

## The Proving

by Noah Weatherly

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Her hand tensed and wilted by her sword, hesitant to release *Sezja* from her sheath. She'd been taught that the *Kono-Kon* were merciless beasts that basked in bloodshed, that paraded throatless corpses through their camps like war-trophies. The solemn moment before her, swathed in serenity, unmoving like the beckoning depths of the pools before the *Kono*—it reflected none of the harrowing stories she'd been spun.

Kalu's attention sprung free from her inner ramblings when the *Kono* flipped the urn in her hands, its contents wisping out into the night air like rose petals on the wayward wind. The ash, tinged silver and glinting with sapphire streaks, hissed into the awaiting waters of onyx. A ripple pulsed from where the *Kono* emptied the urn, rolling over the water's surface as a harmony over the strings of a harp.

The few seconds it took to empty the urn felt like a dozen lifetimes, a bead of sweat dotting Kalu's temple despite the cold that nipped at her tingling fingertips. Nothing about it felt...right. She'd expected elation, even thunderous excitement when she first laid eyes upon her star-crossed kill. But she felt out of place, like an intruder, watching something unmeant for onlookers.

Once the last of the ashes had sifted into the folded sieves of sand, the *Kono* twisted the lid back onto the lovely urn, placing it on the ground beside her slender, pale feet. She cast her gaze out into the dusk-shrouded distance, rolling her shoulders as she released a lengthy breath.

"Have you come to kill me?" she asked, the words rolling from her mouth like rainfall from a sagging leaf.

A jagged flash of cold cleaved through Kalu's chest, her breath hitching in her throat. In one fluid motion, her sword sang out into the silverish moonlight, brandished before her like she was facing down a feral beast.

The *Kono* turned, hanging in the air like a marionette, her strings fluttering in the breeze behind her. When her eyes finally rested on Kalu, the hunter resisted a flinch.

She was more beautiful than any woman Kalu had ever seen. Her eyes were drawn first to the markings that adorned her exposed neck and collarbone, peeking from the tattered collar of her grayish tunic. The tattoos were blacker than a nightmare,

winding and waving into runes Kalu didn't recognize, ending at succinct points beneath her rounded chin. Her high cheekbones and swooping jaw were chiseled from marble, the work of a seasoned craftsman. The *Kono* almost appeared regal to Kalu, her hooded eyelids calculating but impassive, roving from her boots to the tip of the blue steel that trembled ever-so-slightly in her cloth-swathed hands. The skin beneath her eyes sagged and rolled, the soothing fingers of sleep foreign to the purpled wrinkles there.

Kalu knew she'd made a mistake the moment she met the creature's eyes—depthless, ebony pools twinkled back, beckoning her to take a step closer, to pad within striking distance. There was no pupil, no cornea. Only the promise of a swift death.

"I asked you a question," The *Kono* said, her full lips the same pale white as her milky skin. Her voice was a melody Kalu was unfit to hear, every syllable coaxing her mouth apart an inch. The creature rested a hand on her hip, her other hand trailing to one of the swords strapped to her shoulders. "Think carefully. Your next words may be your last."

Kalu seemed to remember her tongue, lying dormant in her parched mouth. "I have to." She managed.

"Wrong." The *Kono* spat. "You want to. You want the glory, the revelry, the approval of some beer-bellied old man who thinks no more of you than he does his mug of mead."

"You know nothing of my father." Kalu shot back, sliding a booted foot through the sand, a makeshift barrier between her and her opponent.

"No?" The *Kono* said, bored eyes shifting from Kalu's boots to the wrinkle on the bridge of her freckled nose. She bared her teeth. "I know he put a blade through my mate's back." Her eyes drifted to the urn at her feet, a wince flickering beneath her cheek.

"Liar."

"I know he's a coward, like every other Cecisen hunter who treks out to our watering hole." She spat the title like a curse, her face twisting into a scowl. "I know he makes sport out of slaughtering my kin like fauna. I know he sent a little girl to my ancestral waters, expecting her to come back with a head in hand or not at all."

