

Deviations: Appetite

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Elissa Malcohn

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“This novel is, in a word, riveting.”

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In memory of my parents

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About the Author:

Elissa Malcohn’s novelette “Lazuli” (_Asimov’s_, Nov. 1984) made her a 1985 John W. Campbell Award finalist. Her short story “Moments of Clarity” (*Full Spectrum*, Bantam, 1988) reached preliminary ballot for the 1989 Nebula Awards. Commenting on “Moments of Clarity” in his review of *Full Spectrum* in the November, 1988, *Out of This World Tribune*, Bruce D. Arthurs wrote, “This one story is worth the price of the entire book.” More recently, Elissa’s story “Hermit Crabs” (_Electric Velocipede_ #14, 2008) garnered praise from Marshall Payne (_The Fix_), Charles Tan (_Bibliophile Stalker_), and Fabrice Doublet (Night Shade Books message board).

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CHAPTER 1

Late Autumn

Alvav: The Cliff

Broad and deep, the steps in Alvav swallowed Piri's tiny feet as she hoisted herself up the rock wall. Ghost watched muscles jumping in her calves and buttocks, her shoulders tensing beneath her pack. He climbed behind her, his long legs negotiating granite with ease. The overhangs accommodated his height. The distances fit his stride.

He cast a worried glance at the chiseled stone, at passageways too narrow for Yata to pass abreast, yet too cavernous for one. This route was designed for Masari bodies.

"These steps are not sized for Yata," he called to her. "Be careful."

Piri pointed toward a high ledge, where sentinels paced back and forth behind a low marble balustrade. Their smooth skin held a warm glow against the silvery stone. Their black hair gleamed in the light. They appeared small, but that could be a trick of the distance. Many more steps remained.

The clouds were gone, but now the wind picked up. The stairway became more recessed, carved more deeply into the mountain to protect climbers from the elements. Ghost rested his palm against deeply-scored rock that felt cool even at midday. Iron spikes jutted from the walls.

Piri grabbed one, hauling herself determinedly up the giant steps. Ghost frowned at the goosebumps raised on her arms. Climbing behind her for so long, he realized with a start that her pale hair now hid most of her branding.

They advanced in silence. Occupied with her ascent, Piri's fingers were too far ahead of him to drum any messages. At last, passing back into crisp open air, Ghost could tell that the sentinels were indeed Yata. They ringed the top of the stairway, their stance protective, curved knives belted to their waists. Jeweled chains sparkled around their necks.

Piri lifted her head and beamed a smile at them.

They glanced down at her with raised eyebrows, joking amongst themselves in their own lilting tongue. One waved Piri forward with a gesture that was more challenge than welcome.

“Something’s wrong,” Ghost whispered. “Let me squeeze past you and go ahead.”

Piri shook her head, quickening her pace.

Ghost’s heart lurched. If he overtook and stopped her, where then would they go? These men were the first Yata she’d seen outside captivity. Their language was foreign to her, but it was her language, nonetheless.

It was foreign to Ghost as well. His family, tillers of the soil, had no need to learn Yata. He couldn’t understand the guards’ banter.

But he could read cruelty.

“Come back!” he called after her. “You’re not safe!”

One of the sentinels extended his hand to Piri, helping her over the lip of the top step and up onto the ledge. He whipped out his blade, sliced her pack from her, and cinched her in a tight grip. His knife bit into her neck, drawing a bead of blood.

“Let her go!”

Ghost flung himself onto the ledge. The sentinel sheathed his knife, maintaining his hold. In his arms, Piri stared wide-eyed at the men who would kill her, who were now equally dumbfounded at Ghost’s outburst.

“It’s all fine and good if you want to tenderize her yourself,” said one, in flawless Masari, “but do us the courtesy of letting us know in advance. Otherwise, we’d be happy to throw her off the cliff for you.”

“Not unless you’re ready to follow her,” Ghost growled, fighting the panic rising in his throat. “Let her go. *Now!*”

Piri's abductor released his hold. She gathered her pack to her chest and stepped unsteadily to Ghost's side, leaning into him as his arm came around her narrow shoulders. Her fingers shook against his back as she tapped, *Why?*

I don't know. "You've never seen this woman before. What makes you so eager to kill her?"

Her captor smoothed out his tunic, then screwed up his face as he sniffed at Ghost's rags. "We're just doing our jobs, hobo. We certainly don't want her. Why are *you* trying to smuggle her in?"

"We've come a long way. We're only visitors."

The man guffawed. "You've come a long way from the Marsh, from the smell of you. I suggest you go back there before we send a message to Rudder that one of their Masari tried to return a criminal to the Cliff." He sidled up to Piri and switched to Yata. "What did you promise this one? A finger? A toe? A child for him to munch if he brought you here?"

"She's not a criminal," Ghost said, his voice level. "And neither of us understands Yata."

The sentinel squinted at Piri, tracing a line on her scalp. "A mental deficient, then. Bad blood, too. Hair the color of goat's milk." He pursed his lips, casting a sideways glance at Ghost. "I thought you people ate anything. But obviously, someone as impeccably dressed as you has higher standards." He grinned at snickers from his comrades.

Piri's eyes narrowed. She bent forward at the waist, exposing her neck.

Ghost said, drily, "The meaning of those markings was explained to me."

The sentinel examined her. "Old Yata. It's a dead language."

"It says, 'Destiny Farm.'"

"Sounds like another prison." The guard shrugged. "A waste of ink. All convicts die in the hunt or in squalor. They end up on your table either way. Why should you care?"

Beneath him, Piri shuddered.

Ghost said, "Take us to your superior."

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"Understand this." Shabra, deputy of the Cliff, steepled tapered fingers beneath her chin in a small adobe room. Works of art hung alongside crime statistics recorded on parchment, tastefully spaced on the whitewashed wall behind her desk. "The only reason you were brought here is your quiet friend's tattoo. But I assure you I am patient with neither vagabonds nor thieves."

A thick, dark braid dropped between her breasts, against her cream-colored uniform. Light played on a pendant embossed with an official seal. "We know of no prisons other than the Marsh, so we can only assume your friend wears the mark of a convict gang. I promise you we will investigate. We abhor the idea of a Yata rebellion as much as you do." She observed Ghost through hooded eyes. "I am sorry those responsible removed her power of speech, but we on the Cliff do not grant asylum to criminals. Even to her."

Ghost leaned toward the hardwood table, his hands dangling past his knees. His Masari-sized chair dwarfed Piri's small stool. Even Shabra's desk seemed diminutive. "I'll tell you again." His voice turned ragged with unspent rage. "Destiny Farm is not a convict gang, nor is it another prison. It is a farm within Promontory's canyon, several days' travel from here, and it is run by Masari. Piri has committed no crime. She was born there for the sole purpose of reproducing and eventually becoming meat."

The deputy rose. "Nonetheless, we will investigate. But if what you say is true, it is no concern of ours."

Piri sprang from her chair. Ghost lunged to hold her back as she tried to reach across the desk. Her fingers fell to the wood, beating a staccato in urgent, repeating rhythms.

Shabra pursed her lips at the drumming, mildly intrigued, then looked up into Piri's incensed eyes.

Ghost caressed quivering flesh. "She wonders how you can be so callous toward your own people."

A smile twitched the corner of Shabra's lips. The deputy pointed to a framed cloth hanging behind her, a pastoral scene interwoven with gold threads of Yata calligraphy. "Do you recognize this? No, I didn't think so." She sighed. "It is 'Ballad of the Trees' by Ozal, one of the Cliff's greatest poets. Our children memorize it. I've been told some copies hang in Rudder as well, among your more learned people." She turned from Ghost, toward Piri's uncomprehending stare. "It's obvious you understand Masari, or you would not have been so eager to rip my throat out just now. I can tell, though, that you are unable to read Ozal, much less recognize his name. Yet you say you are one of us."

She circled the desk until she stood before the woman thrashing in Ghost's grasp. "Release her. If she's innocent of crimes, she won't hurt me."

*Guards are outside the door. We must remain calm.* Ghost's fingers encircled Piri's shoulder, drumming lightly before they withdrew. Piri struggled toward stillness.

Shabra nodded. "Good." She looked from Piri to Ghost. "Ozal was murdered in his sleep by a servant interested in his coat. One of the greatest minds of his generation was snuffed out for want of a bit of wool, by a weapon similar to the knife we found among your effects." Her gaze returned to Piri. "One's 'own people' is not an honor bestowed by merely being Yata. It is earned. You can start by familiarizing yourself with the language, but you won't learn it here."

Piri studied the composed, stern lines of Shabra's face. She reached blindly toward Ghost and tapped his arm.

Ghost whispered, "Are you sure?"

Piri nodded and tapped again.

He frowned. "Show us the way to the Marsh."

"You have *come* from the Marsh."

"We came from Crossroads." Ghost smiled wryly at Shabra's unconcealed surprise. Then he swallowed, his pleasure cut short. "Over there, I am the one who is a criminal—so it is best you direct us to your prison."

She scowled. "It is best I send word to Rudder, so they can extradite you back to

Crossroads. What exactly was your crime?”

“Crimes.” Ghost took a deep breath and looked down into Shabra’s obsidian eyes as Piri gripped his hand. If the gods existed, he could use their guidance now. “I was looking for a way to end Masari dependence on Yata. I experimented secretly on body parts from those who had been killed. I harbored an underage *yatanii* runaway and then Piri until my laboratory was destroyed. After that, Piri and I began our journey here.”

Shabra squinted up at him. “Those are lapses in judgment. They are hardly crimes.”

“In Crossroads they merit death.”

