



Kenji was promised honor and instead received orders to hurt those he swore to protect. The only hope lies in capturing the Shulforine, a rotting, mythical beast said to grant power. Kenji only has to survive long enough for it to matter.

Faceless

by B.M. Valdez

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A large, white, oval-shaped egg is the central focus. It has two bright orange and yellow flames positioned where eyes would be. The word "FACELESS" is written across the middle of the egg in a black, jagged, dripping font. The background is a snowy forest scene with snow-covered evergreen trees and a light blue sky.

FACELESS

B. M. VALDEZ

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Chapter One

Okami

Okami wondered why perpetual winter was a thing to be desired. White clouds would puff out with every breath. Snow would pile up as high as the lowest branches of the forest trees. The lake would be frozen so thick with ice that it would be easier to starve than carve a hole for fishing. Subzero temperatures, slick ice and all. But it wasn't his place to question the whims of the deity who floated before him in the blackness of the dreamspace.

"How many kinsmen were lost this cycle?" the deity asked, blue-white brow furrowed.

Okami tried not to look into Zawa's bright silver eyes. One didn't ask the deity for things when one was meant to do the deity's bidding. It was impossible to look anywhere else, though. Not in this space. Zawa had all the power and made all the rules, even though Okami's unconscious mind should've been his own.

"How many—" Zawa started, slow, like he further wanted to give Okami a chance to answer. The deity didn't like to repeat himself. Then, Okami had learned over the seasons that Zawa didn't like much, especially when things didn't go as he planned.

"Twenty-five," Okami said.

Zawa didn't like being cut off either. He folded his arms across his bare chest and spun away.

It was easier to bow his head when he wasn't being flayed by those silver eyes. Okami hooked his right ankle over his left, as he continued to kneel on something that felt like the ground in the blackness. His hands were folded in his lap, resting on the white fold of his bed shift. Zawa

usually saw fit to give him a more proper garment in the dreamspace, but he supposed that was only when he entered dreamspace on the deity's terms, not his own. What good was communing with the higher power if one couldn't ask him for anything?

"My lord, I'm not asking for a favor," Okami said. He hated begging Zawa to do anything, but begging was one thing Zawa liked. It stroked his ego. "The Spring Moon is approaching, and we will have a proper celebration in your honor this cycle."

Zawa was suddenly in Okami's face. His head snapped up and he fell backwards as Zawa pressed forward. Either the deity had no concept of personal space or he didn't care. It disturbed Okami that he couldn't feel Zawa's breath on his cheek.

"Don't you suppose if I desired a proper celebration, I would have asked for it?" Zawa asked.

"Maybe you had other things to be doing," Okami said. He did not know what Zawa did when the deity was not bothering him. "Besides, it is in your best interest to provide us with new prospects if you want us to capture the Shulforine."

Face a sliver away from Okami's, Zawa burst with a raucous laugh.

Okami jerked awake, limbs flailing like he was swimming through linens. Blues and purples flared around him as he struggled to sit up tangled in the blankets. They were the colors of fabled royalty, the kind that ZK Commune elders passed on to little children to keep them mystified and train them in moral values. Okami had grown up listening to such fables from times when the caravans had wheels. He had never admired the kings. They reminded him too much of the Kin's Father. Okami would rather have been the servant boy than the king.

It was funny how things turned out. He wasn't the servant boy. Instead, he'd become the Kin's Father, much too like a king for his fancy. He looked up at the large circular hole in the ceiling of his private quarters. It was a domed building set apart from the Kin's compound in the forest surrounding the ZK. Starlight rained down on him. Okami hadn't known what it was like to sleep a full night since before his name was added to Zawa's Tomb. Not Okami. His real name. The one people had known him by before he donned the Kin's mask. No one knew that name now, not even his fellow Kinsmen. It was a secret Okami only shared with Zawa.

The deity liked it that way.

Okami's skin was cold. It was near to impossible to stay warm in the dome even when it wasn't snowing. A tree sprouted through the middle of the room, needle-lined branches poking up towards the stars. It had been planted there to collect the snow by a Father many generations before his time. Somehow, despite the tree's shelter, he always woke up with snow in his hair.

He stepped out of the dirt-covered, sunken-in area where his blankets were splayed out and onto the wooden platform covering the rest of the room. Bare feet brushed creaky wood slats as he crossed to the wall. Okami shed his white night shift and draped it over a hook on the wall next to his black combat suit. It was a skintight one-piece that he pulled up to cover his body from the top of his neck to his wrists and ankles. Heavy black boots went on his feet, gloves with clawed fingertips on his hands, and a jointed mesh covering of dark silver armor went over the suit. Chain, hooks, and knives were clipped to strategic locations on the armor, mostly on his waist, but also on his forearms, tucked in his boots, and crossed over his shoulderblades.