Kalu could feel rage bubbling within her, battling against the surging tide of shame that washed over her shoulders. The *Kono* spoke with a vicar's vindication, her sermon loud and dignified as she paced along the shoreline, toes careful not to disturb the glimmering ash that dotted the sand. The creature was

trying to rile her, and she'd nearly succeeded.

"I'm no little girl." Kalu said, her tone measured. "Once I kill you, I'll be a true hunter."

"Nothing about your hunt is true." The *Kono* sighed. Her righteous demeanor seemed to slouch, the hand she'd rested against the hilt of her sword moving minutely. "Alas, if it's death you seek, I will be its handmaiden."

Steel hissed against sheath as the *Kono* drew one of her swords, the wicked-looking weapon flashing white in the moonlight. Its blade coiled and curved like a serpent's scales, the edge hued a fluorescent lavender, glowing with the crackle of otherworldly power. It was thin and reedy, unlike the fat, flat edge of *Sezja*.

Kalu tensed, flipping her own sword once, testing its weight. Familiar and balanced, it hummed near her ear, the luted harmony of death. The *Kono* seemed amused, a faint, subdued smile wrinkling her nose.

"Are you afraid?" she asked, the malice replaced with intrigue.

"Yes." Kalu answered, seeing no use in lying.

"Don't be. I've seen the face of the Mother. You've nothing to fear."

"Our gods are not the same."

The *Kono* chuckled, a bitter sound that scraped. "I'd wager they are, in some ways." She cocked her head at an angle, like a hawk eyeing a field mouse. "I like you, girl. What do they call you?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." The word echoed into the empty space, racing over the surface of the pond behind the *Kono*. "But I'd like to know all the same. Consider it a parting pleasantry to your prey—a token of respect."

*As if you have respect for me.* Kalu thought, but she raised an eyebrow, willing herself to speak despite the apprehension that nearly buckled her knees. "Kalu. My name is Kalu."

"Kalu." The *Kono* swished the name between her cheeks, testing its consonants between her tongue and teeth.

"A fine name."

"And you?" Kalu asked, her mouth overrunning her mind, surprising even her.

"I have many names, Kalu." She considered, flipping her blade into an underhanded grip. "My mate called me Asja."

Kalu was nearly floored when Asja sketched a bow, bending at the hip and closing her eyes. The hunter didn't return the favor, too enamored with the gesture to fully comprehend its implications. Once Asja stood upright again, she tucked her sword behind her back, extending a hand before her and turning her knuckles towards Kalu.

"Your move, little hunter."

A frigid breath trailed through Kalu's teeth, filling her chest with the crisp night air. A second passed, and then another, her heart pattering against her ribcage like rainfall against the roof of their cottage. She closed her eyes, settling into the calm of combat, willing her fingers to cease their shaking, a plea brushing her lips and slicing through the silence.

"By Fell's breath, I am made." She began, releasing the pent in breath with a roll of her neck.

Her eyes shot open, honed and alert. Gripping her sword in two hands, she charged Asja, kicking up plumes of ebony sand in her wake.

Asja's sword swung out in front of her, halving her face in a fencer's stance. Kalu cried out, bringing her blade around in a mighty horizontal stroke, aiming to sever the *Kono* at the midsection.

Steel met steel with a deafening clang as Asja parried with ease, sidestepping Kalu and watching as the warrior nearly lost her footing. Kalu whirled, blood welling beneath her cheeks, her breath frothing into the brisk cold of the night air.

"Sloppy," Asja chided, her laughter lighting into the breeze.

Kalu huffed, launching another offensive, her movements more thoughtful and thorough this time around. Her sword blurred through the moonlight, Asja's blade meeting hers mid-stroke. The hunter feinted left, spinning right once the *Kono's* guard had clicked into place.

But she'd been the one baited. Asja whipped her sword into position on the left side of her torso, catching Kalu's hefty strike without so much as a grunt. The hunter's hands trembled with tremendous effort as she pushed down with both arms, whilst the *Kono's* stance didn't shift or quake, not an inkling of struggle thrumming through her fingertips.