Her eyes glinted with shock. “Tell me,” she said, “how one group of Masari slaughters farm-raised Yata, while another deems the scientific study of the dead a capital offense.”

“You tell me,” Ghost answered, “how one group of Yata command worship from us while another uses its own people as prisoners to be hunted down.”

“We have no need of your worship. We do, however, have need of your appetites.” Shabra’s even gaze held neither the hubris of a god nor the fearfulness of prey. “The Cliff has enjoyed a long, peaceful relationship with Rudder. Your kinsmen help us maintain a civilized society and we help them survive. You say neither of you has been in Alvav before.” She folded her arms, nodding to herself. “I will detain you here while I check our records to confirm your story. Your belongings will be returned to you except for your weapon. I can promise you nothing more.”

## CHAPTER 2

### Crossroads

TripStone tried to shut out the sounds of retching and the stench of dysentery. Ignoring the wails of fresh grief proved harder.

She had carried her father home, stunned at his thinness. Now he lay dwarfed and alone on his marriage bed while she checked and rechecked what meat remained, smoking and preserving slabs that only seemed uncontaminated.

Her keen nose might deceive her. An incriminating blemish might escape her eye. Then she and NightShout would join the newly fallen, succumbing to death that continued not at the hands of Yata but from creatures she couldn't even see and in which only a few believed.

TripStone would have been a disbeliever as well, except for Ghost and his animalcules. She counted the days. He must have run out of meat by now. She should cut into her own sparse ration and spirit something to him.

The battle's smoke would have been visible from the cabin. He would know something was wrong.

But something had gone wrong long before Meat Day.

She returned to NightShout's bedside and cradled his hand, her whisper one of forced calm. "Why did Piri attack you? What happened after I left you at the cabin?"

She jumped when he drummed into her palm, *Ask WindTamer.*

She stared at his fingers. "WindTamer is dead. I helped bury him this morning." She wanted to stroke her father's cheek, but his face was still too bruised. "Father, you must tell me."

*Leave me alone.*

He pulled his hand from hers and turned away.

She padded into the common room, wanting instead to flee to the cabin. Ghost, Piri, and BrokenThread would know what happened. Had her father learned touch-speech before or after Piri's attack? What else did her family tell HigherBrook?

She was pinned here. When not by NightShout's side, TripStone washed putrid wastes from the cobblestones or dug graves at the Grange. Beneath the sounds of suffering she listened to distant gunshots as Rudder's hunters trained anyone in Crossroads willing to lift a weapon.

She grimaced as she flexed her discolored arm. The extraordinary rifle from Rudder still leaned against the common room wall. Next to it, her father's gun became a quaint relic rendered all but useless. Above both rested FeatherFly's training rifle, still on its hooks. Stock and barrel smooth and unembossed, the sacramental object remained pure and unsullied in its plainness.

TripStone hefted it. It was the gun of a child. She cradled it to her chest and slid to the floor, burying her face in her arms.

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HigherBrook laced brushed trousers beneath his dry, gray tunic, feeling unclean despite his heated bath. The Rotunda's remaining stewards would see to the muddied, befouled clothes he'd tossed into his dormitory basket. They would sluice his washwater down the polluted streets.

His footfalls echoed in the curving mosaic walkway, past the sacred offices of scribes. Scant days ago, a lifetime ago, the ever-present scratches of nib on parchment had risen into rarefied air until the great books themselves seemed to whisper from buttressed dome walls. Now the offices sat empty, the few surviving scribes consumed by other concerns.

HigherBrook wished he could join them. Once his hands, too, had been stained with ink. He'd written furiously with the others as devastated hunters sat opposite him, their heads bowed, recreating story after story. Speaker and recorder barely looked at each other. For most, the scribes were visible only by their handwriting.

HigherBrook's pen had woven verbal tapestries of Yata lives, the closest he had ever come to hearing a Yata voice. The sheaves of parchment encircling the

dome were old friends, the lineages of Basc cocooning him in a wondrous, leather-bound community.

He'd tried to imagine peering into the living faces of the revered. He'd reveled in their tiny intimacies, their loves and longings, the minutiae of people who lived on in Masari blood and bone. Often, while writing, he had forgotten about the exhausted hunter behind the voice. He'd seen only the Yata brought back to life in the telling, not the haunted eyes remembering the dead.

Now the great tomes sat inert in row after row, holding secrets he never could have imagined. More than anything—certainly more than the Chamber session that lay ahead—HigherBrook wanted to lift each book in its turn and pore through page after page for a sign, a warning. He doubted he would find one. His answers lay not in dignified remembrances, but in the raw passions of surviving kin.

Years ago he had flushed with pride when chosen to represent the people of Crossroads in its Chamber. The world was simpler then.

In recent days, he and the scribes and census takers had scrubbed the same stench from beneath broken fingernails and combed out the same blood matted into their pelts. Today, HigherBrook's duties plucked him from even that camaraderie. Each step toward the Chamber's quiet, pristine suite increased his dread.

The marble knob was a cool egg in his palm. He opened the great wood door and stepped wearily into a hall ringed with handsome, cushioned chairs.

Most of them were empty. The others held the surviving few caretakers of Crossroads: merchants and artisans, one other former scribe, and one blanched and sickened minister. They rose in honor of a junior member suddenly granted seniority in the wake of violent attrition.

“Sit.” HigherBrook lowered himself onto velvet as the walls amplified his command. He spotted an unfamiliar face belonging to a robust man in dusty traveling clothes. “The guest of the Chamber will identify himself.”

The traveler coughed into his fist. Rust-colored fur peeked out from beneath his sleeve. “My name is BrushBurn.” He leaned back, crossing a booted ankle over his knee and relaxing his shoulders. “I'm a trader from Promontory.”

CHAPTER 3

Basc

Gria nodded at her lieutenant and listened to his quiet withdrawal from the visitor's hut. She sat cross-legged on the floor, her rifle on her back. Her chin tilted up toward the white-robed crone perched on a straight-backed chair.

"Thank you for seeing me, Honorable One."

"Bear in mind that I did not have a choice."

"True," Gria admitted. But the smoldering, silver-haired woman before her had exercised the choice in deciding where the two would meet, and how. Where Gria sat, countless Masari had bent their heads to the ground and wept, seeking forgiveness. The message did not escape her.

"Honorable One, it is not my intent to conquer Basc."

"No. Only to place your troops on every road."

"For your protection. We do not know what the response from Crossroads will be."

"Protection?" The elder punched her staff into hard-packed earth and levered herself upright. Her heavy braid dropped to her waist. She circled Gria slowly and slipped wood beneath the gun muzzle. "My aunt once condemned you to death for our protection, before you escaped your confinement. How handily you have undone her work."

The wood swung up and returned. Gria winced at the sharp pain blossoming across her shoulder but kept her gaze steady.

Her lieutenant burst through the door at the noise, releasing his safety behind her back.

"Remember your orders," Gria called, without turning around. "I am unharmed."

She listened, waiting for the door to shut again and the dust to settle. She rose

and brushed herself off, ignoring the sting of the bruise, standing head and shoulders above the elder. “No one regrets the deaths of innocent Yata during the Reckoning as much as I. They could have been our farmers, our scribes, our manufacturers. They could have tasted the freedom that lies ahead of us.”

Gria paced to the blank wall, thankful that the citizens of Basc were at least capable of constructing their own dwellings. “I do not promise it will be easy. We will have to relearn the skills that died with our ancestors. We will have to wield plows and weapons both. But we will survive to preserve our own history.”

“Well-orated,” the elder muttered, “but poorly-conceived. You are nothing but a stupid girl, destroying our best chance of survival and demanding the impossible in return.”

Gria whirled from the wall. “And you ask that our citizens step into the hunting grounds to be complacently shot. You make it *quite* possible to offer no resistance. To have one’s life, one’s family, mean nothing.”

“If you believe they mean nothing, then you have never understood the Covenant.”

“I understand it too well.” Her gaze rested on the elder’s belted waist and its ceremonial pouches. “I understand that your fervor is outweighed only by your shame at surviving the deaths of so many others. That you sacrificed your name for a title because you detested the name. I understand that some never become divine in death, but live long enough to turn into spiritual leaders who perpetuate the myth of godhood.” She looked deeply into dry, brown pools. “What made you choose that path? Was it fear?”

The elder returned to her chair. “You asked to see me for a reason. I assume it was for more than an attempt at humiliation.”

“Basc still needs its soul.” Gria stood before her, arms folded. “I do not ask for the impossible, Honorable One, but what I ask of our people will be grueling until we can become self-sufficient. I will lead our citizens alone if I have to, but we will all be better off if you help me to nurture their strength.”

“You want my cooperation.”

“I will not force it from you.”

The elder heaved herself up and craned her neck. A gob of spittle flew from her lips and spread across Gria’s chin. She slammed her staff against the ground and shoved her way past the warrior.

Gria called after her, “Remove your influence, and there are elements among my troops who would sacrifice Basc’s soul altogether. You may have known them. Lotzil. Taba. Zai—”

The elder turned from the door. “Zai abandoned her children at her brother’s household last season. A Masari hunter came to me, looking for her. *A yatanii.*”

“Yes,” Gria said. “I saw the list.”

“You, then, provided the breeding ground for her demons. Do not cry to me about saving Basc’s soul.” Her staff beat a loud rap on the door. An attendant swung it open, took her arm, and hurried her past the soldiers.

Gria massaged the pain from her shoulder and strode to her lieutenant. “We’ll need to appropriate the visitor’s hut,” she said, flatly. “Outfit it as temporary barracks for those forces who have no home to go to.” She looked back upon the walls, wondering what dreams they would give her.

