you want to try eating the fish?” Piri smirked again.

“Piri! Do you really want to eat animals?” Yara screamed in horror. “That’s disgusting! And also... pity! They are not to be eaten!”

“Grandpa never said they shouldn’t be eaten.”

“I don’t care! I don’t want it!” Yara screamed.

“Neither do I,” Tero said. “I’d rather be hungry than eat animals. After coming out, I will eat two bags of allumint fruit at once!”

“Don’t even think about eating those fish, Piri!” Yara exclaimed.

“Well, one day we might be forced to give it a try...”

“No! I don’t want to hear it!”

Piri laughed. He got up and went down to the river.

They drank a few sips of water, then continued on their way.

So far there had been no sign of them getting close to the end of the cave passage, but Piri had decided to cross this river. He had to keep believing that it was the right decision.

But after so long, fatigue was very difficult to fight. Their speed slowed as they reached the shallower part of the river. They stumbled and slipped several times between the rocks of the river.

“Maybe we should sleep first...” Piri finally said.

Tero and Yara answered with a nod of their heads. Tired as if no one cared anymore if the green-eyed creature would come and eat them.

After all, they probably have nothing to fear, Piri thought. As long as there was a red stone in their hands, they would be safe.

The children pulled over to the riverbank in the cave and lay down in whatever place felt comfortable for their heads and

backs. Rock niches were as cozy as tree houses.

In an instant, Tero was asleep and snoring. Yara immediately fell asleep as well, this time not caring about the snoring at all.

Piri aimed the red stone beam at the end of the river they had crossed. The creature didn't follow, so they had nothing to worry about. Feeling calm, Piri followed Tero and Yara. He held a red stone to his chest.

What happened next made Piri unsure if he was really asleep. In the dark, he saw a pair of yellow dots of light in the distance.

Are that Yellow Eyes?

He woke up. His chest was pounding. His eyes opened, and he realized everything was not as dark as he had seen earlier. The red stone was still there, enough to light up the place.

But he saw something far away, which made him believe that the light had not been a dream. He saw a yellow light, now, far down the river.

His sleepiness disappeared. His eyes narrowed. Yes, there was a point of light far away. That must be the mouth of the cave!

He cheered, ready to wake Tero and Yara, but then remembered, if it was Yellow Eyes, then it was still night. They'd better stay asleep. After all, they can go home tomorrow afternoon.

Besides, what would happen if Yellow Eyes saw them coming out of the cave? Piri didn't want to know. He laid his body back.

This time he slept happily.

After that, a long time later, he woke up thanks to the shaking that came along with a loud noise in his ears. "Piri, wake up! Hurry!"

Piri stretched and opened his eyes. This time, what greeted him was Yara's beaming face.

“We’ve arrived, Piri! We have arrived!”

At the end of the river, there was a small circle of cave slits that were lit up by the morning light. It was still quite far from their current position, but it couldn’t be wrong, they would be home soon.

“Look, when we sleep, the gap can’t be seen because it’s still night!” Tero said. “Come on, let’s get out now!”

Piri chased Yara and Tero, who had already descended into the river. Yara half ran on the river bank then jumped and swam vigorously, making the water splash here and there. Tero followed with limping legs while holding onto the rocks.

Both of them were so happy, so maybe Piri didn’t need to tell them he actually knew about this since last night. They don’t need to know about Yellow Eyes.

Piri slid, swam fast past Tero. Soon he arrived beside Yara. The two of them arrived at the mouth of the cave, with a bright blue sky above their heads.

Piri looked up. While floating, he grinned.

Yara replied with a strange look.

“Where... where are we?” the girl asked.

“What do you mean, where? We’re outside!”

“But why isn’t there a caramunt tree there?” Yara pointed to the bank of the river that was across from the mouth of the cave.

Piri was stunned. That’s right. He saw thickets and rows of green trees along the riverbank, but not a single caramunt tree. The broad leaves of the tree should be easy to spot from afar.

“There’s also no big rock that Grandpa used to go to every morning!” Yara continued. “Also the allumint trees that should be there! Also, all the children! Piri, we are in the wrong river!”

Teropiriyaraint Fruit

“**W**e’re in the wrong river?” Tero said from behind. The boy could not swim in the middle of the river like Piri and Yara. He could only hold on to the rock at the mouth of the cave.

“The river is right. It’s just that we came out in the wrong cave.” Piri calmed down the other two children. “The important thing is that we’ve made it out of the cave.”

“But now what?” Tero exclaimed.

“We’re going down the river. Surely we will get home,” Piri said.

“To the left or to the right?” Yara asked.

Piri hesitated, then watched. The river that came out of the mouth of the cave forked in two.

“I remember the river near our treehouse turned right as soon as it came out of the cave mouth,” Piri said. “That means now we have to take a tributary that leads to the left, or against the flow of the river. That way, we can get home.”

“How far do we have to walk?” Tero asked.

“It won’t be far,” Piri replied. “Don’t worry. Besides, here we

can find fruit to eat.”

Tero grinned. “That’s right. I’m hungry!”

“Then, unfortunately, we have to forget about them.” Piri looked at the fish that appeared on the surface, near to the mouth of the cave.

Yara immediately screamed in disgust, while Tero laughed.

The first fruit they found was oddly shaped. Long green, sticking up with yellow petals at the base, unlike allumint fruit that always hangs down.

The children could reach the fruit, but they were still not sure to pick it.

“I don’t think we can eat this. It’s not edible,” Yara said. “Look, it’s green like a leaf. It may taste bitter.”

“The tuirrint leaves are edible, and they taste good,” Tero argued.

“That’s because tuirrint leaves are red, not green!”

“Instead of guessing, why don’t we just try it?” Piri said.

He stretched out his hand and plucked one of the fruit. The fruit didn’t come off right away, so he had to pull it with all his might.

The tree branch was pulled down too, but finally, Piri took the fruit.

At the base, the inside of the fruit was white, and the surface was fibrous. Piri smelled the fruity aroma, which smelled appetizing. He tore off the green outer layer. One, two, three strands, until finally, the inside of the white fruit opens.

“This is the fruit,” he said. “The green one outside was just the skin. Anyone want to try?”

Yara was still hesitating, but Tero replied, “I will!”

He took the fruit from Piri’s hand and devoured it. He chewed while looking at Yara and Piri.

“Delicious!” he exclaimed. “Sweet! Soft! Not inferior to allumint fruit!”

“Is that true?” Yara and Piri asked at the same time.

“Yes! Come on, let’s take it all!”

Yara and Piri responded to Tero’s call. Triggered by hunger and unbearable joy, the three of them rushed to pick the fruits, from one tree to another, and then piled them on the grass.

After gathering enough of them, they ate them all without hesitation. Piri had to admit that the fruit was indeed tastier than the allumint fruit. They eat until they are full and their stomachs swell.

Tired and satisfied, the three of them sat back on the tree trunk. They fell to the grass, enjoying the breeze while looking at the clear water of the river.

Tero laughed. “I have no regrets now. Our journey was hard and my feet were swollen, but I got to see thousands of star butterflies and enjoy the most delicious fruit in the world. I can go home, tell the others, then one day, I will come back here and enjoy this fruit again!”

“Yeah, maybe we can take the seeds and try planting them near our treehouse,” Piri suggested while rocking the red stone, which no longer glowed, maybe because it was in a bright place. “So that we don’t have to go all the way here if we want to eat it.”

“That’s a good idea!” Tero nodded. “I’ll plant it next to my flower garden. They will grow accompanied by butterflies. Ah, yes, I’ll collect the seeds, then I’ll take them. I can’t wait to go home and plant it!”

“Shall we find a name for it?” Piri asked.

“Name for this fruit? Hmm... what is it? How about... yarapiriteroint? Or... teropiriyaraint? It’s our combined name

because the three of us found it!” Tero exclaimed.

Piri laughed. “That’s a good name.”

“Teropiriyaraint fruit! I will take it and introduce it to all the children!” Tero laughed louder. “I can’t wait any longer!”

“We still have to walk home, and we don’t know how long it will be,” Yara said. “Don’t get too excited just yet.”

Tero replied, “What’s wrong with having fun? It lifts us up, and happiness makes us strong!”

Yara didn’t answer. She just straightened her legs, then fell on the grass. Her eyes looked up at the blue sky that was visible through the branches and leaves.

Piri followed the direction of the girl’s gaze. Far above, there were white clouds clumping over the peaks of the mountains.

Piri understood something that made Yara suddenly lose her joy. Tero had fulfilled his dream of seeing a star butterfly, but Yara had not. She hadn’t reached the clouds yet.

“Piri.”

Piri turned his head, staring at Tero who was yawning widely.

“Jiro and the others should have gone home, right? Should be...” Tero yawned once more. “They will come down from the slopes once we are lost...”

“Yeah....” Piri yawned too. “Why should they keep going up, anyway?”

He glanced at Yara. The girl was asleep.

Piri turned back towards Tero. He’s asleep too!

Then Piri realized there was something strange.

This sleepiness... came too soon....

Piri didn’t know how long he had been asleep.

He woke up earlier than Yara and Tero.

Piri yawned widely, watching his two friends, who were still sleeping with their bodies curled up. Unusually, Tero's snoring was not heard.

Piri looked around. His astonishment arose.

This... wasn't the bank of the river where he had been sleeping. They were now in a closed room, where all four walls were dark!

Piri stood up, stepped on the dry dirt floor, then approached the wall. From the shape of the fibers and the grooves, Piri knew the wall was made of tree trunks, which somehow were cut and made in such a way that it became flat like a rock cliff.

He tapped and scraped against the wall with his fingernails. His prediction was correct. This must be what is called wood, as Grandpa said one day. It's soft, but hard too.

Piri was restless again. What is this place and why is he here?

Piri turned his head, noticing a long horizontal slit an inch wide in the wooden wall behind him. Light entered through the gap. From there, he should be able to see where they were.

Unfortunately, the gap was too high to reach. Piri thought about climbing up, but it seemed impossible because the wooden wall was so flat and smooth. There was no gap at all for her fingers to slip through.

He approached Tero and Yara, intending to wake them both up. But Tero squirmed first, and his elbow swung against Yara's head.

As a result, Yara woke up first. Her eyes opened and looked directly at Tero with annoyance.

Her annoyance disappeared when she met Piri's eyes.

"What is it?" Yara asked, while Tero opened his eyes.

Piri didn't have time to answer. There was a strange creaking sound from behind.

He turned around. Some of the wooden walls open inward.

From behind it appeared a creature similar to the strange creature they had encountered in the cave.

Difficult Food

The creature that had just appeared was similar in shape to a child's, but with a much larger body. If Piri stood in front of him, if he dared to do that, perhaps Piri's head wouldn't be higher than the creature's waist. The creature's waist circumference was also very large, bigger than the trunk of a caramunt tree.

However, what distinguished this figure from the strange creatures in the cave was that he had a clean face. No dirty, messy hair around his big nose and thick lips. The hair was only on top of his head. The hair was thin and short and as gray as stone.

Another thing that distinguishes him was the creature's entire body, which from the bottom of the neck to the elbows and knees was covered by a strange thick layer of brown that was joined in such a neat and intricate manner.

Piri was surprised. So far, Grandpa has only told children to cover their bodies on the genitals, with leaves of the caramunt tree, so why does this creature cover almost its entire body? Does he feel ashamed of his body that everything needs to be

covered in such a way?

Piri didn't dare ask about it yet. In contrast to the strange creature in the cave, who always cowered at Piri, this huge creature before him stood tall and gazed at them, looking dangerous.

Piri was silent. He squatted down between Tero and Yara, who also didn't dare to speak. Piri suddenly remembered the strange creature in the cave was afraid of him because he had a red stone. Now, where is it?

This time, without thinking, Piri looked up and asked the creature loudly, "Where is my red stone? Did you take it?"

The big creature looked back at him. His thick eyebrows knit together.

"What stone?" His voice was heavy. The pronunciation of his words sounded a little strange, but his tone was quite gentle.

"The red stone, which..." Piri was silent. Suddenly, he hesitated. Should he tell him about this?

However, sensing that the big creature didn't seem so dangerous, he asked again, "Hey, what's going on? Why are we here?"

The huge creature burst into laughter, enough to make his stomach seem to bob under the covers. He then walked out of the room, leaving a piece of the wall open.

Piri and the other two children looked at each other, then glanced around, trying to see what was outside the room. Unfortunately, before they could see, the creature had returned, this time with two large bowls. The first bowl contains dozens of colorful fruits. Yes, they must be fruits, Piri thought, as they were placed in the bowl.

In the second bowl, the contents are more like red tuirrint fruit that has been crushed and mixed with river water until it is

runny and sticky. Only Piri wasn't sure it was from tuirrint fruit because it smelled different. This one smells more pungent. Inside the bowl was a small piece of wood as long as a palm, which was partly inside the food and seemed to be used for stirring.

The creature sat cross-legged in front of the children and held out the two bowls. "Here, eat the fruit, one or two. After that, taste this red porridge. Have you ever eaten porridge?"

The children shook their heads.

The creature continued, "It's up to you which one you want first."

Piri smelled the porridge and immediately lost his appetite. He was also still hesitant to take the fruit in the first bowl.

He looked at Yara and Tero. The two children didn't seem to intend to speak, perhaps because they were still afraid.

"We're not hungry yet," Piri said. "We ate by the river earlier, and—"

"You all fell asleep. What you eat by the river is maullavaloa fruit. If you eat too much of it, you'll get sleepy."

"Mallava fruit—what?" Piri asked.

"Maullavaloa," Yara said.

"That's right." The creature looked at Yara. "You know its name."

"No, I don't." Yara shook her head.

"But you're good at saying it."

"I was just imitating what you said."

"It's a hard name! We have our name for the fruit, which is easier to remember," Tero now spoke. "Teropiriyaraint."

"Oh.... So apparently you know the fruit too. Then why did you eat it until you were full?"

Piri shook her head. "It's our first time seeing the fruit."

Tero nodded. "I then gave it a name after our name. We are the inventors. I'm Tero, he's Piri, and this is Yara."

"Funny names, and weird. Are you from...?" A strange glint appeared in the big creature's eyes, but it disappeared quickly. "So, you all discovered the fruit? OK." He laughed. "My name is Jenasin. You can call me Mister Jenasin."

"Mister? What is Mister?" Yara asked.

"Well, it's a calling, because I'm bigger and older than you. Don't you know about this?"

The children did not answer, because they did not understand.

Tero even asked back, "Your name is Jenasint? I think it's more suitable as a fruit name. A big, fat fruit."

Mr. Jenasin laughed again. "You are funny! Ah, your name was Tero, right? Your ankle is swollen. Let me treat. But eat first. You must be hungry. You've been sleeping all day and night!"

Piri was taken aback, as were Yara and Tero. They've been sleeping that long? Piri turned his head and glanced at the tall, bright slit behind her. Looks like it's been a day!

Tero shrugged his shoulders. He didn't seem to care that he had slept for a long time. He took the fruit that was round and red.

"You try the yellow one, Piri, and you the brown one, Yara. We'll see which one is the best."

The greenish-yellow fruit that Tero offered was also round, while the brown fruit for Yara was more oval.

Piri and Yara were ready to take a bite of the fruit when Mr. Jenasin then held back, "You have to peel the skin first, then eat it."

What a hard way to eat, Piri thought. Or difficult food. Everything must be peeled and cannot be eaten immediately.

But he and Tero and Yara had to admit that these fruits were

delicious. No less delicious and even tastier than their aluminum fruit.

“A little sour,” Tero said, as if he knows all about the red fruit. “But it’s fresh, lots of water, and it’s sweet too.”

“This one is hard,” Yara argued about the brown one. “And the seeds in it are big. But the meat is delicious too.”

“Tero, how much water do you get with this?” Piri said while showing the yellow one. “I think this is the best! But don’t bite the small seeds, they taste bitter.”

Mr. Jenasin explained that the three fruits were named tilaruola, kenelatui, and aramulao.

Piri couldn’t understand why they had to give such difficult names to such simple fruits. He would ask Tero to come up with alternative names later.

After each child ate three fruits, Mr. Jenasin said, “Now, try this red porridge.”

The three children looked at him doubtfully.

“Compared to the maullavaloa fruit, the red porridge is spicy but has more benefits. After eating it, your body will feel stronger. You’re gonna need that.”

Piri stretched out his hand, was about to scoop up the red porridge and put it in his bowl, but Mr. Jenasin quickly stopped him. “Use the spoon. Take the pulp with that wood. That’s how you eat it.”

Again, a hard way of eating, Piri thought.

But he just obeyed. He scooped up the red porridge with a wooden spoon, then brought it to his mouth, then licked it. Not too sweet, not to his liking, but Piri kept forcing himself to put the porridge in his mouth. With a little chewing, he immediately swallowed it.

“Is it delicious?” Tero asked.

“No,” Piri answered without hesitation, “But, I think it can be eaten.”

“In your opinion, fish can also be eaten,” Yara said.

“Ah, you like to eat fish?” Mr. Jenasin asked. “I’ll take it later in the river and burn it for you.”

“Nooo!” the three children answered immediately.

“We just eat this,” Yara said.

She and Tero followed Piri to eat the red porridge.

Wooden Wall

Mr. Jenasin brought another bowl. This time, it was smaller and contained a pungent smack of green leaves.

In addition, he brought another object that was oddly shaped. It was like a bowl, but there was a round lid on the top. On its side was a kind of arm that curled upwards like the long neck of a kamio bird. A small hole appeared at the end of the neck.

Mr. Jenasin shook the object slowly, and from the splashing sound inside, the children could tell that it was a place to store water.

“A drink for you,” he said.

The children drank, then smiled and laughed to themselves, realizing that from the first day they were gone, despite all the dangers they had experienced, they had found many interesting new things to tell.

That means it’s true, Piri thought, that to get something great, they have to do something extraordinary before. And if they dare to do it, it will be felt later that even the extraordinary is actually not a difficult thing to do.

Mr. Jenasin smeared Tero's swollen ankle with the mash of sticky leaves from the third bowl. Tero grimaced.

"Now your feet will feel hot," Mr. Jenasin said, "but after you rest for the night, you will feel better."

"That means I have to wait some more," Tero muttered.

"It's alright," Yara said. "We can wait for you until your leg heals. After that, we can walk faster."

Piri turned. "Is this your house, Mr. Jenasin? Is it near the river where you found us?"

"Not far. Incidentally, yesterday I was walking near the river and saw the three of you, so I could bring you here right away."

"Can we go out and have a look?"

Mr. Jenasin shook his head. "You'd better stay indoors this afternoon and tonight. Outside... there are wild animals."

"Wild animals?" Tero asked. "Like fishes, star butterflies, or kamio birds?"

Mr. Jenasin looked confused. "No. I mean snakes, wolves, or wild buffalo."

The children were silent. They did not know the animals that Mr. Jenasin mentioned and therefore did not know how to react.

"You don't know them? Snakes can bite you until your body swells more than the swelling in Tero's feet. Wolves can bite your hands and feet until they bleed a lot. Wild buffalo can gore your body with its long and pointed horns. All animals are big and dangerous. Not to mention the other animals, which can be dangerous too."

This time, the children got goosebumps.

"That's terrible!" Yara exclaimed.

"If you want to go out, let me accompany you. Unfortunately, today I have to leave first."

"So we can go out tomorrow?"

“Hm... we’ll see about that tomorrow.” Mr. Jenasin stood up in a hurry. “Sorry, I have to go now. If you are still hungry, eat the fruits, and when night falls, sleep.”

He left the room, then closed the wooden wall. The sound of his footsteps drifted away until finally completely inaudible.

Piri and the other two children looked at each other, then Piri stood up. He approached the wall that had been opened and closed. There was a small cavity the size of a palm there, which Mr. Jenasin had always held when he opened or closed the wall.

Piri tucked his fingers in, trying to pull the wooden wall off, but couldn’t do it. The wall couldn’t open.

Piri turned his head, looked back at Yara and Tero. He was confused and scared. They knew there was something strange here.

“He... locked us in here!” Yara said frantically. “He’s hiding something. That creature has bad intentions towards us!”

“No!” Tero denied it. “He already said earlier, he doesn’t want us to go out because there are a lot of wild animals. He just wants to keep us here so we really don’t go out!”

“Do you think so?” Yara exclaimed. “We’re like the butterfly you used to keep in a bowl that couldn’t get out when it wanted to come out!”

“Hey, I didn’t keep the butterfly for long. I just kept it for a while! I released it again in my flower garden! He is happy to be there.”

“Keep it from what? The butterfly can take care of itself. Like us, we can also take care of ourselves. We don’t need Mr. Jenasin’s help.”

“But he may be right, Yara,” Tero tried to be patient. “Wild animals are dangerous. Because they are wild. Do you want us all to get hurt?”

“He’s just scaring us!” Yara replied. “While on the bank of the river, there are no animals that appear and disturb us. There’s only fish. Then why then there must be wild animals?”

“We don’t know yet, so we have to be careful,” Tero said. “Is that right, Piri?”

“Perhaps,” Piri replied. He was still looking at the wooden wall that had been opened and closed. He had tried several times to pull, push, or tap on it, but he still couldn’t open it. Looked like it would take an enormous force to open the wall.

“We’d better sleep,” Tero said. “We can go out tomorrow, anyway. Mr. Jenasin is a good creature. He has treated my leg. Do you see? Tomorrow I can walk again!”

Yara scowled when she saw Tero lying down, and she looked away. But the look of annoyance on her face lessened as she watched Piri.

“What are you thinking about?” Yara asked.

“This soil below us.” Piri crouched down. “We can dig it up.”

“Dig it?”

“We can make a hole, then get out of here.” Piri sat pensively. “If the hole is deep enough, we can get through this wooden wall from below, then we go up and we’ll get to the outside! We could dig there, under that wall, which has a bright hole over it.”

Yara was immediately excited. She nodded in the direction Piri was pointing, then her finger touched the ground near her.

“It’s harder than the soil we used to play in our river,” Yara said. “What should we dig it up with? Our hands can get hurt...”

“With those bowls. But we have to finish the fruit and pulp first.” Piri grinned. “And even though it’s hard, it’s just soil, not rock. So we can definitely dig it out.”

“But what if the wooden wall is buried deep inside? How far and how long do we have to dig?”

“We will see. We’ve always tried when we got troubles, so why not now? If it works, at night we can go out.”

“I don’t agree with this. At night, Mr. Jenasin will come,” Tero spoke. He was already sitting behind Piri and Yara. His face looked annoyed. “And if he sees you two digging holes, he’ll be furious!”

“If we make a hole in a dark corner, Mr. Jenasin won’t be able to see it,” Yara said.

Tero shook his head in disbelief. “Why are you so stubborn? Don’t you believe what Mr. Jenasin said? It’s dangerous out there!”

“If it’s really dangerous, we can just go back in and hide,” Piri replied. “If the animals force their way in, we’ll just fill this hole again.”

Tero laughed like he couldn’t believe it. “You worked so hard to dig, but in the end, you closed the hole again?”

“Yeah, like we were tired of climbing a tree, then go down again.” Piri grimaced while glancing at Yara.

“When I climb a tree, at least I get the fruit,” Tero said. “Now, what do you get?”

“I can go out for a bit,” Piri replied. “To have a look and see where we are now.”

The three children looked at each other.

Piri smiled widely. “Hey, we’ve climbed mountains, through caves, and past rivers. We are tired, exhausted, but we always get something. We are not weak. Right? So, once again, that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I know you’ll do it.” Tero’s voice softened. “But I don’t understand why we can’t trust Mr. Jenasin. He has helped us.”

“But he’s hiding something. He locks us here.” Yara persisted in her opinion. “That means he can’t be trusted.”

“Tero,” Piri said. “I wanted to believe him too, but you said yourself, we don’t know what will happen, so we have to be careful. Therefore, I will dig this soil, and hopefully, nothing will happen.”

Digging a Hole

Piri took the third bowl, which was previously full of leaves, to treat Tero's feet and was now empty. He walked to the corner of the room and sat down in front of the wall with a long hole above it. The hole was where the sun's rays enter; their only connection with the outside world. The sky outside was still bright, so there was still time to dig until nightfall.

Piri dug. At first, the hard soil in front of him was difficult to dig, but he tried to dig it little by little. Sweat flooded all over his body.

After some time, his efforts showed results. The hole he made was quite large, and even though it was solid in there, the soil felt softer and easier to dig.

Piri put down the bowl to rest his arm, and suddenly Yara said beside him, "Here, let me continue digging."

But before the girl could reach the bowl, Tero came first and moved faster. "Let me."

Piri smiled and backed away to make room.

Tero showed the strength of his arm. He dug much faster and

more powerfully. The dirt piled up, and Tero could now descend into the hole almost at his waist.

“Look, the bottom end of this wooden wall is showing!” Tero looked genuinely happy. “You’re right, Piri. We can get out this way.”

“Try to dig a little deeper,” Piri said. “Want me to do it now?”

“No. I’m excited and I’m still going strong!”

“It’s going to be night soon,” Yara said anxiously as she looked up at the sky through the long slit. “You can’t dig at night.”

“Who said I couldn’t?” Tero said. “My eyes are getting used to the dark.”

“I mean, Mr. Jenasin will probably come.”

Piri ran to the center of the room and spilled the red porridge from the second bowl. After that, he turned around again and jumped in next to Tero. “Then we have to hurry. Yara, please remove the soil above so it doesn’t fall into the hole again.”

The three children worked hard. They dug faster, deeper. When the sky was dark, Piri and Tero had started digging under the wooden wall.

But both of them knew the next stage would be more difficult and tiring, as they had to throw dirt further towards Yara, who was waiting behind.

Tero finally shook his head. “Piri, we can’t possibly finish tonight.”

“I know,” Piri answered quietly. “It will take a day or two, and we need light. Impossible to dig in the dark. The dirt could fall on us.”

“Then what should we do?” Yara asked from above.

“Light... If only we have light...” Piri muttered.

“You know what I’m thinking?” Yara said.

Piri looked up and nodded. “Yes.”

“Red stone,” the two said at the same time.

Tero was stunned. “Yeah, how did that thing get lost?”

“Mr. Jenasin,” Yara said. “There’s no way he didn’t see the red stone that was in Piri’s hand when we were asleep by the river. He must have taken it and then hid it.”

The three children fell silent.

Piri finally said, “There’s nothing more we can do.”

“Then we can only hope that Mr. Jenasin is a good person?”

Yara said.

“I’ve already said about that, haven’t I? Come on, let’s go up,”

Tero said.

“Wait a minute,” Yara interrupted.

Piri and Tero looked at her.

“I heard his voice,” Yara stuttered. “Mr. Jenasin!”

Panicked, Piri and Tero rushed up the hole.

But it’s too late. Just as they were halfway out of the hole, the wooden wall on the opposite side of the room opened. The three children froze.

Mr. Jenasin stood stiffly. His hand gripped a wooden stick as long as one arm. At the end of the stick hung a strange, round object the size of an adult’s head. It was slightly larger than the muarrant fruit, which the children used to cut in half and make into a bowl.

The skin of the round object was thin, hollow at the top and bottom, and inside was something that gave off a yellow glow. At first, Piri thought it was a glowing stone, like a red stone, but when he looked again, the light source was neither solid like a rock, nor liquid like water. The shape of the light source was like an undeveloped flower, swaying slightly, and it emitted a kind of black fine powder on it, which floated up in thin lines.

The oddity of the round object filled Piri’s mind, but Mr.

Jenasin's words distracted him. "What are you doing?"

His voice was not rising, but loud enough. His eyes gazed at the mound, then at each child. He let Piri and Tero go up and snuggle up with Yara before walking over to them. The three children shivered in fear.

Mr. Jenasin looked into the dark hole. "Why did you make this hole?"

The children did not dare to answer.

"Do you want to run away? Why? Don't you like me?"

Piri ventured. "We... we just wanted to go out for a bit."

Tero nodded. "Only for a minute."

"And what for?"