She pushed Kalu's blade away, twirling the ebony cloth-wrapped hilt of her sword about her silken fingertips, her bottomless, black eyes wide with the thrill of combat. "You aren't horrible, little hunter," she purred. Kalu scowled, widening her

stance and holding her sword before her in a defensive position. Asja's smile widened, creasing her cheeks. "I suppose it's my turn."

Asja pounced into a flurry, the lilting light of the two moons overhead glinting off her glossy blade. Kalu's eyes didn't falter, her sword hand true as she parried the *Kono's* first strike. Her eyes widened a hair's breadth at the power behind the stroke—her hands were already beginning to ache, and they'd been fighting for no more than a few seconds.

But Asja was still coming. She parried another strike, and another, the *Kono's* movements like those of a wildcat, feral and flashing. A shallow gash opened on Kalu's hip as her guard whipped into place an instant too late, another ribbon of blood split on her cheek as she narrowly weaved beneath a throat-carving swing. The difference between their training was apparent—she'd been trained flatfooted, circling her reluctant father on their bearskin rug, a wooden sword in hand. There'd been no threat of injury, no promise of a gory, grunting death if her footing wasn't flawless.

Asja had been birthed by the stars, mothered by the trees, and hardened by the mountains.

Kalu's breathing was growing raspy after a minute had passed, her boots filled with lead as she slid through the sand. Asja moved like the clap of thunder, sudden and jarring, dancing across the sodden shoreline like it were her stage. They were leagues apart. Leagues separated them.

"*Watch for the ticks, mejha.*" Her father's voice rang out in her mind, the low, gravelly crawl nearly shrouded by the sound of steel meeting steel. "*If they're stronger, you have to be faster. If they're faster, you have to be smarter.*"

"*And if they're stronger, faster, and smarter than me?*" She'd asked.

That had given him pause, and after a tense blip of silence, he'd shrugged.

"*Then you picked the wrong fight.*"

But she hadn't picked this fight. He had. He'd done it for her. And she'd be gods-damned if she were piled beneath the dirt before she had the chance to pick her next one.

The pair clashed, sweat dotting Kalu's brow as her chest rose and fell with vigor, Asja's demented smile bright over the entwined tremble of their blades. "You aren't ready."

"Shut up," Kalu ground out.

Asja pressed down harder, Kalu taking two retreating steps as her heels sunk into the sand. "Don't you hate them for this? Do

you know how many of your kind I've killed—simply because they were deceived into opposing me?"

"I said, shut up."

Kalu hefted the clash over to her side. Asja surged forward a foot with the sudden break. The hunter saw her opening, spinning and clipping the *Kono's* jaw with the heel of her boot, the creature stumbling backward a step as her head rocked back.

Asja's hand drifted to her face, her fingers feathering over the bleating would-be bruise that had surfaced on the underside of her sleek jawline. Her attention rolled back toward Kalu, her movements predatory as her hand lilted from her cheek to the second sword jutting from one of her sheaths. She drew the weapon, the lengthy sound of steel against sheath like a flat note scraped by a violin's bow. Asja spun both swords, crouching low like a leopard.

Kalu gulped, shifting her own stance, placing the flat of her blade on her forearm defensively.

"I'll give you one last chance." Her tongue slid over each syllable, the sound of her voice like bitter birdsong. "Go back to your village. Be their failure for a time, perhaps grow strong enough to challenge me again some day."

She paused. Kalu shifted, her fingers drumming on the hilt of her sword.

"Or?"

Asja crossed her swords. "Or die."

Creeping cold leaked into Kalu's bloodstream. She knew the *Kono* wasn't bluffing. But she wouldn't go back to that village. Not as a welp. Not as a defenseless child, unfit to bear the legacy of her ancestors.

She squeezed her eyes shut, air whistling into her lungs as she filled her ribcage with the crisp essence of the watering hole. Asja awaited her decision patiently, poised to strike, eyes flicking from Kalu's hands to the tip of her blade.

Her eyes opened slowly, the burnt honey glaze of her gaze steady and unmoving. "I have to do this."

