Chapter 3

The wide beds of kelp which surround our island on three sides come close to the shore and spread out to sea for a distance of a league. In these deep beds, even on days of heavy winds, the Aleuts hunted. They left the shore at dawn in their skin canoes

and did not return until night, towing after them the slain otter.

The sea otter, when it is swimming, looks like a seal, but is really very different. It has a shorter nose than a seal, small

webbed feet instead of flippers, and fur that is thicker and much more beautiful. It is also different in other ways. The otter

likes to lie on its back in the kelp beds, floating up and down to the motion of the waves, sunning itself or sleeping They are

the most playful animals in the sea.

It was these creatures that the Aleuts hunted for their pelts.

From the cliff I could see the skin canoes darting here and there over the kelp beds, barely skimming the water, and the long

spears flying like arrows. At dark the hunters brought their catch into Coral Cove, and there on the beach the animals were

skinned and fleshed. Two men, who also sharpened the spears, did this work, labouring far into the night by the light of

seaweed fires. In the morning the beach would be strewn with carcasses, and the waves red with blood.

Many of our tribe went to the cliff each night to count the number killed during the day. They counted the dead otter and

thought of the beads and other things that each pelt meant. But I never went to the cove and whenever I saw the hunters with

their long spears skimming over the water, I was angry, for these animals were my friends. It was fun to see them playing or

sunning themselves among the kelp. It was more fun than the thought of beads to wear around my neck.

This I told my father one morning.

'There are scarcely a dozen left in the beds around Coral Cove,' I said. ‘Before the Aleuts came there were many.

'Many still live in other places around the island,' he replied, laughing at my foolishness. ‘When the hunters leave they will

come back.'

'There will be none left,' I said. ‘The hunters will kill them all. This morning they hunt on the south. Next week they move to

another place.'

'The ship is filled with pelts. In another week the Aleuts will be ready to go.'

I was sure that my father thought they would leave soon, for two days before he had sent some of our young men to the beach

to build a canoe from a log which had drifted in from the sea.

There are no trees on the island except the small ones stunted by the wind. When a log came ashore, as happened once in a

long time, it was always carried to the village and worked on where a chance wave could not wash it away. That the men

were sent to hollow out the log in the cove, and to sleep beside it during the night, meant that they were there to watch the

Aleuts, to give the alarm should Captain Orlov try to sail off without paying us for the otter skins.

Everyone was afraid he might, so besides the men in the cove who watched the Aleut ship, others kept watch on the camp.

Every hour someone brought news. Ulape said that the Aleut woman spent a whole afternoon cleaning her skin aprons, which

she had not done before while she had been there. Early one morning, Ramo said he had just seen Captain Orlov carefully

trimming his beard so that it looked the way it did when he first came. The Aleuts who sharpened the long spears stopped this

work and gave all their time to skinning the otter which were brought in at dusk.

We in the village of Ghalas-at knew that Captain Orlov and his hunters were getting ready to leave the island. Would he pay

us for the otter he had slain or would he try to sneak away in the night? Would our men have to fight for our rightful share?

These questions everyone asked while the Aleuts went about their preparations - everyone except my father, who said

nothing, but each night worked on the new spear he was making.

Chapter 4

The Aleuts left on a sunless day. Out of the north deep waves rolled down upon the island. They broke against the rocks and

roared into the caves, sending up white sprays of water. Before night a storm would certainly strike.

Not long after dawn the Aleuts took down their skin tents and carried them to the beach.

Captain Orlov had not paid my father for the otter he had killed. So when the news came that the hunters had packed their

tents, all of our tribe left the village and hurried towards Coral Cove. The men with their weapons went first and the women

followed. The men took the trail that led to the beach, but the women hid themselves among the brush on the cliff.

Ulape and I went together far out on the ledge where I had hidden before when the hunters first came.

The tide was low and the rocks and the narrow beach were scattered with bundles of otter pelts. Half of the hunters were on

the ship. The rest were wading into the water, tossing the pelts into a boat. The Aleuts laughed while they worked, as if they

were happy to leave the island.