"To... Mmm..." Tero was confused.

"What if we need to pee?" Piri said. "We can't do that here. We have to get out."

Mr. Jenasin nodded. It seemed he could accept that reasoning.

But Yara still said loudly, "Why did you lock us here?"

Her words were sharp, but her grip on Piri's arm was firm, showing that the girl's fear was quite great.

"Why can't we go out and have a look?" Yara asked again.

"I told you, it's dangerous outside!" Mr. Jenasin replied. "If you want to go out, you have to be with me!"

He looked at each child, then shrugged. "Well, that's that then. Do you really want to go out? We're out now. It's about time, anyway."

"Now?" Yara's brow furrowed. "To... where?"

"To where you come from, of course."

"Go home?"

Mr. Jenasin didn't care about the children's confusion. He turned and stepped outside, leaving the wooden wall open.

There he said again, "Do you want to go out or not?"

The three children looked at each other, then stood up.

Mr. Jenasin looked different. He didn't look very nice now. But the kids didn't care, because for them there was something more important. They're coming home!

The three of them followed Mr. Jenasin, turning into a long, three-step-wide hallway flanked by wooden walls.

Piri looked up. The wall on the left was twice as high as the right, and between the walls was a gap that ran from the back to the end of the hall in front. The night sky appeared above them.

Piri understood they were walking through the gap between two wooden walls. The building on the left was where they had been locked up, while the building on the right, which was bigger, Piri didn't know what it was. The shape of the building was strange. It was square and had corners like sharp stones in a river.

Piri thought if this building was a house, wouldn't it be great if these big creatures made it in a half-round shape like a bowl? Or circular walls and high like the Black Tower?

Tero whispered, "Apparently, they always build houses using walls like this. Unlike us, who just have a treehouse with broad leaves as a roof!"

"Perhaps, as Mr. Jenasin said, there are a lot of wild animals here," Yara answered. "They need that wall to protect themselves."

"So it's true that there are wild animals here?" Piri asked.

Yara nodded reluctantly. Like Piri, there was still something lingering in the girl's mind, although she had to admit that Mr. Jenasin was right.

Not the World I Want

“**M**aybe this big building isn’t a house,” Piri said as he looked at the two high-walled buildings to his left and right.

Tero grimaced. His walk was no longer limping, but the pain in his ankle seemed to still be there. “We were sleeping there, meaning this is indeed a house. If this isn’t a house to sleep in, then what is it?”

“Well, just like the Black Tower. Is that a house to sleep in?” Piri said.

Yara and Tero didn’t reply, because at that moment Mr. Jenasin looked back, apparently disturbed by their whispering voices.

They kept walking until they finally came to the end of the passage, next to a grassy ground that had a downward slope, presumably because of being on the slopes of a mountain. Rows of trees and shrubs lay ahead, but there was a path in the middle.

Piri looked back, to recognize the two buildings he had passed before, and also to convince himself that the peaks of the mountains were indeed behind him.

“Hurry,” Mr. Jenasin said. “Don’t be left behind, or the wolves will come and eat you.”

For Piri and the other two children, the threat was truly terrifying. They hurried after Mr. Jenasin, trying not to fall far behind the large creature’s wide steps.

The road they passed was winding, going up, down, up again, then down again. The children’s breath hitched, their bodies tired.

Piri remembered they had not rested after digging.

After a while, the road was flat again. The rows of trees and shrubs that were previously dense thinned out. They arrived at the foot of the mountains. After turning several times, there was now a wide, grassy plain as far as the eye could see.

Looking up, they could enjoy the open night sky without a hitch.

Piri held his breath and was stunned. He hadn’t realized what was bothering him the most, but there was something odd here.

He glanced at Yara and Tero, but it seemed the two children were still too tired to think.

Fortunately, Mr. Jenasin’s steps as he crossed the plains slowed down so the children could follow him without having to half run.

Piri asked, “Mr. Jenasin, you said you wanted to take us home, right?”

“Yes.”

“But this is not the way home.”

“You’re going home! Don’t worry.”

“Do you know where we’re going?”

“Of course. To where the children are.”

“But where is it?”

“The person who will escort you know the place!”

“Person?” Tero asked. “What’s that?”

“Huh? A person is a person! He is a person, I am a person, you are also a person. Just shut up! We’re almost there where he’s waiting.”

Piri let Mr. Jenasin go further.

Yara and Tero watched Piri.

“Piri, what’s wrong?” whispered Yara restlessly.

“Don’t you see?” Piri asked.

“See what?” Tero replied.

“This valley! Don’t you think there’s something strange?”

“What? Strange why?” Yara and Tero looked frantically in all directions.

“We can’t see the Black Tower! Nothing, anywhere! It’s the tallest building in the valley, but why can’t it be seen from here?”

Yara and Tero froze, staring at Piri in fear.

Piri nodded, knowing that both of them understood what he meant. “This is not the valley we know. This is not our valley!”

Yara gaped. “Piri, what do you mean?”

“Mr. Jenasin lied to us?” Tero asked.

Piri looked at Yara. “Yara, you’ve always wanted to see the wider world. Well, your wish has come true. We’re already there. Behind the mountains! Beyond our bowl world!”

Shocked, Yara’s eyes filled with tears. She shook her head. “But... it’s not a scary world like this that I want to see!”

“I know,” Piri replied bitterly. “This is not the world I want either.”

Thousands of questions popped up in Piri’s mind, circling, looking for answers. Why is it like this? Where are they now? Where have they gone? Who are these people?

Then a million assumptions haunt him. If only this, if only that. Piri thought back, trying to find a point in this journey where they might have made a big mistake.

Maybe in that cave, when they chose the wrong path or chose the wrong river direction. Or maybe long before that, when they decided to climb the mountains.

Before this, Piri believed it was unnecessary to make assumptions. It is more important to think about what to do now or later. But that fear won't go away.

It seemed that it was because he had believed that this mistake could be irreparable. They could not go home. They were even in danger. After in this strange place, they encountered something strange and frightening. A figure stronger than them, and untrustworthy.

Unfortunately, not believing is no longer an option. Piri, Yara, and Tero were already in this unknown outside world. Now they only hoped that Mr. Jenasin was telling the truth. That they will be brought home. That there is a way home.

“Soon we'll be in Jampa.” Mr. Jenasin pointed to the points of light in front of him. “The village is a place for traders to stop. It's a quiet place, no one will see us, but I suggest you all don't talk too much. Just be quiet, follow my words or the words of someone who will help you, and you will be fine.”

“What is ‘village?’” Piri asked.

“I told you before, don't talk too much!”

After crossing the grassy plains, they crossed a fairly wide dirt road. Piri looked left and right, guessing where the two roads would lead. Is one of them the way home?

They stopped in front of a large building with wooden walls. The building had several flat squares that seemed to be stuck to the wall and gave off a bright yellow glow. The lights seemed to

come from inside the room.

Piri remembered. There was no Black Tower in this valley, so could these lights be what he saw while he was in the cave?

Piri turned his head towards the mountains behind him. It could be. This light may be bright enough to be seen all the way there.

The sound of creatures talking could be heard faintly from inside the building.

Piri thought that Mr. Jenasin would take them in, but he didn't. Someone appeared from behind the dark walls of the building. Tall, one head taller than Mr. Jenasin, but slimmer. Seeing the two large creatures standing close together, Piri immediately thought of Jiro and Buro's figures. Of course, in a more terrible form.

"So this is them?" The tall creature asked as he approached.

His voice was hoarse, and thanks to the light from the round object that Mr. Jenasin was carrying, Piri could see his slender face with a sharp and slightly crooked nose. His eyes were sharp, and dark, coarse hair appeared around his cheeks, lips, and chin. Though that hair is not as thick as Grandpa's hair. His hair was neck-length, and on top of his head was a veil that, if slightly pulled down, would instantly hide his pair of eyes.

Like Mr. Jenasin, the creature was covered by a body covering from top to bottom. The palms of his hands hide in the folds at the waist. Likewise, the soles of his feet were covered by a dark object from the toe to the knee. Compared to Mr. Jenasin, this person is much more ashamed of his own body.

"This is Piri, Yara, and Tero," Mr. Jenasin answered. "Children, this is Mr. Roddick. He's the one who will take you home tomorrow."

The Tall Person

Piri shuddered as his gaze met with the tall person in front of him.

This person... who is he? What will he do?

“No,” Mr. Roddick replied to Mr. Jenasin’s words, shaking his head. “We’re leaving tonight.”

“Why so soon?” Mr. Jenasin asked in surprise.

“There’s a change of plans! And that’s none of your business.” Mr. Roddick’s right hand came out holding a bag full of something. He handed it over to Mr. Jenasin.

“Don’t forget, you know nothing about this meeting,” Mr. Roddick said again. “If you can’t keep your mouth shut, I’ll come, and you can believe it won’t be long, then I’ll take this bag again, and your tongue, and... maybe something else too.”

“Y-yes. Of course, I won’t talk,” Mr. Jenasin said nervously.

He smiled and patted Mr. Roddick on the shoulder. “Hey, relax, Master, don’t talk like that. There are children here.”

“I don’t care,” Mr. Roddick replied coldly. He watched Piri, Yara, and Tero, as if studying what was on the minds of the three children, then nodded. “Yeah, I don’t care. We’re leaving.”

What Mr. Roddick said to Mr. Jenasin was a threat, Piri was sure, even though he didn't understand what it meant. Does he want to take Mr. Jenasin's tongue if Mr. Jenasin talks about something? Is it about the three of them?

It was truly a terrible threat! How could Piri believe in such a terrible person as Mr. Roddick?

Mr. Roddick picked up another strange object from the side of the building. It was a very large object, made of wooden planks shaped into an elongated box. It was also like an inverted bowl, but not as round as a bowl. The box was probably half the size of the room the children had slept in this morning and could move around because it had four circular wooden legs.

The big object was astonishing, but that wasn't what scared the kids. They trembled at the sight of the giant animal figure used to pull the wooden box.

The animal has four legs and brown skin. Its body was over ten steps long, and its neck was long and large, with thick hair flowing down the back of its neck. The shape of the head is like a kamio bird, but longer. It's not a beak, because it's not pointed.

Piri thought the kamio bird uses the beak to peck and crush the fruits before they eat. If this is not a beak, then how does this gigantic animal eat the fruit? Did the fruit go straight into his mouth and chew, as children usually do?

Or maybe this animal food is not fruit?

Piri suddenly remembered the wolf that Mr. Jenasin had mentioned. Is this the dangerous wild animal called the wolf?

Mr. Roddick smirked at the reaction of the children. "Hey, why are you so scared? Have you never seen a horse? No kidding! The horse won't eat you, he'll just kick you. That's only if you bother him, or if you don't want to obey me. Do you want to disobey me?"

The children were too afraid to answer, and he took their silence as an answer.

“Good,” Mr. Roddick said. “Be quiet now. Get on the cart!”

So that’s the name of the big box. Cart.

While the gigantic animal is a horse.

Mr. Roddick lifted the bodies of the children one by one and placed them in the cart. Beside the wooden building, Mr. Jenasin was counting something in his hand, which seemed to be the contents of the bag that Mr. Roddick had given him.

The fat man hadn’t left, but the children didn’t care about him anymore. They have bigger problems now.

Mr. Roddick got up and sat down in front of the cart. He pulled the rope around the horse’s neck, then looked back at the three restless children.

“I know the bad thoughts in your head. But as long as the thought doesn’t annoy me, then I don’t care. Do you understand?”

The three children remained silent, not even daring to answer with a nod.

But Piri then ventured. Perhaps a question or two won’t upset Mr. Roddick, as long as it’s said well. “Master, where are you taking us?” he asked.

“Mr. Jenasin hasn’t told you yet?”

“Go home, he said. But... he might not know the place.”

Mr. Roddick glanced at Mr. Jenasin, then snorted. “That idiot really knows nothing. Yeah, he doesn’t need to know.”

“Do you know which way to go home?” Piri asked again.

Mr. Roddick asked back, “Where is your house, anyway?”

Tero replied while pointing to the far left, “Our house is behind the mountains! We’d better go over there.”

“Right.” Yara nodded, being brave too. “There must be a way

there. The path this cart can move on.”

Mr. Roddick replied with a wry smile, then snorted and muttered, “This is why I don’t like children. Dreamers! Always trouble the others!”

“Dreamers?” Yara and Tero were flabbergasted.

“You... don’t you believe us?” Piri asked.

“Alright, just shut up!” Mr. Roddick turned to face the front and slashed the wooden stick against the horse’s ass. The cart’s round legs turned. “We’re going home now. People are waiting for you. You don’t have to make up stories anymore.”

He looked back for a moment. “And use that blanket to cover your body. Yes, that thick stinky cloth under that chair. You naughty kids, where do you throw your clothes, huh? Running around naked like that, with your long, messy hair. You all stink! I don’t know where you’re going. You all are annoying.”

“But, Master, we’re telling the truth!” Tero exclaimed. “We came by the river, which flows under the mountains. Maybe we should go back to that river, and—”

“Shut up!” Mr. Roddick snapped. “As I said, I don’t want your bad thoughts to annoy me. So shut up, or just go to sleep, or I’ll have to force you to sleep! Also, don’t even think about jumping down while the cart is running unless you want to break your neck.”

Piri was shocked. Tero gaped, his eyes blinked and his breath was ragged. Yara curled up, trembling in the wagon’s corner with tears in her eyes. She tried to hold back her tears when Piri hugged her.

The three of them were close together, silent, and unable to speak anymore.

Hugging each other, the children finally fell asleep during the trip.

When they woke up the night had passed and the sky was bright again. The cart rocked through the wet and rocky dirt road. The snort of horses accompanies every beat of his step.

Piri lowered his thick blanket and peered over the cart wall, eyeing the rows of trees. The only sight he could see. They had gone far past the grassy plains and were now entering through the forest.

At the front, Mr. Roddick controlled his horse while sitting with a slight bow. His head was lowered, hidden behind his shoulders. Only the circular head covering was visible.

The tall person remained silent. He must have known the children were awake, but just didn't care.

Tero whispered, as quietly as he could, "Piri, shouldn't we try jumping out and running? Or hiding? Maybe we can hide in this forest."

"Master Roddick was right," Yara said without enthusiasm. "If we jump while the cart is running, we can get hurt."

"And we don't know this forest," Piri said. "Mr. Jenasin said there might be wild animals. Let's just see where Mr. Roddick takes us. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe... later, there will be someone who can help us get home."

Red House

They reached the end of the journey in the afternoon. Mr. Roddick carried his cart down a straight road, across a wide grassy field, before stopping in front of a building.

Piri and his two friends were stunned. The building they had just seen was so huge. The walls were made of stone and neatly shaped, while the roof was made of wood. Most of the walls and roof were red. The width of the building might be a hundred steps, while its height was equal to the height of an allumint tree.

The horizontal boxes on the walls were partially open. One row at the top and a row below, revealing glimpses of the rooms in the building.

The largest pair of boxes was in the center of the building, at the bottom. From there, as soon as the box on the wall was opened, someone appeared. He was a thin, tall person, not as tall as Mr. Roddick, but his clothes—Piri knew what it is now—were neater.

“Roddick, what are you doing here?” The man’s response was not pleasant. He took turns looking at Mr. Roddick and the three

children. His face was expressionless, but his eyes were full of suspicion. "Who are they?"

"Who-?" A look of anger appeared instantly on Mr. Roddick's face. "It was you who told me to look for these children. Don't mess with me, Dullum!"

"I'm not messing with you," the man answered, whose name was apparently Dullum and that meant the children had to add Mister in front of him. "We have found the three children we were looking for in the forest not far from here. These three kids..." He looked at Piri, Yara, and Tero. "... I don't know who they are."

"Then why wasn't I told about this in the first place?"

"It's not our fault that we can't tell you. We've already sent people, but you're hard to find."

Mr. Roddick growled angrily. "I don't care! I've worked hard and spent money to get these kids. I want my payment, in full and right now!"

Mr. Dullum shook his head. "We don't have to pay for something we don't want. Here's a lesson for you, Roddick. Next time, you should be more careful and don't rush when you do something."

"You insolent fool!" Mr. Roddick stepped up onto the rocky floor. He approached the old skinny man and threatened, "Pay me, or you will regret it!"

Mr. Dullum remained upright. Compared to the rough man in front of him, he looked weak, but strangely, he didn't look scared.

The ones who are scared were Piri and the other two children, who were now close to each other. They had never heard such harsh words as Mr. Roddick's in their lives, and so they were utterly terrified.

Suddenly, a clanging sound was heard from inside the house. Several times. It was not loud, but sounded quite clear.

“Excuse me.” Mr. Dullum hastily entered the house, leaving a sour-faced Mr. Roddick and the three children who were speechless.

Soon the thin man appeared again.

He said, “Mrs. Kullip is willing to meet all of you. She wanted to see these children. But, Roddick, I warn you, watch your mouth and your manners.”

“Of course, I know that!”

Piri, Yara, and Tero followed the two men to meet the person named Mrs. Kullip. The children entered and crossed the largest room they had ever seen in their life. The high roof emitted bright light from the ceiling and seemed to be supported by four white stone pillars, or maybe more.

The floor was stone too, gray and so smooth that the children could see their reflections below. The walls were white, in stark contrast to the red outer walls, and decorated with pictures. There were also animal head ornaments. Not only horses but also one other similar animal, which was smaller in stature and sharp-toothed.

At first, the three children shuddered, thinking the animals were real. It was only after a while and seeing that the animals weren't moving did they realize they were just imitations.

While walking down the corridor, they heard small whispering voices on the left side. Piri glanced and saw several children peeking out from behind the exposed wall. Yara and Tero were also surprised. Those were the first children they saw outside the Bowl World!

Those children are like... just like normal children. The difference was they all wear clean clothes. Piri gave them a

big smile.

But Mr. Dullum's sharp voice was heard. "You!" he said to the peeping children. "Get into the room! All of you! Or I'll smack your ass later!"

As he spoke, there was no angry expression on Mr. Dullum's face. But his words were enough to sow fear. Those children disappeared as quickly as they appeared.

After seeing that they were gone, Mr. Dullum turned around and knocked on the wooden wall to the right.

"Yes." Someone's voice was heard. "Enter."

Mr. Dullum pulled some kind of grip on the wall and pushed it open. Mr. Roddick removed his hood and entered the room, followed by the three children.

A thin woman stood straight in front of them.

From the wrinkles on the woman's face, she was quite old, just like Grandpa. Her dress was light blue. Around her neck hung tiny, brilliant white stones. Her eyes were sharp, her nose pointed, and she looked at her guests with a raised chin.

Mr. Dullum bowed to him, while Mr. Roddick nodded while still smiling wryly.

For a few moments, all was silent. Mr. Dullum and Mr. Roddick seemed to let the old woman use her time to observe the three children one by one.

The old woman then said in a firm voice, "Master Dullum, don't you know who these children are yet?"

Mr. Dullum replied, "Not yet, madam."

"You too, Mr. Roddick, don't you know?"

"Mrs. Kullip, as far as I know, they are the children of the Red House. That's why I brought them here. It might turn out that I was wrong, but I did my job properly, and it's only natural that I get paid."

“Money is not a problem, Mr. Roddick,” replied the madam, to which Piri was sure her name was Kullip and in front of her name was added Mrs., probably because she was a woman and not a man. “But that doesn’t mean I have to accept them into my house.”

“What do you mean, madam?”

“You can take them again.”

Mr. Roddick snorted. “I have other more important things to do, and I don’t like children. I don’t want to take them again! Look, Mrs. Kullip, I need my money. The sooner this matter is over, the better things will be for all of us.”

Mrs. Kullip gave the man a disdainful look, then turned her head. “Master Dullum, get the money and give it to Mr. Roddick. After that, Mr. Roddick, you may go.”

The two men left the room to finish their business.

Piri and the other two children stood in the room’s corner. Mrs. Kullip turned her back on them and stood straight, looking out of the house through the boxy hole in the wall with the two flaps wide open.

Piri had a lot of questions, but the old woman seemed to keep her distance and didn’t want to talk directly to Piri, Yara, and Tero.

A moment later, Mr. Dullum came in again and said that Mr. Roddick had left with his horse and cart.

Mrs. Kullip nodded. “Good. For the moment, I don’t want to deal with that man anymore.” She turned her head, looking at the three children. “Now, Master Dullum, take care of them. Tell them, from now on, they have to follow my rules. I’ve spent a lot of money on them, and for that, they have to show that they are worth it.”

Land of the Backwards

Mr. Dullum took Piri, Yara, and Tero to another room on the second floor. He introduced them to a fat woman called Aunt Mollen.

She looked almost always sullen, and her first order to the children was that they should take a bath because she couldn't stand their smell.

If bathing means playing with water, the three children didn't mind, because playing in the river had always been their favorite activity. What was unpleasant was that the fat woman then brushed their bodies and smeared them with a strange green liquid that emitted white foam that looked like clouds.

The white foam was beautiful to look at, but because it was the first time seeing it the children couldn't like it. The foam made their eyes hurt. Another reason was that they didn't like the harsh way Aunt Mollen rubbed their bodies.

They were then rinsed again several times, then dried with a thick towel; it's a kind of blanket but small. After that, Aunt Mollen took them to the next room, which was drier.

The woman was no longer sullen now. It must be because the

smell of the three children's bodies has turned into a fragrant one. She clothed them up and down, then combed and tied their hair neatly. Because her mood seemed to have changed, the three children didn't hesitate to burst out laughing.

"Why are you laughing?" Aunt Mollen asked.

"Mmm... these clothes," Tero said. "This is funny!"

"I think this is good," Yara said as she stretched out her lower cloth, which was wide from the hip to the knee. She turned around, waving her lower cloth, which was a different shape than Piri's and Tero's, which were straighter and narrower at the feet.

"I like these clothes," said Yara.

"The clothes that are on your bottom are called skirts! For men, it's called pants," Aunt Mollen said curtly. She looked at the three of them for a while with a strange look, then shook her head slightly. "Sounds like Mr. Dullum was right. You three are weird kids."

"Weird? We're not weird," Piri said.

"Yeah, we just came from another place," Tero replied knowingly. "The Bowl World."

"The world beyond the mountains," Yara added.

"Beyond the mountains," Aunt Mollen repeated dryly. "And how did you get here?"

"By the river under the mountains," Tero answered.

"You swam?"

"The river wasn't deep, so we didn't need to swim," Yara explained. "The river flows in the cave. At first, we didn't know where we were going either, but—"

Aunt Mollen shook her head, more firmly this time. "Mr. Dullum said you are from the country of Maderut, and even though he is an obnoxious person, I still trust his words more

than yours. If you want to tell different stories, just do it to the other children. They always liked strange stories like that. Mr. Dullum and Mrs. Kullip may want to hear it too later, but they may not.”

“But we’re not lying!” Yara exclaimed.

“All the kids always say that!”

Piri grabbed Yara’s arm, trying to calm her down, then asked, “This country of Maderut, Aunt Mollen, where is it?”

“It’s far. I don’t know.” Aunt Mollen shrugged. “It’s a land of backward people who don’t like to wear clothes.”

“Backward? What’s that?” Tero asked.

“Well, people like you, who are not ashamed to go everywhere without clothes on!” Aunt Mollen said. “Enough talking. Come with me now and don’t act up.”

Piri, Yara, and Tero followed the big woman through the long hallway. As they walked, they saw several other rooms to their left and right whose doors were open.

From the little conversation between Mr. Dullum and Aunt Mollen before they were forced to take a bath, now Piri knew that a wall that could be opened and closed was called a ‘door’, while the horizontal boxes on the wall were called ‘windows’.

They went down through horizontal rows of logs, which Aunt Mollen called the ‘stairs’.

When he saw Aunt Mollen walking some distance in front of him, Tero whispered, “Piri, you asked about the country of Maderut. What’s up with that country?”

“People here have their own names for different things or places,” Piri said. “Do you remember? Mr. Jenasin called the fruit on the river bank as maulla something, while we call it teropiriyaraint. Yes, that’s the name you came up with, but what I mean is that even though the name is different, the meaning

is probably the same. So I wonder if Maderut is the same as our Bowl World.”

“Just because the people there don’t like to wear clothes, does that mean it’s the same place?” Yara said.

“Hey, I didn’t say that,” Piri said. “I was just asking. Then Aunt Mollen said that people there don’t like to wear clothes. Well, what’s wrong with that, anyway?”

“Maybe that’s a different land,” Tero said.

“Yes, but if it’s really the same land, if it’s true that the people here know about our world, maybe later we can find someone who will take us home.”

“If they knew, they wouldn’t think of us as weird children,” Yara said quietly.

“Let’s hope,” Piri muttered. “That will make us happier...”

Yara said, “But I was thinking... It looks like the world here is interesting too...”

“What do you mean?”

Yara exhaled slowly. “I mean, if I can’t go home in the end, maybe I won’t be so disappointed.”

Tero was wide-eyed. “You don’t want to go home? And stay here?”

Piri shook her head, looking at Yara in disbelief. “You’re not serious, are you?”

“This world is no fun, Yara!” Tero said. “And neither do the people.”

“I’m just saying ...”

“Hey!” Aunt Mollen’s screams distracted the three children’s attention. “Don’t be noisy! What are you talking about?”

“N—no,” Piri answered. “It is nothing.”

From downstairs, Aunt Mollen looked at the three children who were still on the stairs with glaring eyes. Piri suddenly

wasn't sure if the fat woman couldn't hear their whispers. Maybe she heard and would pass it on to Mrs. Kullip.

Once downstairs, they then entered the room that seemed to be the most spacious in the Red House. It was at the back of the building, with a high roof and no windows, but the gaps under the roof allowed the skylight to enter the room.

In the center of the room, there was another wooden object that was in the shape of a box, long and quite large. On top of it lined bowls of food, which look like porridge.

Piri, Yara, and Tero were hungry, but it wasn't the food that fascinated them. Around the long box sat about twenty children; boy and girl. Some stared at the three without expression, others whispered to each other. There's also a smile.

The smiles relieved the three children, and they approached without hesitation and sat down on the empty seats that seemed to have been reserved for them.

A girl sitting next to Piri said in a half-whisper, "Hi, did you just come? Where are you from?"

Piri watched the girl, whose face was pleasant and her bright hair was almost waist-length. He smiled back. "From behind the mountains."

"Behind the mountains?" The girl gaped. "Isn't that a scary place?"

"No, it's not. Why is it scary?"

"I heard there—"

"Attention!" Aunt Mollen's loud voice caught everyone's attention. "Mother is coming!"

Each child stood up.

Piri, Yara, and Tero didn't understand at first, but when they saw Aunt Mollen's rebuking gaze, the three of them stood up as well.

Then they all waited.

Rules and Punishments

The sound of footsteps broke the silence, coming from the doorway.

Mrs. Kullip appeared, followed by Mr. Dullum. The two of them then stood stiffly in front of the long box.

Piri noticed, except for himself and Yara and Tero, none of the other children dared to look at the old woman, and only looked down at the bowl of food in front of them. It seemed that it was one of Mrs. Kullip's rules, that in this room, they had to be quiet and look down at their food.

Piri, Yara, and Tero immediately looked down as well, but it seemed too late.

Mrs. Kullip caught their movement and said, "You three seem more civilized now. You have to thank Aunt Mollen. Have you done that already?"

Piri looked up. "Done what?"

"Say thanks to Aunt Mollen! Now!"

Piri and her two friends shuddered in horror. They quickly looked at Aunt Mollen, who was standing beside Mrs. Kullip.

"Th—thank you, Aunt Mollen!" the three children cried.

“Good.” Mrs. Kullip nodded.

She then said to all the children, “You see, we have new residents. They are no smarter than you, and so I ask you to help them recognize and obey the rules of this place. You already know, Mother is very kind to obedient children, and conversely, very strict and will not hesitate to punish those who are naughty and like to break the rules. For the latter, Mother will set an example and a lesson for all of you.”

There was something eerie about Mrs. Kullip’s tone of voice. What does the example mean? Piri wondered.