Asja sighed, her expression wilting like the frost-crusting petals of a violet. "I thought you might be different from the others." Her eyes narrowed. She slid one foot back, the muscles of her calves tensing. "But you're as foolish as you are brave, little one."

Kalu was ready when she charged. Their swords met with a flash, violet sparks trailing from the serpentine twists of Asja's

blades. She cried out as she deflected the two-handed strike, her sword heavy in her heaving arms, trailing a blueish silver strand through the air as she launched a counterattack.

And so they danced. A whirlwind of steel, waltzing up and down the shoreline like a practiced choreography. The waters watched in silence, an unbiased audience, as the reflections of the women clashed, weaved, and struck, stretched by the impassive surface of the pond. Kalu's blade nicked Asja's shoulder when the *Kono* fell for one of the hunter's many feints. Another gash opened on Kalu's stomach as she leapt backwards, avoiding a whirling strike that encircled Asja's body. They stepped to the rhythm of death, tiptoeing its sinister promise, ebbing and flowing with its simmers and swells.

Asja brought one of her blades around in a lethal arc, the invisible line of her sword aimed for Kalu's neck. The hunter weaved to the side, clanging the lethal blow away from her with a practiced stroke. Her pupils slanted as Asja's torso was exposed, open and vulnerable.

Kalu attempted to riposte, lunging for the *Kono's* heart, a piercing attack that would slip between her ribs and nip the bud of her existence.

Asja disappeared, blurring between seconds, her movement faster than Kalu could perceive. One moment, the hunter's aim was true, the battle certainly within her grasp. The next, the world was slanted, a crippling kick landing behind her knee cap as she crumpled into the sand.

Despite its plush appearance, the ebony sand was unforgiving. Kalu's breath shot from her lungs as her spine connected with the damp blackness below, her eyes widening as she heaved. Asja stood over her, head shaking softly, her face obscured by the long shadows of twilight.

Kalu attempted a feeble swing, her sword acting as her lifeline, as her hope. But Asja blocked the strike with ease, her foot slamming down on the hunter's wrist with a crunch. A small, broken whimper sounded from deep within Kalu's throat, her vision hazing.

The tip of one of the *Kono's* swords lighted beneath Kalu's chin, tilting her face up so her eyes met Asja's. She glared on in defiant silence, whereas Asja's shoulders sagged, her expression resigned. Asja sported no indication of triumph.

"Why do you hunt us?" she asked, cocking her head inquisitively. "What do your elders tell you about my people?"

"That you're monsters," Kalu hissed, her throat bobbing against cool steel. "That you'd just as soon cut the throats of our children as look at us."

"How ironic." Her words were clipped, bitter. "You are the ones that raid our camps, slaughter our younglings. Your kin put my mate in that urn." She jerked her head behind her, the brass urn sitting as a resolute spectator. "You fear us. And so you hunt us, herd us like cattle."

"It is my duty--"

"*It is your delusion!*" Kalu flinched when Asja's scream echoed across the pond, a ripple rolling across its surface. "You call us savages—but your tribe is backwards. Your god is unjust."

"You have no right to speak of Fel."

"Fel?" She scoffed. "If Fel is the reason my linens are cold in the night, that my daughter will never see her father's smile—then Fel be damned, along with all of his petty, worthless little subjects."

The words carved a pit into Kalu's stomach, her mind emptying as she envisioned what the *Kono* described.

*My linens are cold.*

*My daughter.*

*Her father's smile.*

The *Kono* weren't meant to have families. They were long-fanged creatures of legend, their souls as bleak as their faces, their fingers and lips painted with blood. Kalu's mind was unraveling at the seams, her conscience a conspirator, crying out against every teaching her forefathers had spun through the generations of Cecise.

Kalu's mind snapped back to the peril at hand as Asja lifted one of her swords into the air, poisoning it to deliver the blow that ended her, the blow that subdued her nerves and quieted her mind, the blow that would send her adrift into the unknown, her paddle lost in the vehement rapids, her will estranged and torn.