The mask was the final piece. By Zawa's decree, absolutely no one was permitted to look upon Okami's face. It was common practice for members of the Kin to doff the mask when in familial company, allowing each other to see their faces and use their real names. No one from the ZK saw their faces and no one from the other three Kins saw them either. But not Okami. The only place he showed his face was in his sleeping quarters and in his dreams.

Okami's mask resembled a wolf's face, with a short snout and pointed ears. The same dark blues and purples of royalty had been used to paint patterns on its countenance. Zawa had told him once that he liked those colors.

Once the mask completed the outfit, the only things visible of Okami were his green eyes. It used to bother him that his own view of the world was limited to what he could see through the eye holes and that he always had the mask frame in his peripheral vision. He told himself now that it wasn't a big deal.

It was too early to expect the rest of the Kin, who weren't on patrol duty, to be stirring, so Okami had no reason to leave his quarters. But he left anyway. He had to visit the Tomb and see if Zawa had taken his request seriously.

Juzo stood guard outside Okami's door. As one of the Kin's great uncles, Juzo's position had shifted to a mostly advisory role. He had traded responsibility with the other greats to personally guard Okami's quarters. As Okami closed the door behind himself, the only piece of Juzo that was visible was his eyes. He was also clad in full armor, but the wrinkles at the corner of his open gray eye hinted at his middle-age. His right eye was closed. It always was, having been blinded many seasons ago.

"Father," Juzo said, bowing at the middle. "What has you stirred at such an hour?"

Okami didn't bother to tell Juzo that he was always stirred during the night. "I must visit the Tomb," he said.

Juzo's eye widened. "Is it time?" he asked.

"I don't know," Okami said. "I have a feeling." There was no way he was going to tell the Kin that he had asked the deity for new prospects. Especially if Zawa really did refuse to listen.

"Would you like an escort?" Juzo asked.

Even though it was customary for the Kin's Father to travel alone, the greats often supposed that Okami was not granted the deity's immunity. Okami didn't believe that Zawa granted him any sort of protection either, but it was more comforting to him to travel alone. He shook his head at Juzo and started walking away from the great uncle. "I'll be alright," he said.

If Juzo responded, Okami didn't hear it. He was already out of earshot, sprinting through the forest. He ran in the opposite direction as the main house of the winter Kin. The complex was designed that way, to put the Father as close to the Tomb as possible without making it an impossible outpost to defend. It only took ten minutes to get from his quarters to the pillar of stone.

The Tomb wasn't really a Tomb, because Zawa hadn't been alive and therefore had no body. Okami was certain that the name was a romantic version of what Zawa had wanted to be. That, or it was a memorial to all of those followers of Zawakuroi who had died in their quest for his perpetual winter.

Okami's name was on the pillar. His real name, the one he had before donning the mask. He hoped that there would be a new slate of names on the pillar, identifying a collection of youth from the ZK Commune who were worthy of becoming Kinsmen. At first glance, it was difficult to tell if the stone obelisk had changed since the last time Okami had

laid eyes on it. It had four sides and rose high into the sky, well above the top of the tree line. Each side had a different list of names on it. One for current, living Kinsmen. One for deceased Kinsmen. One for prospects. The final side was usually blank, but Zawa used it to send arcane messages. This last side is where the list of new prospects would begin, before being carried over to one or more of the other three sides.

The Tomb grew as if from the ground whenever one of the three sides ran out of space. As Okami stepped from the trees, the side of the Tomb facing him appeared to be a long list of names. He slid closer to read the names. Usually this was a thing he enjoyed taking the time to do, especially on the deceased list, but now he was anxious to find out if Zawa really heard his plea.

Circling around the pillar, Okami scanned the other two list sides before he reached the blank side. His breath left his lips in white foggy clouds, moisture settling on the list etched before him. He brushed the condensation away from the stone to make out the words. At the bottom, closest to his eye level, Zawa had scrawled, "*This is what you asked for, little Inuki.*" Okami was at once irritated. He didn't like it when Zawa called him little or when the deity addressed him by his real name. And for once, Zawa's message was direct. Okami could only think that was a bad thing.

He took a few minutes to commit the list to memory. It told him the age ranges he needed to approach commune elders for, and the names of those adolescents who Zawa thought might be Kin material. Okami hadn't appeared before the members of the commune in a few cycles, not since the last time Zawa had given him a list like this. He was not looking forward to having this conversation with the elders again but knew that he had to. Even so, the Kin would have a proper celebration in Zawa's honor this cycle.