“Geza, Poffel, Horun!” Mrs. Kullip’s cry boomed. “Come forward!”

Piri could hear the breaths of all the children.

Three children, all boys, stepped out of the line hesitantly and walked to Mrs. Kullip’s side. The faces of the three were pale and their bodies were shaking.

“I will give them the punishment they deserve,” Mrs. Kullip said, and turned to Mr. Dullum.

Mr. Dullum took out a wooden stick like a tree branch that was one hand long and one finger thick. Piri remembered the stick was almost the same as the one Mr. Roddick used to control his horse. By hitting its ass.

Piri shuddered. He knew right away what was going to happen, even before the three children pulled down their pants.

It happened so fast. The three boys lined up and looked down with both hands holding on to the edge of the long box, then Mr. Dullum smacked their butts one by one.

The three screamed.

All the children gasped.

The second slash swings.

Piri couldn’t stand it and immediately shouted, “Mrs. Kullip,

Mr. Dullum, stop it! They're in pain!"

His screams took aback Mrs. Kullip, and so were Mr. Dullum and Aunt Mollen.

The old woman's eyes gleamed sharply. "Your name is Piri, right? Before you dare speak, you should know a few things. First, call me 'Mother'. Second, do you know what these three kids did to deserve punishment?"

"I—I..." Piri stuttered. "I don't know."

"These three ungrateful kids are trying to escape from the Red House!"

Piri remembered the conversation between Mrs. Kullip and Mr. Roddick, about the three children that Mr. Roddick was supposed to be looking for but had been found hiding in the forest. Here they are.

Piri watched the faces of Geza, Poffel, and Horun. Pain and fear mixed there.

"They broke the rules, and so should be punished!" Mrs. Kullip said.

"But why?" Tero shook his head in confusion. His eyes flickered as he looked at the three boys, then at Piri, Yara, and Mrs. Kullip. "Why did they have to be hit?"

"Because that's the form of punishment!"

"But they are in pain!" Yara exclaimed.

"That's the aim!"

Piri was shocked. "You want to make them feel pain? Why?"

"So that they, and all of them, including you, will no longer dare to violate my rules." Mrs. Kullip's voice turned low, but sounded colder.

Seeing Piri, Yara and Tero froze, the terrible old woman nodded. "Good. You understand now. Well, Mr. Dullum, you may continue. There are still eight more."

Every child shuddered helplessly.

Next, the screams of Geza, Poffel, and Horun were heard again.

After witnessing the punishment, Piri was sure that no child could enjoy their porridge this afternoon.

It doesn't taste good, anyway. Bland, not sweet, not savory.

But maybe it was also because Piri was in a bad mood. All the children ate silently, and some even held back tears, including Geza, Poffel, and Horun; the three children who had been punished.

Mrs. Kullip and Mr. Dullum left after giving the punishment. Only Aunt Mollen accompanied the children. The fat woman did not eat. She just stood in the room's corner, watching.

Piri glanced at her. There was no glee or anger in her eyes, so Piri was glad that Aunt Mollen was watching over them now, not the other two big persons.

After eating, some children cleaned the table and took the dirty dishes to the kitchen. From the conversation with some children, Piri now knows that the long box in the middle of the room is called a 'table', a flat-shaped bowl is called a 'plate', and the room where people cook food and wash dishes is called a 'kitchen'.

Tero then invited Piri and Yara to talk outside the house. It seemed he had a plan.

But one child said, "Children shouldn't play outside."

"Yesterday it was still okay," another one said.

"Don't argue," another child whispered while glancing at Aunt Mollen. "If you want to talk, we can talk in the room."

Piri, Yara, and Tero agreed. Together with the other children, they went up to the third floor.

There were two large rooms on the left and right. The room on the left was a bedroom for girls, while the one on the right was for boys. It's still not evening, it's not time for bed yet, so almost all the children could still gather in the room to the right.

The room was lined with a dozen wooden beds that were placed opposite each other. All the beds were made of thick cloth. The children gathered in the room's corner next to the wall and window. Some were sitting, some were lying down, some were standing.

A red-haired boy introduced himself. His body was sturdy and his name was Kassen. The other kids followed him, introducing themselves before Piri, Yara and Tero said their names too.

"So how did the three of you get here?" Kassen asked.

"Mr. Jenasin found us on the river bank, then Mr. Roddick took us," Tero said.

"I know Mr. Roddick," a small boy named Rhulan said. His body was smaller than Piri's. "He's rude. Nobody likes him. He was the one who brought me here, too."

Kassen nodded. "Some of us were brought here by Mr. Roddick. But what I meant was what happened before you were taken. For example," he pointed to himself. "... I came from Frauli, a country to the west. After Frauli lost the war and my father died, Mallava soldiers came to my village and took me. They sold me to Mr. Roddick, who then took me to the Red House, about three months ago."

Telling Each Other

Piri, Yara, and Tero gaped at Kassen's explanation. They didn't know where Frauli or Mallava were. They also didn't know what war, death, or soldier means.

"I'm from Terata, still in this Mallava Kingdom," Rhulan said. "I don't have a house and always sleep on the side of the road. I never bothered anyone, but they don't like me. I was banished to the city of Andara. Mr. Roddick took me, then brought me here, a month ago."

Piri, Yara, and Tero still didn't understand. They remained silent when some of the other children then spoke as well.

Kaia, the pretty girl with long hair who had greeted Piri in the dining room, said softly, "I'm from... the land of Suidon, and I don't know why I got here."

"You don't know?" Piri asked, confused.

"Until that night I was still living at my master's house, with my aunt who was a servant there."

"Aunt? Like Aunt Mollen?"

"Not like that. She's my real aunt. Early in the morning, some people took me away. After three days, they brought here me."

“Did your aunt know you were gone?” Yara asked.

“She knew. She saw me, but did nothing.” Kaia looked sad, then shook her head. “She’s always been nice to me, so I don’t know why...” She didn’t continue, and all the children looked at her sadly.

“Would you like to know why?” Piri then asked.

Kaia turned around. “Yes. But...”

“Once we’re here, we can’t go home or anywhere else,” Kassen said. “Unless Mrs. Kullip gives us permission.”

“Can’t go home?” Piri was taken aback.

“You saw what happened today, didn’t you?” Kassen turned to Geza, Poffel, and Horun, who were standing by the window. “Those who try to leave without permission were immediately punished as soon as they’re caught.”

“Why did you want to leave?” Tero asked the three children.

“I want to go back to Darkur! At home, my mother is waiting for me!” Horun exclaimed. He was a boy with dark brown skin and dark hair, quite different from the other lighter-skinned children. The accent he spoke sounded a little strange.

“I want to go home too,” Geza, who had yellow hair and was almost as big as Tero, said, “I don’t have any family in the village, but I have a garden. Who will take care of my carrots or my potatoes after I’m gone?”

“Well, I don’t want to go home,” Poffel, whose hair was brown, hoarse, and had a long scar on his left cheek, said. “I don’t like my hometown,” he continued. “They think I’m a beggar, a thief, but I’m not. But I don’t like it here either. I want to go somewhere more pleasant.” He glanced at Kaia. “To Suidon, maybe.”

Kaia smiled and nodded. “We can go together.”

“Yeah, but it’s no longer possible, right?” Poffel grimaced, it

seemed that the pain in his ass was back. "Don't dream anymore. Better to just accept our fate."

Kaia looked down. Her eyes watered.

Piri shook his head in confusion. "We can't go home, even if we all want to?"

"Not everyone wants to go home. Yara doesn't," Tero grimaced, trying to joke. "She wants to stay."

Yara glared. "No, I don't! Don't say like that!"

"Actually, not going home doesn't mean it's bad," Kassen replied. "If we are lucky, we can get a better place out there."

"Lucky?" Piri's brow furrowed.

"You can see for yourself later," Kassen smirked. "But to be fair, first tell us how you got here."

"I tell the story!" Tero exclaimed.

He explains that he, Piri, and Yara are from the Bowl World on the other side of the mountains. They set out in search of a star butterfly, fall into a cave, down a river, and then out into a world which they don't know. Then they ate the fruit of the teropiriyaraint, met Mr. Jenasin, and were finally brought by Mr. Roddick to the Red House.

All the children, except for Piri and Yara, of course, gaped at the story.

Kassen said, "Never have there been stories of people coming from behind the mountains, and appearing through caves in the river! Are you really from there?"

"My story is true!" Tero exclaimed. "I'm not making this up."

"I'm not saying your story isn't true," Kassen said. "I actually find it very interesting!"

"Yes, we like it!" the other children said.

"Are any of you from Maderut?" Piri asked.

“Maderut?” The children shook their heads.

“I’m the oldest kid here,” Kassen said. “Many children came after me and then left, and as I recall, none of them were from Maderut. Why are you asking that?”

“Master Dullum said maybe we are from Maderut.”

“And you believe it?”

“I don’t know. Do you know where that country is?” Piri asked again.

“It’s far to the west, further than Darkur.”

“Are you going to Maderut?” Poffel asked. “You’ve heard before, once you get here you won’t be able to go anywhere else you like, or want to!”

“Unless we’re lucky,” Kassen said.

Poffel snorted. “Before this, I thought we should try it ourselves. That’s why I took Geza and Horun away when the opportunity arose. But... it seems you are right, Kassen. It is better if we just keep quiet, and await our fate.”

“I prefer your old spirit,” Kaia said quietly.

“That was before Master Dullum hit my ass!” cried Poffel. “When you feel the pain, your mind will change, and your spirit will disappear. Besides, I’m not leaving you here again.”

This time, Kaia smiled, although she still looked sad.

“But why did Mrs. Kullip keep us here?” Yara finally joined in, asking. “If we all don’t like her and are going to make her mad all the time, why doesn’t she just let us go?”

“You still don’t understand, don’t you?” Poffel said. “Mrs. Kullip has already spent money to get us. In return, of course, she has to make money too, by selling us!”

“Money?” Tero was confused.

“Yes, money. You... you don’t know what money is?” Kassen laughed, and the other children laughed too. “Unfortunately,

we don't have money, so we can't show it to you."

"Just as Mr. Jenasin and Mr. Roddick did, Tero. Don't you remember?" Piri said. "Mr. Jenasin sold us to Mr. Roddick, then Mr. Roddick sold us to Mrs. Kullip. They all use money."

"Well,... alright. But I mean, who is Mrs. Kullip trying to sell us to?" Tero asked.

"If you're lucky, to good people," Kassen replied. "If you're unlucky, to the bad guys."

"I will not allow myself to be carried away by bad people!" Yara said. "Piri, Tero, and I have climbed mountains, climbed cliffs, went through caves, and we never gave up. We will find a way out, or run away if we have to."

Yara looked at Piri, asking for approval.

Piri smiled widely, happy to see Yara's spirit growing again. So he nodded. "Certainly."

Yara looked around. "You said once we got here, we could no longer go where we like. Well, nothing is impossible. You've tried to run away, and failed, but that doesn't mean you will fail all the time. You still have to believe that one day you will succeed."

The Buyers

“**T**alk is easy,” Poffel said. “I had a good plan back then. I thought so. But it still failed.”

“But Yara was right,” Kassen said. “We still have to believe.”

Everyone looked at him, then nodded.

“But we need luck.” Kassen looked at Yara, Piri, and Tero. “You say like this, does that mean you already have a plan... to escape?”

Yara was silent for a moment, then shook her head. “Not yet. But we will.”

Kassen nodded. “No need to hurry. We can talk about that later.”

“Yes, not now.” Poffel glanced out the window. “It’s almost evening,” he continued. “It’s going to be dinner soon, and after that, we have to sleep. If we dare to talk at night, Master Dullum will not hesitate to punish us again.”

“We’ll talk again tomorrow, before or after breakfast,” Kassen said. Then his voice lowered, “Hopefully there’s still a chance... .”

The children had dinner, and after that, they were told to go up and sleep. Yara in the girls' room, Piri and Tero in the boys' room.

Aunt Mollen walked back and forth to check that all the children were present and complete. It seemed she didn't want to miss out again like the day before when she lost Poffel, Geza, and Horun.

Tonight, all went well. No tension, no harsh words from Mrs. Kullip, no more punishment. It's different when compared to what happened this afternoon. When Piri closed his eyes, he thought that tomorrow could not be worse than today.

His prediction was wrong. At dawn, he was awakened, and all the children were immediately ordered to take a shower. The girls showered first, and while they were bathing, the boys waited by the stairs.

"I still want to sleep," Tero grumbled.

"Is it always like this every morning?" Piri asked.

"No." Kassen shook his head. "This only means one thing. There are buyers coming, and of course, Mrs. Kullip doesn't want to see us looking ugly in front of them."

"They're the masters, or maybe your new parents," an icy voice came from behind.

Piri and the other children looked up. Mr. Dullum stood stiffly. His gaze was sharp, but as usual, his expression was flat.

Kassen gulped. "Master Dullum, I... I just..."

"Joking? Joking and mocking made little difference. You are the oldest kid in this house, you should understand best what is good and what is not. Get rid of that bad habit of yours, or you'll never get a master, a good one, of course. If that's the case, we'll have to send you to a terrible place. You won't like it, neither will we. Do you want it like that?"

Kassen nodded. "I'll keep my word. I promise."

Mr. Dullum raised his face, then walked away with firm steps.

Poffel snorted softly as he stared at the tall man's back. "What's wrong with the word 'buyer'? New masters or parents, still they are all buyers."

"You don't like them?" Piri asked. "The buyers?"

Poffel laughed. He looked pleased to see Piri not hesitate to say the word 'buyer'. "If they're good, I like it. If not, then no."

"It means there will be more tension today, Piri," Kassen said. "Twice. First, when we wait for what kind of buyers who come. Is he good or bad? Second, as we wait for who will be chosen. Who's lucky, or unlucky."

Piri didn't know yet if he would like that kind of tension. But it shouldn't be too scary compared to the times when he was exploring caves and meeting strange creatures.

Maybe it's because it's light here, while it's dark outside. It was dark beyond the night that frightened him if he wasn't used to it.

After all the children showered and dressed neatly, they immediately went downstairs and gathered in the dining room. Aunt Mollen prepared food in a hurry, and so the children ate in a hurry too.

As before, only a plate of porridge was available, no fruits. While eating, the children did not have time to talk, or planned to run away like yesterday afternoon.

After eating, Aunt Mollen said, "All of you, hurry and gather in the living room."

The children flocked to the living room, which was close to the dining room. The room was smaller but felt empty because there was no long table. There was only one small table and three chairs at the front.

The children lined up against the wall next to the window. Girls lined up in front, while boys behind stood on the floor that was an inch higher. Everyone was silent, enveloped in tension.

The sound of a horse neighing from outside broke the silence.

Piri couldn't help himself. He glanced at the window to see who was coming.

It turned out that he wasn't the only one who dared to glance. Tero, Kassen, Poffel, and several others also looked.

Aunt Mollen said loudly, "Don't glance or whisper! Everyone stood still and looked ahead. Show a smile, don't make a sullen face."

Piri was stunned, suddenly restless. He wondered why now he had to be here and lined up to be bought. This was not what he wanted at all. He just wants to go home!

He glanced at Tero beside him, then saw Yara standing right in front of him. Piri was sure that both of them must be equally nervous.

He heard footsteps. Each child held their breath.

The first to enter the room were two women walking side by side: Mrs. Kullip and another, who looked younger but was just as haughty.

A man followed behind them. Dressed in black, but in contrast to Mr. Roddick's disheveled appearance, this man's shirt was clean, with neat creases around his neck, arms, and chest. His hair was thin, as was the mustache under his nose.

The three people stood in front of the children. Meanwhile, at the door, Mr. Dullum was standing next to Aunt Mollen.

Mrs. Kullip smiled, and every child knew it was an order. They all smiled, too.

"Good morning, children," Mrs. Kullip said cheerfully. "A nice sunny morning, don't you think?"

“Yes, Mother!”

“Today we have a special guest from the capital. The wonderful Mr. and Mrs. Blummer. Say hello to them, children.”

“Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Blummer!”

Mrs. Blummer replied, “Good morning.”

Mr. Blummer just nodded expressionlessly.

Piri wondered if most of the big men here were like Mr. Dullum and Mr. Blummer, while the women were like Mrs. Kullip and Mrs. Blummer. Really unpleasant!

Piri remembered Kassen’s words. There would be two times of tension today. The first tension was over. The children had already seen what the figure who came was like. Both are not fun at all.

Now comes the second tension. Which unlucky child will Mr. and Mrs. Blummer choose?

Mrs. Blummer looked at each child one by one, then moved closer to get a better look. She walked back and forth. In front of Yara, she stopped. Her blue eyes stared at Yara fixedly for a few moments.

Yara’s body turned stiff, and Piri wasn’t sure if Yara could still smile. Maybe not, maybe since earlier Yara didn’t smile at all.

Fortunately, then Mrs. Blummer walked again.

Yara’s breath was heard. Her voice was thin, showing her relief.

The woman then stopped in front of several other children, and after that, returned to the front of the room. She whispered to Mrs. Kullip. While talking, the two looked around at some children.

“Children, you can go out and play in the yard. But remember, only up to the fence.” Mrs. Kullip emphasized her last words.

Her voice was soft, but the children knew it was a threat.

“But I will ask some children to stay here.”

Again, each child held their breath.

“Arin, Lusi, Kaia, Yara. the four of you stay here.”

Yara was stunned.

After a few moments, she looked back. Piri could clearly see the fear on her face.

Piri's Plan

Piri and Tero waited anxiously in the courtyard. Under a shady tree near to the cobbled streets, the children gathered, talking about Mr. and Mrs. Blummer.

Some said the two of them were unpleasant, but others said it's just their looks that were stiff and that they're good people.

Good or not, Piri and Tero didn't like it. They didn't want to part with Yara, and they were sure that Yara would, too. Yara would have preferred to go home with them.

But what if not? What if Yara has to go?

What if it turns out she wants to go?

So when the four girls who had been asked to stay in the room ran out of the house, all the other children called them. They moved away to a corner of the courtyard so that Mr. and Mrs. Blummer's carriage driver would not overhear their conversation.

"So how was it?" Kassen asked.

Yara and the other three girls looked at each other.

Arin, who has short hair, replied, "Mrs. Blummer spoke to us one by one."

“She asked us where we were from, what we liked, and where we liked to go,” Lusi, whose smile and expression were the brightest, said. “I think Mrs. Blummer is a good person, and I hope she likes me.”

Poffel looked at her in disbelief. He turned to Kaia. “She asked like that too?”

“Yes,” Kaia answered.

“To you too, Yara?” Tero asked.

“Something like that,” Yara said.

Piri couldn’t guess what was going on in the girl’s mind yet. Is she hoping to be liked by Mrs. Blummer, or the other way around?

“Where did you say we came from?” Piri asked.

“From the Bowl World,” Yara replied, who then grimaced. “She doesn’t believe it, it seems. I hope so.”

“You don’t like Mrs. Blummer?” Lucy asked in surprise.

“I don’t want to go.”

Piri smiled, hearing Yara’s answer. So did Tero.

“Then what after this?” Kassen asked.

“Mother told us to get out,” Arin replied, glancing at the house. “After that, maybe—”

“Children!” Aunt Mollen’s cry was heard.

The fat woman was standing near the door. It was quite a distance from where the children had gathered, but her voice was indeed unbeatable, much louder than Tero’s.

The children rushed over. Aunt Mollen said nothing. She went straight into the house, and the children followed her.

They entered the living room. Mrs. Kullip and her guests were waiting.

Mrs. Kullip said, “Children, Mr. and Mrs. Blummer are very pleased to meet you. Mrs. Blummer thinks, you are all beautiful.

If she could, she would like to take all of you as her children.”

Take them as her children? What does it mean? Piri didn't understand.

He glanced at Kassen beside him. The burly boy's forehead wrinkled. He didn't seem to believe it one bit.

“Too bad Mrs. Blummer can only take two. And she has chosen.”

Mrs. Kullip paused for a moment, making each child hold their breath.

“Kaia and Yara, come forward. Say thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Blummer.”

Kaia and Yara froze.

The two looked at each other, then looked back. Kaia towards Poffel, while Yara stared at Piri. She shook her head in fear.

“Piri, i—I... don't want to go.”

“Then say it, Yara,” whispered Piri. “If you don't want to come, tell Miss Kullip.”

“But... I... Can you tell her, Piri?”

“Kaia, Yara.” Mrs. Kullip's voice came again, this time more firmly.

She walked over, then lowered her head and whispered to the two children, “Come forward now and say thank you to Mr. and Mrs. Blummer. I don't want to hear you say anything more now. Do you understand? I don't want you to regret it.”

“But, Mother...” Kaia shook her head.

Mrs. Kullip glared. Kaia and Yara could no longer argue.

Mother embraced the two children and brought them to the front. Both bowed respectfully to Mr. and Mrs. Blummer.

“Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Madam.”

Mrs. Blummer smiled faintly. “You two are beautiful and good girls. You don't have to hesitate. From now on you can call us

Mom and Dad.”

The children gathered again in the yard. This time, they were more restless.

“Piri, we have to seize Yara! Don’t let her be taken away!”

“Keep your voice down, Tero,” Piri whispered, glancing at the carriage driver waiting in the distance.

They panicked when they realized Kaia and Yara didn’t want to go, but they also knew that they couldn’t show it in front of Mrs. Kullip, Mr. Dullum, Aunt Mollen, or their guests.

“They will put Yara in the carriage,” Tero continued, “and we won’t be able to see her again!”

Poffel growled in annoyance. “We have to do something. What do you think, Kassen? Let’s just pull Kaia and Yara out as soon as they get out of the house.”

“We can’t do that.” Kassen shook his head. “Mother will be furious, and things will get worse for all of us!”

“Then, how? Piri...” Tero turned his head.

“I was thinking, Tero!” Piri said.

It annoyed him that Tero didn’t know how sorry he was. Yara had asked him to tell Mrs. Kullip she didn’t want to come along, and Piri didn’t do that. Of course, now Piri must save Yara.

“Listen,” Piri said. “I found a way. Do you see that?”

He pointed to the wooden crate attached to the back of the horse-drawn carriage.

“The carriage driver had opened it to get something,” he said. “It looks like it’s still pretty empty in there, and there’s a blanket, too.”

“What do you mean?” Tero asked.

“Do you want to hide in that luggage box?” Kassen looked at

Piri sharply. "It's dangerous, Piri. They will find you."

"Your body won't be able to get in there," Tero said.

"I can. And I can hide under that blanket."

"But then what, after you got in there?"

"I can go wherever they go. If the train stops somewhere and then Mr. and Mrs. Blummer are caught off guard, I might free Kaia and Yara."

"But after you let go of Kaia and Yara, then what?" Kassen said. "Do you know where to go? Mr. Blummer will definitely come back to tell Mrs. Kullip. You will be sought again by Mr. Roddick, and all of us here will be punished."

"That means we'll all have to run away later," Poffel said.

The children stared at him, gaping.

Tero looked at Piri deeply. "If you and Yara go, I'll go too, somehow. Do you have a plan?"

"Not yet. The important thing now is that I can go in there first."

The children looked at each other.

Piri understood their doubts. There are big decisions to be made, which would affect the fate of all children. Piri knew he couldn't force his own will.

But finally, Poffel nodded in support.

"There is no other way," he said. "We have to try it."

Kassen nodded slowly, followed by the others.

"If only the luggage box was big enough, I'd be in there too," Poffel said. "But it's just enough for you. Let's do it. I'll get the coachman's attention, and you go into the trunk."

Piri smiled widely and nodded.

Enter the Box

While Piri was getting ready, Poffel led Geza and Horun to walk to the front of the carriage. The three of them stopped beside the horse. Fearlessly, Poffel reached out his hand to caress the animal's body.

"Hey, you guys!" the coachman immediately snapped from a distance. "What do you do there? Don't come near my horse!"

"Why can't I?" Poffel replied. "The horse like me."

"Go!"

"Why?"

"Just go!" The coachman stepped forward. He raised his bat, ready to strike.

Geza and Horun quickly hid behind Poffel's body.

"Hey, no hitting," Poffel stepped back.

"Go!"

"Alright, alright." Poffel nodded and turned around. But he had glanced at Piri.

Piri knew he had his chance.

He rushed to the carriage from behind. Tero and Kassen followed him. The two of them opened the trunk cover board

and helped Piri inside, silently. Piri quickly snuggled under the blanket.

“Careful,” Tero whispered, looking worried.

Piri stared at him for a moment, then grimaced. “Close the door.”

Tero and Kassen nodded.

As soon as the trunk door closed, the darkness returned to cover Piri.

Inside the trunk, the air didn’t feel stuffy because it turned out that there was a small gap in one corner. Piri could breathe a sigh of relief while waiting for what would happen. He hoped no one would open the door of the cramped room and find him hiding there.

He heard footsteps, as well as the faint talk of several people.

Piri wasn’t sure if it was Mr. and Mrs. Blummer’s voice, but he was feeling that maybe he had acted too boldly this time.

He curled up, covered himself with the blanket, and the door opened. Piri held his breath and closed his eyes. A large and heavy object fell on his body.

Luckily, he didn’t scream. He tried to remain silent.

It wasn’t long before the trunk door closed again. Piri didn’t dare to open the blanket and see what had hit him. His chest pounded, and the carriage moved.

Piri’s body shook, but he tried not to make a sound even though his head hit the trunk wall. He hoped no one would suspect the sound of a small crash.

He glanced, finally knowing that the heavy objects that fell on him were two bundles of cloth that seemed to be full of clothes.

His attention was diverted. From behind the wooden wall inside the carriage, he heard Yara’s voice. “Where are we going?”

Yara's voice sounded nervous, but it seemed the girl was trying to be brave.

"Don't you understand yet?" Mrs. Blummer replied. "We're going home."

"Where to?"

"If I tell you where, will you know where it is? Shut up. You'll only talk if I tell you to."

After that, Piri heard no more words, neither from Yara, Kaia, nor Mr. and Mrs. Blummer. Only the sound of the wheels of the carriage turning over the cobblestone streets, and the snorting of horses' breath. Sometimes, there was also the sound of the whip being released by the coachman. For Piri, who was huddled in the trunk, everything seemed so long and tiring.

The scorching sun that infiltrated through the gap in the trunk's corner subsided as the afternoon approached. Piri was sure the train had walked quite a distance from the house. He wanted to jump out, stretch and breathe free air. But as soon as he remembered Yara and Kaia, he steeled himself. He had to stay alert, and when the time came, he had to hurry to save them both somehow.

Suddenly, the carriage stopped.

Piri waited with a thumping heart, wondering whether they had arrived somewhere, also whether the coachman would open the trunk door now. But what he heard was a strange voice.

"Get down! Now!"

From the front. It looked like he aimed it at the coachman.

The same person then spoke after the side door of the carriage creaked open. "Well, well, well, Mr. and Mrs. Blummer, nice to meet you!"

"Bartok! How dare you!" Mr. Blummer shouted.

"Master, there is no need to be angry." The man laughed.

“You know one day I’ll show up. Come on out, let me see what you’ve got. I believe you have something that people like us usually need more.”

There was the sound of footsteps getting off the carriage, and a grunt of Mrs. Blummer, which seemed to be aimed at her husband. “I told you, we should have brought bodyguards. The streets here are dangerous now, full of criminals!”

“Hey, madam, don’t say like that. I’m not a criminal. Remember, I used to work for you, and you broke your promise. I’m just asking for some of my rights.” Bartok’s voice was muffled. “Oh, wait a minute, there are other passengers, apparently.”

“Don’t disturb my children!”

“Children?” Bartok laughed. “Sorry, madam, I find no resemblance of these girls to you, or to you, Mr. Blummer. Compared to you, they are too pretty.” The laugh was getting longer.

“Come on, we know what you’re doing,” Bartok said. “You took these children to serve as unpaid servants living all day in your kitchen or barn, or, perhaps worse, working on your plantations?”