"If you've any prayer you want to offer to your couthless god, now is the time, Kalu."

The hunter cast her gaze to the stars once more. She hoped her fate was among them. Her fingers longed to delve into their belts of celestial beauty. Her mind yearned for the texture of space, for the feeling of nothingness, her soul adrift in the boundless expanse of the universe. Perhaps she would find peace with no direction—perhaps aimlessness was the only absolute she could be afforded.

"By Fel's breath I am made, and by his hand I am guided."

Asja hesitated, but shook her head, scowling down at Kalu. "His hand guided you to your death," she muttered, tensing her shoulder to deliver the stroke that would end the Cecisan's hunt.

Both Kalu and Asja started when sand crunched behind the *Kono*, giving away the approach of someone far heavier than either of them.

Asja abandoned Kalu, spinning around and catching the massive brunt of a broadsword, one of her swords splintering with the impact. She leapt to the side, revealing a shadow that dwarfed Kalu, his salt-gray beard and hair shining the silver of a direwolf.

Her father cast his gaze on her, emotions she couldn't identify warring within the warm, dark brown depths she peered into.

"You said you wouldn't interfere," Kalu breathed.

"And you said you wouldn't fail me," he shot back. A pang of guilt lighted beneath Kalu's chest.

"It wasn't her who failed you, old man." Both father and daughter turned to the seething *Kono*, watching as Asja tossed her broken sword into the sand. "It was you who failed her."

"How dare you lecture me, filth?" Kalu's father spat.

"You're right," Asja conceded, flipping her sword into an underhanded grip once more. "Words would never be enough to sway someone as simpleminded as you, Cecisan."

Kalu's eyes widened with horror as the *Kono* pounced at her father, teeth bared and ebony eyes wide with bloodlust. He absorbed the blow without moving his feet, his sword an extension of his arms, slicing through the night air like a butcher's cleaver through the calf of a lamb.

She watched in horror as their battle commenced, the sparks of steel casting lengthy shadows over the shoreline, two seasoned combatants waging a war far beyond Kalu's level of skill. It took only a few seconds for Kalu to decide who she'd wager to win—her father was past his prime, and Asja was too swift, too determined. Her hatred reverberated through each clang of steel, warbling into the trees and disturbing the creatures laying dormant there.

"Did you kill my mate?" Asja asked, her breathing hardly disturbed as she danced circles around the grizzled warrior.

"I don't know," her father snarled. "Your faces aren't worth remembering."

Asja's shout was deafening at that, her blade flashing with lethal precision as she cut the tendon behind his knees. Kalu attempted to pull herself upright, but found her strength wavering, the blood that had been saturating the sand around her evidently sapping what energy she could muster.

Her father was faltering, his sword slowing with each swing. Asja was making sport out of it, darting in and out with surgical precision, slicing and serrating the tendons and chords that cobbled him together.

"His name was J'asa." She spat into the sand as the warrior fell to a knee. "Say it."

"No," he growled, lunging for the *Kono*. She backpedaled out of reach as he flopped into the sand, blood dripping from the dozens of cuts she'd opened on his thighs and arms.

Kalu fought against the surging darkness that threatened to pull her beneath its surface. If she passed out, she would die. There would be no mourners, no funeral—only the vultures, pecking her eyes free from her skull, pulling her entrails from her gut.

"Say it, and I'll spare your girl." Her father perked up at that, his beard hueing crimson as he coughed blood into the sand. "J'asa. He was more of a man than you ever could have claimed to be, coward. Say his name."

Asja stopped circling Kalu's father, the *Kono*'s back to the hunter as she crouched. Her father could scarcely move, his back rising unevenly with his wet breath. Kalu managed to pull herself into a sitting position as the creature placed her sword over the old man's breast, her palm on the bottom of the pommel as she balanced it against his skin.

"You're a liar," he rasped. "You'll kill us both, no matter what I say."

Asja clicked her tongue, pushing the blade in an inch with practiced precision. Kalu's breathing was frantic as she reached for her belt of knives with her left arm, her dominant hand lying limp and broken in the sand.