Chapter Two

Kenji

People whispered around the clearing in the center of the caravan ring. Dried, frozen winter grass crinkled under Kenji's boots as he stepped out of the caravan he shared with his mother, leaving her alone in the cramped space. The Spring Moon rose for the first time that night on its final journey of waxing. Tomorrow night, when it was full, Kenji would turn sixteen. Then the Spring Moon would start to wane, winter officially over and spring would begin. Not only was it his birthday, but it was the biggest day of the cycle for the ZK Commune. They would celebrate their patron deity, Zawakuroi, and ask for his blessing as they began a new seasonal cycle.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Kenji's gaze caught on the three Kinsmen standing before the elder caravans at the center of the commune. He instantly recognized the white hooked wolf mask of the Kin warrior in the middle: Okami, their leader. The countenance swirled with abstract patterns of bold blues and royal purples, colors unlike the masks worn by other Kinsmen.

A shiver passed through Kenji's body as he stopped on the edge of the crowd, with a good view of where the Kinsmen addressed the commune elders. The Kinsmen were heroes, the warriors who protected the commune from the darkness and the deadly creatures found in it. Kenji had longed to join their ranks. Time was running out for him. Kinsmen only recruited youths whose bodies and minds would be more able to learn.

This could be it, Kenji thought.

“Why are you here?” Elder Taki asked. He stood in front of the stoop to his caravan, flanked on either side by the other two elders. Taki was hunched in his old age, pressing a gnarly stick into the snow at his feet to help himself stand. He looked incredibly fragile as he faced down Okami.

“I have a list from Lord Zawakuroi,” Okami said. His voice was raw. Kenji had heard Okami and other Kinsmen speak before. They all sounded that way. It was hard to pick them apart on voice alone. Okami’s words carried no formality or respect. They were a demand presented plainly.

“I knew this would be the cycle,” Elder Kurihara said from one side of Taki. She was the youngest of the three. Her spine was still erect and her hands still nimble despite being the third oldest person in the commune.

Okami didn’t seem to hear her words. At least, he did nothing to respond to them. The Kinsman on his side nearest to where Kenji stood shifted. Kenji couldn’t tell by looking if a Kinsman was a man or a woman. They all wore the same style of armor. And a lot of their masks looked similar to his untrained eye.

“Lord Zawakuroi will have all youth with eleven to seventeen cycles,” Okami said.

Murmurs rippled around Kenji. He had heard the commune complaining about this selection in the past, though he was too young to remember the last time Okami had asked for such a sacrifice. The Kin was asking the commune to hand over an entire generation. But eleven to seventeen meant that Kenji would be going too.

I get to be a Kinsman! He thought. Then someday he could be standing before the elders with Okami, asking for a new batch of recruits. Children would be looking at him with such admiration. They’d want to be just like him. Kenji knew his mother disagreed with the Kin, but this would be

the best way to protect her from undesirable things. A woman came up on Kenji's side, prodding at his ribs.

"Ouch," Kenji hissed, turning to glance at her.

"Keeeenji," Ueshima hissed. "Do you know what this means?"

"I get to be Kin," he whispered back.

"Yeah, and I don't," Ueshima said.

Kenji was too excited to let this notion bother him. Ueshima had been his friend since they were young children, even though she was a couple cycles older. Girls her age were considering marriage or having their first child. Though Kenji's mother had managed to have her promised to him, Ueshima had no interest in things like that. Instead, she spent her evenings daydreaming with Kenji about what life outside the commune looked like. There were three other communes in the forest, each bowing to a different patron season, and each possessing their own elite force of Kin for protection.

Taki hummed low, the sound reverberating around the caravans. It drew out the rest of the commune, the ones who hadn't already joined the crowd, and it cast a blanket of silence over the onlookers. The elder stopped humming, eyes fixed in Kenji's direction. Kenji made a show of clamping his mouth shut before Taki turned his haggard form back to Okami. "Are there any exclusions?" Taki asked.

Okami tapped his index finger against the belt on his hip, the only indication Kenji had to the man's irritation. "Lord Zawakuroi does not require any youth of fourteen or sixteen cycles," he said. He turned away from the three elders and began walking away. The other two Kinsmen hung back before following after. The crowd started to part before them and Okami stopped on its edge. "We'll be back tomorrow night to collect your contribution to our forces."

Taki dipped his head, hollow eyes sunken even farther into his wrinkled brow. He did not lift it or say anything else until the Kinsmen had disappeared into the trees. He turned to the elder on his other side. "Please begin preparing the children," he said.

Ueshima grabbed Kenji by the arm and drug him away as the elder slunk into the crowd on the other side. "You don't have to go after all," Ueshima said. She jumped up and down in front of Kenji.