There would be no Day of Atonement for the Masari, no Day of Remembrance for the Yata. No need for honeycombed rooms ringing with stories of which Basc retained no written record. What Yata would walk into Crossroads to consult its repository of memory, bearing the stares of a people as self-effacing as they were ravenous? *Our history has been debased as a Masari fetish.*

Her mind raced with mental lists. *We will need to support more livestock, plant our own fields, produce our own parchment.* “When we have settled here,” she added, “we will start clearing ground. We must teach these people, drag them out hut by hut if we have to.” She clapped the soldier’s arm. “And I need a good scout. It’s time we met our brothers and sisters in Alvav.”

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Ila crouched in front of Abri and Evit, spreading his arms before them like protective wings. The small boys clung to him, cowering. “By the gods, Zai,” he

whispered. “What have you done?”

Zai dropped to her knees. She slipped her rifle from her shoulders and wiped the last remains of dried clay from her cheeks. “I have made a better world for my children. And for yours.”

Her voice was hard and flat. Even kneeling she was a coiled snake, ready to spring. Ila tried to imagine her armor lifted, her flesh soft again. He tried to focus on her, looking for his little sister. But his tadpole was nowhere.

He listened to Teza’s forced gaiety behind him as she marshaled toddlers into the back room.

“And what of Kana’s children?” Lani, ashen-faced, leaned against the far wall and cradled her infant against her breast. “What of Rato’s children?” She hissed, “Their parents never came home from the Reckoning, and I dare not imagine how our kinsmen might have died.”

“We never meant for any of you to die.” Zai bent lower, extending her arms. “Let go of my boys, Ila.”

“I’m not holding them.” A rock swelled inside Ila’s throat. He pushed his words around it. “They are holding onto me.”

“Abri, you can let go of him now.” Even softened, Zai’s entreaty was still a command. “Evit, sweetheart, it’s all right. You’re safe now.”

The boys hesitated.

“You’ve both grown so much.”

Ila’s heart tried to leap from his breast. “We missed you, Zai. More than you will ever know.” His hands dropped to his sides as the children snuggled against him. “I asked for you everywhere. In the Soala. In the Meethouse. Watu had seen you, but he couldn’t tell me where you’d gone.”

Zai said, quietly, “Watu is dead.”

Lani looked down at Ila, blinking back tears. “I told you, Ila. Watu was *one of them*. You saw the changes in him, yourself.” She glared at Zai. “He knew where

she was.”

“I thought of you,” Zai whispered. “In the camp.”

“How unlucky for us.”

“Enough, Lani.” Ila breathed hard, trying to fathom his sister hunched on the floor. “What do you want, Zai?”

“Only to see my boys.” She sat back on her heels, resting her hands in her lap. “And to have a room to stay in, between missions.”

“Convenient, that we have rooms available *now*,” Lani spat. “Especially since you no longer have Rato’s advances to rebuff.”

“What missions?” Ila asked.

“Does it matter?” Lani lifted the sleepy infant from her breast and burped him. “We’ll all have to do Gria’s bidding.”

“Not Gria’s.” Zai narrowed her eyes at Lani. “There are other missions.”

Loud squeals issued from the back room. Boisterous laughter.

“Ila.” Lani’s voice quavered. “She cannot stay here.”

“She is my sister.” He was rooted to the floor, patting Abri and Evit with numb fingers. “These are her sons.”

“I will help with the chores,” Zai offered, “when I am here.”

“The gods help me if I let a paring knife slip into your hands.” Lani pushed off the wall and trudged with her child into the back room. Brother and sister beheld each other.

“Things will get better,” Zai said. “I promise.” She smiled at Abri, who stared wide-eyed at her rifle. “This is a gun,” she cooed. “It will protect you against those who wish to do you harm. When you are old enough I will show you how it works.”

Abri looked quizzically at Ila before he bent toward his uncle’s ear. “Who is

she?” Even hushed, his voice was bell-clear. “She sounds like Mommy.”

A sob of relief rose in Zai’s throat. Her shoulders began to shake.

## CHAPTER 4

### Crossroads

Crossroads huddled against a chill wind. Fevers raged.

TripStone's stomach knotted as she unwrapped thick cloth from the Yata jerky she had stashed away. Every day her hunger sent her staggering to her room and her fingers to that hidden package. Every day she saw Ghost's gaunt face in the dried folds of meat and resolutely pushed it away. *I must see you, dear friend. I must get this to you and tell you what has happened here.*

She could not afford to be weak, physically or spiritually. It was too late for her father, who refused the Yata she tried to push past his lips, insisting she eat it instead.

"Not unless you tell me what happened up there!" She cursed herself for screaming at him. They were both in pain. The ghosts of ShadowGrass and FeatherFly echoed around the house, in the cupboards, in the sacrificial table, in the scrimshawed bones that still hung on the walls. "Father." She bent over him, grasping his arms. "We have a responsibility to the *living* now. We can't abandon them. I need to know what happened."

*I see nothing, he tapped. I know nothing. It is all illusion.*

She padded to the back of the house and howled in frustration.

At dusk she wrapped herself in layers against the cold and slung the black repeater across her shoulders. More and more of Rudder's shooters had been recalled home, leaving their new Crossroads trainees to guard the border. They left the new arms behind as well. The children of hunters discarded their training rifles in favor of the repeaters' deadly efficiency.

The Grange was especially difficult to secure from sporadic and random raids. Equipment and livestock went missing; crops were ripped from their beds. TripStone prepared to keep vigil at the windbreak, alert to Yata slipping in from between the trees.

*Shoot to kill. Do not atone. Prepare the meat quickly.*

The streets were all but deserted. The death toll began to level off, but TripStone took no comfort in that fact. Mortality would rise again as hunger increased. Her pelt should have thickened by now, but it remained summer-thin. She drew her vest more closely around her shoulders and watched faint steam rise from her breath.

A man left the empty marketplace and crossed her path up ahead. He approached the road to the Rotunda, his steps jaunty.

One look at his face and TripStone swung her rifle into her arms. She lifted its thick barrel, pulling the cocking lever. “Stop right there.”

BrushBurn halted with his back to her. He slipped gloved hands slowly from his pockets, turning his palms to show that they were empty.

“I should blow you away,” TripStone snarled, “except that we have laws here. So help me, the one thing saving you is that you are unfit for Masari consumption.”

He spoke without turning around. “I am here on official business.”

“State it.”

“I will state it to the authorities,” he said. “Not to you.”

She stepped closer. “What about SandTail? Is he on official business, too?”

BrushBurn turned his head, matching TripStone’s grim smirk. His voice dropped. “Yes, he is. But not in Crossroads.” He heaved an impatient sigh. “You’d better let me go. The Chamber is expecting me.” He nodded at the gun. “I see you hold the StormCloud, one of Promontory’s more popular models. Rudder chose its arsenal well. Its citizens were very generous in their aid to you.”

His hands still dangling at his sides, he began to amble toward the Rotunda.

TripStone shouted after him, “You tell HigherBrook that I will see him come morning! If he does not get that message I will hunt you down myself!”

She maintained her aim until BrushBurn was far down the spiraling road. She could not track him and protect Crossroads' crops at the same time; she had to choose. For one horrific moment TripStone envisioned Yata pens springing up at the Grange, the agony of Ghost's family forced into that kind of butchery. Her steps faltered.

"Easy, Stone," she murmured. "It's just the effects of meat deprivation. You've had hallucinations before. You know what to expect."

She wondered which was worse, procuring Destiny Farm's foul product or breaching the border, snatching innocents from Basc. Or raiding its burial ground in search of fresh dead, the carcasses of children and elderly. How soon would she and her fellow citizens devolve into beasts?

She looked toward the meadow and the burned woods beyond. The battle had erased one source of Destiny, at least temporarily.

"How much more 'bed snuff' will you have to squeeze from the factory in Skedge now?" she muttered into the wind. "How long can you keep up your unholy charade?"

Shooters passed her in a weary line as they departed from the Grange. Others joined her, approaching from scattered routes to begin their shift. TripStone hid in the shadows of tall pines, trying unsuccessfully to quell her hope that a raider would blunder into her sight. Even holding the stout metal monster in her hands, she could still aim cleanly for the heart.

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TripStone's nails were digging into her flesh by the time she was relieved. The pain kept her from nodding off. The bags under her replacement's eyes were almost as deep as her own.

"Good luck," she said, hoarsely. "Get one."

"Two, if I'm lucky."

The night had seen no action and chances of a daylight raid were slim. TripStone patted the shooter's arm and staggered from her post. She quickened her pace as advancing dawn melted the chill from her joints.

She welcomed the absence of shade as she spiraled in toward the Rotunda, tilting her head toward a warming sun. Mica glinted in the dome's granite coffers. Unbidden genealogies rose from the depths of memory. *Ila, surviving son of Elam. Elam, surviving husband of Doret. Doret, surviving daughter of Tanat and sister of Halla, Elda, Merot. Halla, surviving wife of Idri, Bala, Nedum, co-wife of Ashar, Tzi...*

TripStone closed her eyes against the light and drove them away.

She had burned those patterns into her mind when she was last in the Rotunda. She swore then that she was going to find Ila and warn him about Destiny Farm, voicing her fears that his missing sister had been spirited there. She would go from hut to hut if she had to, spouting lineages until someone led the way to his household.

For all she knew Ila could be dead, and his sister Zai as well.

Or—more alarming—Zai could have gone missing of her own accord, and was now armed by Promontory.

“Buy meat from those bastards,” she muttered, “and I’ll shoot off every head in the Chamber.”