Mrs. Blummer was silent, did not reply to Bartok’s words.

But Mr. Blummer said, still in his haughty tone, “You are wrong. We will treat them very well.”

“Sorry, I don’t believe it anymore. They deserve to be better people, now and then when they grow up,” Bartok said. “Ah, yeah, you know what’s going through my mind right now? Those two should have joined me.”

“What?” Mrs. Blummer exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Blummer protested. “You want to turn these kids into bandits? Or beggars, who will give you all the money they get?”

Bartok laughed. "Everyone needs money, but your words are exaggerating. I'm not a bandit. I'm a patriot. My goal in life is higher and nobler than royal sycophants like you! I will make these children warriors, and together we will overthrow the evil witch!"

Silence for a moment.

Mr. Blummer then whispered in fear, "Are you stupid or what? The Red Witch can hear your words even though she is far away in the palace. But... that might be good too. Now she'll come here and get you!"

"Just come when she wants! I have prepared something for them." Mr. Bartok snorted. "Enough! I won't take your clothes, so you can still go home to Maruvat without needing to be naked. But these two children are coming with me."

Kaia's scream was heard, but Piri wasn't sure if the girl was scared or in pain from being pulled by Bartok.

Yara's voice hadn't been heard yet, and just as Piri was thinking about what to do next, the rear trunk door suddenly opened.

A large dark figure stood there, with his back to the afternoon sun, and unfortunately, Piri hadn't had time to cover his face with the blanket.

"Bartok!" the man said. "There's one more child!"

Piri did not move. The big man pushed aside the bag and blanket covering Piri's body, then grabbed his collar. With one hand, he grabbed Piri and pulled him out of the trunk.

Mr. and Mrs. Blummer stared at him with shocked.

Trying to familiarize his eyes with the sunlight, Piri looked around. Not far to the right, Yara tried to smile, while Kaia stood with a frightened face.

Between Yara and Kaia stood a man with a sturdy build, but

shorter than the one who took out Piri. The person's eyes were sharp and thick brown hair wrapped around his mouth. He must be the one named Bartok.

Band of Bandits

The man named Bartok smirked when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Blummer's surprise. "You didn't expect this kid to be in there?"

He shook his head, then shrugged. "Well, none of my business. But obviously, this one extra passenger means we've got three kids now." He looked at Piri. "Look at him, Krog. He's small, but look at his eyes. He seems to be a smart and brave boy. I like him."

Krog, the big man who had pulled Piri in, looked at Piri sourly. He didn't seem to believe Bartok's judgment. "Do you really want to take them? They will only trouble us!"

"It's none of your business to think about that," Bartok replied. "Just get them on the horses. We're leaving now."

Bartok had five subordinates. All of them were men, with rough faces in shabby clothes and hats. They all rode horses, and Piri had to go with them... for the first time in his life... rode that animal called horse!

Piri sat in front of Krog, while the other horsemen brought Yara and Kaia. They made their way through the misty forest on

a muddy trail. They said little. Along the way, Piri heard only the sound of galloping and the snorting of horses.

He actually wanted to ask where they were going, but Krog wasn't a very pleasant person to talk to.

Towards evening, they arrived in the courtyard of a small house on the edge of the forest.

Krog said, "It's here."

It was more like a self-indulgent mutter.

They lowered Piri from the horse, and for a moment the boy with Yara and Kaia just stood in one corner of the courtyard.

Piri noticed a group of people who seemed to have arrived shortly before Bartok's group. The men removed several cloth bags from the horses' backs and carried them into the house. Including Bartok and his five men, there were over twenty people milling about in the house.

What caught Piri's attention the most was that they weren't all adults. There were one or two people who looked immature, maybe even called children, because their faces were clean and hairless.

Bartok called one child, "Ruffio!"

The boy, who was about Bartok's ear, turned his head. He wore a long brown cloth tied around the top of his head. His hair is black, disheveled.

He came closer, looked at Piri for a moment, then turned to Bartok.

"Who were you with?" Bartok asked.

"Safin," the boy replied.

"Was the result good?"

"See it for yourself. Six bags. Full."

Bartok nodded. "Alright. After this, you can come with me to the Terata. For distribution. Maybe tomorrow or the day after.

But before that, I want you to accompany these children. Piri, Yara, and Kaia.”

Bartok pushed Piri forward, while Yara and Kaia dodged and choose to stay behind Piri.

Ruffio nodded unconcernedly.

After Bartok entered the house and was followed by several people, Ruffio looked at the three children with sharp eyes.

“Where did Bartok get you?” he asked. The boy didn’t feel the need to address Bartok as Master, surely because he was a close friend of that man.

“From the carriage...” Yara answered, hesitated, but then her voice was firm. “From Mr. and Mrs. Blummer’s carriage.”

“Who are these Mr. and Mrs. Blummer?”

“They’re the ones who took us from Mrs. Kullip’s house.”

Ruffio’s brow furrowed. “You were taken?”

“They said we would be their children. Kaia and I. Mr. and Mrs. Blummer saw all the children in the house, and they chose us.”

“There are a lot of kids there?”

“Yes,” this time Kaia answered. “From various cities or countries. We were taken, then stayed there until a guest came to pick us up.”

Ruffio was stunned. “I’ve heard of such a place, but...” He looked at Yara and Kaia intently, before turning his head to Piri. “They said only the two of them were taken. Then who are you?”

“I hid in the carriage.”

“Why are you hiding there?”

“It’s a long story,” Yara answered.

“Tell me about it,” Ruffio said.

Yara was ready to open her mouth, but Ruffio held back.

The boy looked left and right. “Don’t talk here. Later, at my

place. I have some food. I put a little aside from the bags. Come on, you must be hungry.”

Piri, Yara, and Kaia followed Ruffio down a path between thickets and large trees. It was getting late, and the sky was getting dark. There was the sound of running water. They came to a rocky creek bank, a clearing in the middle of the forest.

Ruffio pointed to the top of a large tree. There was a row of wooden planks arranged into the walls and roof, forming a kind of small house.

“There I used to sleep. I’d rather live there than at the house.”

“You made this treehouse? By yourself?” Yara looked up while gaping in admiration. “Great! At my place, we also sleep in the tree. But we just made holes for comfort, and put big leaves on top, not making walls.”

“You also live up in the trees?” Ruffio’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well, come on then, you can talk while you eat.”

He pulled a rope, lowered a ladder made of similar material. He nimbly climbed up and in an instant, he had arrived at his wooden house.

Yara was about to follow, but Piri held her back.

“Yara,” he whispered carefully. “Are you going to tell him all about us?”

“Why not?”

“We don’t know him yet. So far, we’ve told many stories to many people, but nothing is useful. Mr. Jenasin, Mr. Roddick, they all lied to us.”

“But there are those who believe us too, right? They help us.”

“Who?” Piri asked.

“Children in the Red House.” Yara smiled.

“Yes, I believe in you,” Kaia said.

“So since Ruffio is a child, we can trust him?” Piri asked

unsurely. “Not necessarily so...”

“Piri, there is no harm in trying to believe.”

Finally, Piri agreed. Maybe Yara was right. If they had told other people about themselves before, then there was no harm in trying again. Who knows, Ruffio could really help, by influencing Bartok to take them home.

Yara climbed up the tree, followed by Kaia, and finally Piri.

Piri and Yara looked around, then smiled at each other.

They both knew it would be wonderful if they could live in a warm treehouse like this, on a cross of sturdy trunks and branches, among the thickets of leaves.

Ruffio took out several palm-sized brown objects. That thing is called bread, if Piri remembers correctly. He had seen it in the Red House. They all sat enjoying it. Although it tasted a little weird at first and wasn't as juicy as fruit, Piri admits that this bread is pretty good.

“Now, tell me all you know,” Ruffio said.

Tree House

Yara glanced briefly at Piri. Because Piri was silent, Yara then explained to Ruffio that she and Piri were from the Bowl World. After crossing the river under the mountains, they came to Mallava, where they met many people.

But of all the stories, only one thing really caught Ruffio's attention.

"Do you know where all those kids came from?"

"I'm from Suidon," Kaia replied. "The others are from Mallava, Frauli, Darkur, Kalani—"

"Kalani?"

"Yes. Poffel. He's from Kalani."

Ruffio looked at Kaia without blinking. "Tell me about him."

"He's quite tall. Her hair is brown. His voice was a little hoarse. He has a scar on his left cheek. His eyebrows are thick and his eyes are... sharp, like..." Kaia suddenly froze, "you."

Piri and Yara turned their heads, and suddenly Piri realized that there was indeed a resemblance between Ruffio and Poffel's faces.

But Piri didn't understand why Kaia should be surprised. In

the Bowl World, there were several children who had similar faces, and there didn't seem to be anything unusual about that sort of thing.

Kaia said, "Is Poffel your little brother?"

"Little brother?" Piri asked in confusion.

Kaia turned to him, also to Yara, who was just as confused.

"You don't know what a brother or sister is?" Kaia asked.

"No." Piri shook his head.

This time it was Kaia who was confused. "If Poffel is the little brother, then Ruffio is the big brother. Sisters, if they were girls. They have the same father and mother. This is called a family relationship. Don't you know about this?"

Piri was silent. So was Yara. Even though it had been explained, Piri still didn't understand what a father, mother, brother, and sister really are, and whether these family relationships were more important than the relationship between her, Yara, or Tero, for example. Or with all the kids in the Bowl World.

"You're Poffel's brother?" Yara asked Ruffio, as if she already understood.

Ruffio nodded. "Yeah. That's my brother Poffel."

"What happened?" Kaia asked. "Are you separated? Poffel never told us about this!"

"I don't want to talk about it," Ruffio said. "But all I can say is that I hate everyone who keeps the two of us apart."

The other children were silent. For a while, no one dared to ask further. Piri swallowed slowly at the last piece of bread.

Ruffio looked at him.

"I have to go to that house," Ruffio said. "Take me there."

"I don't know the way," Piri replied. "I was just hiding in the trunk."

"We can follow the stone path we passed," Kaia said with a

proud smile. "I still remember what I saw."

"What do you want?" Yara asked Ruffio. "Bring Poffel away? It wouldn't be easy, especially if Mr. Blummer had already told Mrs. Kullip what had happened. They must be more alert now."

"And perhaps Mrs. Kullip will call Mr. Roddick again." Kaia shuddered.

"If you want to go to the Red House, why don't you ask Mr. Bartok for help?" Piri asked.

Ruffio shook his head. "I'm not sure he wants to help. Bartok always calculates profit and loss if he wants to do something. If he thinks going to the Red House won't do him any good, he won't go. After all, he already has plans of his own."

"You haven't tried, so how would you know?" Piri said.

"Yes, please," Kaia said in a pitiful voice. "Please speak to Mr. Bartok."

"Why are you forcing me now?" Ruffio replied curtly.

"We're just asking for help," Yara said. "There are a lot of friends there who want to run away, not just Poffel, and you can help us."

"I'm not sure Bartok would want to help."

Ruffio looked away, looking outside the treehouse.

"Okay," he finally said again. "I'll talk to him tomorrow, very early in the morning. Tonight he might have drunk, and if he was drunk, there was no point in talking to him. You three just sleep here. This house is enough for you."

"How about you? Where do you sleep?" Piri asked.

"I can sleep under a tree."

"Alright... thanks for the bread."

Ruffio nodded in response. He swiftly descended from the treehouse, and in no time, he was at the bottom.

Piri looked up, noticing how the boy had plopped down on a

pile of thick leaves, then lay there on his back. Whether Ruffio immediately closed his eyes, or just stared back at Piri, Piri didn't know.

Piri turned. Yara and Kaia were already lying down, close together on the left, leaving a little space on the right. Piri lay down too.

But even though he was sleepy, he didn't fall asleep right away. He remembered, last night he, Yara, and Kaia were still sleeping in the Red House, then this morning everything changed. How things could change so quickly? Ever since he left the Bowl World, there was something new every day.

His eyes were closed.

Then, suddenly, he woke up again. It seemed like it had been a long time since he had fallen asleep, though the sky was still dark.

"Wake up, Piri! Wake up! Yara! Kaia!"

Piri sat down, while Yara and Kaia just opened their eyes. At the door of the wooden house floor, Ruffio looked up. His hands were holding on to the wooden floor, and it looked like his feet were still on the tree trunk.

"What is it?" Piri asked.

Ruffio stared at him without blinking. "They attacked our base."

"Attacked? What does that mean? By whom?" Piri asked again.

Behind him, Yara and Kaia's stifled breaths were heard. Both of them sat down.

"The soldiers. Soldiers of the Mallava Kingdom."

"Why did they attack?" Yara asked.

"What should we do?" Kaia panicked.

"You all stay here," Ruffio said.

“And you?” Piri asked.

“I’m going over there, peeking through the bushes.”

Ruffio didn’t seem to want to be denied. In an instant, he descended and disappeared again.

Piri and her two friends looked at each other. For a while, the three of them were silent. Piri was sure Yara and Kaia must also wonder what was really going on out there, but was still too shocked, or scared, to say.

Yara whispered, “If Ruffio told us to stay, why did he wake us up?”

“Maybe he’s also confused about what to do,” Piri said.

“It reminds me of Grandpa’s words.”

“Which one?”

“About the Bowl World,” Yara said. “He was talking about a world that has borders, and then I thought he was actually trying to say that our world isn’t like that. The world has no limits. So... maybe Ruffio meant that, too. He wants us to think otherwise. Maybe we’d better get down, catch up with him, and see what happens. Come on, Piri, let’s go down.”

“That’s not a good idea,” Kaia held back. “Ruffio said there were soldiers. That means there will be fights with weapons! That is dangerous! We can get hurt if we get too close to them!”

“Wait, weapons?” Piri asked.

“Yes, weapons! All kinds of sharp weapons! Swords, knives, spears. We’d better be here like Ruffio said,” Kaia said.

Yara and Piri fell silent. They waited anxiously. Their chests were pounding. Piri heard faint voices in the distance. Now and then there was a shrill scream, then it disappeared.

From the sidelines of the grove of trees, streaks of light appeared, which were getting brighter and brighter. Morning has come.

Suddenly, the sound of bushes parted, and Piri could hear footsteps near to under the tree. Piri and his two friends drew closer.

“Is that Ruffio?” Kaia asked nervously.

The Kingdom Soldiers

Piri put a finger to her lips, telling Kaia to be quiet.

He looked at Yara, whose face was turning pale, then looked back at the wooden house door. Piri slowly approached the hole in the door, trying to see who was coming.

“Piri! Yara! Kaia!”

That’s Ruffio, and he sounded fine.

The three children were relieved and scrambled to stare out.

Immediately, the three were stunned. Ruffio was down there, but not alone. With him were two well-built men who also looked up, accompanied by threatening looks. Their hands gripped a long, shiny object. Piri shuddered to see that thing.

That thing... that must be what Kaia meant as a sharp weapon!

It took some time before Piri, Yara, and Kaia finally agreed to come down from the treehouse. That’s because Ruffio called out again, “It’s okay, they won’t harm us.”

The children came down from the top of the treehouse, although they were still horrified to see the weapons that the soldiers were holding. Piri imagined what the weapon could do to his body. It must be very painful!

Arriving under the Piri tree whispered, “Ruffio, what happened to Mr. Bartok?”

Ruffio didn’t answer right away. He walked after a soldier, through the thickets towards the house that became Bartok’s headquarters. Piri, Yara, and Kaia were forced to follow him, while the other soldiers walked behind.

Ruffio then answered in a whisper as well, “They caught him. But some people escaped. The soldiers chased after them. They will definitely be caught, too.”

“But why would the kingdom soldiers want to capture them?”

“That’s because Bartok likes to rob people,” Kaia replied. “Isn’t that right, Ruffio?”

“That’s how it is.”

“You don’t seem so sad,” Yara suddenly said.

Ruffio turned around, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“It seems that you are calm when you see Bartok and his friends being arrested,” Yara continued. “Not sad, angry, or upset. Aren’t they all your friends?”

Piri didn’t understand how Yara could think like that. Yara guessed what Ruffio was feeling, then said it sharply.

Seeing Ruffio’s reaction, which didn’t argue at all, it could be true. But what was the reason Ruffio could act like that? Was there something he’s hiding?

Ruffio kept quiet and kept walking until they finally arrived at the grassy ground next to the house that had been Bartok’s headquarters.

The house was now empty. From the outside, the doors, windows, chairs, and tables were shattered. Bartok and his friends were no longer there.

Now, there were only about a dozen horse soldiers, all wearing blue and white uniforms.

One of them wore a cloth that was wrapped around his neck and hung long behind his back. His stature was dashing, his face clean and his hair neatly combed and tied back.

Seeing Piri and his friends, the man said in a deep voice, "So they are the children?"

Ruffio nodded. "Captain Morat, this is Piri, Yara and Kaia."

"So? What should I do with them?" Captain Morat asked. "Bring them together with the rebels, then put them in prison?"

"No, don't do that," Ruffio said.

"Of course, I won't," Captain Morat replied curtly. "I'm not like the Witch who is... cruel. The children are none of my business."

"The Red Witch is now the ruler of Mallava. You dare speak ill of her?" asked Ruffio.

"Hey, be careful when you talk!" the soldier sitting on the horse said.

"Let him be." The captain laughed. "This kid is smart, although sometimes too smart. Ruffio, I'm an obedient person, but that doesn't mean I like all the Witch's actions. These children are still too young. You just take them away. Or whatever. It's up to you."

"So I can go now too?" Ruffio asked.

Captain Morat smirked. "You're still wearing your bracelet, aren't you? Then you can go anywhere. I can still find you later if I need you."

Piri glanced at Ruffio's left hand, and only now did he see that behind the boy's sleeve was a dark-colored object wrapped around his wrist. It was made from the roots of a plant which, when you hear Captain Morat's words, didn't seem like an ordinary object.

"I have done all your orders," Ruffio growled. "I infiltrated

here and gave Bartok to you. You should have taken this bracelet off of me!”

“Later.” Captain Morat shook his head. “I’m grateful, but I heard there’s another rebel group in Terata. Bartok’s friends. Maybe you need to infiltrate there, too.”

“No! It won’t be easy this time!” Ruffio cried. “Soon they’ll be sure to hear about what’s going on here, and they’ll be more alert.”

“Let me judge the situation, brat. You just do your job, with all your intelligence, without fear and doubt, as usual. But... maybe you’re right. Looks like now is not the right time. So maybe later, when they let their guard down.”

“So?”

“Now, just go. I told you before, didn’t I? Yes, because it’s best if you don’t come with us to the capital and let many people see you with us. I have faith in my soldiers here, but elsewhere, I can’t be sure.”

“They have spies too?”

“If I can secretly include you in their group, then there’s a chance that they could also do the opposite, right?”

“Captain Morat, you promised you would let this thing go...” Ruffio’s voice trailed off.

“I know, but sorry, I can’t right now.”

“You broke your promise!”

The captain’s expression did not change. “No. That’s not what I promised.”

“Then, at least you can help me!” Ruffio cried.

Captain Morat’s eyes sharpened. “What do you mean?”

“You must help me before I carry out your next order! To be fair! These kids...” Ruffio pointed at Piri and her two friends. “came from the Red House. And there are many more children

at that house who are like them. They are all locked up. The children wanted to go, but couldn't. You have to help them."

Captain Morat was stunned. "I know about the Red House. As far as I know, they didn't do anything wrong to us. And as long as the rich people are willing to pay taxes from their every activity, then it doesn't matter."

"But they are bad people! Please, Captain, you will understand. Come with me. Free the children."

"I still have a business on the Terata. I don't want to make an unnecessary fuss anyway. I have rebels to take care of."

"You cheated!" Ruffio cried.

Captain Morat glared. "Don't push my patience, Ruffio. Maybe I'll help you later, but not now, got it? We're leaving now. I left some food there." He pointed to the cloth bag on the small table by the door. "Take care of yourselves."

Captain Morat spurred his horse away, followed by all the soldiers, leaving only Ruffio, Piri, Yara, and Kaia in the middle of the forest.

The four of them looked at each other. For a few moments, they could only be silent, confused, and desperate.

Then Piri grinned. "Hey, why don't we just eat? I am hungry."

White Fox

That morning, the children ate the bread and fruit the soldiers had left behind. Piri didn't want to ask Ruffio questions about what really happened, because he seemed to be still upset after his talk with Captain Morat. So all that time, they just ate while sitting on the grass.

When the sun was getting higher, Ruffio asked the others to stand.

"We're leaving now. To the Red House." He turned to Kaia. "You know the way, right?"

"Are you okay?" Piri asked.

"Eating makes me happy," Ruffio said. "I'm fine. Instead of getting angry, I'd better do something."

"So, may I ask a few questions?"

Ruffio was silent for a moment. "You may. But on the way."

He picked up his food bag and walked down the path. The strides were long and fast, so Piri, Yara, and Kaia had to half-run so as not to fall behind.

After a long way through the forest, Ruffio slowed down. "What do you want to ask?"

“About Bartok,” Piri said. “So... he isn’t your friend?”

“If I had a choice, I would prefer Bartok to be my friend.”
Ruffio stared. “Although rude, basically he’s kind.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Bartok robs from the rich, but his intentions are good. He gave his money to the poor. So, I like him. But I can’t choose.”

“Because of the bracelet in your hand?” Yara asked.

“What bracelet is that?” Piri asked too.

“I don’t know, but it’s definitely an ugly bracelet!” Ruffio snorted in annoyance. “I met Captain Morat a few months ago, shortly after I came from Kalani to look for my brother. I heard that soldiers of the Mallava Kingdom took my brother away, but I don’t know if he was then made a soldier or a worker elsewhere. Captain Morat promised to help me search, but he said I had to help him first. To keep me from betraying him, he gave me this bracelet.”

“Can’t you get it out of your hands?”

“I’ve tried cutting it with a knife, or a saw, but I can’t. This bracelet gripped my hand even more and made my hand hurt.”

“That’s an evil bracelet!” Kaia shuddered.

“Hopefully he’ll let it go,” Yara muttered.

Ruffio was silent. Maybe he wasn’t sure himself. Perhaps the bracelet would forever hold Ruffio’s hand.

They continued their journey along the muddy road at the edge of the forest. The ruts and hooves of the horses were still there, and Piri knew it would be a long journey. By carriage they had spent almost half the day yesterday, so on foot, they might do it in two days.

“Don’t worry,” Ruffio said. “The important thing is that we don’t get lost.”

They came to a bend near to a creek and rested.

The sky wasn't dark yet and Ruffio was using the remaining time before nightfall to find a pile of dry wood. He arranged the logs in the middle of the field, then took out two black stones from his pocket. He rubbed the two stones, and after a few tries, sparks appeared and burned the wood.

"Wow! Great!" Piri and Yara shouted while Kaia laughed. "You can make fire!"

"It's normal. Almost everyone has this. Haven't you two seen it yet? This is a very useful stone. The only thing I brought from Kalani."

"In our place, we never make a fire," Yara said. "We didn't even know about the fire."

"Fire is good for burning meat, for eating..."

"We don't eat meat! We eat fruit."

"Good. I'm also lazy to hunt birds at the moment. We'll eat fruit later when we run out of bread. But you need to know, fire is good to accompany us if we sleep on the edge of the forest."

"Yes, our bodies become warm," Yara said.

"Not only that. The wolves wouldn't dare come near us because of it."

Piri just found out about it, and that was very useful information. They were lucky to be with Ruffio.

Accompanied by the bonfire, Yara and Kaia fell asleep first, and after that maybe Piri, because when he closed his eyes it seemed Ruffio was still sitting on his knees.

Then Piri woke up, this time earlier than the others, while it was still dark.

At first, he was surprised because the bonfire had died. He was afraid that wolves would approach them. He sat up, looking around.

Ruffio snuggled beside him, while Yara and Kaia slept with

their bodies pressed against each other by the boulder. The sound of the river water was clear, while the dense leaves at the edge of the forest rustled.

Then Piri saw a pair of eyes. Not far from him, among the trees, there was an animal with thick gray hair, staring intently with its green eyes.

Its snout resembles that of a horse, but was sharper. His body was small, maybe if he stands his height would not exceed Piri's body. Despite that, Piri couldn't hide his fear. It's a wolf!

Trembling, he immediately grabbed Ruffio's hand and whispered nervously, "Ruffio! Wake up!"

Ruffio squirmed. "What ...?"

"There's a wolf!"

Immediately, Ruffio sat down. His eyes followed the direction of Piri's gaze. Ruffio and the wolf stared at each other for a moment.

Then Ruffio whispered, "Wake up the others, but slowly."

He shifted, slowly took out a pair of black stones from his pocket, then lit a fire.

"Yara, Kaia, wake up!" Piri said.

The two girls woke up. Once everyone was on alert, Ruffio stood up, holding up a piece of wood that was burning at the end. He took a step forward and pointed his fiery wood at the wolf. The animal raised its head.

"That's not a wolf," Ruffio said. His voice was calm now. "It's just a fox. White fox. It's like a wolf, but smaller. It has big ears, and it's harmless."

"But why is he here?" Kaia asked nervously.

"Maybe this is his home." Ruffio shrugged.

"Then we should ask his permission to sleep here," Piri said.

"Are you sure he won't attack us?" Yara asked. "He will not

bring his friends to attack us?”

“If he wanted to harm us, he should have done it while we were still sleeping,” Ruffio said. “Never mind, just let it be.” He sat down and put the wood back down. “If you want to sleep again, just sleep. Let me be on guard.”

The children agreed and went back to sleep.

They woke up when the sky was light again.

As soon as Piri sat down, Ruffio said, “That white fox is still here.”

He pointed to the row of trees in front of him. “The fox was still sitting there, watching us. I thought, what does he really want?”

“Maybe he’ll say what he means now,” Piri said.

“Say?”

“Yes. You don’t believe it, do you? We will see.”

The fox stood up, then slowly walked towards them with its head lowered and mouth as if smiling. In fact, Piri didn’t think that the animal would actually come to them, and perhaps say something. But he had been seeing strange things a lot lately, so he wouldn’t be surprised if the animal could suddenly talk like a human.

“He’s hungry. Maybe he hasn’t found a mouse or a rabbit yet.” Ruffio took out a loaf of bread from his pocket. He threw it in front of the white fox. “Eat that.”

Yeah, he’s probably just hungry, Piri thought to himself. Even though he had hoped the animal could really talk.

After eating the bread, the fox barked. Several times, towards Piri. Piri laughed. So did the other three children.

The fox then turned and ran towards the forest. Among the bushes and trees, he spun around and ran back to Piri. He barked again, then ran, circled, over and over.

“Looks like he wanted to say something,” Ruffio said.

“Maybe...” Yara froze, “he wants us to follow him.”

“To the forest?” Kaia asked doubtfully.

“I will follow him,” Piri said.

“No. Our goal is to go to the Red House,” Ruffio said. “We’d better not waste time.”

“Just a moment. Maybe he has something important to show.”

“Nonsense!” Ruffio’s voice hardened.

“Ruffio, don’t be angry,” Yara interceded. “There’s nothing wrong with that, right? For this morning only. Let’s follow the fox and see what he has to show. If nothing happens by midday, we can return to the main road and continue our journey.”

“Yes,” Kaia replied. “I think that’s a good plan.”

Ruffio was silent. His lips pursed. Then he nodded.

“Alright. Until noon. Hurry, don’t waste time.”

Directions

The white fox jumped for joy as soon as he saw the children wanting to follow him. He ran through the trees, stopping occasionally to give the children a chance not to get too far.

The fox seemed smart enough to choose a path that was not too difficult for children to pass. If he wanted to, maybe he could sneak in between the dense undergrowth. He ran on flat ground, which was dry and not slippery.

It took the fox and the four children a long way through the forest until they arrived at the mouth of the cave, which was waist high for an adult. Piri and his three companions were panting, while the white fox stuck out its tongue and wagged its tail.

A moment later, the fox ran into the cave.

“Should we go in too?” Yara mumbled.