"Kalu is an innocent. I have no reason to kill her other than her intent to kill me." She cooed, sounding almost as if she were lecturing a toddler. "But you, old man? If it wasn't you who put a sword through my mate's back, it was one of your spineless comrades. I feel I'm owed a life debt—one you will pay in full. But your daughter—she is your daughter, isn't she?—doesn't have to die."

"Savage piece of—"

He wheezed as the sword slid deeper into his chest. "I want no words from you if they aren't the name of my mate. This can be quick for you. Or it can be slow, agonizingly so. Is that something you want her to see?"

His eyes drifted to Kalu, their aging sharpness dulled into a resignation she'd never known from him. The darkness there was half-glossed, blood trickling from his lips like sap from a tree, matting his beard and staining his wolfskin. Kalu shook her head, her hand fumbling for Aste, the beaded hilt of the throwing knife sliding between her knuckles.

Her father turned back to Asja, his mouth curling into a knowing smile. His stare dropped to the steel protruding from his chest, and he seemed to sag with relief as he placed two hands around the curving blade. His weary eyes returned to the *Kono's* face, peaceful, lacking the hammered steel Kalu had known from him all her life.

"*J'asa.*" He said.

Asja seemed to balk at the admittance of defeat, but she'd made the graying hunter a promise. Without another moment's thought, she pushed the blade deeper, bloodstained tip jutting from his back as it tore a hole in his tunic.

"No!" Kalu's scream ripped from her throat, a raw sob that shook her shoulders. She freed Aste from her sheath, flipping the blade into her fingertips, her aim honed and unfaltering as she drew the dagger back over her shoulder.

She didn't throw knives with her left hand. Her right was dominant, and it was easily her more coordinated hand. But she had no use of it. The bones of her wrist floated freely beneath her skin, leaving her with nothing but her left hand to rely upon. And thus, she relied on it, flinging the knife, every prayer she'd muttered guiding its arc as it hurtled end-over-end toward the back of Asja's neck. Her aim was true. Her breath hitched as the dagger traveled its course, her vengeance promised by its flight, sworn to be delivered into her awaiting arms.

The *Kono's* tattoos flared an iridescent violet, her pointed ears seeming to twitch at the ends. Asja's hand shot out, swifter than the strike of a cobra, the blade coming to a shuddering halt between her fingers.

Kalu's hand dangled uselessly in the air, her mouth agape, a sob hitching her breath as her father slumped over, Asja's blade still planted in his heart. The *Kono* stood, dropping the dagger into

the sand and planting a bare foot on Kalu's father, wrenching her sword free with a grunt. She used the folds of his garb to clean his blood from the twisting blade, her face mirthless in the grim deed.

"You monster," Kalu breathed. She twisted, Sezja within her grasp, but fell face first into the sand, granules crunching between her teeth. Another sob racked her shoulders, her entire body quivering as she reached out pointlessly for her sword. "I'll kill you—I swear, I'll kill you—"

Asja appeared beside her, kicking the sword further out of her reach. She sheathed her sword on her back, her eyes trailing from the urn behind the pair to the starlit surface of the pond, her posture curling an inch as she sighed. "I gifted him a better death than he gave my *J'asa*," Asja whispered. She glanced at Kalu, tenderness shimmering beneath the cold, distant black of her gaze. "I thought killing him would make me whole again."

"Rotting bitch—" Kalu heaved, a wretched wail cutting off whatever curses she wanted to hurl at the *Kono-Kon*.

"Hear me, little one," Asja said, her voice ginger and coaxing. "Do not hate me for what I've done. It will fester. It will rot you from within, seizing every sunrise you see and warping it into something wretched and ugly. Your life was his final gift to you. Do not waste it pursuing me."

Kalu bared her teeth at the *Kono*, her lungs alight with ragged wheezing as she growled, the sound like that of a cornered animal. Her tears flowed freely as she shouted at the *Kono*, her voice steeped in resentment. "I will hunt you until I draw my last breath, Asja. You will know no peace so long as I live. This is my promise to you, a promise I make on the dying breaths of my father."