She squared her shoulders and hauled herself up the large stone steps to the great bronze doors.

The silence at the top assailed her. The scribes were all gone. A lone census taker filed the records of Masari dead, creating single, hollow rustles of parchment.

TripStone planted herself before him. “I have an appointment with HigherBrook.”

The census taker squinted at her, studying the firearm at her side. “It’s early yet. He’s still in the dormitory.”

“Thank you.” She spun on her heel and strode toward the staircase curling down the dome. She ignored the census taker’s futile shouts and flew down the stairs three at a time, her palm grazing a thin rail.

A long, dark hallway curved to HigherBrook’s rooms. Slivers of light edged

through slits in the granite outer wall, striping her path. TripStone found his door, aimed her boot, and listened to the wood splinter. She raised her head as he bolted upright on his pallet, struggling to catch his breath.

“I told BrushBurn I would meet with you this morning.” She stepped into the room and nodded as she looked beyond the blanket’s edge. “I’m glad to see your pelt’s still thin. I thought you might have eaten the evidence I’d delivered—or perhaps BrushBurn’s samples of the many delicacies he can offer us.”

Behind his soft tenor HigherBrook’s face purpled with fury. “Should I be thankful you haven’t threatened to shoot me as you threatened him? Obviously, ‘morning’ is subject to wide interpretation.”

“You don’t know what he is.”

“I know that he is not your messenger boy. Though he has fulfilled that role admirably, considering your promise to hold him accountable for it.”

“I’ll tell you what else he delivers.” She turned her back as HigherBrook reached for his tunic. “Destiny, produced in Basc and in a factory in Skedge, that he brings to a place in Promontory called the Warehouse—what *used* to be their Rotunda. And guns, produced in Promontory, that he has brought to the militia responsible for—” She licked her lips. “For your elevation to the head of the Chamber.”

“Your implication,” HigherBrook said, his voice low, “is disgusting. Turn around.”

He stood covered in wool when she faced him.

“Use that language with me again—or with anyone within my hearing or the hearing of my subordinates—and you will rue the day you met me. Is that clear?”

TripStone raised her rifle. “As clear as the fact that I still have an unspent bullet in this breech.”

He looked from her to the gun and shook his head. Brightness glinted in his eyes. “I’ve learned recently that Piri has made the acquaintance of a friend of yours. A gentleman named Ghost, born SunDog.” He waited for the words to

register, then turned back to his pallet and began to straighten his blanket. “I have some personal hygiene to attend to, TripStone. Kindly wait in the hall after you have closed my broken door. I will be with you shortly.”

She stared at his spine as he bent to smooth the weave, then stumbled backward into the darkened corridor. She eased the door shut, studying the way it hung precariously from a cracked hinge. Her heart hammered. She paced, huffing as she counted off minutes.

At long last the door creaked open.

“Come in.” HigherBrook waved her past the pallet, to another room. “I’ve fixed tea, but I insist that my guests disarm before imbibing. How is your father?”

She stepped numbly into a dining alcove. “Not good.”

“I’m sorry.” He took her gun by its strap and laid it aside. “I know you need to get back to him. I won’t keep you.” He sat opposite TripStone at a small table and warmed his hands around a simple brown cup. “First, do not doubt for a minute that I know who BrushBurn is and what he does. Your information after the attack was quite helpful.” He sipped. “And I could tell the type of man he is by how he carries himself.”

“And yet you do business with him.”

“No.” HigherBrook met her gaze. “That is what *he* wants.” He sighed. “And that is what some in the Chamber want. We are deeply divided.”

She sipped, closing her eyes as the hot tea bathed her throat. She opened them and traced knots in the wood. “And if we are forced to buy from Promontory?”

“We are not yet at that point. I know how far we can stretch what we have.”

“We can’t stretch it for too much longer.”

“You’re right,” he said. “We can’t. As for your other concern—” He peered at her. “Unless you are more interested in my table.”

TripStone looked up from the knots and raised her cup for a hasty drink. “I’m listening.”

HigherBrook nodded. “Your mother knew you were in Alvav. When she asked for my help in finding you, I promised to contact the Chamber in Rudder. As you might imagine, the Alvav searches turned up nothing because you had already moved into Skedge.” He smoothed his close-cropped sideburns. “Yesterday I received a messenger from Rudder. The Chamber there reacted with some dismay to the fact that days after the search for you had concluded, two more residents of Crossroads were found in Alvav. They were the woman who attacked your father, and Ghost.”

“In *Alvav*.” She frowned. “Why there?”

“The runner didn’t say. According to her, the Yata authorities indicated only that Piri and Ghost are in good health and are staying there as guests.”

TripStone opened her mouth to speak, then clamped it shut.

HigherBrook poured more tea. “Out with it, TripStone.”

She took a deep draught. “You’re certain there were only two people?”

“I’m certain of what the messenger tells me.” He sipped. “Who would the third person be?”

TripStone whispered, “There was a girl with them. A young *yatanii*.”

“If she were a *yatanii*, she probably did not survive the journey. I assume you mean RiverRun.”

“BrokenThread.” She coughed. “Yes. RiverRun.”

“Both her parents were killed during the massacre. According to our records she has no surviving kin.” He worried his goatee. “BrokenThread. You obviously knew where she was hiding and chose not to tell us.”

“I believed she was safer where she was.”

“You were helping Ghost harbor an underage girl whose life was in jeopardy. Why?”

TripStone held the tea to her lips, squeezing the ceramic until it threatened to

break.

“Rudder cannot extradite Ghost and Piri unless Alvav turns them over to the Masari.” HigherBrook laced his fingers together. “And Alvav has welcomed them as guests. On that matter my hands are tied, until the circumstances change.” He reached over and loosened TripStone’s hands gently from the cup. “Listen to me, TripStone. We can be of service to each other, but to do that I need you to be honest with me.”

She swallowed. “I can’t promise that.”

“Then you have me at a disadvantage.” He drained his cup. “I will have to trust you, and I’m not sure that’s altogether wise.” He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “You and I have provided each other with valuable information. I will offer one piece more: I believe the Covenant can be re-established.” He smiled at her incredulity. “Yes, the chances of that are slim, but I’m sure you’ve considered the alternatives.”

He tipped his chair forward, counting on his fingers. “Listen to me—the numbers of dead Yata we have processed and the reports of living Masari witnesses indicate that those who carried out the massacre are still in the minority. I am willing to gamble that the majority of people in Basc are as revolted by that attack as we are.”

TripStone shook her head. “Even if that were true, we cannot go back to the sacraments as they were. There’s no way to predict another uprising. Taking to the hunting grounds with a single-shot rifle would be suicide now, and our children have already grown attached to the repeaters.” She gestured in the air. “We are a transformed people, HigherBrook. Too many Masari are dead and dying, and many of the living have turned their faith into hatred. Worship is out of the question. I cannot bow to Basc when I am dragging myself to the border day after day to guard Crossroads against raiders.”

“True. They have fallen low, and we must account for that. But we can recover from this damage.” His finger jabbed the table. “Think of what we provide Basc in return for a controlled quota of lives. Food. Clothing. Manufactured goods, as before. We know how to rebuild, but they must learn the most elementary processes before they can advance further. How many of them are willing to undertake that?”

“They learned how to modify our training rifles pretty quickly.”

“That was a fringe element. They had the motivation to do so.”

“Still.” She left her chair and paced the small room. “Once Basc’s citizens learn that the militia traded Destiny for arms, and the true purpose of that trade, that militia is finished. But knowledge of Destiny Farm would destroy any trust of Masari among the Yata.”

HigherBrook scowled. “They are not to know about Destiny Farm.”

She stared at him.

“We will not give them that leverage. Basc needs to earn *our* trust back as things currently stand. Not the reverse.”

A low laugh rose in TripStone’s throat. “You would have us be their Promontory, then. The simple price of dependence.” Her fist rattled the table. “I find *that* disgusting.”

He glowered up at her. “Then give me an alternative, because we have a lot of hungry people. Neither you nor I want to buy the flesh of Yata who have been treated worse than anyone in our valley’s history. And believe me, of the few of us left in the Chamber there is an increasing number who no longer care *what* meat we get, which is why we will not speak publicly about Promontory’s hand in this massacre. Not yet.” He reached up and grasped her wrist. “I am going to Basc, and I need you to accompany me. I have never been face to face with a living Yata. I want you to be my guide and my intermediary.”

“Ah.” She freed her arm with a slow, firm twist. “Hence your ‘concern’ earlier about my father’s health.” A smile ticced her lip at the color rising in his face.

“NightShout,” he fumed, “will receive the best medical treatment we have at our disposal while you are gone. It’s your choice.” He pushed back his chair, swung to the far corner of the room, and lifted the strap of her rifle. “You know what’s at stake.”

TripStone secured her weapon. “Thank you for the tea,” she said flatly. She paused. “And for the information.”

“You’re welcome.” This time his touch was tender. “We’d been watching Ghost for some time before he left his family. We know of some of his irregularities. Whatever he has done, we are not currently in any position to enforce severe punishment.” HigherBrook sighed. “On the contrary, we might benefit from his expertise.”

TripStone bit her lip to still the sudden tremor in her legs and shook her arm free of him. “I must get home.”

“Give my best regards.”

She looked back and tried to read his face. It was the face of a diplomat, open and enigmatic at once.

HigherBrook walked her to the broken door. She waited until she was far from his rooms, then fled across the striped corridor and up the dizzying staircase.

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*Go with him.*

“I’m not leaving you.”

NightShout looked upon his daughter’s face, so like his own. But ShadowGrass lived on in the curve of her cheekbone, the bow of her lips. There was something left of his wife, some fleeting traits of inheritance. He took comfort in what he could grasp, what his heart could hold.