Piri was about to follow, but the fox then appeared. This time, the animal took something in its mouth.

The fist-sized object was a brilliant red.

“Red stone!” Yara screamed.

“We found it!” Piri exclaimed.

The white fox put the stone in front of his feet and seemed to smile again. Piri took the stone and hugged the fox.

“Thank You! This stone turns out to be on you!”

“That’s... a beautiful stone,” Ruffio muttered. His gaze was fixed, not leaving one bit of the red stone. “Where did you get it?”

“In the cave between this world and the Bowl World,” Yara explained. “In this cave, this stone can shine, not just red on the outside like this.”

Her smile died down when she saw Ruffio was worried.

“Do you know what stone is this?” Yara asked.

“It’s red, so maybe it has something to do with the Red Witch!” Ruffio said. “Do you know her? No? The Red Witch was originally just an advisor in Mallava, this kingdom, but she later came to power. She’s a dangerous woman and has terrible magic. After taking control of the kingdom, she brought her troops against other countries such as Frauli, Kalani, and Suidon, conquering them. I don’t know about this stone yet, but I’m afraid... it’s one of her terrible weapons.”

“So far it’s harmless...” Piri said as he cradled the rock in his hand.

“Yes, at most it only scares the creatures in the cave,” Yara said. “Because of its dazzling light in the dark.”

“You better be careful. What if it’s dangerous? We could get hurt!”

“What do you think we should do with this stone?” Yara asked.

“Throw it away,” Ruffio replied.

“Throw it away?” Yara’s voice rose.

“What if it was the other way around?” Piri replied. “What if this stone can help us? This stone helped us in the cave once,

and may help us again in the future.”

“It’s stupid of you to think like that,” Ruffio said.

Piri and Yara were silent.

Then Yara said, “If this stone really belongs to the Red Witch, maybe we can use it to help you. We hide this stone, then we tell Captain Morat that we have a valuable item. If he wants to get it, he must let go of the bracelet in your hand first.”

“Impossible. Captain Morat is a smart man, he can’t be fooled that easily. He could even harm us back.”

The four children fell silent again. In their midst, the white fox barked again as if asking for attention. The children didn’t respond, because they still didn’t agree on what to do with the red stone in Piri’s hand.

“I still think it’s best to hide the stone somewhere. But whatever, you found the stone, so you decide,” Ruffio said a little reluctantly.

Piri nodded. “I believe in this stone, and I also believe in the white fox. He had good intentions. He knows this stone is harmless.”

The white fox barked. As soon as Piri stuffed the red stone into his trouser pocket, the fox jumped happily, as if in agreement.

Yara smiled widely. But Kaia and Ruffio were silent.

“I think he still has something to say,” Piri said as soon as he saw the fox didn’t stop barking. Just like when he took the children into the forest, now the fox ran back into the deeper woods, then turned and barked. “He wants us to keep following him there...”

“But, is it good?” Kaia asked.

“No, that’s enough!” Ruffio said impatiently. “Let’s head back to the edge of the forest now and continue our journey!”

“But I thought of something,” Yara said. “Perhaps this fox

wants to help us. Come to think of it, he used to pick up a red rock by the river as soon as we got out of the cave. Why did he do that?”

Piri was pensive. “He wanted to hide it.”

“Yes. From Mr. Jenasin! This fox knows this stone is a valuable object and should not fall into the hands of Mr. Jenasin. But now he’s leaving it to us. Why? Because according to him we are the ones who should guard this stone! He knows we’re good children!”

Piri nodded. “Yeah, that’s probably true!”

“This fox has been watching us since we came out of the cave, until now,” Yara continued excitedly, “to find the right time to return this stone to us. He walked through the forest from end to end carrying stones and finally arrived here. And now...” The girl smiled at the white fox in front of her. “... he will take us home.”

“To our home?” Piri’s brow furrowed.

“Yeah, to the cave where we came out first!”

“Through which?”

“Through this forest! He knows the shortcut!”

“Shortcut?” Kaia’s beautiful eyes blinked.

Ruffio nodded, apparently interested now. “The white fox is a clever animal. He knew the quickest paths through the forest. But if that’s true, shouldn’t our goal be to go to the Red House? I know you guys want to go home, but aren’t your friends there? Don’t you want to take them home?”

“We will not abandon Tero!” Piri said.

“We also want to help other children,” Yara said. “Including your brother.”

“What should we do?” Kaia asked. “Shall we follow this fox?”

“Maybe... he also knows the shortcut to the Red House,” Piri

grinned. "It's a shame he doesn't know what we're talking about."

"Maybe he knows," Yara replied. "Yes. Try, Piri, talk to him."

"Talk?" Piri's grin widened. "Why don't you do it?"

"Because you are the one he likes the most! He's always been fond of sniffing your feet. Come on, Piri, hurry up."

Piri laughed while looking at the animal in front of him. How can he talk to the animal? Is it in ordinary words?

"House!" Piri spread his hands. "Do you understand, fox? Big house!"

The fox barked and jumped up and down.

"Looks like he understands!" Yara laughed. "Show him the red stone, Piri, so he can understand better. It's red, similar to the Red House!"

"Can he really distinguish colors?"

"Just try it! There's no harm."

Piri showed the stone in the fox's face.

Again the fox barked, then ran further into the forest. There he stopped among the trees and barked.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? He understands!" Yara exclaimed.

Without hesitation, she ran after the fox.

Piri and Kaia quickly caught up, and Ruffio ran behind.

While running, Piri thought, did the animal really understand what he was saying? If true, it means that the white fox is indeed a clever and special animal.

But what if it turns out to be wrong?

The Crow

The next trip to the Red House was long and strenuous. It was now past noon and Ruffio thought they should be back on the main road.

He couldn't seem to believe they could get to the Red House any faster. But Yara repeatedly reassured him they were on the right track.

They arrived outside the forest in the afternoon. Behind the last thicket they passed, they found a gravel dirt road on which were the marks of wheels and hooves.

The four children stopped.

"We're back on the main road..." Kaia was stunned, then looked left and right, trying to convince herself. "Yeah, looks like this is the road we walked yesterday."

"Are you sure?" Ruffio asked.

Kaia nodded. "It's near to the Red House. If we keep going left, we'll get there."

Yara continued, "If we cross this road, across the meadow ahead, we will arrive at Jampa, where Mr. Jenasin and I handed over to Mr. Roddick. I'm certain. Then further ahead, to the

foot of the mountains, there are rivers, and caves, where we can return to our world. Right, Piri?"

He looked at Piri with a big smile.

"That's right." Piri nodded in agreement, though still a little hesitant.

He patted the head of the white fox beside him. "This fox is really helping us."

Yara also patted the fox's head. "After rescuing Tero, we can head home soon."

"The other kids too," Kaia said.

"Do you want to come to our world?" Yara offered.

Kaia smiled. "Is there a nice place there?"

"Of course!" Yara exclaimed.

"Poffel might want to come too," Kaia said.

"Hey, before we even think about it, we have to save them all first!" Ruffio said, annoyed.

"We'd better rest tonight," Kaia said.

"It's better to stay in the forest, away from the road," Piri said. "Mrs. Kullip's people would have passed this way, including perhaps Mr. Roddick, if he had been told to look for us. If we get spotted, I doubt we'll be able to escape once again."

The children went into the forest, away from the road.

Ruffio found a little clearing behind a thicket of thickets and boulders and chose it as a place to spend the night.

But he said, for tonight, he would not light a bonfire. He didn't want to risk the light and smoke being seen by Mrs. Kullip's men.

"Hopefully, there aren't any wolves here," Ruffio said.

"Don't worry," Piri replied. "The white fox can protect us. If there's a wolf, he'll wake us up."

"Do you really believe him?"

"Why not? He is nice." Piri didn't hesitate. The white fox

proved to have helped twice. Return the Red Stone, and then escort them to the Red House.

Before going to sleep, he thought about what he could do to repay the animal's kindness. Hey, how about he invites him to stay in the Bowl World?

Piri fell asleep, and he had a dream. He and the white fox went on a journey with Yara and the others. They crossed the meadow, then came to the river in front of the mouth of the cave. But... strangely enough, they didn't enter the cave; they went up instead, up the mountains!

Because it was a dream, of course, it didn't feel strange. It seemed ordinary, so when he woke up Piri forgot about it. He woke up not long after the sun appeared behind the thick leaves above his head.

Ruffio, Yara, and Kaia followed shortly after.

Then Piri sensed that something was missing.

"Hey, where's the white fox?" Glancing around, he looked left and right in all directions. The animal was nowhere to be seen.

"Probably looking for a rabbit," Ruffio muttered as he shuffled into his seat. "We'd better eat too. Here, our last slice of bread."

They finished eating and waited. It took a long time, and apparently, the white fox didn't appear either. The children were getting restless.

"Could it be he won't come back?" Yara said.

"We can still go," Ruffio said. "Want to go now?"

Piri sighed. "What is our plan?"

"We're going to the Red House now. After that, we look for ways to free the children. We can't be careless. Maybe tonight we'll spend another night around the Red House, and move tomorrow."

“If we have the chance, we can free them tonight,” Yara said.

“It could be,” Ruffio said, then nodded.

The four children stood up, ready to go.

But Ruffio then looked at Piri. “Anything else on your mind?”

Piri was stunned. “I was just thinking about that white fox. Why did he leave?”

“He can find us later,” Yara said soothingly. “He’s a smart animal, isn’t he?”

Piri nodded. Together with other children, he continued his journey.

They kept their distance from the road to remain vigilant. So far it was safe. There was no sound of Mrs. Kullip’s messengers as they had feared, only the usual silence of the forest. The only sound was the breeze, then the rustling of the leaves of the dense trees.

Then the blackbird’s wings fluttered over their heads. The bird has perched on a branch not far ahead, gazing.

Ruffio stared back at him.

“That bird...”

“Do you know it?” Yara whispered.

“A crow. I feel like I’ve seen it before. Maybe just similar, but I think I’ve seen it on the border of Kalani and Mallava. I didn’t know birds like that lived here too...”

“It has a scary look,” Kaia said.

“Crows like to stare like that. We keep going.”

“No. Wait.” Yara held back. “Hear.”

The four children ducked behind thick bushes and listened. The faint sound of footsteps running accompanied by a snort of gasping breath. From the left, at the far end, there is the Red House.

Piri peered through the leaves and tree trunks, trying to see

who was coming. He was surprised. The ones who came running were Tero and Kassen.

Piri was so happy he was about to call the two boys, but Ruffio immediately covered his mouth with his palm.

“Don’t get out. Someone is chasing them. Let them pass first.”

Piri, Yara, and Kaia looked nervously, then ducked lower and lower.

Piri peeked. Kassen galloped ahead of them, behind the bushes. Behind him, Tero tried to run too, although his legs were still a little limp.

“Kassen,” Tero shouted, “I can’t stand it anymore. My feet still hurt....”

“Boland will catch you,” Kassen said from afar. “You and Poffel will be severely punished!”

Tero fell and grabbed his aching ankle. “Go, Kassen. Look for Piri... as well as... Yara and Kaia.”

Piri trembled to see Tero’s suffering. His eyes were wet, and he was about to scream, but Ruffio held him back again with an elbow in his stomach. Ruffio’s hands were now covering Yara’s and Kaia’s mouths, who seemed to be almost out of control as well.

“Calm down,” Ruffio whispered as quietly as possible, then continued, “You three stay here. Don’t move. I go first.”

“Where are you going?” Yara asked.

“I have a plan.” Ruffio backed away, then turned around, disappearing behind the trees.

“Where is he?” Yara asked again.

Piri shook his head. He also did not know what Ruffio would do. Does Ruffio have a plan to help Tero and Kassen? Or does he just want to run away?

Piri peeked. Tero seemed to have given up and sat down, wincing in pain. Kassen, who was hesitant at first, finally turned around and continued running.

Another voice came from the left. One person with a heavy snort. He wasn't that big, not as tall as Mr. Roddick, but his fat belly made him heavy and he ran with a thud on the ground.

He stopped near Tero, cursing, "Can't run anymore, huh?"

His palms flew, stopping on Tero's head to make a loud sound. Tero screamed, but the man didn't care. He looked down the road. Kassen was already running far ahead, but he still seemed hesitant to catch up.

His cursing sounded again, and he pulled a string from his pocket. "So you don't mess around anymore, kid!"

He crouched down and tied Tero's hands behind his back.

Unexpectedly, suddenly a stone the size of almost a head landed on the head of the fat adult.

The man collapsed instantly and lay face down on the ground, motionless.

From behind him appeared the figure of Ruffio, who stood with his chest up and down and a pale face. He was holding a large rock.

Do You Have a Plan?

Tero didn't know Ruffio yet, so when he saw Ruffio standing next to him with a big rock that could make the fat man near him collapse, his first reaction was to shuffle backward in fear, not thinking at all that Ruffio helped him.

Piri quickly burst out from behind the bushes, followed by Yara and Kaia. Tero's face immediately brightened.

"Piri! Yara!" Tero screamed. "You escaped! How?"

Piri smiled widely. "It's a long story. I'll tell you when we have time."

He and Yara lifted Tero's body so he could stand up, then looked at Ruffio and the man who had passed out in front of him. Ruffio grimaced.

"Is he... dead?" Kaia asked.

"Just passed out," Ruffio answered, throwing the rock aside. "Don't think about it. We'd better hide him behind a tree immediately."

Until now, Piri did not understand what it meant to be dead. But it must be a worse condition than just being unconscious.

If that was the case, then Ruffio had actually done something terrible, even though he was doing this to help Tero.

Tero looked at the man who had fainted. "He'll wake up and report this to Mrs. Kullip, won't he?"

"So tie his hands and feet to a tree, cover his mouth with a cloth," Ruffio smirked.

That's when Piri felt Ruffio was really no longer a child. Ruffio knows a lot of things and also does things that Piri couldn't imagine.

They pulled the body of the man named Boland behind the trees, away from the road. Ruffio tied his hands and feet with the rope that was used to bound Tero. Ruffio tore off the fat man's shirt and used it to gag his mouth.

Kassen then appeared, gawking with delight when he saw them. He seemed to have returned as soon as he heard the commotion.

"How did you all get here?"

Yara briefly told the story. Starting from the horse carriage of Mr. Blummer, Bartok, Captain Morat, to the help of the white fox.

"Ruffio helped us a lot," Yara said.

"So you're Poffel's brother?" Kassen asked.

"Yes, where is he?" Ruffio asked. "You said he would be severely punished?"

"At first Poffel came with us this morning. But near to the gate they caught us. Poffel was captured, but he held them off, so Tero and I could get here."

"We didn't know you escaped!" Tero said to Piri and Yara. "At first, we thought we were the ones who had to save you. It turned out to be the other way around."

"We have to save Poffel and the others right away," Kaia said

quietly.

Kassen nodded. "This could be an advantage. As soon as she finds out you're running away from Mr. Blummer, Mrs. Kullip will send her men out to find you. The guard at the Red House became looser. We have a chance to save our friends."

"How?" Tero said. "I'm not sure we..."

"We can," Ruffio said firmly. "I will find a way. You three want to come?" he asked Piri, Yara, and Tero. "Or do you want to go straight back to your world?"

"I'm coming with you," Piri answered quickly.

Yara nodded. "We want to help our friends."

"Me too," Tero said. "My leg doesn't hurt that much anymore."

"Well, let's do it then." Without saying much, Ruffio walked.

The other children followed along, exchanging stories. In a low voice, of course, because they had to be careful.

At midday, they finally saw the gates of the Red House fence and its stone walls that were as high as an adult's head.

Piri, Ruffio, and Kassen climbed a large tree with thick leaves. Piri saw no guards around the iron gate. A dozen of children were gathered in one corner of the courtyard, talking timidly.

Then the lunch bell rang, and all the children marched into the house.

"I didn't see Poffel," Ruffio, who was sitting beside Piri, said worriedly.

"Maybe he was taken to the barn and locked up there," Kassen pointed to the wooden walled building on the left side of the house. "Or maybe he's in the house."

"Is the punishment always like that?"

"Hm... Poffel has already tried to run away," Kassen answered dubiously. "The punishment is hitting his butt with a rattan in

front of the other kids.”

“God damn it!” Ruffio cursed. His gaze scorched, his jaw clenched a few times.

He stared at the Red House for a while. “When it’s dark, I’ll climb the wall and go inside. I’m going to find my sister.”

“At night there will be guards at the gate,” Kassen said. “But maybe only Golick, because you beat Boland unconscious in the forest.”

“Wouldn’t this guard be suspicious since his friend didn’t come back?” Piri asked.

“If it’s just one night, maybe not,” Kassen replied. “But tomorrow he will be suspicious. And there will be more men who are looking for you. Including maybe Mr. Roddick.”

Piri shook his head. He really didn’t want to see Mr. Roddick again.

“So, my only chance is tonight,” Ruffio muttered.

“Do you have a plan?” Piri asked.

Ruffio didn’t seem to want to explain. Just like earlier when he didn’t want to say his plan when he saw Tero being slapped by Boland. Does he now have a plan that was more shocking than just hitting people on the head with a big rock?

All day and evening, Piri and her five friends hid.

Unlike usual, that afternoon the Red House children did not leave the house at all. Maybe it was part of the punishment because some of them had run away.

The tall, skinny guard Golick kept walking back and forth near the gate. He puffed tobacco smoke from the pipe in his mouth. He looked agitated, but then sat drowsily in his chair, not far behind the gate.

In the evening Golick went back into the house. By that time, all the children were hiding behind the bushes, no one was

watching from above the tree.

“Usually he will rest for a while in his room, then go to the bathroom, get food in the kitchen, then come out again,” Kassen explained.

“He doesn’t eat in the kitchen?” Piri asked.

Kassen shook his head. “Mrs. Kullip doesn’t like them eating in the kitchen. So usually with Boland he would go out with his food, sit in that chair, chat and drink a glass or two of wine, then eat. He smoked tobacco and drank again. But not drunk. Then they took turns on guard all night long.”

“It’s a strange habit of drinking before eating,” Ruffio said. “You know about all those habits?”

“I used to see them from the bedroom window before going to bed,” Kassen said.

“But that’s if it’s the two of them,” Ruffio said. “If Golick was alone, he might have eaten right away. I’ll go in now before he reappears.”

“The sky isn’t dark yet,” Piri said. “If you climb the wall now, someone from inside the house can see you.”

“Maybe I won’t have another chance to approach the wall later,” Ruffio said. “I have to go up now.”

“What is your plan?” Piri asked once again. “Why won’t you tell us?”

“Maybe you don’t have a plan,” Yara accused Ruffio. “Do you?”

Putting to Sleep

Ruffio denied Yara's accusations. "I can't make a plan if I don't know what's in there! So the important thing is to get in first. To be brave."

"But we can help," Kassen argued.

"You're all just kids. What do you want to help with?" Ruffio asked.

"We can help!" Tero said.

The children stared at him, doubtful.

"How?" Piri wasn't sure.

"We can put the guard to sleep." Tero smiled. "We gave him the fruit of the teropiriyaraint. We put the fruit in his food, and he will fall asleep."

"Therapy... what?" Ruffio asked, confused.

"Maullavaloa fruit," Yara answered.

"Oh." Ruffio nodded. "Yeah, it can make you sleepy."

"Is that fruit around here?" Yara asked. "There are some trees with fruit in the forest, but I don't know if..."

"There is. I saw one or two trees earlier," Tero answered. "If you agree, I will look for it. It's not far."

“But how do you get the fruit into his food?” Yara asked.

“Putting it in his drink is even better. We can mix it with the taste of the wine. He wouldn’t be suspicious.” Ruffio smirked. “If we can put the guard to sleep, we can get the keys and open the gate and then take the kids away. Tero and Kassen, you guys look for the fruit now. But don’t stay too long, or the guard will appear.”

All the children agreed, although the details of the plan were not yet clear. Tero and Kassen hurried off while the rest of the kids waited, hoping that Golick wouldn’t show up.

Tero and Kassen arrived soon after. The two of them were breathing heavily, but their smiles grew as they showed the teropiriyaraint fruits they had gotten.

“Only ten?” Yara’s brow furrowed. “Is this enough?”

“I used to eat less than ten, and I could fall asleep,” Tero said.

“But this Golick is an adult. He must be stronger than us.”

“It’s enough, hopefully,” Ruffio said.

He took a broad leaf and made it a base. With clenched fists, he pounded the fruits until they were runny, then put them into his drinking bag containing a little water and shook them until they were mixed.

“It’s ready.” The boy grinned.

Ruffio tiptoed toward the wall while the other children watched the house. He climbed by, tucking his fingers and toes between the stone walls. The children could only hope that he didn’t get caught.

Piri held his breath as Ruffio reached the top of the wall, then rolled over and out of sight.

“He’s in,” Kassen said. “Now we just have to wait for Golick.”

The guard appeared after. In his left hand is a packet of food and on his right is a bottle of drink. Behind the gate, he paused,

watching the sky darken.

The children crouched behind the bushes. So far, so good, Golick wasn't suspicious of anything. The man placed his food and drink on a chair under a big tree, then lit torches to the left and right of the gate.

The firelight lit up the place, Golick smirked in satisfaction. He sat down in his chair and unwrapped his food. He placed his drink bottle on the grass close to his feet. Golick took a few sips, then put down the bottle and ate voraciously.

That's when Piri saw Ruffio. Poffel's brother hid behind a tree behind Golick.

He's really brave! Somehow, he sneaked around without being seen or heard by Golick. Piri understood Ruffio meant to put the teropiriyaraint liquid into Golick's bottle while the man was eating.

"He couldn't have made it." Kassen shook his head worriedly. "As soon as he reached out for the bottle, Golick must have seen him and grabbed him!"

"We have to help him," Yara said frantically, then turned her head. "Piri, what do you think?"

Piri thought hard. What can he do?

One idea came up. He grabbed a fist-sized stone. He spread his arms, then threw the stone towards the left of the Red House yard, past the stone wall.

"Piri, what—?" Yara's words were stifled as a loud sound through the bushes was heard.

Behind the gate, Golick stood in shock, then glared at the source of the voice.

Piri waited while the other children ducked deeper behind the bushes. They hoped Golick would check the yard, so Ruffio would get the bottle. But apparently, the man just shrugged his

shoulders, then ate again.

Piri picked up the second stone, and threw it one more time, in the same direction. This time, the loud sound of the rock stunned Golick. Hastily, the man put his meal on the chair and then left with long strides to check.

“Now, Ruffio, now!” Kassen whispered.

Of course, Ruffio couldn't possibly hear Kassen's voice. But the boy emerged from behind the tree and grabbed Golick's bottle. He spilled the teropiriyaraint fruit mixture into the bottle, then shook it. Only about ten seconds. Ruffio put the bottle back in its place and went back into hiding.

The children looked at each other, this time with relieved smiles.

For a while, they heard nothing. Only the breeze and rustling of the bushes in the yard. It wasn't long before Golick appeared. His face looked a little sour in the dim light of the torch. The man took back his package of food and sat down to continue eating.

When he finished eating, the moment the children had been waiting for arrived, he drank from his bottle.

“Good!” Tero whispered. “He'll be asleep in a minute!”

Piri still had doubts. Can Golick really sleep?

Ten teropiriyaraints are sure to put kids to sleep, but for adults? Golick still looked fine even though he had almost gulped down the water from his bottle.

“If he can't fall asleep, what should we do?” Kaia, who had been silent all this time, now asked worriedly.

Piri was stunned. “Perhaps Ruffio should look for the boulder again...”

“To hit that man's head?” Yara shuddered in horror.

“Yes, if you have to...”

“That’s terrible!”

“Hey,” Kassen said. “Look at that!” He pointed. “Golick is nodding off!”

Piri’s heart raced anxiously, watching the tall, skinny guard slowly lose consciousness. The water bottle in his hand fell off and rolled to the ground, then his head lowered deeply, and finally drooped.

“We did it! We-”

Tero’s cheers stopped because Kassen elbowed him in the stomach. “Would you like Mrs. Kullip or Mr. Dullum to hear your voice?”

From behind Golick’s body appeared Ruffio, in the dark, with his trademark grin that was terrifying in the dim light.

The boy approached, then pulled out the key ring hanging from Golick’s waist. Wasting no time, he ran to the gate and unlocked it.

“Hurry in!” he whispered.

The kids run. Once assembled, they together dragged Golick’s body behind the thicket. Ruffio took off Golick’s shirt and tore it open with the knife hanging from the guard’s waist, using some of the cloth to bind his legs and arms. They gagged his mouth with the remaining cloth.

“How long will he be asleep for?” Piri murmured.

“I don’t know,” Ruffio answered. “But this way, if he wakes up, he won’t be able to do anything.”

Dangerous Task

“**N**ow let’s divide the tasks,” Ruffio said. “Three children stand guard outside the fence, holding keys. Tero, Yara, and Kaia. Piri and Kassen stand guard in this garden. Meanwhile, I will check the warehouse. If Poffel isn’t there, I’ll find a way into the house. You said the children’s room was on the third floor, Kassen?”

“Yes...”

“I might as well climb.”

“That is dangerous.” Kassen shook his head.

“That’s all I can think of,” Ruffio looked into each child’s face. “Listen, if anything happens, don’t worry about me. Just go, and hopefully, the other kids can come along. Otherwise, the five of you must save yourself. Lock the gate from the outside and run.”

“We want nothing to happen to you,” Yara said.

“Neither do I...” Ruffio replied.

“We’ll keep watch,” Kassen said.

Everyone agreed, they executed the plan.

Tero, Yara, and Kaia went outside the fence and waited. Tero

held the key. Kassen and Piri hid in the garden. Golick was still fast asleep behind them with his hands and feet tied.

Ruffio ran down the street beside the house. He checked the warehouse, which was locked. There he whispered, calling for his brother, then shook his head with a disappointed face.

Without wasting much time, he climbed a tall tree close to the walls of the Red House. The tree has a branch that extends to approach the bedroom window. The branch wasn't that big, so Piri doubted whether Ruffio could climb it.

Piri thought, maybe if he went up there wouldn't be a problem because his body is lighter and the branches won't break. Bad thoughts came. Piri remembered when he let Tero climb the allumint tree at the edge of the cliff, which caused the branch Tero stepped on to break. Hopefully, something like this doesn't happen again now!

"Maybe he can sit on that branch." Kassen watched Ruffio climb higher and higher. "As long as he doesn't step the branch on for too long. He has to tread for a while, then jumps against the wall of the house."

"It's quite a distance to the wall." Piri shook his head. "He could fall..."

"He can do it."

"Then what about after he reached the wall? Is it okay to knock on that window?" Piri looked at the window that was still closed. Beyond it was the girls' room, which was now dark because the candles had been extinguished.

"There are children who haven't slept. They can open it."

"They don't know Ruffio. Maybe they won't open the window."

"They'll open it," Kassen answered confidently. "We used to talk about this. When we are sad because we can't go, we then

wish, one day, someone will come from behind the window to save us. If that happens, we have to open the window and let the person in.”

Piri smiled, then nodded.

“Ruffio would be a hero, and Poffel would be proud.” Kassen’s face turned tense. “But hopefully Poffel is not punished severely for this morning. He’s tried to run away twice, I’m afraid—”

His speech stopped because suddenly the front door opened.

Piri and Kassen quickly ducked behind a tree.

Out of the house, Mr. Dullum came out, still in his trademark style: erect and head held high. The man stared at the gate, which was now closed again, though not locked.

Of course, he couldn’t tell when the gate was no longer locked, so what annoyed him was something else. There was no Golick figure who was supposed to be standing guard there.

“Golick!” He called. “Golick!”

“What is it?” Mrs. Kullip followed Mr. Dullum out.

“Golick is not in his place, madam,” Mr. Dullum said irritably. “Maybe he went to the restroom next to the barn.”

“Call him. Tell him not to leave the gates too often.”

