Snapshots From The Dzaqtlas

1. The Noql

‘See, Mazhotla, the lagoon has begun to bring forth new brood. You children there! Watch that gap in the net, ere the flyers scoop up too many of the tads!’

Dzalo had come over the Tall Ridge from the North with her Gift the year before last. I had been on watch that five-day, at the post overlooking the Pass from the mountains. She’d come alone, half-mad from thirst, and she’d been on the road long enough to wait for the Wise Man to come check her for the Horribleness. Dzalo had carried something, alright, but it hadn’t been contagion.

‘We can take the spawners out now,’ Dzalo went on, ‘before they too eat too much of the brood themselves.’

‘Back to the main pen with them, then?’ I looked over at the hooked poles and scoop nets hung carefully- per her instructions- on the side of the Keeper’s shed. I was studying with Dzalo ever since the Baz sling stone had cracked my knee two months gone. I couldn’t walk the tall, steep trails up to the watch posts anymore.

‘Yes. Get two of the larger children to help you. You know how slippery these are.’

I whistled for Talizl and Zoqtan. ‘Come help me get the breeders out of the lagoon.’ They’d been working with Dzalo since the Council agreed to her plan, which back then sounded purely insane. We’d all dug the lagoon, near starving, eating the last of the stores save what would keep us barely alive until Dzalo’s plan came to fruition. Many of us had been skeptical, but there was little left we could do once the Baz had cut off the road to the lower reaches of the Valley.

Dzalo’s ‘Gift’ hadn’t seemed like much. A leather bag holding a smaller sealed bag of the ‘plastic’ used before the Horribleness had descended on the World, filled with slimy, shriveled green-grey spheroids. ‘I had to flee from the Northern Valley when the Baz brought the Horribleness and madness upon our village. I took the one thing we had and no one else did, to save the lives of whomever would take me in.’

There had been a large, old disused metal water tank, used in the Old Days for no one remembered what. We removed its roof, filled it with water from the River and some orange water weed and let the Sun warm it and make the weed proliferate. Some old netting kept the flyers from getting to the water. An odd request from an odd woman, even odder when she then dumped most of her Gift into the warm water . . .

Now the slimy four-leggers that had hatched out of the green-gray nodules fed the two hundred in our Village and two others beside. They traded their lumber, salt, and the things gleaned from the ruins of the Old Town many kilometers up-Valley for the succulent, rich meat, the hides, and the salted spawn of the Noql. The Old Lagoon was now filled with the second brood, and the New Lagoon would soon be ready to bear the third.