His thick fingers spoke to TripStone’s palm. *I will eat something if you go with him. We need the Covenant.* He was reduced to the bargainings of a child, but so be it.

TripStone whispered, “You thought HigherBrook was an idiot not long ago.”

*That was reciprocated.*

She shook her head and smiled as she kissed his hand.

If the Crossroads Chamber was worth anything, being its leader’s attaché might give NightShout’s daughter an edge in survival. He cleaved to that knowledge.

Regardless of the Covenant's fate, she had to remain fed. And sufficiently armed.

He relaxed into the kiss of her fingertips as she drummed onto his arm, *Father, when did you learn to touch-speak?*

*WindTamer taught us. We were hiding information from your friend.*

"Is HigherBrook my friend?" She took a deep breath. "I'm not sure."

NightShout cupped her cheek in his hand. His thumb touched the lines spreading on her brow, the dark circles under her eyes. He felt the weakness in his bones, a slow dissolve.

TripStone continued, "HigherBrook told me that Ghost and Piri are in Alvav—as guests of the Yata."

Her words startled NightShout. Tension drained from his shoulders as tears nestled in the corners of his eyes. The people he had feared dead stopped hammering against the walls of his chest.

They were safe and unharmed. He had not broken completely his promise to his daughter to protect the cabin's occupants.

*RiverRun?* he tapped.

"He didn't know."

NightShout saw the ache in her eyes. Her agonized questions had gripped him in walls of flame, but he couldn't shrink from them any longer. He could not lose TripStone without answering her, even if she hated him for what he disclosed.

He needed meat to help him survive the telling, before his darkness returned and the strength of his own demons pulled him apart.

Ghost and Piri lived. The knowledge wrapped around NightShout, warming him in a white cloak of calm.

He had to snatch the walking stick from the cabin wall again. He had to force his way again past the tapestry, into the laboratory, clearing a path of safety and

erasing the evidence.

He had to fight his way through RiverRun's howls, Ghost's shouts. Piri's rage had scorched him clean at last. She had been his agent of atonement, the avenging angel who exacted justice for the atrocity he had perpetrated in the hunting grounds.

He squeezed his daughter's hand and licked his lips. "Food."

TripStone's lips trembled. She slipped a morsel of jerky into his mouth.

He closed his eyes and bit down. Ribbons of white-hot light coursed through his veins. He swallowed. "More."

Her breathing changed as she fed him. He listened to TripStone's struggle to control a maelstrom of joy and sorrow. It twined around him as well, binding his soul with thick, dual ropes.

He found the soft pad of her palm. *The cabin.*

"I'm here, Father," she whispered. "I'm listening."

*Help me to go back there.*

She bent down. Her sweet breath warmed his ear, worry in her voice. "You were pounding on the door. I heard the men from Promontory. I left you to follow them."

His fingers began to graze her palm, uncertain and hesitating. The truth emerged in the movements of his knuckles, components of sound translated into patterns, a monotone of fingertips. His struggle with SunDog in the dirt, the dust in their hair, the rolling chamber pot. Piri protecting RiverRun with her body, gripping a knife.

His tapping intensified; the patterns whirled on TripStone's skin. RiverRun's hostility and exhaustion, shadows flickering, Ghost reaching to turn up the wick, NightShout's fingers closing around the staff. The staff swinging.

Hot tears fell onto his neck, but he did not know whose they were. His fingers moved of their own accord, speaking for him. He was inert, the beasts of his



hand scuttling.

He lay in a chemical stink on a hard floor. His head rang under Piri's swift kick. He awakened in a tangle of bushes, breathing hoarsely through his mouth. The pains in his leg pushed the events of the night back, back.

*The cairns are gone.* He pressed her hand. *There never was a laboratory.*

"I understand."

*You were never involved,* he drummed. *They were never there.*

She cried, softly, "I know." Her arms enfolded his sunken chest. "I know what you tried to do. I forgive you."

NightShout clutched his daughter to him, running his fingers through her hair. Her body heat washed over his pallet in a wave. He pulled the wave in, smelling the woods in her vest, discerning her mother's touch. FeatherFly's laughter danced in his head.

Benevolent spirits surrounded him. All the Yata he had killed wrapped him in a rose glow emanating from their punctured hearts. *I forgive you.* They murmured to him in his daughter's voice. The unknown Yata woman walked placidly among them, echoing their words, trailing the colors of sunset from her shattered skull.

They melded into the rest of his dreams and faded away.

NightShout felt TripStone smooth his hair back on the pallet. She drew his blanket over his shoulders and rubbed her cheek against his, telling him she loved him.

WindTamer handed him a walking stick and led him toward a shimmering portal ringed in large granite stones. Piles of white iridescent rock extended toward them, delineating a single path. Disguised as natural rock formations, pointing the way.

A blanket of cloud-spun sky rose up behind them as WindTamer led him through. It settled ever so lightly over NightShout's eyes.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Cliff

The eastern sun drew gold across cool, lightening walls at the top of the bluff. Another tapestry of Ozal's poem brightened next to graceful paintings exacted by an easy brush.

Not for the first time, Piri wondered if the artist's name hid in the strokes interrupting a richly-toned waterfall. She had no way to tell. She leaned back into her pallet's silky coverings and looked toward Ghost. He slept on the other side of Shabra's guest room, his mouth hanging open.

Piri had awakened groggily, feeling gravity pull on her spine. She knew the weaving inside her, the fortifications building piece by piece. Softness became entwined with hardness. Steady heat flushed her breasts.

She had said nothing before, but now she was sure. She had probed between her legs, then held glistening fingers up to her nose and mouth. She was sure.

She was a sturdy mountain rising from the bed's embrace. Naked, Piri padded to the window. She gazed across the meadow to a line of blue summits ringing the dawn. Fog tumbled into valleys. Water streamed down slopes, sluicing through rivulets crossing the grass far below.

Below Shabra's house, beneath the summit, the cultured of Alvav took their tea. Their patterned robes caught a gentle breeze; the gems they wore cast tiny rainbows. They huddled and laughed amongst themselves, oblivious to the men and women in dun-colored tunics who poured amber liquid into fanciful cups set down by parchment and drawing board.

The servants moved quickly and efficiently, proffering food and removing waste. Their faces bore the calm disposition of the bas-reliefs carved into Shabra's walls.

For days Piri had walked past the contemplative, noncommittal sculptures, their sanded lips pressed together in knowing smiles. Nowhere did she see a tongue. Surely the servants must have them, must use them after disappearing into the

recessed corners of their lodgings.

Ozal's words meandered like firefly tracks across the forest tapestry. Piri still wondered what he said.

Joints cracked behind her. Ghost stretched his long body beyond the confines of his bed and Piri smiled at the depth of his yawn. She joined him on a pallet too narrow for them both, snuggling against his fuzzy chest as his arms and legs encircled her.

They were careful. In the woods their secretions watered the ground, settling beyond reach. Surely the rules were different here. It was good they slept apart.

She waited until after his tongue comforted hers, and after his lips teased and left her neck. Then she reached for the hand blanketing her hip. She guided it to her stomach and held it there as her pulse throbbed against Ghost's life line.

His palm traced the curve of her reddening skin. His lips brushed her ear.  
"Child?"

She nodded.

Ghost gathered her in his arms again, then pulled back wearing a grin. His eyes held more elation than fear.

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Outfitted in modest robes and escorted by guards, they arrived at Shabra's bright alabaster terrace. Ghost took his seat by the plate that differed from the others and wondered about his desensitization. Even the most skillfully-crafted tongs could not erase his mild sense of horror as he closed them around the Yata furnished by his host. Days earlier he had reeled at the concept.

"We are used to visitors from Rudder," Shabra had assured him, that first morning. "We can accommodate them."

Unfazed, Piri bent to her broth. She had known worse.

As before, the deputy quizzed Ghost about Crossroads while a young woman hovered over them and took notes. Why did only a select few of Crossroads'

Masari know Yata? How far back had the Covenant been established? Did people truly believe the mythos? Didn't they think hanging bones on the walls was ghoulish?

Ghost answered between bites, feeling like a specimen under his own lenses. Having his own history recorded for posterity gave him the oddest sensation of all. No Masari he knew had ever been preserved this way.

But Masari were curiosities on the Cliff. Those outside Rudder were exotic.

Piri was no longer considered a criminal, but Shabra ignored her for reasons that soon became clear. The Yata of Alvav preserved the Cliff's integrity. Those living beyond the valley were of no consequence.

Ghost looked away from the deputy to gauge his beloved's reaction. Far from being offput, Piri studied her environment and its denizens with even greater scrutiny.

Shabra had stopped him during his first meal on the terrace, when he had tried to thank the household servants for waiting on them. "They don't understand Masari," she said. "Only Yata."

"What does one say in Yata, then?"

She offered him an indulgent smile. "They wouldn't recognize your accent."

She was more gracious toward her scribe, who also wore the marks of servitude. The scribe at least was bilingual, bowing silently to Ghost's gratitude and Shabra's open amusement.

Now the marble around them warmed and someone strummed a small harp from a dwelling below. Ghost watched as Piri rose from her finished broth and moved to stand behind the servant.

Shabra asked, sharply, "What is she doing?"

Piri pointed to her own eyes, then to the parchment, then to Ghost.

"You want to watch what she writes." Shabra raised an eyebrow. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

Piri answered with a sage nod as the scribe's smile broadened just a bit. The scribe moved her parchment to afford a better view.