“I’ve told him many times, madam. I warned you before, we should no longer use Boland and Golick. Both are not good. Often drunk and overslept, often left the post. Until tonight Boland also has not appeared again. What’s so hard about catching the kids? Maybe he sleeps in the forest, or goes to Jampa.”

This was the first time Piri had heard Mr. Dullum speak at length. He seemed really annoyed.

“There’s no need to lecture me, Mr. Dullum,” Mrs. Kullip replied coldly. “If you can find me a better guard, then do it. Tomorrow Mr. Roddick will come. You want him to be the guard here?”

Mr. Dullum was silent, after which he replied, "I'm sorry, madam."

"Find Golick. Tell him to do a better job, or I'll cut his wages."

Mrs. Kullip went back into the house, while Mr. Dullum went down into the courtyard.

The man called again, "Golick!"

When there was no answer, he walked to the side of the house, closer to where the children were hiding.

Piri's breath caught, and so did Kassen. The two glanced briefly at Golick, who was fortunately still unconscious, then leaned closer, hoping that the thicket and trunk of a large tree beside them would hide the trio's bodies.

Mr. Dullum was walking steadily ahead of Piri and Kassen. The worries of the two children are not over. Mr. Dullum turned and walked down the lane to the left of the Red House.

He seemed to head for the warehouse at the end of the yard, which meant he was going to pass a large tree with Ruffio on top.

Piri and Kassen looked up, hoping Ruffio could hide upstairs. Both were stunned. Ruffio was nowhere to be seen. Where is he going?

Piri and Kassen looked in all directions. Where did Ruffio disappear to?

Mr. Dullum kept walking. Soon he was near the warehouse and again called out, "Golick! Mr. Golick!"

As soon as he realized Golick wasn't there, Mr. Dullum turned around. His eyes looked around him suspiciously.

Piri and Kassen hide closer and closer. Piri's chest was pounding harder. This is a dire situation. Now Mr. Dullum would search every corner, and he could definitely find them both, and Golick, who was fast asleep!

“Should we run?” Piri whispered.

Kassen shook his head, unsure.

Suddenly, there was a scream. From the back of the house, maybe the kitchen. Aunt Mollen’s voice.

“Fire! Fire!”

Smoke rose from behind the house. The sky that had been dark turned red. Mr. Dullum was flabbergasted, then ran towards the sound.

Piri and Kassen looked at each other.

“Fire? Looks like we got lucky!” Kassen said.

“I know who caused it,” Piri said.

Definitely Ruffio! That boy was clever and brave, but he was also dangerous. Earlier he hit people on the head with a big rock, now he’s burning down the house! Unimaginable. He must have done this with his fire stone.

“He’s really crazy!” Kassen shook his head. “Apparently, he got off while Mr. Dullum was talking to Mrs. Kullip and then ran back. He saw the pile of firewood behind the kitchen and suddenly thought about setting it on fire? Crazy! What is he thinking? If the fire gets bigger, the house can burn, and the children can be harmed!”

Red Sky

Piri was stunned. He had never seen a fire before, but from Kassen's words, it seemed a very dangerous situation.

"What should we do?" he said frantically.

Kassen looked up at the rooms whose windows were now open. The panicked screams of children echoed.

"Everyone out!" Aunt Mollen said with a loud voice. "Get out of the house! Hurry!"

The Red House was on fire! How quickly the fire spread from behind the house, then consumed the other parts one by one. The cold air turned hot. Thick, suffocating smoke filled the air. The roof and walls creaked.

Luckily the children showed up soon. They ran out the front door screaming. Mrs. Kullip and Aunt Mollen were with them. Mr. Dullum was nowhere to be seen.

Behind the tree, Piri was still confused about what to do.

Beside him, Kassen counted. "Eighteen, nineteen... Nineteen! Less one!"

Piri watched every child gathered in the courtyard. All the

children stared dumbfounded at the Red House, which was now on fire, while Mrs. Kullip's body shook, holding back her anger.

"Poffel? Is it Poffel who isn't among them?" Piri asked.

Kassen shook his head, confused mixed with worry. "Yeah, I didn't see him."

"We have to find him!"

"Where to? Into the house? You're crazy."

"I'll ask the children."

Without hesitation, Piri came out from behind the tree, sneaking behind the group of children. Mrs. Kullip and Aunt Mollen were standing not far ahead, so Piri knew he had to be very careful not to let them see his presence.

Piri saw Geza and Horun standing at the back, so he approached them and poked the backs of the two children. The two of them almost screamed in surprise. Piri quickly told them to be quiet.

"Piri," Geza whispered with a confused face. "You're here?"

Piri asked back, "Poffel. Where's Poffel?"

"Don't know," Horun responded. "This morning, Mr. Dullum brought him to the storeroom."

Geza looked at him in surprise. "You saw that?"

"To the warehouse beside the yard?" Piri asked.

"No. Storeroom inside the house, downstairs." Horun was flabbergasted at his own words. "Oh, he's still inside! He could die!"

His cry made everyone turn, including Mrs. Kullip and Aunt Mollen. Both of them glared at the sight of Piri.

"You... Why are you here?" Mrs. Kullip said angrily.

Piri gets annoyed. The fear just disappeared. For him, Mrs. Kullip's question did not need to be answered, because at the moment, there was one more important matter.

“Where’s Poffel?” He asked fearlessly. “Is he being held in the house? Is he still in the storeroom?”

Mrs. Kullip and Aunt Mollen were startled, looked at each other, then looked at all the other children.

“He... he’s not with you?” Mrs. Kullip asked them.

The children shook their heads.

“I saw Mr. Dullum take Poffel to the warehouse!” Horun exclaimed. “Mother ordered him, right?”

“I just told him to hold Poffel until the afternoon! After that, he can come out!” Mrs. Kullip said.

“We must save him, madam,” Aunt Mollen said nervously. “He could...” She didn’t continue and looked worriedly at the burning house.

“Where is the storeroom?” Piri asked.

“Between the living room and the dining room,” Aunt Mollen said quickly. “There’s a door on the floor, but it’s locked—”

Piri had already run towards the house, not paying attention to Aunt Mollen’s last words, nor the screams of the other children trying to stop him. Only one thing was on his mind: he had to save Poffel.

The fire almost burned the entire building, but he saw that the door and living room had not been caught in flames. He still had a chance to get into the living room and open the door downstairs.

Before Piri jumped into the house, someone appeared, grabbing his arm from the side. Piri turned around, surprised. Ruffio looked at him with a puzzled look.

“Is Poffel inside?” Ruffio asked.

“Y-yes. In the storeroom downstairs, next to the living room.”

“You stay here. I’ll go in.”

“But I can help.”

“You’re still a child!”

“I can help!” Piri shouted louder.

“I can help too!” Two other voices answered from behind. Kassen and Tero.

Piri didn’t know when Tero had entered the yard, but the boy seemed so eager to help.

“Stupid! It’s dangerous inside! Poffel is my brother! I’m the one who must help him!” But seeing Piri, Kassen, and Tero not wanting to obey him, Ruffio finally shook his head. “Whatever.”

Ruffio ran into the house. A moment of fear hit Piri as soon as he felt the surrounding heat, but he braced himself and jumped in as well. Kassen and Tero followed him. The four of them ran through the living room into a long corridor, going deeper and deeper.

A huge fire licked the wall behind the dining room, almost reaching the roof. Piri was shocked. The roof and beams supporting this room could collapse at any moment!

In the room’s corner, Ruffio found a wooden door on the floor, next to a chair and an extensive wardrobe. The iron door handle seemed to be already hot because Ruffio used a cloth to hold it. He tried to pull, but as Aunt Mollen said, the door was locked.

“Poffel!” Ruffio called out. “Poffel! You in there?”

A low voice sounded in response. “Yes...”

“It’s me! Ruffio!”

“B-Brother?”

Ruffio’s smile spread, relieved. “Don’t worry! I will get you out!”

“But it’s locked!” Tero said.

“Mr. Dullum has the key,” Kassen said. He looked at Ruffio. “Did you see him in the back? What happened? Is it true that

you set fire to it?”

Ruffio returned his gaze without fear or regret. “Yes! That man appeared suddenly, tried to get water from the well, and doused the fire, then I hit his head with a stick. He passed out, but I dragged him away from the fire. He’s fine.”

The children were silent, unsure of how to react. Ruffio had destroyed the Red House, which the children disliked, but his actions had also put Poffel in danger.

“We need the key!” Piri said. He knew they couldn’t think too long, or they wouldn’t have time to get out of the fire.

Tero stood up, then dragged the chair beside him. “Let’s just destroy the door!”

The children get out of the way. Tero has two firm hands. He lifted the wooden chair high and swung it with all his might toward the door below. The chair hit hard.

The wooden door was cracked, but not shattered.

“Let me do it,” Ruffio said.

He took the chair and swung it.

Piri heard a loud crash.

Once again ...

And this time it’s destroyed. Both legs of the chair were broken, but the basement door was shattered.

Children scrambled to see. From the dark spot below, appeared a face. Poffel. The boy smiled weakly, sweat all over his face and body. With trembling steps, he climbed the stairs. Ruffio stretched out his hand, caught Poffel’s hand, then pulled his brother’s body.

The two hug. Ruffio laughed, tears welling up in his eyes.

“We have to go quickly.” Kassen coughed.

Thick smoke filled the room and obscured the view. The place grew hotter, and the flames drew nearer, now almost blocking

their way into the vestibule.

“Run! Run fast!” Ruffio shouted.

Rain Magic

Kassen ran across the room towards the front room, followed by Tero. Poffel followed behind him, then Piri and Ruffio. They escaped a flame coming down the wall.

But when he reached the living room, Piri heard the loud sound of wood breaking from above his head. He looked up and screamed. A block of hot, reddened wood slid toward him.

The danger was approaching, but at the last moment, Ruffio gripped his body, causing them both to fall to the side. The wooden block fell beside them.

Ruffio grimaced. "Are you okay?"

Piri nodded, then tried to get up.

"We're trapped, Piri."

Stunned, Piri felt his eyes getting wet. Kassen, Tero, and Poffel managed to escape from the house, while they were both cornered in a corner of the room. Flames filled the path to the front door, and thick smoke filled the room.

Ruffio hugged him. "I'm sorry, Piri..."

Piri's vision blurred, so did his hearing. His chest was tight.

A thunderous sound was suddenly heard. Followed by a rumble in the sky. Before he lost consciousness, he saw Ruffio smiling.

Then a drop of water dripped fell on Piri's face.

When Piri woke up, the heat was no longer there. Only cold and wet all over his body that he felt. Water pooled on the floor. Thin smoke drifted from the floor and walls, which were blackened and glistening with water.

Ruffio smiled at his side. "It rained heavily and extinguished all the fires. But it's stopped."

He asked Piri to stand up. Slowly, the two walked across the wet floor towards the front door. Once out, Piri was greeted by Yara, who ran to hug him, as well as Tero. Meanwhile, Ruffio was hugged by his younger brother, Poffel.

The children cheered.

Behind the crowd were Mrs. Kullip, Aunt Mollen, and also Mr. Dullum. It was difficult to describe the faces of the three, whether they were angry, relieved, or sad. Or maybe afraid, because behind the three people there was now another figure that is even more terrifying. Captain Morat.

The tall, sharp-eyed man was still sitting on his horse. On his shoulder was a crow that the children had seen in the middle of the forest this afternoon.

"Ruffio," Captain Morat said.

The atmosphere turned silent.

"You just made a colossal mess here, but also saved people at the same time. That's a magnificent combination. Don't think I don't know what you're doing here. Burn the house down." He shook his head. "Your criminal acts are out of bounds.

I'm always watching you, Ruffio. This afternoon I finished my business at Terata and my crow informed me you were here. So I quickly came. I thought I could sort out your problem. It turned out to be this way. Luckily I came at the right time, so I could save your life once again. Yes, to be honest, I didn't think something like this could happen. I'm annoyed, I'm angry, but on the other hand, I'm glad you finally found your brother. "

"Master, this petty thug set my house on fire!" Mrs. Kullip screamed. "He should be severely punished!"

"Madam, the fire is out," Captain Morat replied calmly.

"Master, you are a rain summoner and a good royal knight. We are very grateful for your help. But what about my house? I want this child to be punished—"

"The Kingdom will give you money, madam. You can rebuild your house the way it was. What the Kingdom will do to this child, that's our business."

Mrs. Kullip was silent. He looked back at Ruffio with a look of hatred.

"You can come to the capital whenever you want, madam, to get your money. Don't worry," Captain Morat continued. "Or you can come with me now." Then he looked at Ruffio with a piercing gaze. "Together with Ruffio."

"Should I come too?" Ruffio asked quietly.

"I have helped you, and of course now you must help me. You will carry out your next task. Until I have had enough."

Captain Morat's voice, though polite, was piercingly cold. Piri knew Ruffio had no choice. He had to go with the kingdom soldiers. And that evil bracelet on his hand will be there forever.

"I'll go with you," Ruffio answered. "I've found my brother, anyway. But, Captain, I have a request. If you can grant it, I won't argue with you anymore."

Captain Morat chuckled. "Good. Tell me, what do you want?"

Ruffio looked around. "I want all these children to be allowed to leave the Red House. Completely free from Mrs. Kullip."

Mrs. Kullip glared. "Captain, all these children are mine!"

Captain Morat looked at the woman. "You mean you've paid a heavy price for them, and you don't want to lose your money? Madam, I don't care about your business, as long as it doesn't interfere with the Kingdom. I can accept your reasoning. So, Ruffio, why don't you explain to me why the Kingdom has to spend more money to pay Mrs. Kullip for these children, apart from the money the Kingdom will spend because of your burning of the house."

"Kids don't like being here!" Ruffio said.

He glanced at all the children, asking for support.

Piri noticed. Unfortunately, the children didn't dare to say anything in front of Captain Morat, even though Ruffio couldn't explain because he wasn't from here. The children should be the ones explaining, not Ruffio.

Captain Morat shrugged. "There are a lot of kids out there who don't like living in their homes, but does that mean they can just leave? Children still have to always obey their parents or their guardians, don't they? Otherwise, they will become like you, who are unruly and will often cause a ruckus."

He took his eyes off Ruffio and looked at the rest of the kids, who now looked sad and dispirited. All the children seemed to realize that they couldn't leave the Red House.

Captain Morat stared at Piri for a while. "You. Brave boy. You don't agree with what I said?"

"Captain," Piri ventured. "We are all here because we were taken by force. Yara, Tero and I were taken by Mr. Roddick, and for that, he got money from Mrs. Kullip."

Unexpectedly, Captain Morat's face hardened. "Mr. Roddick? What does he look like?"

"Hm... he's tall and scary. His nose is pointed, but a little crooked."

Captain Morat smirked. "I once had a subordinate who was sometimes called Roddick. That's not his real name. He escaped from the war. Your information is interesting. Go on with your story, Piri."

"They then sold the children to buyers."

"It was their new parents who took them!" Mrs. Kullip argued. "I actually help them so they can have a better life!"

Captain Morat nodded. "Yeah, Piri, I don't think there's anything wrong with that."

"Mrs. Kullip doesn't want to help us, she only cares about money!" Piri shouted without fear.

The children are now nodding in agreement.

But they still couldn't influence Captain Morat. The man's face didn't change, still cold.

Suddenly Yara said, "Captain, do you have children?"

Piri was stunned. He couldn't think of it that way, because he didn't understand the relationship between parents and their children. However, Yara understood it further, and she used her knowledge to influence Captain Morat.

The tall man was silent for a moment, before replying, "I have a daughter in my house. She's your age, I think."

"What if a stranger took her, then brought her to this place?" Yara asked.

"She... must be sad."

"And what about you?"

"Angry, of course," Captain Morat replied.

Yara nodded. "So you're still going to keep us here?"

Captain Morat looked at Yara without blinking. It seemed the girl's last question made the captain hesitate.

Piri immediately took the opportunity and said, "We will go."

He then looked at the other children, who still looked doubtful, and exclaimed, "I'm going! Do you want to come with me?"

Time to Part

The children looked at each other. At first, they were still hesitant.

But Poffel and Kassen then replied, “Yes, we’re coming!”

The others followed them. “We are going too!”

They cheered, suddenly all the children were excited again.

“We’re leaving now!” Piri exclaimed without thinking.

He had learned about this. For him, once all the spirit has been released, then there is no need to hold back, not to be hampered and muffled again, and there is no need to be afraid of anyone anymore. Together, they can face any difficulties.

He walked past Mrs. Kullip, Mr. Dullum, and Aunt Mollen, who gaped in surprise, toward the wide-open gate.

Mrs. Kullip screamed in anger. “Arrest him!”

Aunt Mollen was silent, as if in defiance, but Mr. Dullum hurried to obey orders. He ran and caught Piri.

Piri struggled with all his might.

“Hey!!” Ruffio tugged on Mr. Dullum’s arm.

The man shook it with all his might, sending Ruffio flying.

Tero's turn to advance, followed by Poffel, Kassen, Geza, Horun, and finally all the children. They swarmed Mr. Dullum, forced him to let go of Piri, then dropped his tall thin body to the ground.

Mrs. Kullip screamed angrily.

"Stop it!" Captain Morat's voice boomed. "Everyone!"

Two soldiers dismounted and ran to the scene of the commotion and separated the children from Mr. Dullum.

"I'm in charge here!" the captain shouted again. He looked annoyed at everyone. "Alright, that's it! These kids can go."

"Captain!" Mrs. Kullip screamed.

"Shut up! Mrs. Kullip, this is my warning. My decision. These kids can go. As compensation, I will give you money."

"But I spent a lot of money, Captain!" Mrs. Kullip cried. "Would you like to pay me back all my money?"

"My money probably won't be much," Captain Morat replied coldly. "So if you don't like it, go ahead if you don't want to accept it."

Mrs. Kullip scowled, but no longer argued.

"The problem is finished!" Captain Morat said. "We're resting tonight, and I want no more fuss. Tomorrow my soldiers and I will return to Maruvat. Mrs. Kullip, tomorrow you come with me, and you will get all your money in Maruvat. Ruffio, you come too, and we'll see where it goes. For the other kids, starting tomorrow, you can go anywhere. You are free."

Piri, Yara, and Tero looked at each other, smiling, half in disbelief.

This stressful night was over and tomorrow they can head back to the Bowl World!

That night, they were all finally able to sleep.

The next morning, the children woke up early.

Everyone had gathered, including Boland and Golick, whom the soldiers had found last night. The two guards looked angry at what had happened, but couldn't do anything about it. Captain Morat made sure that there was not the slightest commotion in that place.

Ruffio was already preparing to leave with the troop of soldiers, and he said goodbye to the children. He hugged his brother once more and asked, "You're going to Suidon?"

Poffel nodded. "I will accompany Kaia. Some of the other children will also come with us. They are happy to be together. We can protect each other. We'll be fine."

"I thought you wanted to come to the Bowl World." Yara smiled at Kaia.

"I would, but maybe next time," Kaia replied. "One day we will meet again, right?"

"Of course." Yara nodded confidently. "After returning to the Bowl World, I might as well leave again and then go to your country. I enjoy traveling." He grimaced at Piri. "As long as nothing terrible happens while we're gone."

"What about you?" Kassen asked Ruffio. "What is your plan?"

Ruffio shrugged. "I have more work to do, but I don't care. I'm calm now, knowing my brother is here and okay."

"Take care of yourself," Piri said.

"You too. Pleased to meet you, Piri. All of you. I'm sure we'll meet again later."

"Children!" Captain Morat called out. "I'm going with my troops, but you don't have to worry. Two of my soldiers will take you all the way to Jampa. After that, it's up to you. Take care of yourself and don't make trouble. Goodbye."

Captain Morat led his troops away. Ruffio, Mrs. Kullip, and

Aunt Mollen went with them, sitting on horseback behind the soldiers. Meanwhile, Mr. Dullum, Boland, and Golick stayed behind.

Maybe the three were ordered by Mrs. Kullip to guard this place, Piri thought. But he still didn't understand. Why do they have to keep guarding this burnt-out house? What else could they do here?

Piri looked at the three people before leaving with the other children. Mr. Dullum stared at him unblinkingly, as if Piri, apart from Ruffio, were the most to blame for the misfortune that had befallen him and Mrs. Kullip. Piri didn't care. What happened to those people was appropriate because they had hurt children.

The children walked happily. Talking to each other, laughing. Even though only some of them have a clear goal of where to go, at least they have been released from the entanglement of the Red House.

By noon, they came to a fork. To the right is the main road leading to Maruvat, the capital of the Mallava Kingdom, while to the left will cross the prairie to Jampa. From Jampa, they can go to other countries.

All the children voted to the left, none wanted to go to the capital.

After resting and eating, they resumed walking, arriving at Jampa in the late afternoon. The soldiers escorting them rented a large room at the inn for the children to stay in for one night. The soldiers will guard outside.

The exhausted children fell asleep immediately. In the room's corner, Piri, Yara, and Tero were lying side by side on the floor, which was covered with a thick cloth. Beside them was a window, where they could gaze up at the dark sky, which they loved so much.

Yara, who was lying in the middle, said, "Piri, do you remember this place?"

Piri mumbled, half asleep. "This village? Mr. Jenasin said this is a kind of stopover for people who come and go to various places."

"No," Yara said. "I mean, this Jampa used to be where we met Mr. Roddick."

Piri yawned widely. "Yeah, so what?"

"Could it be that the two of them are now in this place as well?"

"They? Here? Now?" Tero made a sound, even though Piri thought the boy was asleep.

"That's possible, right?" Yara said.

"Why are they here?" Tero asked.

"To take us, or the other children."

"Ah, your thoughts are getting weird again," Tero said.

"There are two soldiers guarding us, Yara," Piri replied. "Mr. Roddick wouldn't dare do anything like that. What does he want anyway? No one will ever be able to pay him again."

"What if Mrs. Kullip doesn't give up," Yara said, "and comes back to rebuild her house?"

"Doesn't she regret it after her house caught fire?" Tero replied in a loud voice, which the other children might have heard if they hadn't fallen asleep.

Yara was silent, so was Piri.

"Let someone burn their house down again one day." Tero grimaced.

"Burning house is a bad thing," Yara said. "People can get hurt. Poffel almost got hurt. You too, Piri. More than hurt. That shouldn't happen again."

"Of course," Piri and Tero answered at the same time.

But it was not clear who started it. Suddenly, the three

laughed.

“But yes, they deserve a lesson,” Yara said.

They laughed again.

Then silence.

“Hopefully nothing happens to us tomorrow, and so on,” Piri said.

“I know. That was just my bad thought.”

“It’s not bad, but you don’t have to think about it now. Go to sleep, Yara.”

“Good night, Piri. Good night, Tero.”

The three of them fell asleep soon after.

After one night, maybe those worries will go away.

Inside the Cave

The next day, after waking up, eating, and preparing to part with the other children, it turned out that Yara had not forgotten her worries last night.

On one occasion after coming out of the room, she said to all the children, “You still have to watch out for someone like Mr. Roddick when he comes near you. After this, the soldiers will not guard you anymore.”

Kassen nodded. “Don’t worry, we can protect ourselves.”

“Yes,” Poffel, who was standing beside Kaia, said. “If we can continue to be together, Mr. Roddick won’t dare interfere.”

“It’s you, the ones to be careful,” Kassen said. “There are only three of you.”

“The river and the mouth of the cave are not far away,” Yara said. “It won’t be long, so nothing should happen to us.”

“Are you sure you can find your way home?” Poffel asked.

Yara nodded. “Yes.”

“It must be dark in the cave,” Kassen said.

“We can get through it,” Piri replied, though he wouldn’t explain why he was sure. He had a red stone that could light

up a cave in his pocket, but apart from him, Yara and Tero, so far only Ruffio knew about the thing, and Piri didn't mean to make it known to more people. "It will be a long journey, so we brought quite a lot of bread. But of course, we must be careful."

"Let's pray that we're all safe," Kassen said.

They all prayed, except for the three children from the Bowl World, who did not yet understand what prayer was and to whom they should pray. After that, they separated.

Piri, Yara, and Tero made their way through the meadow, then through the forest, which they had once passed in the dark. This time, they said little and were more alert because they didn't want to meet Mr. Jenasin, whose house was nearby. Every time they hear a suspicious sound, they hide behind trees or thickets.

Then they heard a rustling sound. The children hid behind the bushes and peeked. Their hearts were pounding. They hoped it wasn't Mr. Jenasin.

The rustling sound was getting closer. Something poked out from behind the bushes. The head of an animal with gray-white fur. Animals that now seem to smile at them.

"White fox!" Piri exclaimed excitedly.

The fox barked and wagged its thick tail.

Piri patted his head. "We meet again! As expected, he's always watching over us. Guarding us!"

"Maybe you can ask why he left us when we were about to go to the Red House," Yara said.

"Yeah, why did you leave us?" Piri asked the fox.

The fox barked, then looked down, as if embarrassed.

"Maybe he's afraid of something," Yara said.

"Afraid?" Tero frowned.

"Do you remember, after he left, what then appeared?"

Piri remembered. "Crow?"

Yara nodded. "This fox is afraid of the crow."

"Could the crow bite him?" Tero asked.

"No. He knew the crow was Captain Morat's pet. As Ruffio said, the red stone probably once belonged to the Red Witch. But the White Fox wants us to hold it. He didn't like them, and he was afraid of them at the same time. That's why he ran away as soon as the crow came."

Piri was stunned. "I didn't think that far..."

The white fox barked.

"He seems to agree," Piri grinned.

"Now what?" Tero asked. "He wants to take us to the cave?"

"Of course," Piri said confidently. "Is that right, fox? Do you want to take us to the cave? By taking your shortcut?"

The fox barked. Then he turned and sprinted over the bush deeper into the woods, away from the path. Piri, Yara and Tero followed.

Fortunately, their journey turned out to be safe. In the afternoon, they arrived at the river bank. They were standing beside a teropiriyaraint tree whose fruit used to make them sleep. Across the river, at the foot of the towering mountains, was a dark hole through which water flowed out. The three children were relieved.

"We'll be home soon!" Piri cried.

"Let's rest here," Tero said.

"No," Yara said. "We'd better hurry into the cave and continue down the river. Let's just rest inside."

"Right," Piri agreed. "Mr. Jenasin can find us in this place."

"Alright." Without hesitation, Tero jumped into the river and swam towards the mouth of the cave. Yara and Piri were about to follow, but the fox barked beside them.

Piri looked at him. "You're not coming with us?"

The white fox was silent.

“He’s not coming,” Yara answered.

“He seems sad that he’s going to part with us,” Piri said, patting the white fox’s head.

“I’m sad too.”

“Yes. He has helped us a lot.”

“But maybe we’ll see him again later,” Yara said. “As with the other children, we might see them again!”

“That’s right. Cheer up!” Piri smiled widely.

The white fox barked, now more cheerful.

“See you, fox.”

Piri and Yara threw themselves into the river, then swam after Tero. Tero waved at the white fox, then entered the dark cave.

Piri takes out a stone from the bag. Within the cave, the rock emitted red light in all directions. Excitedly, the children walked on the shallow riverbed and continued to go inside.

They had walked far enough that they didn’t know if it was already night or not. After a while, their stomachs were hungry and their bodies were tired, so the children then stopped. They removed their wet clothes so that their bodies were not cold.

On the boulder, the three of them rested and ate some bread, and finally fell asleep.

When they woke up, they continued their journey. They continued down the river. Long after that, on their left, they saw another cave opening. It was where they had come out of the cave passage where the green-eyed creature lived.

Tero said doubtfully, “Are you sure, Piri, that you want to continue down the river? Wouldn’t it be better to just enter that cave passage so we can return to the cavity we fell into?”

“We already know we can’t get out of that cavity,” Yara replied.

“That’s right, don’t go there again.” Piri nodded. “But actually I’m glad to see that green-eyed guy again.”

“Let’s not waste time,” Yara said.

The three of them continued their journey. So far, the river was still shallow enough so there was no problem. After being hungry and tired, they then rested again on a large rock. Yara and Tero lay down, letting themselves fall asleep. Piri wanted to sleep soundly like them, but he couldn’t, even though he had taken off his wet clothes.