My father was talking to Captain Orlov. I could not hear their words because of the noise the hunters made, but from the way

my father shook his head, I knew that he was not pleased.

'He is angry,' Ulape whispered.

'Not yet,' I said. ‘When he's really angry, he pulls his ear.

The men who were working on the canoe had stopped and were watching my father and Captain Orlov. The other men of our

tribe stood at the foot of the trail.

The boat went off to the ship filled with otter. As it reached the ship, Captain Orlov raised his hand and gave a signal. When

the boat came back it held a black chest which two of the hunters carried to the beach.

Captain Orlov raised the lid and pulled out several necklaces. There was little light in the sky, yet the beads sparkled as he

named them this way and that. Beside me, Ulape drew in her breath in excitement, and I could hear cries of delight from the

women hidden in the brush.

But the cries suddenly ceased as my father shook his head and turned his back on the chest. The Aleuts stood silent. Our men

left their places at the foot of the trail and moved forward a few steps and waited, watching my father.

'One string of beads for one otter pelt is not our bargain,' my father said.

'One string and one iron spearhead,' said Captain Orlov, lifting two fingers.

'The chest does not hold that much,' my father answered.

'There are more chests on the ship,' said the Russian.

'Then bring them to the shore,' my father said. 'You have one hundred and five bales of otter on the ship. There are fifteen

here in the cove. You will need three more chests of this size.'Captain Orlov said something to his Aleuts that I could not understand, but its meaning was soon clear. There were many

hunters in the cove and as soon as he spoke they began to carry the otter pelts to the boat.

Beside me Ulape was scarcely breathing. ‘Do you think that he will give us the other chests!' she whispered.

‘I do not trust him.'

'When he gets the pelts to the ship he may leave.'

'It is possible.'

The hunters had to pass my father to reach the boat, and when the first one approached him, he stepped in his path.

'The rest of the pelts must stay here,' he said, facing Captain Orlov, 'until the chests are brought.'

The Russian drew himself up stiffly and pointed to the clouds that were blowing in towards the island.

'I load the ship before the storm arrives,' he said.

'Give us the other chests. Then I will help you with our canoes,' my father replied.

Captain Orlov was silent. His gaze moved slowly around the cove. He looked at our men standing on the ledge of rock a

dozen paces away. He looked upward towards the cliff and back at my father. Then he spoke to his Aleuts.

I do not know what happened first, whether it was my father who raised his hand against the hunter whose path he barred,

whether it was this man who stepped forward with a bale of pelts on his back and shoved my father aside. It all happened so

quickly that I could not tell one act from the other. But as I jumped to my feet and Ulape screamed and other cries sounded

along the cliff, I saw a figure lying on the rocks. It was my father and blood was on his face. Slowly he got to his feet.

With their spears raised our men rushed down across the ledge. A puff of white smoke came from the deck of the ship. A

loud noise echoed against the cliff. Five of our warriors fell and lay quiet.

Ulape screamed again and hung a rock into the cove. It fell harmlessly beside Captain Orlov. Rocks showered into the cove

from many places along the cliff, striking several of the hunters. Then our warriors rushed in upon them and it was hard to tell one from the other.

Ulape and I: stood on the cliff, and watched helplessly, afraid to use the rocks we held lest we injure our own men.

The Aleuts had dropped the bales of otter. They drew knives from their belts and as our warriors rushed upon them the two

lines surged back and forth along the beach. Men fell to the sand and rose to fight again. Others fell and did not get up. My

father was one of these.

For a long time it seemed that we would win the battle. But Captain Orlov, who had rowed off to the ship when the battle

started, returned with more of his Aleuts.

Our warriors were forced backward to the cliffs. There were few of them left, yet they fought at the foot of the trail and

would not retreat.

The wind began to blow. Suddenly Captain Orlov and his Aleuts turned and ran to the boat. Our men did not pursue them.

The hunters reached the ship, the red sails went up, and that ship moved slowly between the two rocks that guard the cove.

Once more before it disappeared a white puff of smoke rose from the deck. As Ulape and I ran along the cliffs a whirring

sound like a great bird in flight passed above our heads.