Answering questions about Masari culture proved more difficult. Ghost could describe only the tapestry he'd left behind in the cabin and the bawdy tavern songs he'd heard before his self-imposed exile. He could point to no theater, no sculpture, no literature.

The bits of scrimshaw he remembered from his parents' home depicted Yata stories, but at least Masari hands had crafted those. The deputy fixed him with a look of pity when he told of WindTamer's simple embellishments carved into tables and chairs.

He did not want to think about Crossroads, but about the hybrid child that would swell Piri's diminutive womb. Her eighth pregnancy. Their mingled blood. Yata gestation lasted for only a season, Piri had drummed, though the timing of hybrids was uncertain. She had not counted the days before the other births. There was no sense in counting the days toward loss.

Now they would count them together and keep their own notes.

"Parchment," Ghost said, without thinking.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sorry." Ghost concentrated, tracing back lines of thought. "You wanted to know about our Thanksgiving Days." He closed his tongs around a tender cube. "When we tithe part of our harvests to Basc, we keep an inventory on parchment."

"Rudder supplies food to the Marsh," Shabra mused, "but that is only to keep the prisoners' meat on their bones."

A server collected their plates, his complacent smile unwavering.

Ghost observed the man. "He doesn't know Masari?"

"Not a word."

"What made him into a slave?"

Shabra said, plainly, “The crimes of his ancestors.”

CHAPTER 6

Crossroads

Crossroads' marketplace came to grisly life. No brightly-dressed hawkers shouted the merits of their wares; their carts and lean-tos were gone. No tinted awnings fluttered in the breeze. No one raised flasks to punctuate a point. No boisterous laughter joined the sport of wager.

Instead a single cart stood, hidden by exhausted throngs. They pressed in toward BrushBurn, clutching sacred relics and heirlooms to their chests. Swarming from all corners, Crossroads' citizens converged on packages of dried, stamped Yata. One gaunt neighbor supported another, each holding the other up as they shuffled toward the growing mob.

The parcels BrushBurn distributed were small, but enough. Voices in the crowd cried out to him, pleading to him to take their bones, their combs, and their purses stippled with dazzling ideograms executed in multiple inks.

How can you buy from Promontory when they have done this to you? Don't you know where that meat comes from? TripStone wanted to scream that the very man who fed them had played a role in their own destruction. But they were not hunters. They had no other way to eat.

Cramps sliced through her stomach. Even as her mouth watered, she staggered from one villager to the next, beseeching them not to sell off their history. She knew how long she could live without Yata, but the others had never invited that stigma into their lives.

Since when, she wondered, had the minute detail of Yata days become part of Masari heritage? Since when had she grown so attached to the stories that eclipsed her own, unrecorded dreams?

She was not alone in her urging. Several other citizens tried to persuade the desperate that they could still turn their courses back, recover, and begin anew without abandoning the Covenant. But the devout were few, and weak. The mob pushed them away.

BrushBurn possessed the meat, their salvation. The small packages leaving his hands were good for a meal. The handiwork he reeled in would fetch handsome prices in Skedge, whose citizens would gladly trade Destiny for treasures depicting the lives of their distant, rare cousins, the other “Little Masari.”

A hand locked around TripStone’s wrist, firm and insistent, pulling her away.

“Let me go,” she panted. “They shouldn’t be doing this.”

HigherBrook grasped her shoulders and turned her from the crowd. “I know. But it’s done. Save your strength for protecting the crops.”

She glanced back toward the throng. “I never thought I’d be—” She blinked back tears. “I’ve resented the Yata for a long time, HigherBrook. We took their voices into us and never expressed our own. Of all those books in the Rotunda, not one of them speaks about any of us.”

He led her away. “It might make no difference, soon.” He grimaced. “Our own citizens have tried to raid the Rotunda, to sell its library to Promontory. Fortunately, they are no less weak than the rest of us, and we’ve been able to hold them off.” His clothing flapped loosely about him. Plain rope tied the fine fabrics to his body. “We’ve been collecting family shrines because the Rotunda is harder to breach than homesteads. I took the liberty of moving your possessions, myself.”

TripStone stopped in her tracks, feeling heat at her neck. She sputtered, “I hadn’t taken you for a thief.”

“You’d rather they’d be sold to BrushBurn, then,” he snapped. “Because believe me, TripStone, your neighbors *will* steal from you.” He trudged ahead. “They’ve already tried.”

They walked side by side in silence. TripStone tightened the knots that kept her own vest from flying away. Her shoulders ached from a StormCloud repeater grown leaden. She shoved cold hands into her armpits, fighting the chill of late afternoon, but she also recognized the effects of malnutrition. Her knuckles pushed the limits of her skin. “My mother’s kin were scrimshanders,” she said, finally. “Her blood and theirs went into some of my—relics.”

He nodded. “I will do my best to keep them safe.”

TripStone tried to smile. “She never was all that good at it. She was a better hunter.”

“I imagine your father had much to do with that.” HigherBrook pulled his jacket collar up, against a fresh gust. “I’m familiar with the census records. They show his performance over the years, and that is how he will be remembered. The Rotunda holds Masari stories as well as Yata, if you know where to look.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat and coughed. “Thank you.”

He walked her to a line of shooters at the edge of the fields. TripStone frowned at the gaps between their diminished numbers, wondering how they could possibly provide defense against the raids. Almost all of them were inexperienced, handling guns for the first time in their lives. They could learn and retain only so much, their memory dulled by hunger. Their backs bowed under the firepower.

“The number of raiders has increased,” she whispered. “They’re hitting several locations at once now, in small groups. We’ve been losing more people.” She glanced at HigherBrook and saw only a mask. “They’ve got some of our weapons as well. Fortunately, the StormClouds are too big for most of them to lift, let alone fire.”

“I know. All the more reason to get to Basc, and soon.”

TripStone looked away. The Rotunda’s dome rose beyond small hillocks, a pale cousin. “These attacks mean Basc is controlled by the militia, even if its citizens are against it. We must meet with the traditional authorities, and we have no way to tell whether they are still alive.”