Fortunately, it was his consciousness that helped him. In a state of half-sleep, he heard splashing water from the direction of the river they had previously passed.

At first, he thought it was the sound of fish jumping, but his feelings told him otherwise. There were other people in the cave, apart from the three of them.

Piri woke up. The first thing that popped into his mind was the green creature coming toward them, and so he grabbed a stone from his pocket, directing it towards the river they had passed. A red light flashed, dazzling the eyes. There was a muffled scream.

Piri saw, still quite far from them, a tall man standing in the middle of the river. He gasped when he realized who it was.

“Yara! Tero! Wake up! Mr. Roddick is after us!”

The Return of Mr. Roddick

Yara and Tero immediately woke up when they heard Piri's scream. They screamed in panic as well. Tero rolled off the rock and fell into the river.

They ran quickly, trying not to feel the sharp stones that pierced their feet at the bottom of the river, nor to care about their clothes that were still drying on the rocks.

Piri pointed his red stone forward to light the way. At first, he panicked, but suddenly he thought of something. If only they could find a small hole they could go into, which was small enough that Mr. Roddick could not come in, perhaps they would be safe for the time being.

Piri searched around, and finally found such a hole not far to the right, on the rocks. Piri preceded Tero and Yara, climbing up there. He looked. It seemed to be some kind of smaller cave passage.

"Come on, get up here!" he exclaimed.

Yara and Tero followed up. Piri slid into the narrow hole, rolled over there, then followed by Yara.

"Adults can't come here. Come on, Tero!" Piri said.

“What hole is that?” Tero asked.

“A cave passage, probably leading to somewhere. Don’t ask! Just hurry up!”

“Watch out, Tero!” Yara said. “Mr. Roddick is behind you! He-”

“Kids! Where are you going to run to?”

Piri’s blood seemed to freeze when he heard that voice. Mr. Roddick was running so fast on the river. With one leap, the tall man reached behind Tero, who was climbing. Mr. Roddick grabbed Tero by the ankles and pulled him so that the boy’s body plunged into the river.

Yara screamed, “Tero!”

Mr. Roddick pulled Tero out of the river, then looked up at Piri and Yara with a sinister grin. “Do you really think you can run from me?”

“Please, don’t hurt Tero,” Piri begged.

“I won’t hurt him, as long as you all obey me! Come out of that hole and follow me out of the cave.”

“No!” Tero exclaimed. “Piri, Yara, you two just go on. I am alright.”

“Why do you keep chasing us?” Yara asked fearfully.

“Ask Mrs. Kullip.” Mr. Roddick laughed. “Maybe she doesn’t want to lose her money yet. Maybe it’s just a grudge. I met Mr. Dullum yesterday, in that charred house, and he mentioned Piri’s name. You, brat, seem to have made them furious. He also mentioned Yara, the most beautiful of all, who seemed to be the most expensive. So that’s it. He told me to look for you, and if possible, look for the other kids later. It wasn’t hard for me to find you. Do you think you can fool me?”

“You are all bad people!” Yara shouted, her voice shaking.

“Look, it wasn’t me who wanted you. It’s Mrs. Kullip. I want

something else. I want that red stone in your hand.”

Piri was stunned as he gripped the stone tightly. “Why ...?”

“That’s something that kids shouldn’t have.” Mr. Roddick smirked. “Come out now and let me carry the stone.”

The man waited, but Piri still stayed in his hole with Yara. He looked back, thinking whether he should come down and give himself up or leave. This passage seems to lead somewhere. It might come out at the part of the river that is closer to the Bowl World. But maybe not.

After all, there was no way he could just let Tero be taken away by Mr. Roddick.

“Hurry!” Mr. Roddick shouted impatiently. He raised his right hand while his left hand gripped Tero’s collar. “Or I’ll hit your friend!”

“No! Don’t do that!” Yara screamed.

The girl turned her head, looking at Piri. “What should we do?”

“Alright!” finally Piri answered. “We’re out!”

He slipped through the hole and waited on a large rock. After Yara came out and sat beside him, the two of them descended into the river.

“Good.” Mr. Roddick towered over the three children. “Give me the stone.”

Piri reached into his trouser pocket, took out his red stone.

Mr. Roddick took it. He looked at the stone in his hand with an excited face. “There’s something in this rock, but... you don’t need to know.”

He directed the stone light forward, towards the mouth of the cave at the end, then pushed Piri and his two friends to walk. “Master Dullum awaits you.”

The children walked languidly. Desperate, angry, sad, afraid;

all the feelings are mixed. Even though they had arrived at the river and were sure they would be home soon, it turned out that now everything had failed.

Piri didn't know what else would happen, and he didn't know if he would ever have the chance to return to the Bowl World.

Mr. Roddick did not let them rest and continued to force them to walk. But the man was still kind enough to let the children pick up and put on the clothes they had left by the river.

The three children stared at each other when next to them was the mouth of the cave that led into the cavity where the star butterfly lived.

It occurred to Piri's mind, what if they just run there? The tall Mr. Roddick couldn't get through the passages in the cave. But Piri understood, they couldn't walk in the cave without the help of the red stone's light which is now in the hands of Mr. Roddick. In the end, they kept going.

Then, something happened.

A dark figure flashed from behind the cave walls, escaping the beam of red stone's light. Piri saw it, but the others didn't.

The figure jumped off the rock, then ambushed Mr. Roddick. The green-eyed man! He had overcome its fear of red stone in order to help Piri and his friends.

Mr. Roddick roared in pain as the caveman bit his neck. The red stone in his hand fell into the river. But he was a strong man. He bent down and then slammed the green creature's body into the water. Piri, who had intended to come closer to dive and pick up a red stone, abandoned his intention.

Mr. Roddick glared at him, so Piri backed away.

"Piri, where are we running to?" Yara whispered.

They should have run toward the river behind Mr. Roddick's back if they wanted to go home, but they certainly couldn't get

past the man. Besides, they couldn't get in there without the red stone. Apart from being dark, they also didn't know the way. The only option was to turn towards the river, which would lead them back to Mallava.

But will they be able to escape the pursuit of Mr. Roddick?

The green creature again attacked Mr. Roddick. This time, the attack was stronger. The two struggled and fell into the river, fighting there.

"Run!" Piri immediately shouted.

The children ran down the river to the cave mouth, which would take them back to the land of Mallava. Thanks to the light of the red stone that was still sinking at the bottom of the river, they could see ahead, but as they went further, the children could no longer see anything. But they knew that if they kept running while holding on to the rocks in the cave wall, they would come out.

They ran in the dark as fast as they could. The red stone behind them now only looked like a point of light. That means the two men are still fighting over there.

Another light appeared ahead. The children sped up their run and finally arrived at the cave mouth.

Out of breath, Piri and his two friends smiled in relief. They failed to return to their home, but at least escaped Mr. Roddick for the time being.

Strong Wind

The children swam fast in the river until they reached the bank, then quickly climbed up.

Piri sat for a moment, catching his breath while observing the cave mouth on the other side of the river. “We have to keep running... as far as possible.”

“Where to?” Yara asked.

“To Jampa, perhaps, then to Kalani. Following Kassen and the others.”

“Not returning to our world?” Tero grimaced sadly.

“We will have another chance.”

Yara finally nodded. “I agree.”

“But I don’t.” Another voice coming from behind startled the three children.

They turned. A large man stood with his hands on his hips. Mr. Jenasin.

The three children screamed and prepared to run away. Mr. Jenasin’s hands quickly caught Tero and Piri. Seeing the two caught, Yara couldn’t help but tremble.

“Now then, run no more, children.” Mr. Jenasin laughed

evilly. "Aren't you tired? You've been running too much."

At first, Piri kept trying to rebel, but then he stopped. Tired? Yes, maybe Mr. Jenasin was right. They were already exhausted and had to give up in the end.

Piri stopped struggling, and Tero followed.

"That's better. Now let's wait for Mr. Roddick," Mr. Jenasin said. "What was he doing in there? Was he fooled by you?"

The children did not answer. Piri didn't want to say that in there Mr. Roddick was fighting with a man who lived in a cave. He just waited anxiously, hoping that the green-eyed creature could defeat Mr. Roddick.

A red light appeared from inside the cave, then dimmed and disappeared completely as soon as it got outside. Piri's hopes did not come true.

Mr. Roddick appeared out of breath. He had hidden the stone in his pocket. He looked at the three children who were in Mr. Jenasin's arms, then swam across the river.

"Wasting your time?" Mr. Jenasin quipped as soon as Mr. Roddick reached the shore.

"Shut up!" Mr. Roddick replied. "Someone attacked me there. But he won't bother us anymore." He grinned viciously at the three children.

"It's almost noon," Mr. Jenasin said. "If we stay here too long, we won't be able to meet your payer until late in the evening."

"I know! We're going to your house now."

Piri glanced. Yara and Tero were tired and demoralized. He sighed.

Can they really do nothing now? It seemed so. Piri realized they were still too small and weak to face the cunning and strength of adults in this foreign world.

After climbing one hill, they arrived at Mr. Jenasin's house.

Beside the wooden house was attached Mr. Roddick's carriage. His horse neighed when he saw them coming.

Mr. Roddick took a roll of rope from his cart, which he would use to tie the hands of the three children. Yara cried when she saw the rope.

Suddenly Mr. Roddick was stunned. He seemed to hear something and twisted to look at the row of trees. He ran, trying to reach Yara, who was standing next to Mr. Jenasin.

Piri heard a gurgling sound.

"Stop where you are, Hooter!"

Captain Morat came out from behind the wall of the house, accompanied by two soldiers. "Or you'll immediately feel an arrow pierce your heart."

Mr. Roddick froze. Several soldiers appeared from behind the trees. Mr. Jenasin panicked and released Piri and Tero. But the children were still confused.

The soldiers quickly approached and captured Mr. Roddick and Mr. Jenasin. Mr. Roddick looked at Captain Morat with hatred.

The captain laughed. "There's one thing I don't understand, Hooter." Apparently, that was his nickname for Mr. Roddick. "You dare to wander around Mallava when you are already the most wanted criminal here?"

"I'm not a criminal! I'm just one of many people who don't like you. Mallava is my land. I have the right to live here!"

"No. You stay because only here you can earn money from your dirty work! You're a criminal. Used to be a dissident and now kidnap children. Once a criminal, always a criminal."

"I wouldn't disobey you if it was a righteous and not stupid order!"

"Captain," a soldier who had just searched Mr. Roddick's body

said. "We found something."

He handed the red stone to Captain Morat.

The captain was stunned. "Ah, Hooter, what do you have here?"

"I took it from these kids!" Mr. Roddick said while looking at Piri. His eyes gleamed as if he had just had his chance to escape. "Don't you understand? I captured these children precisely to help the Kingdom, to help you! You should be grateful!"

"What other nonsense are you talking about?"

"These children are from the land of Frauli!"

Captain Morat looked at the three children.

"This stone is theirs," Mr. Roddick continued. "Where did they get it if not from the country of Frauli?"

"No! We found it in the cave!" Piri argued.

"Why are they in the cave? You can ask them, Morat. There must be a way through there, leading somewhere. I believe that is where the Frauli people have been hiding for years!"

"We are from the Bowl World! Not Frauli!" Tero exclaimed.

Piri was silent. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he felt that maybe the Bowl World was a place that had a different meaning than he had known all along. Could it be that there used to be a country called Frauli?

"You're just bragging, Hooter," Captain Morat looked at Piri, Yara, and Tero intently. "But the possibility exists. Is what this guy said true, children?"

"We are from the Bowl World." Piri continued to argue. "We don't know what Frauli is. And we found the stone in the cave."

Captain Morat stared at the mouth of the cave on the other side of the river. "My soldiers will check. Maybe there really is something there. Meanwhile, the three of you come with me to the capital. The Red Witch can tell if you really are from Frauli

or not.”

He smiled, which to the children now looked so terrible.

Meet the Red Witch? That seemed like something really bad!

Captain Morat had two of his soldiers inspect the cave with torches. After that, their group left. Mr. Roddick and Mr. Jenasin were taken as captives with their hands tied, while Piri, Yara, and Tero were not. However, Piri felt, hearing what might have happened in the capital, the three of them were actually the same as captives.

The three children rode horses with one soldier each, through the dense forest.

On the way, Piri then asked, “What does the Red Witch want with us?”

Captain Morat, who was riding beside him, replied, “Maybe just asking.”

“I heard she’s a bad person. You also used to say you didn’t like what she was doing... to the children. What did she actually do?”

Captain Morat was silent. That made Piri even more scared.

He turned away, looking far to the left. They crossed the meadow, and far up the hill, something was watching their party. Piri’s breath caught when he recognized the figure.

The white fox!

The animal howled.

Maybe he just wanted to say goodbye one more time. Piri slumped down.

But... what is this? A strong wind blew across the meadow.

Piri closed his eyes long enough, because the wind had not stopped. The horses neighed and jumped up and down. The soldier’s cry was heard.

Then a long, deafening shriek was heard.

STRONG WIND

Piri covered his ears with both hands.
Suddenly he felt his body being thrown backward.
Someone screamed in panic.
“Griffayr!”

Giant Birds

Terrified, Piri opened his eyes. The world seemed to spin as he soared high. Before he could realize what was happening, something grabbed him and pulled him up. The soldiers and their horses were now visible far below.

A gigantic flash of wings appeared beside Piri. Piri looked up and was immediately shocked. He was in the clutches of a giant greenish-brown bird.

It was the biggest and most terrifying animal he had ever seen. This was the worst of the worst, something he had never imagined. Now he and his friends will become bird food!

“Piri!” Yara screamed.

Piri turned. The same bird had taken the girl. The left claw carried Piri and the right claw carried Yara. And not only them. Not far ahead, another bird flew, and his right claw carried Tero. They all soared higher and higher, leaving Captain Morat’s army flying towards the slopes of the mountains.

Yara and Piri were crying in fear while Tero was screaming.

The sky turned dark so fast. Black clouds overshadow the meadow. A yellow light flashed in the sky, followed by a loud

crashing sound from within the dark clouds. A strong wind blew, and so much water seemed to be poured from the sky.

Piri thought it must be Captain Morat who made the sky change. As Mrs. Kullip said, the captain was a rain summoner. He used to put out the fire in the Red House, and now he summoned the rain to stop these giant birds.

The two giant birds flew left and right, avoiding the pouring rain and the growing wind.

Piri closed his eyes once again. His body was soaking wet, and he was shivering with cold. His stomach was queasy and his head was dizzy. He couldn't take it anymore. Not long after, his consciousness vanished.

When Piri woke up, the sky was already dark. The cold air hit him, but it didn't feel as fierce as when he was carried by the giant bird.

Piri remembered, and since he had returned to the ground, he thought Captain Morat had saved him. But his fear came when he saw a giant bird perched on the edge of the cliff in front of him. The bird stared. Its eyes round and dark.

Horrified at its huge beak, which could surely cut through a child's body with a single bite, Piri inched backward. His back hit someone behind him. He turned. It looked like Tero and Yara had woken up first and were now cowering in fear under the boulders.

"Where... where are we?" Piri asked.

"Over the mountains," Tero answered.

"Captain Morat didn't save us?"

"No," Yara replied.

Piri gulped, "That bird... hasn't eaten us yet?"

Tero and Yara did not answer.

“That means we still have a chance,” Piri said. “We can still run.”

“One bird has left, but this one, he’s there watching us,” Tero said. “He never let his guard down, unlike humans.”

“If he wanted to eat us, he could have done it earlier,” Yara muttered.

Piri was stunned. Yes, that makes sense.

Or maybe the bird is waiting for feeding time?

The bird spread its wings while screeching. The children squirmed in fear.

It turned out that the bird did not approach them. His both legs bounced. His pair of wings flapped, making waves of wind roll up to the children’s place under a large rock. In an instant, he disappeared behind the cliff. The children were relieved.

“He left us?” Tero asked doubtfully.

“Perhaps.” Slowly Piri stepped out.

“Where are you going?” Yara asked.

“To see where we are.”

“Maybe the bird is still here! If he sees you out, he’ll be furious!”

Piri looked back up at the cliff, then shook his head. “He is not here. Come on.”

“But why did he leave?” Tero stood up but still hesitated.

“Maybe... he doesn’t want us to continue to be scared.”

“You mean he wants us to walk away from here?” Yara asked.

“Probably. Look at that.” Piri pointed to the path on the left side of the cliff, behind the rock where they had taken shelter.

In the dim light of the stars in the sky, ahead of them was a path that was cobbled together, but quite flat, like man-made.

“Maybe he wants us to go that road,” Piri continued. “He left,

so we wouldn't be afraid to get up and go that way."

"You think so?" Tero still had doubts. "So that bird isn't evil?"

Piri grimaced, covering his nervousness. "There's no harm in trying."

"Walking at this time of night? Isn't it dangerous?" Tero asked.

"Would you like to wait until tomorrow, Tero?"

Tero and Yara shook their heads.

The two of them followed Piri down the path.

But they had to be careful because on the left side was a chasm that seemed so dark. In addition, a chilly wind also blew across the cliff walls, making them shiver.

After a while, Piri turned around and saw a piece of clearing hidden behind a cliff. There was a small building with stone walls and wooden doors, resembling a house but without windows. The three children looked at each other, confused and also doubtful.

"If it's a house, it looks empty," Yara said. "Who would want to live in such a cold and lonely place?"

"We're going in?" Tero convinced himself.

"We must," Piri said. "I don't want to be here all night."

He stepped over to the door and looked up. He saw a pair of doors that were twice the height of the door in the Red House. Piri grabbed the handle and held his breath, then pushed. Turned out the door wasn't locked. A creaking sound was heard as he opened the door.

The room inside the building was not as dark as he had imagined. Green lights flashed in some corners, not from candle flames or torches, but from stones that seemed to be planted in the walls. The light was enough to make the entire house visible,

even if only dim.

The house was empty. There were no chairs or tables. The floor was made of long logs that were neatly glued together, and the room was circular, following the curved shape of the walls of the house. A stone fireplace appeared across the room. Above it was a hole to let out the smoke.

Piri entered, followed by Tero and Yara. Piri approached the fireplace. If only he had fire stone, he could burn the ebony piled up there to warm the room.

“Delightful house.” Tero smiled broadly.

“So the birds are good, huh?” Yara guessed. “They saved us from the army, then brought us here?”

“To have a rest.” Piri grinned, then sat down and straightened himself on the oddly warm wooden floor.

Yara and Tero laughed happily, then lay down, too.

“We’re safe,” Tero muttered as he looked up at the conical roof of the house.

Piri and Yara nodded in agreement.

They didn’t know which side of the mountainside they were on, and so they didn’t know what to do next. But the important thing is that they can sleep tonight and think about everything tomorrow. Their bodies pressed together, warming each other.

They hoped to fall asleep soon, replacing the sleep that was only been fragmentary the previous night.

Sound of Fire

Unfortunately, the children's wish to sleep until morning was not granted. Once again, something happened. When the children were still half asleep, the wind rustled as if calling to them. Piri woke up and thought, how could the wind call them? And the wind should be out there, not indoors.

Slowly he got up, then looked left and right to find out where the wind noise was coming from. Yara and Tero also woke up and seemed disturbed as well.

The children huddled together nervously again.

Flames burst out in the fireplace and burned the ebony, then danced there. The three children held their breath.

The voice came again, this time clearer.

It's also clearer where it came from. From the flame.

"Don't be afraid, children." A small chuckle followed.

Then more words. "Yes, you are looking in the right direction. I'm here in this fire. Your presence warms the room, and it makes me appear if you want to know."

The voice was deep, but friendly.

The fear in the hearts of the children faded.

“Who... what are you?” Piri asked.

“I used to be a human, just like you. My name is Ardin. I’m the one who used to be called the Protector.”

“Protector? Who are you protecting?” Tero asked.

“Many people. Including the three of you.”

“Us?” Piri asked confusedly.

“Oh, you mean protecting us from those bad people?” Yara said. “Mr. Jenasin, Mr. Roddick, and the others? So it was you who saved us and brought us here?”

“Thank you!” Piri said.

“Yes. Thank you!” Yara and Tero nodded.

The voice as fire laughed again.

“How did you do that?” Yara asked.

The three children now drew near to the fireplace and spoke to the fire, which swayed in the slight breeze as if the creature were their close friend.

“Did you order the birds?” Yara asked again.

“Well, you three are in danger, so I ask the birds for help. I didn’t order them to. They are not mine. They are divine beings belonging to the Goddess of Wind.”

“Goddess of Wind? Who’s she? What are those birds? Can you see far from here?”

The children scrambled to ask. There were so many questions that arose in their minds. Piri suddenly remembered Grandpa, who used to answer their questions patiently by the river in the World of Bowls.

“I heard what happened from my world.”

Unclear answer. The children were not satisfied and waited.

Instead of explaining, after a while, Ardin said something else. “Children, don’t you want to ask why I and the birds are helping

you?”

“Because of who we are? Who are we?” Yara asked back.

“You are children from the land of Frauli.”

The children froze, staring at each other.

“So what they say is true?” Piri asked.

“Who are they?” the creature of fire asked back.

“Those bad people!” the children answered together.

“Well, I can tell you everything from the start. Do you enjoy listening to fairy tales?”

“Of course!” Tero exclaimed. “Grandpa often told stories about plants or the kamio birds.”

“I’ll tell you about something more interesting. About who you are, which, I’m sure, your grandpa has never told you.”

Piri and his friends looked at each other and beamed.

For sure, this will be an interesting story! They will finally find out who they really are!

Ardin opened the story. “Once upon a time, in the north of Mallava, there was a country called Frauli. It was a prosperous and beautiful country. Among other countries like Kalani and Suidon, Frauli is the most powerful as well.”

“Is Maderut near them too?” Piri asked impatiently.

“Maderut? Maderut is very far away. Why did you ask?”

“Mr. Dullum and Aunt Mollen said we were from there.”

“No, you’re not from there.”

“Oh.” The three children nodded.

“Well, for a long time, these countries have been enemies of the Mallava Kingdom. They always fought, but never won. Until finally, a few years ago, the Red Witch took power in Mallava, then she gathered the strength to invade other countries around Mallava.”

“She’s the meanest person, right?” Yara asked.

“Most people say so, but of course, she doesn’t feel that way. Mallava troops attack. At first, the other countries could hold out with the Frauli forces on the front line. But in the end, Frauli gave up. The land was invaded by the Mallava army and was destroyed. After that sad day, one by one, the other countries were subdued, until finally on this continent now there was only one ruler, the Red Witch.”

“But before that happened, the knights of Frauli, before they were destroyed, asked me for help. I am close to the old king of Mallava. After he became seriously ill, then died, the Red Witch came to power. I refused to submit to that mage and went as far away from Maruvat as I could. Finally, I arrived at these mountains. I built this house, helped by my brother Obain and my loyal servant Haim.”

“I intended to stay here for the rest of my life, but a Frauli knight knew of my existence. He came and begged me, so that his sons and daughters, as well as the children of the other knights, could have protection from me. He didn’t want the children to die with them in Frauli. The knight only wanted them to live so that later they could avenge the death of their parents.”

“I respect his wishes, but I can’t possibly fight the Red Witch and her troops and protect the children alone. Even so, I said, maybe the Goddess of Wind can help me. The Goddess is my lover, so maybe she will listen to my request. So I spoke to her, through wind and fire. At first, she was reluctant to help, but I told her this wasn’t about war, it was about humanity.”

“She agreed. She finally agreed to take all the children to his country, a land where only the two of us knew, where we used to meet and spend time together. On one condition, I can’t teach revenge to those kids. What has happened in the war is past, and

there can be no more retaliation in the future.”

“The Goddess of Wind summoned her two griffayrs, the pair of giant eagles that brought you here earlier. With those two animals, I, the knight, and my servant Haim went to Frauli. But earlier my brother Obain gave me a blue round stone and said that a magician from Kalani gave it to him and it could protect me in times of crisis.”

“My brother showed me how the stone gave off a blue dazzling light which, if it aimed at a specific target, could burn the target. That’s an amazing weapon, one that will definitely help me later, I thought.”

“After a long journey, the knight, Haim, and I arrived at Frauli. The attack of the Mallava army, led by the Red Witch, almost destroyed the country. I gathered all the children of the knights. There are a hundred of them, and they are still small, many of whom are even babies. None of them are over seven years old, because, in Frauli, seven-year-olds are already fighting alongside their parents.”

“Fighting?” Yara’s eyebrows rose.

“With sharp weapons?” Piri asked.

“Wow! That’s interesting,” Tero said with a big smile.

“It’s not! It was terrible!” Yara said. “You fight against adults, with those weapons, Tero! Aren’t you afraid?”

Answers

The fire laughed at Yara's words.
"Yes, it's terrible for us, but for them, it's not," the fire said.

He continued, "At the top of the tower of Frauli Castle, I made a gate to the land of the Goddess of Wind. I made a circle of fire on the floor. With the help of magic and wind, I sent the children one by one to that faraway place. I sent the baby kids first because it was easier and quicker."

"Unfortunately, I didn't have enough time. By the time I sent the thirty-third child, the Mallava army had reached the top of the tower. I was really surprised. I thought we were safe there, at least until my job was done. Apparently not."

"I couldn't fight because I had exhausted all my strength to send the children. The only hope was the blue stone that Obain had given me. I took the stone out of my shirt and pointed it at the row of Mallava soldiers who had entered the room."

"To my surprise, instead of emitting a blue light that could help me, the stone gave off a red glow, then exploded in my hand."

“My body was torn apart, and just before I died, I cried, seeing dozens of children who died near me from being hit by a huge explosion. I finally understood the stone was actually made by the Red Witch. It was the stone that had informed her of my existence.”

“I was stupid for not realizing it in the first place. My brother Obain is a kind man, but he is too easily fooled, and I was just as stupid. There are no survivors in that place, except for my servant Haim. But he had burns all over his body, and in great agony, he covered the shards of red stone with his clothes and carried it into the gate.”

“Haim was the last one who left. After that, the gate I built in the Frauli tower was destroyed. Haim followed the thirty-three children to the opposite gate. The gate was at the top of a tall tower through the clouds whose walls were black. It’s an ancient building thousands of years old, where the Goddess of Wind usually descends from the clouds to meet me.”

“That’s the Black Tower you’ve known all along. And that place, the land of the Goddess of Wind, is none other than the world you have been living in all this time.”

Ardin stopped talking. The children were silent.

They just found out who they really are, and also the misfortune that happened to their parents. They had nothing more to say. Piri felt his chest tighten, and his eyes were wet.

He turned. Tero seemed to feel the same way. As for Yara, tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Kids,” Ardin’s voice sounded soft. “May I continue my story?”

“Yes...” Piri replied.

“At the top of the tower, Haim begged the Goddess of Wind so that she could heal him from his wounds. But the Wind Goddess

was unwilling to descend from the sky, perhaps too sad, because after I lived in the World of the Dead, I could no longer see her. Haim then showed her the stone he was carrying, saying that the stone not only killed me but also killed many children and that the Goddess of Wind should have been able to prevent that.”

“Hearing that story, the Goddess of Wind was finally willing to help. Her servant came down from the sky and gave Haim a potaroant fruit potion. The potion could heal the wounds on Haim’s body, but on the condition that Haim had to stay on top of the Black Tower forever, because that was the only place where the medicine could counter the effects of magic on his wounds.”

“The servants brought all the children down from the tower and stayed for some time in the valley to care for the children. You three and thirty other kids. Once you were big enough, the servants then returned to the sky. But before leaving, they put a magic stone on the river bank, where you can communicate with Haim.”

“Oh, that Haim, of course, is the one you know as Grandpa.”

The children stared.

But suddenly Tero nodded. “I knew it!”

“You knew it from a long time ago?” Piri asked in disbelief.

“No, I knew it just now!” Tero grimaced.

Piri laughed.