He nodded his head in time to her jumping, eyes concentrated more on her chest than her face. Ueshima had a habit of showing a lot of skin no matter what season it was. She was much taller than Kenji anyway, so her chest was usually about his eye level. "Why would you think that?" he asked, trying not to let the disappointment into his tone. It had to be better this way. He'd be sixteen tomorrow and then he'd be expected to marry Ueshima and move out of his mother's home. He had always figured he and Ueshima would be taken to the Kin together, or they'd be left in the commune to start their own family. Kenji didn't want to admit that this latter option was much more disappointing than it had ever sounded.

"Because you're sixteen," Ueshima said. She stopped jumping. "That means you're excluded."

"I guess," Kenji said.

The elder passed them by with a pad in his hand. He scratched on the pad a moment before moving on.

"Tomorrow's the Spring Moon," Ueshima said.

Kenji tucked his hands into the pockets of his trousers and started walking towards the edge of the commune. Most people weren't allowed to go into the forest wherever or whenever they wanted. There were a few well-worn trails at strategic points that were open for traveling. One led down to the lake, frozen now, where fish were gathered throughout

the seasons, and water was collected during spring, summer, and fall. Another led down to a small clearing, where women of the commune maintained a berry patch and a few other fruits three seasons out of the cycle. The third was a hunting trail that men would use mostly during the winter to bring back larger prey. The last was nearly invisible, a small foot trail leading in the direction of the Kin's compound.

Ueshima had liked the idea of the Kin for the equality it would've provided her. Kenji didn't like that the older Ueshima got, the less she cared about equality and the more she wanted to settle down.

"And?" Kenji asked.

Ueshima dashed through the snow to keep up with him. "We could be married by the time the Summer Moon comes," she said. "And then we can have a caravan of our own."

Kenji didn't want to think about it. He'd probably be a father by the next Spring Moon. He could share the same birthday as his child. At least it would mean Kenji wouldn't be an absent father. It wasn't uncommon for children not to have a father. Sometimes Kinsmen spent the night in the commune. That's where Kenji figured he came from.

"Uh huh," Kenji said, not really listening to Ueshima as she talked. She didn't seem to mind, or notice. He wondered if the Kin lived in caravans. People would sometimes say that the Kin slept in trees, making it impossible to sneak up on them.

"I hope we have a daughter," Ueshima said. "At first. And then we'll have a son for you."

"Look, I promised my mother that I'd help her prepare the dried flowers for tomorrow's celebration," Kenji said, stopping abruptly. "I'll talk to you later."

He didn't wait for Ueshima to respond before beelining back towards the circle of caravans. It wasn't true, of course;

Kenji hadn't liked helping his mother since he was eight, but it was the perfect excuse to get away from Ueshima.

"Hey, look who it is," a haughty female voice said as Kenji passed by one of the neighboring caravans. As he turned, Haruta stepped out of the shadows between the caravans, full lips already curled into a sneer.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"At this time tomorrow, I will be basking in glory while you twiddle your thumbs here," Haruta said. She flicked her dark coiled hair over her shoulder. "The Kin want me."

"Until you open your mouth," Kenji said, trying not to feel the burn. A girl like Haruta would be Kin while he played caravan and father. "See how fast they throw you back."

"Ah, happy birthday to me," Haruta said. It wasn't her birthday. She spun around and skulked towards the center of the clearing where the elders were busy gathering a group of young people.

Kenji tried not to be bitter that he wasn't gathering too. With much effort, he pushed the excitement in the center of the commune out of his mind and continued to the caravan him and his mother shared. The small space was cozy with just the two of them, with his father likely being a Kinsman and him his mother's only child. But now, the space was suffocating. It represented a future he'd never wanted. A future that was now destined to be his.

About the Author

B. M. Valdez has been writing since they were a child in elementary school. Though they write a broad range of genres, including everything from dark fantasy to science fiction and even contemporary romance, B. M. considers themselves an author of queer stories above all else. B. M. is passionate about the LGBTQIA+ community, and their work always features a diverse cast of characters representing this community. *Relapse* is their first published novel.

When they aren't writing, B. M. enjoys spending time with their sibling playing video games, watching movies, or just generally having a good time. They can often be found covered in pet hair from their two dogs and two cats. They live in the Washington D. C. region of the east coast, though will always remember growing up on the Oregon Coast.

Without readers, B. M. Valdez would not have the opportunity to continue sharing their stories! They would love to connect with readers and can be found on the various sites below. You can find exclusive rough excerpts of other projects, short stories and chapbooks, character concept art, and more through these channels.

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