HigherBrook squeezed her shoulder. “We’ll find a way.”

~~~

TripStone took her position by the windbreak, its pines swaying in dwindling light. Sporadic exchanges of gunfire crackled in the distance, followed by yells. A series of whistles told her a raider was dead, but gunfights against the surviving Yata continued. Ghost’s kin rushed wheelbarrows to the site to gather the bodies for butchering, willing to risk their own lives to keep Crossroads fed.

The knots in her stomach tightened. She mustn't think of the cutting blocks. She had to be a *yatanii* again, summoning the will to reject her body's urgent demands. She would receive her ration in time; she had to be patient. TripStone concentrated instead on the feel of the gun in her hands, changing her hold on the rifle to compensate for her decreased weight. The StormClouds weighed down more than just the Yata.

She glanced up as branches bent the other way. Her nostrils flared at the faint smell of meat, her lips drawing back to magnify the scent. Heat coursed through her, thawing her hands and feet. TripStone shifted position, moving low to the ground.

The raiders were headed for the sheep pens. Three of them, she guessed from subtle shifts in the air.

They knew she lay in wait for them, alone in this isolated corner. They probably thought she was a neophyte, like most of the other shooters here. They assumed they had strength in numbers. TripStone weighed the possibilities. The raiders would probably converge on her as a single unit, guns blazing. She had to act quickly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, tracking them by feel. They were well-trained, moving silently through the lines of trees and tempering their advance, but they couldn't hide from her. TripStone's sinews tautened. Saliva spurt in her mouth. Adrenalin flooded her. Beneath the pains in her belly, a dull joy radiated from her spine. It coaxed her, creating a plan.

The air settled. She no longer needed to think; her body knew what to do. It bypassed her brain, knowing when to act and how to tell her.

*Now.*

She fired as they burst from the windbreak. One, two went down. The third squeezed off a shot and TripStone dove, angling her rifle and grinning as the raider's gun flew from his hands. She slung the StormCloud across her back and threw herself between the Yata and his weapon, charging him.

He fled into a squash patch but she was faster, bounding over the vines to tackle him. Blood roared through TripStone's veins as they rolled in shattered bits of pulp. Her muscles twitched, singing like steel. In one swift movement she ripped

leather armor from the raider's back, moaning convulsively at his exposed, glorious skin before she bent to his side.

Sweet blood gushed into her as her teeth sliced through him. Her jaw clamped shut like a vise. She twisted her head and pulled, swallowing the meat whole. She grabbed a gob of dirt and shoved it into the Yata's open mouth to dampen his howls.

TripStone pinned him to the ground with her body, bending again to his ripped side. The world buzzed around her, drowning the sound of his choking as she wedged her palm harder against his lips. She had to dig into her brain to remember his language.

"That was for my mother," she panted. She sheared a lozenge from his shoulder. "My father."

He struggled, twitching, unable to break her hold. Ecstasy coursed through TripStone as she subdued him. Something deep inside her awakened, something wonderful and natural and strong.

She forced herself away from his throat; she needed him alive. Instead, she eased a small, controlled mouthful from below his scapula, working her incisors into muscle, pausing to lick the gore from his wound before she finished detaching his flesh. Her captive's wild bucking only excited her further.

"My brother." She chewed the last piece, savoring its rawness, exulting at the stench of fear beneath her. Unparalleled potency shook her as she basked in the truth that she had been starving all her life.

Only the thin veneer of civilization stopped her from bending down again to feed; once she began she wouldn't be able to stop. The sweet smears of Yata on her face and neck and the spatters on her clothing brought her body to a fever pitch. Every ounce of her instinct struggled against learned restraint.

"This is what you have reduced me to," she rasped. "This is what the Covenant has saved you from."

His struggles diminished. He was losing strength.

"I will let you go," she told him, marveling at the quick clotting of his blood.

“Soon. I have taken enough from you to let you know what we are. If you can avoid the rest of us you will make it back home alive. I know how quickly Yata heal.”

Air moved more easily through his nose; TripStone felt his breath on her hand. She would let him spit out the dirt, but not yet. “Know that this fate awaits your people unless we can come to an agreement. Do you understand me?”

He nodded. TripStone smiled at his shudder. “Then listen to me very carefully.” She bent close to his ear but then backed off; the temptation he presented was too great. “I will come to Basc, with another, soon. Not to feed but to negotiate. Harm us, and you and those you love will know what it is to be eaten alive.”

His eyes were tight shut against pain. The rest of his body was limp.

“We need to see The Honorable One,” TripStone continued. “Is she still alive?” He nodded. “Excellent.” She relaxed her grip. “You are a messenger to her. Tell her to be ready for us. Fail to deliver that message and you will face the consequences.”

She slid off him, eased her hand from his mouth, and waited as he coughed out the dirt and retched into tangled vines. “You are also to tell your leader that we will put an end to these raids, once and for all.”

He remained doubled over, dripping spittle and moaning against the agony of his wounds. TripStone helped him stand and walked him back to the windbreak. She stopped to snatch his rifle from the grass, to add to Crossroads’ cache of arms.

They passed his comrades broken on the ground. He stumbled beside her, mumbling too softly for her to understand him.

She bent down to hear the frightened words, “We are starving, too.”

“You would, without our tithes, now that you’ve burned the forest. Your raids won’t make up the difference. The more you destroy, the less we can provide you.”

He glared up at her. “We won’t be your slaves, Woolie.”

“Our peoples have been slaves to each other.” The darkening light might deceive

her, but she was certain his flesh already began to regenerate, weaving a natural bandage around her bites. “The repository of your history in Crossroads is also threatened. The records of your lineages, the stories Basc has given us for generations. Ask yourself if you want to sacrifice that as well.”

She let him go, listening as he dragged himself haltingly among the trees. When he was far enough away she whistled for the wheelbarrow, unsure of what she wanted more—to tell Ghost’s parents their son was safe in Alvav, or to unpeel the armor from the nearest Yata corpse and sink her teeth into his thigh.

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“That is the most *idiotic*, sacrilegious, *dangerous* thing I have *ever* known anyone to do!” HigherBrook paced the common room floor in the center of a sprawling farmhouse. He stopped long enough to seize TripStone’s chin. “I asked you to help me *restore* civilization, not *obliterate* it!”

From behind him RootWing, head of the household, murmured, “Her method might just work. It should remind them why the Covenant existed in the first place.”

TripStone wanted to smile back at Ghost’s father, but HigherBrook cinched her jaw too tightly. She knew that more than her transgression upset him. Sounds echoed from the next room of cracking and slicing, joints being separated in food preparation. She wondered when the leader of the Chamber last ate.

RootWing himself had come with a barrow and gathered the dead Yata, smelling not just death on TripStone but the perfume of digestion. He’d ordered her to come to the farmhouse as soon as her watch ended. There, in the lamp light between dark wood walls hung with well-worn tools, he’d silently appraised her soiled clothing and the uneasy equation of two corpses and three captured rifles.

Even more perplexing, TripStone explained that she had sent the third soldier back to Basc instead of devouring him outright. Then she’d asked that someone fetch HigherBrook, quickly.

RootWing had called to his wife DewLeaf to draw a bath and continued interrogating TripStone from behind a curtain. The news that his son was still alive was almost enough to offset the shock of her other revelations.

Now HigherBrook examined her, wiping a lingering bit of blood from her ear. He scowled at her straight back and the unselfconscious triumph in her gaze. “You see the aftereffects of her feeding, RootWing. How many others saw her?”

“For all I know, just myself and my household, and the man who relieved her.”

TripStone broke HigherBrook’s hold on her chin and pushed his arm away. “I ran before he got close enough and made sure I stayed downwind. I doubt he saw what was on me.” She relaxed into a thick, clean robe, surprised at the vividness of its comfort. They listened to a cleaver descend in the next room, its rhythmic chops a bittersweet music. “I understand the rituals now. All the strictures of preparing the bodies. The curing, the spicing. The timing of the prayers.” She smiled contentedly to herself. “It’s all to hide what’s really there, isn’t it? It’s to deaden the taste.” Her eyes gleamed. “HigherBrook, have you ever—”

“No, I have not!” he barked.

She spied a wash of pain crossing his face. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t speak of eating. You’re hungry.”

“SunDog ate raw Yata,” RootWing said. “When he was a boy.” He tried to smile at TripStone, his voice faraway. “You know as well as I do that there was nothing he wouldn’t try.”

He leaned forward in his chair, supporting well-muscled arms on mud-stained trousers. TripStone looked upon long limbs and an angular build so like Ghost’s, though the father was robust where his son was slight.

RootWing noted the surprise in her face. “I know you were SunDog’s confidante, but he didn’t tell you everything. Only the family knew.”

“How could Ghost have gotten raw Yata? Only hunters prepare the meat.”

“Until now, yes.” RootWing raised his eyebrows at her. “SunDog—Ghost—never told us where he got it from, or how. But we all saw what it did. The power of that small piece of meat frightened him half to death. Scared the rest of us, too.”

“The fact remains,” HigherBrook said, “that if TripStone, spent as she was, ran

down a Yata soldier and mauled him, it's only a matter of time before someone else discovers that kind of potency." He glared at her. "And they might not rein themselves in so readily."

RootWing shrugged. "That may already be happening. We don't know about a kill until we receive the signal. There's nothing to stop the shooters from hoarding bodies, especially if they've got families to feed."

HigherBrook heaved a deep breath, running his fingers through his short hair. TripStone watched as he began to pace again, his hands shoved into pockets.

"As you said," she reminded him, "it's all the more reason for us to go to Basc." She held up her hand. "After you and I have had a good meal and are sufficiently supplied with provisions for the trip. Otherwise—"

She drew herself inward and buried her face in her arms, but not from sorrow. The sounds from the cutting table no longer wrenched her innards. Instead, she tingled with a rapture she knew was best kept hidden.

CHAPTER 7

Basc

Ila leaned over meager fare, skinning small rodents, his hands flecked with blood. Tired adults and wailing children surrounded him, crowded into newly-cramped rooms. Even the older ones pushed and shoved, fighting over a moment of privacy as loudly as over gristle. Pulling the combatants from each other took almost as much work as capturing dwindling game from a scorched forest.

After the Reckoning, Ila's family had numbered too few. Now Zai's followers camped in his second hut. Even diminished, his kin overran the space she'd left him.

Despite their numbers, they were no match for the soldiers pulling shifts outside, sworn to protect Zai. The house breathed more easily when she departed on her secret missions. Only Abri and Evit grew surly in her absence, raising their fists to the other children. Even Evit, the little one, toddled about the house, chanting *kill kill kill*, though Ila doubted the child knew what he was saying.

But then Zai returned, bearing the spoils of plunder. She presented him with fat animals, well cared for, their throats slashed by her raiders. She offered him fruits not just picked off the vine but trailing it, snatched in haste.

He would have no part of it. None of his household would.

He bent to his task instead, rat to vole to squirrel, whatever poor beast graced his family's traps. The adults worked together by the hearth, their hands grown callused and chapped. Scrawny morsels fell from their knives. They needed many scraps to satisfy their hunger, but even the smallest provided something. They had to catch what they could before winter set in.

Ila looked over at his sister, who held Evit's pudgy hand around the small knife that had been Ulik's. Zai drew it through a chunk of lamb liberated from the Crossroads farm. Abri, old enough to handle a blade by himself, cut his own dinner. They already handled weapons, learning the power they could wield in a sharpened edge.

“You’re a backward fool!” she’d hissed, when Ila rebuffed her offer of better meat. “You insist on struggling in the forest when I bring you so much more. You’ve done nothing but spit on my generosity.”

“Taking our home from us is not generosity, Zai.” Ila’s household had stood beside him in silent agreement, staring her down. “Maybe we cannot drive you out, but we will keep the Covenant alive in spite of you.”

“Not without Masari tribute!” She shoved the carcass at him. “And you are putting your children at risk to continue a way of life that is mercifully dead!”

Ila had ignored the animal pressed against his chest. He held his hands out to the side and felt them grasped by his surviving kin in an unyielding Yata chain. He stood in the steam of their anger, summoning their strength to heal his broken heart.

It was one thing to lose mates in a senseless massacre, through no fault of their own. They’d been innocents on a day of madness. But losing his sister like this was too much to bear. In his agony, Ila wished Zai *had* been killed, as he had feared so long ago. The realization cut him all the more deeply.

Lani had stood to his right. Antal, his sole surviving co-husband, had stood to his left. They had gone from four adult males to two, from nine adult females to three.

Not everyone had died. Some had fled at Zai’s approach, in search of households untainted by the poison of militia.

Their departure left seventeen children to support, far more than could be satisfied by milk from the few goats left running loose in Basc. Gria’s forces—or was it Zai’s?—had slaughtered indiscriminately for meat, severely compromising their source of dairy. They had only so many nursemaids to go around.

Reduced to skinning rodents, forcing himself to ignore the succulent lamb Zai fed her boys, Ila wished he had breasts with which to nurse. Lani at least still suckled. But what awaited their new child, swaddled and blissful and ignorant of the way the world had turned? His older daughters held crying toddlers to nipples that remained painfully dry.

He would rather hear his children's fury than the syrupy coos his sister bestowed on her own. He would rather take his chances in the forest, setting traps amidst burnt-out husks, scooping insects into his mouth to quiet his roiling stomach.

Soon even the bugs would be gone, mating, laying, and dying, or scabbling underground to escape the encroaching cold. Ila's breath already hovered before his mouth at dawn and dusk. He dreaded the seasonal die-back of the damaged woods.

He saw, too, the difference between the devout foraging in the wild and the villagers clamoring for stolen food. On good days he gave part of his catch to those less fortunate, who paid him back in kind when his own luck declined. Even ravaged, the Covenant still fostered cooperation, as it had for eons among Yata and Masari and among the communal huts. It survived inside the Meethouse, where the villagers mixed their traits and filled eager wombs, ensuring that Basc's children belonged to everyone.

Ila dropped tough gristle into a heavy kettle filled with spiced broth. They hadn't eaten rabbit in days. He prayed that the rats multiplied quickly enough to keep his family fed.

A warm hut and a bit of food left for bait would bring them. He would lay his traps indoors, and wait.