“So Grandpa has been living in the Black Tower all this time?” Yara asked in surprise. “Why didn’t he say anything? Instead, he seems to scare us from getting too close to the tower.”

“Grandpa never scares us,” Piri said. “We’re the ones scaring ourselves.”

“Grandpa was silent when we were afraid of the tower. Also, when we are afraid when we see Yellow Eyes,” Yara replied.

“Haim is just waiting for the right time to tell you everything, later when you are older,” Ardin said. “You also need permission and help from the Goddess of Wind if you want to go to the top of that tower. There are no stairs there. You can’t possibly go up the normal way.”

“Then the Yellow Eyes that often appear at night, are those Grandpa’s eyes watching us?” Tero asked.

“That’s a pair of rays emanating from the fireball at the top of the tower, which Haim usually uses to monitor you and the world around you. To look after you.”

“That’s the magic of the Wind Goddess too?” Yara asked.

“I made the fireball. My gift to the Goddess of Wind. We used to love playing around, painting and coloring the sky with those rays.”

“But why is Grandpa watching us? Is he afraid of us doing something strange and dangerous?” Yara kept asking.

“It’s finally proven, right?” Piri grinned. “We’re doing something strange and dangerous, by climbing the mountains!”

“Well, not only that,” Ardin said from within the snaking fire. “Haim did it to protect you from someone who might be near you.”

“Somebody?”

“Obain, my brother. In the past, upon hearing of the disaster that occurred in Frauli, he rushed away from this house and disappeared. He was sorry, at the same time afraid of getting revenge from the Goddess of Wind who might blame him because the stone he gave me had killed me.”

“Obain’s fear is not wrong, because not long after Haim recovered, he returned to the Goddess of Wind for help, this time to help him find Obain. What Obain didn’t understand was that Haim was actually looking for him not to catch him, but just

to tell him I had forgiven him, and therefore Obain no longer needed to run or hide.”

“The Goddess of Wind sent her pair of griffays to help look for her. The two creatures explored the mountains, but couldn’t find Obain. The Goddess of Wind then asked the God of Life to change the form of the two creatures into a pair of ordinary humans. As humans, they can more easily go to Mallava or other countries, to talk to people and get information. They held the red stone so that later it could be shown to Obain that it was the Red Witch who was behind all this evil.”

Time to Go Home

“**W**as the stone still dangerous, then?” Yara asked.
“Not anymore,” Ardin replied. “Haim and the Goddess of Wind already knew that the red stone had lost its power, and that was precisely what they wanted to show Obain. That after the disaster in Frauli, the stone has become an ordinary stone. However, in the dark, the stone still glows, and has a distinctive shape, which Obain would have recognized.”

“Who else knew that the stone was no longer dangerous?”

“Down there, in the land of Mallava, only the Red Witch knows. Even Captain Morat doesn’t know about this.”

“Then those two griffays. What did they do?”

“In human form, they searched all over the country until they finally arrived at Jampa. They accidentally meet Obain. But my brother recognized them. He ran. The two griffays chased until they finally arrived at the foot of this mountain range.”

“Obain entered the cave that had apparently been his hiding place for a long time, and the two griffays chased him inside. The two then showed him the red stone, which could glow in the

dark, but that only scared Obain even more.”

“My brother didn’t give the two creatures a chance to talk. In the cavernous cavity, he made a trap and then knocked down large stones to harm the two creatures. Part of the cave wall collapsed. The two griffayrs were startled and dashed out, while the red stone fell into the cave. The two of them waited outside the cave, waiting for my brother to calm down, then after two days, they entered again.”

“Unfortunately, because of the collapse, the passages were covered in stone. The two of them dug, made new passages, but at one point they finally stopped, unable to go any further. Then they heard something. The voice of someone, who was moaning, crying, screaming, then laughing to himself. I don’t know what happened to my brother once the cave collapsed. Maybe he fell and hurt himself, ruining his memory. Thus, my brother Obain lost his sanity in the cave.”

“The two griffayrs came out of the cave and returned to their original forms as giant birds. They met the Goddess of Wind and Haim at the top of the Black Tower and told them about the whole incident. Everyone was sad to hear that. But... perhaps that is the fate that has been set for all of us. Like it or not, we have to accept it.”

The children stared.

“Fate? What is that?” Piri asked.

Ardin laughed. “You probably won’t understand that yet.”

“Since then, Obain lives in the cave?” Piri asked again.

“That’s right. And you’ve met him twice.”

Piri smiled widely. “That green-eyed creature is your brother?”

“Yes, he is. Turns out, it was you who actually got to meet him.”

“Because the small passages can only be passed by our bodies,” Yara said. “And by Obain, who isn’t much bigger than the rest of the adults either.”

“Until now, he is still terrified of the red stone,” Tero said. “Even though it happened a long time ago, right?”

“Isn’t there anything we can do to help him?” Piri asked. “In the cave, I spoke to him, and I thought he was a good person. He helped us from Mr. Roddick. I promised to deliver fruit to him. If I ever get into the cave again, I’ll ask him out, and stay with me.”

“You’re a good boy, Piri,” Ardin said. “Thank you.”

“But didn’t you say Grandpa was trying to protect us from Obain, by using Yellow Eyes?” Yara said.

“Just in case. For caution. That word might be more appropriate,” Ardin replied. “Haim knows Obain is a good person, but once my brother loses his sanity, we don’t know what he might do if he gets out, so Haim is trying to protect you. The problem was, Haim didn’t know if Obain would come out of the cave, and if he did, he would come out from which side. There were many cave mouths in the mountains surrounding the Bowl World, and no one knew whether the caves were connected or not. So if one night Haim feels something bad, he will light his Yellow Eyes, and search all over the place.”

“Yesterday, Captain Morat sent his soldiers into the cave,” Yara said. “What if they find him?”

“Hopefully not,” Ardin replied. “You’ve been through that cave before. Is the cave easy for adults to pass?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“I remember yesterday Mr. Roddick said he beat Obain in the river,” Piri said worriedly. “Is he alright now?”

“I don’t know,” Ardin replied.

“But you know so many things,” Tero said. “Why don’t you know about this one? Can’t you see it?”

“Kids, I live in the World of the Dead. There isn’t much to see there. What I’m telling you right now is what I heard from Haim, who knows how to talk to me through flames. Also from the spirits who often came to accompany me, and from the Lord of the World of the Dead, who would sometimes tell me stories. I don’t know everything, I just know a lot. So let’s just hope my brother is okay.”

“So we can only wait?” Yara asked, dissatisfied.

“I will wait until whenever needed. But you, children, you have nothing to wait for. You must go home now.”

The children fell silent, staring at the flames in front of them. Ardin’s answer was sounded as firm as an order.

There was crackling of the fire, then silence.

“The three of you have gone through many dangerous events. You have also done many extraordinary things. Each one of you is brave, smart, has a good heart without prejudice, and always wants to help others who are in trouble. You are special children. However, sometimes you shouldn’t need to do more. A time when your abilities are still very limited. Things can get too dangerous if you push yourself. Children, we are all grateful for what you have done. But now, it’s time for you to return home. To your Bowl World.”

“Going home...” Piri said softly. He turned his head, looked at each other with Yara and Tero for a while. “We’re going home now?”

“Sleep well tonight, children. Tomorrow the two griffays will take you over the top of the mountains and down into the valley where you have been living. You can live your normal and pleasant life again. Years later from now, once you’ve grown

up, and when you've learned more things, then you can do dangerous things again if you want to." Ardin chuckled. "Do you understand?"

Piri smiled widely. "We understand."

Yara and Tero nodded. "We do."

"See you later, children."

As soon as Ardin spoke his last sentence, the flames dimmed, then vanished, leaving a thin white smoke floating in the air.

The children lay down on the warm wooden floor. Piri looked up at the ceiling. His mind was filled with all the interesting things that had been told by Ardin.

What an amazing story, he thought, and he was glad they were a part of it. This can be interesting material to share with the other children once they get home.

Tomorrow. Soon.

How fun! He can't wait.

Embracing the Clouds

The next day, the sound of a giant bird awakened Piri from outside the house. He quickly woke Yara and Tero, and together they went out.

The clear blue sky was visible between the rock cliffs. A griffayr perched on the edge of a cliff. As soon as it saw the children, the bird flew away, but not far away, only moving to the plains where the children were brought last night.

Piri, Yara, and Tero walked down the cliff-side path. The deep gorge on the right side is now visible, while the bottom is not because it is covered by rocks protruding from the side of the cliff, but it must be deep.

After circling the cliff, they arrived at their destination. Two griffayrs were waiting. The figure of the gigantic beast still looked terrifying in the eyes of the children.

“I think I’d prefer their human form,” Yara said.

“But they can’t fly as humans,” Piri replied.

The children laughed, because they found it funny, as well as to cover the nervousness of having to fly again with the birds. The previous experience of them flying over the prairie was

not pleasant. Piri hoped he wouldn't faint in midair again. But perhaps fainting meant he didn't have to be afraid of flying.

Piri and Yara's bodies were carried in the clutches of the first bird's giant claws, while Tero's was carried by the second bird. A chilly wind blew bone-chillingly as the bird bounced off the rocks.

Luckily it was only at the beginning because then there was a kind of warm air that was released from inside the griffayr's body, which made Piri not feel cold even though they were high above the mountains. It was probably some kind of wind magic that these birds had.

They flew over the slopes of the mountains, then rose higher and higher. Piri stared in awe at every detail of the mountains they passed. Its large, sharp stones were blackened, and the crevices were dark. There were no trees or plants at all. Maybe the trees can't live on top of the mountains.

Then, they broke through the clouds.

At first, Piri didn't know what happened when the surrounding air turned white, but then Yara exclaimed with a big smile.

"It's a cloud, Piri! It's a cloud!"

The girl spread out her arms, splitting the white clouds that passed by. Yara laughed and screamed cheerfully. Her hands gripped, trying to reach the cloud. But only water droplets she can get and stick to her hands.

Yara didn't care. She hugged her chest as if she had embraced a cloud. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was smiling.

Piri knew that in his life he had never seen Yara so happy, and he was happy too. Yara has achieved her dream.

Embracing the clouds.

Then they came out of the cloud. The giant bird's wings flapped loudly. Once out of the thick clouds, they no longer see

the walls of the mountains. Ahead of them, the sky grew bluer, clear as far as the eye could see, and not far below them were mountain peaks. The ends of the rocks with a kind of strange white sand as a blanket. It fascinated the children.

“Griffayr!” Yara immediately begged. “Please put me on that peak for a bit! Please put me down!”

Piri was surprised. “Yara? What do you want to do?”

“Piri, I want to stand there! I want to feel standing on top of the mountains!”

The two giant birds granted her request. The first bird approached one of the highest ends of the rocks, then placed Piri and Yara there. Tero was also taken down.

The two birds then flew off again, circling not far above them. The warm air from the animal’s body was still felt from that distance, but the chilly wind still caught up, making the three children’s bodies shiver.

Luckily, the children were now wearing clothes and gaiters, no longer naked like they used to be. Still, they couldn’t possibly last long up here. But in that short time, they felt an unimaginable joy, something that is difficult to describe in words. They had reached the top of the mountains, just as they had imagined before. Standing on top of it, on a blanket of cold sand.

The children looked at each other, then hugged and laughed and jumped up and down.

“We did it! We did it!” Yara’s eyes filled with tears. “We are at the top of the mountains!”

“Yes.” Piri could only say one word. His body shivered.

“I... didn’t expect this...” Tero stammered. “This is amazing!”

“Yes! We didn’t come here by climbing, but either way, we got here!”

They were jumping up and down for joy once again.

“Will the others believe it if we tell them about this?” Tero asked breathlessly. White air billowed from his nose and mouth.

“Why not?” Piri replied with a trembling jaw. “Why don’t they believe it?”

“We have to bring something!” Yara exclaimed excitedly. “Which can prove that we’ve been here! I tried to pick up the cloud earlier, but it didn’t work. So I’ll take this sand with me.”

She squatted down and touched the white sand beside his feet. Piri and Tero crouched down and scooped up the sand, which turned out to be much colder than river water. They quickly put a pinch of sand into a shirt pocket.

“It’s enough!” Yara exclaimed.

“Time for us to go!” Tero said. “I can’t stand the cold anymore!”

Piri waved at the two giant birds that were still flying in circles in the air. The first bird came down to answer his call, picking up Yara and Piri, and the second bird picked up Tero. Accompanied by a loud squawk, the two birds flapped their wings vigorously, flying again.

They glided once again through the clumps of clouds, then descended along the mountain walls. The verdant valley floor finally came into view.

Right in the middle of the valley of the Bowl World, surrounded by mountains, towered the Black Tower. Its conical and brownish-black peak was now visible.

Piri and Yara looked at each other. Piri was sure that Yara had the same thoughts as him: one day they would have to beg Grandpa and the Goddess of Wind to be allowed to climb to the top of the tower.

His thoughts immediately diverted as the two griffays

brought them closer to the bottom of the valley. Piri felt his chest pounding because soon he would go home and be reunited with the thirty children they had left before.

He thought, what happened in the Bowl World while he, Yara, and Tero were away?

Is everything okay? What about Jiro, Buro, Sera, and Nere? Did they go straight home after Piri, Yara, and Tero fell into the abyss? Or did all the children look for the three of them first? Were they sad when they can't find Piri, Yara, and Tero?

How about Grandpa? Was he angry when he found out they went climbing the mountains and then disappeared?

All these questions piled up in his mind. His chest was pounding harder. But in the end, he didn't care. Now only one simple thing is his hope: that all the children are fine.

He saw them now!

Those children were gathered by the river. They had just finished hearing Grandpa's lesson. The children looked up, surprised to see two giant birds descending toward them. They looked scared. They screamed and ran frantically.

Fortunately, Tero then shouted in a loud voice, reaching all of them. "Hi! This is us! We're home!"

Fulfilling the Promise

The two griffayrs dropped Piri, Yara, and Tero on the grass. Thirty children were now shouting cheerfully and running to greet them. But the children did not dare to approach, because they were still afraid of the two giant birds that looked so big and scary.

Piri saw Jiro, Buro, Sera, and Nere among the children, looking fine. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Piri, Yara, and Tero stroked the beaks of the two birds and thanked them. The two griffayrs nodded, then with a firm thump on the ground, both returned to the sky, leaving the children behind.

After they left, all the children hugged, cheered, and laughed. Jiro, Buro, and the other kids scrambled to ask questions.

“Where have you been all this time?”

“What happened?”

“Who are those birds?”

“Why are you wearing these strange things?”

Piri and Yara just smiled.

For all those questions, it was Tero who seemed the readiest

to answer. He said, "I'll tell you everything! The greatest adventure ever! But we have to eat first. Yes! Eat the most delicious fruits from our beloved Bowl World!"

Two days later, near noon, Piri visited Tero's flower garden, which was near to the river. Besides various colorful flowers, there were also many types of butterflies flying.

For children, this garden was one of the most beautiful places in the Bowl World. In one corner, under a caramunt tree, Tero sat surrounded by other children, who were listening to his story.

Tero had a lot of great things to tell. Compared to Piri and Yara, Tero was the most passionate and good at telling stories. After two days, the children were still following him, asking Tero to tell them more about life out there. Especially because this morning when Grandpa appeared by the river, he still didn't explain things about the outside world that they wanted to know.

As soon as he saw Piri, Tero called out, "Piri! I just told them about the star butterfly, thousands of butterflies that illuminate the darkness with a flash of light on their wings! I can't show them those little things!" He looked at the children who were listening to him. "But you all believe in me, don't you?"

"Yes," the fat Buro said, still gnawing at his allumint fruit. "Why not believe it?"

"We're just curious," the tall, skinny Jiro replied. "We also want to see them one day."

"You all can do it," Tero said. "I also want to go there again looking for them. Take a walk, see new things. But as Master Fire said while giving us advice on the mountains, we'd better do that once we're bigger, stronger, and smarter. So we can already take care of ourselves."

“I want to go too,” Sera, the little girl, said. “Embracing the clouds, or stepping on the white sand on top of the mountains.” She smiled. “Does it really feel cold on your feet?”

“I’ve told you many times, haven’t I?” Tero said. “That sand feels so cold!”

“That’s not sand,” Piri said.

He remembered, for a moment when they had just returned to the Bowl World, Yara told the children excitedly about the clouds and white sand at the top of the mountains. The girl then reached into her pocket to show her sand. It turned out that there was only cold water in his pockets and clothes. There was no trace of sand.

Piri and Tero also experienced the same thing. The sand in their pockets had also turned into water. Yara became irritated, and as a result, she was silent for some time. After her annoyance disappeared, Yara then said to Piri, those white powders were not sand, but the water that was frozen because of the cold of the mountains.

So that’s what Piri said now, “It’s kind of frozen water.”

“I want to see it,” Sera repeated with a small laugh. “And you must accompany me, Piri. You can do it, right?”

“Yes, I can,” Piri grinned.

“I want to go too.” Nere, who was not daydreaming this time, nodded beside Sera with a big smile. “When we grow up. We couldn’t have climbed that far up there if we were small like this. We can get hurt.”

“And you have to wear shirts, pants, and cover your hands and feet,” Tero added. “That’s what people out there are wearing. You can’t stand the cold if you don’t wear clothes.”

“I was thinking, why are you, Piri, and Yara now no longer wearing those clothes, like when you came?” Jiro asked.

“Are you embarrassed because you have to wear clothes?”
Buro laughed out loud.

The other children laughed too.

“Well, it’s better not to wear clothes here,” Tero said. “We’ll just wear it when we’re older, and want to go back to the outside world.”

“Hey, we can go without climbing, right? If we ask the giant birds for help,” Buro said while looking at Piri. “What do you think, can we summon them?”

“I don’t know.” Piri shook his head.

“Do you want to try it?” Jiro asked.

“Maybe, but not now.”

Summoning the griffayrs? Asking the Goddess of Wind for help just to take the children to the top of the mountains? Piri wasn’t sure that the Goddess of Wind would help them just to do such a small thing.

“That’s right, not now,” Tero replied. “Really, do you think the birds have no work elsewhere? Besides, if you want to go, why don’t you just ask Grandpa? Who knows? Maybe Grandpa can help. How about you try that?”

Jiro and Buro looked at each other. Instead of answering, they laughed while scratching their heads.

The other children laughed too. “You two don’t dare ask Grandpa!”

After that, they opened the food bags filled with fruit, ready for lunch.

But Piri didn’t join. He took Tero away.

“I’m going away for a bit,” he said.

“Where to?” Tero asked.

“I’m going for a walk, down the river.”

Tero looked at him suspiciously, then whispered, “Did you

find something interesting?”

“I don’t know yet,” Piri answered doubtfully. “But if I find anything, I’ll definitely let you know.”

“Alright. Take care.”

“Thank you. I go now.”

Piri left Tero and the other children. He walked along the river bank away from their area of residence, past deserted meadows and hills. After a while, he stopped at a bend in the river. Across the river was a wall of towering mountains, and behind the boulder was the mouth of a cave as high as an adult’s. River water flew into the cave.

Piri found that place by accident, two days ago when the giant bird brought him home. At that moment, he glimpsed a dark hole in the river’s side and instinctively said it could be one of the cave mouths that was connected to the cave he had entered with Yara and Tero.

Piri had not shared this discovery with the other children, as he was not sure if his prediction was correct. He thought it would be better if he first checked how deep the cave was, and only later would tell Yara or Tero about the results. But, if it turned out that now he had found a way in, and then meet the green creature, he was ready. In his pouch, he had carried various kinds of fruit, which he could give to Obain.

Piri will fulfill his promise to the man.

Always Together

Piri tied the bag of food over his head and swam across the river. He lifted his head, trying to keep the bag dry. He continued to swim, before stopping as soon as he arrived in front of the cave mouth. He adjusted his eyes to the darkness, then entered the cave. This was no different from the cave he had passed in the land of Mallava. And the river was shallow, although in some places it felt deeper.

Piri continued to enter until he could no longer go forward because a stone wall blocked the river flow. In the dark, he looked around. If only the red stone was in his hand.

He could faintly see the river flowing to his right into a small cave passage. Piri approached it while fumbling. The passage through which the river passes was small and the upper wall was low. Piri might get through it by diving in, to appear out of nowhere. But that would be very dangerous.

In the end, he understood, this was the end of his journey.

Piri removed a row of tree branches he had previously tied beside his waist. He had assembled the branches to resemble boards. On top of the branches, he put the bag of food he was

carrying and tied it so it wouldn't come loose.

When he was done, he put his branch board on the river water. He was sure it was strong enough to float, even though it was loaded with fruit.

"Dear Mr. Obain," he said, "if you could find these fruits in there, I hope you understand you are not alone. There are people who care about you. Hopefully, we can meet again."

Piri took off his food bag. It floated on the river, flowed into the small cave, and finally disappeared into the darkness.

In the dark, Piri smiled, happily.

He turned around and was now on his way back home.

Before long, when he made it out of the cave, the sky was almost dark. Piri swam across the river, then climbed to the shore.

He was surprised because there someone was already waiting for him with a sullen face.

Yara.

"Why didn't you tell me you wanted to come here?" the girl asked.

Piri was silent for a moment, still confused about what to answer.

He asked back, "How did you know I went here?"

"I asked Tero. Then I followed your track."

"I have to fulfill my promise, Yara."

"I know that, but why won't you wait for me? I want to come in too!"

Piri sighed. "Sorry ..."

Yara was still sullen. "So, what's in there?"

"I can't go any deeper. The river water enters a small cave passage. But I'm sure it's headed somewhere, maybe a river in the land of Mallava. So I just let go of the fruit I brought.

Hopefully, Obain can find it, and get some good food.”

“Yes. Hopefully.” Yara’s face was no longer sullen.

“Yara, if I really want to go later, I will definitely take you.”

“Really? Anywhere?”

Piri’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean... anywhere?”

“Yeah, you know, anywhere. Wherever you want to go, you must take me with you,” Yara said in a commanding tone.

Piri laughed. “Fine, I promise.”

“So, if, for example, you want to go back into this cave, you have to take me with you. If it’s difficult because it’s too dark, we can try to find a way. As long as we have fire or torches, it should be easy,” Yara said with sparkling eyes.

“But how do you make a torch? We don’t have fire stone.”

“That’s why we have to find that stone!” Yara exclaimed.

“Where to?” asked Piri.

“To the land of Suidon, perhaps, the place where Kaia and Poffel went.”

Piri grinned. “Going there, just to look for the stone?”

Yara laughed. “There must be a lot of fire stone in there. Or we can go to Kalani or other countries. Frauli, maybe.”

“Frauli?”

“Yes, Frauli. You... you don’t want to know what that country is like? And find out who our parents are?” Yara’s face brightened when she said that. Her eyes lit up, and Piri knew the girl had just had a dangerous new intent.

“I want to,” Piri muttered slowly.

“Just like me, I want that too!”

“But, Yara, do you really want to go again?”

“Yes.”

“Soon?”

“Why not?” Yara grinned widely.

“Have you forgotten Mr. Ardin’s advice, that we should stay in the Bowl World until we get older?” Piri said.

“I didn’t forget it! But as I said before, advice is made for our good, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t think and have our own opinions.”

“Really? Did you ever say that before?” Piri tried to remember.

“I did. That means, if I really want to go, then I will go. After all, I didn’t harm other people or other children.”

“You really are stubborn. What else are you looking for? You’ve reached the top of the mountains, you’ve seen another world, and you’ve succeeded in embracing the clouds, as you’ve always dreamed of. What more do you want?”

Yara was silent. For a moment, she pensively looked at the river.

“Yes, what you said was indeed my dream,” she replied. “And I’m glad it finally happened. But you don’t understand, the most important of all, which I later remembered most, and will never forget, was not what we accomplished but something else.”

Piri was stunned. “What?” he asked quietly.

Yara looked up with a smile. “The journey! Our journey! Everything we’ve been through. Everything we have done together, we have seen, and we have felt to get there. That’s the most important thing!”

The two of them looked at each other.

Yara continued, “So the next time I go out, it’s not just because I want to reach the top of the mountain or something like that. I do it because I enjoy doing it. I can make new friends, and see many amazing things. Yes, we can’t predict what will happen. Sometimes it’s fun, sometimes it’s scary, but... don’t we always get something else from there, new things, which are far more valuable and unforgettable than the goals we set at the

beginning?”

Piri smiled. “Yes, that’s right.”

In the end, he was always happy to see Yara could speak again with enthusiasm, although often he did not understand what the girl was saying.

“Thank you, Piri. Now you understand me.”

“You’re always weird, Yara, but it’s always interesting too...”

“Half of what I say I actually got from you!” Yara said. “Even though you never put it like that.”

“Was it? Have I ever said such a thing?”

“Yes, you did.”

Piri scratched his head. “Well, so when do you want to go again?”

“Like you said earlier, maybe soon.”

“Where to?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Piri shrugged. “But if you insist on following me wherever I go, then the other way around should be the same. I have to go with you wherever you go.”

“Of course!” Yara replied with a serious expression. “You **MUST** come with me. I want the two of us to be together wherever we go.”

Silence for a moment, Piri then replied with a wide grin. “Agree. Always together.”

Then they both laughed.

The Next Adventure

Yara has already expressed her desire to go again to the wide world beyond the mountains. She always has many dreams, which if one is fulfilled, then it will be replaced by the next dreams, which are always bigger than the previous one.

But do you think she would actually do it, even though she was asked not to go if she wasn't old enough?

If you've known Yara this far, then you definitely know the answer.

She'll do it, anyway.

A more appropriate question is when she will go.

Then how does she go? Will she go back up the mountains? Or swimming down the river in a dark cave? Or maybe another way?

Where will she go? To Mallava, Suidon, Kalani, or Maderut? Or to Frauli, the land where she and the other children come from?

What people will she meet next? Are there other children? Are there other adults, which are perhaps more evil than Mr.

Roddick?

Will Piri stay with her until the end of the journey?

You will find all the answers in their next story:

Heirs of the Knights: The Dreams and Adventures of Children from the Bowl World ~ Book Two.

More than Yara and Piri wish, their next adventure is no longer just surprising or terrifying; it is spectacular. It's bigger than the previous one.

See you there!

Thank You

Thanks for reading Embracing the Clouds. There are still many flaws in this story, but if you enjoy it, you can recommend it to your friends, and leave your review at the store where you bought this book, so that more people will be interested in reading it. Thank you again. Love. ~ Villam



About the Author

R.D. Villam is an Indonesian writer who has published several fantasy books. He also publishes some of his stories online.

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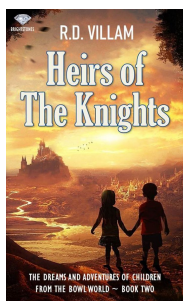
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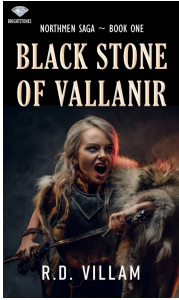


Heirs of the Knights: The Dreams and Adventures of Children from the Bowl World ~ Book Two

One hundred days after their first trip, Piri and Yara arrive in the outside world again. This time they do it without a plan, and as a result, they are immediately caught up in various problems.

They are captured by their old enemy but rescued by new friends, who then ask them to speak to a monstrous giant creature that has been imprisoned for a hundred years under a hill.

Piri and Yara manage to find out who their true ancestors are, as well as the hidden power that is passed on to them. It is a secret that can bring hope to many people, as well as disaster.



Black Stone of Vallanir: Northmen Saga ~ Book One

“I can judge friends. Or foes. I know which one is a big wolf, which one is a small dog, and which one is a small dog who only pretends to be a big wolf. You, big wolf.”

William, a young blacksmith, has promised his mother not to go to the northern lands and find out about his father’s killer. But after he kills several bandits by the river, he has no choice but to flee north and break his promise. He joins a small army of fishermen who will fight the Northmen who want to raid the southern villages. He meets his toughest opponent, a beautiful but fierce girl named Vida.

Whose destiny will win?