~~~

Gria's skin glistened with sweat even in the cold morning as she swung her machete, slicing through tangled vines. Precious little ground had been cleared. Her clothes stank. Her troops wielded band saws and scythes, grumbling that they were warriors, not farmers.

And those were the loyal ones. Others had defected to instant gratification and certain death.

She had yelled at Zai's new converts, "And what will you do when the Crossroads farm is completely debilitated? What will you do when there's nothing left to steal?"

"We'll have their land, then." Lotzil, one of Zai's lieutenants, stood his ground outside the latest hut commandeered by raiders. "It's already been cleared, and

the Woolies store their seeds.” He folded his arms and grinned at her. “Eventually we’ll overrun them entirely and simply take it.”

She wanted to string him up, this young rebel still painted in renewed clay. *We were to strive for independence, not thuggery!* Was this the final legacy of the Dirt People, then? This love of brawn and ignorance?

Watu would have understood, but her protégé was gone. Like her, he knew of growing cycles and fallow seasons, knew to time plantings and harvests. He knew the importance of clearing ground before that ground became hard, before spring thaw set farmers into a frenzy of planting row after row. As an herbalist supporting a village, he could gather only so much from the wild. He’d had to cultivate the rest.

Gria had experimented with rudimentary agriculture on steep slopes and rocky crags after her exile. If she had shared that scant knowledge at the camp, she might now be able to rely on more than a smattering of disaffected troops. But she had taught them to be soldiers. There’d been no time to teach them how to tend crops.

She had hunted and gathered on the outskirts. She did that now, in the old killing grounds, competing with the very people she struggled to save.

The citizens of Basc should be clearing this land with her, but even at gunpoint most of them simply cowered on the ground and awaited execution. Disgusted, she sent them home. They should be celebrating the chance to live under their own power, taking pride in a hard day’s work. Some of them did, but not as she had intended. Those who took to the woods, sharpening their limited hunting skills, resisted her the most.

They said they were preserving the Covenant. At least they were resisting Zai even more.

*Zai.*

Gria performed her own mental calculations. The Honorable One was right; the dream of a cohesive fighting force and a hard-working, self-sufficient community had made for lovely rhetoric. Gria had to give her soldiers what they wanted before they got it elsewhere.

The only way to encourage independence was to stop the raids.

The only way to stop the raids was to stop Zai, through force if need be.

Gria called her lieutenants to her with a sharp whistle. “Suit up,” she growled. “Gather your arms and round up the sentries. We have strongholds to hit.”

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Zai bestowed a contented smile as Evit cupped the shiny bullets in his hands, lifted them up, and let them drop clattering to the floor. He’d been playing that way for hours, squealing at the noise.

Next to him, Abri examined a rifle emptied of its ammunition. The older boy grunted as he tested its moving parts, small muscles straining.

The others kept their distance. In a crowded house, Zai had carved out a private corner for herself and her sons simply by virtue of being a threat. Ila’s family did not ask for her food and she did not ask for theirs. It didn’t matter. She had her boys.

Only Lani refused to ignore her, loudly quoting scripture while tending to the household chores. Perhaps her preaching drowned out the din of the bullets, but it couldn’t erase them entirely. Sound carried well among these adobe rooms.

“Abri,” Zai whispered, “tell me again what the pieces are called.”

He peered into the dark shaft. “Muzzle,” he recited. “Barrel. Magazine.”

“Point to them when you tell me.”

His narrow finger traced the length of the gun, his face a mask of seriousness. “Trigger. Safety. Stock.”

“Again.” Zai nodded toward Lani, smiling. “Louder, this time.”

The door swung open and slammed against the wall. Startled children renewed their wails. Adults crowded into the common room, unmindful of its occupied corner.

Zai looked up, smiling broadly at the dirt-streaked woman before her. “Gria. How nice of you to visit.” She stood and dusted herself off. “Make yourself at home. I’ll fix you some tea.”

Gria rewarded her with a gracious nod. “A lovely gesture—but no; you’ve learned the properties of plants too well. Besides, I have something for you, this time.” She motioned to the soldiers behind her. “Release him. Don’t help him, let him advance on his own.”

She stepped aside as a raider stumbled through the open door. He was half-naked, caked in mud, blood, and vegetable pulp. He dropped moaning to the floor.

“We have your people in custody,” Gria said, plainly. “We intercepted Taba on his way here; he was quite adamant about seeing you. It didn’t take much persuading to make him talk.”

The soldier gasped for breath. Zai scooted forward and knelt next to him. Wounds in his side, back, and shoulder glared an angry, milky red. Great chunks of him were missing.

“What happened to him?” Deena, the quietest of the wives, could barely ask the question. She held onto Antal with one hand and protected her growing belly with the other.

“*Nature* happened to him.” Gria savored the moment as she took in the children’s open stares and the sour frown on Zai’s face. “We deprived the Masari of a good meal. They’re hungry.”

Lani spat, “And you’re proud of that.”

“I’m proud of nothing.” She looked down at Taba. “Deliver your message.”

Taba’s teeth gritted, as much from rage as from pain. “She said to stop the raids. She said they would eat us alive.”

“Who?” Zai asked. “Who did this to you?”

Taba shook his head. “No name. But she is coming here.” He winced at a fresh spasm and struggled to regain his composure. “To talk with The Honorable

One.” He smirked. “To negotiate, she said.”

Zai touched him gingerly, pulling back when he flinched. She hissed between her teeth, “This is an outrage.”

“And your raids aren’t?” Gria scanned her stunned audience of sniffling children cleaving to silent adults. “Do not for a moment think that the ‘negotiations’ will work. Taba is an example of what the Masari truly are; *this* is the type of attack we must guard against. And to do that—” She glared down at Zai. “We must strengthen ourselves and relearn the old ways, *not* forsake them for the thrill of pilfering until we have destroyed what little food they have.”

“If we destroy their food, they’ll die!” Abri shouted, trembling with excitement. “We don’t need them any more!”

Gria raised her eyebrows at the boy trying to wrestle his mother’s rifle into a clumsy grasp. “And then what, little one? How would we feed ourselves?” She frowned at Evit, who fingered the bullets nervously in his lap. “Right now we’re about as capable of that as he is.”

Zai barked a mirthless laugh. “At least I’ve provided *my* troops a decent meal from time to time.”

“And you will continue to do so. Once you and your soldiers have scoured the woods for roots and tubers and have cleared the planting fields.” Gria unslung her rifle, stepped to the side, and aimed. “Don’t even think of reloading, Zai.” She called over her shoulder. “Arrest her.”

CHAPTER 8

The Cliff

Morning chill descended as thick fog tumbled into cut-away paths and crevasses. A cloud lifted and blanketed the top of the bluff. Waterfalls echoed against vanishing alabaster barriers. To step outside before the fog cleared was to risk falling over the edge, into the pale yolk light of a diffused dawn.

Ghost and Piri breakfasted with Shabra indoors, around a polished oak table in a room set with filigreed torches and hung with finely-woven landscapes. A diorama encircled them. Fat fish leapt and danced in midair over a swollen creek, happy to be alive and ignorant of the Yata and Masari crouched in thick foliage, readying nets on opposite banks.

Piri's bare feet nestled into a thick woolen rug, a gaily-toned sunburst pattern. She shifted her toes to rest against Ghost's, comparing the plushness of the rug with that of his fur.

Armed guards flanked the dining room door. Silent servers glided in and out, proffering brass goblets filled with thick fruit juices and a platter of meaty nuts whose taste Piri could only imagine. She beamed up at the slave who delivered her bowl of broth and received an automatic smile back. Another servant set a selection of Yata before Ghost, who nodded back with a sigh.

Piri keened her ear toward instructions she could not translate. She could only observe Shabra's patterns of speech, what sounds were repeated and when, along with the servants' behavior.

The days melded into mind-numbing sameness. Shabra would return to her statistics and judgments after the meal, dismissing Piri and Ghost until the following day. Until then, they could move within the compound, but not among the citizenry out on the marbled streets embedded in the bluff. Isolated foreigners, their only contact during the day would be with the bland, haunting smiles of silent servants as they passed each other in the sculpted halls. The day would end with Ghost railing in the privacy of their room against their detention.

As always, breakfast brought Shabra's continuing probes. Piri noted the

increasing dullness in Ghost's voice and the uneasy twitch of his muscles. Just when he seemed to have answered all of Shabra's questions, she began a new layer of inquiry. He shifted away from the general recounting of life in Crossroads, scouring his memory for tales about TripStone, WindTamer, BrokenThread.

"I have heard of *yatanii* in Rudder," Shabra mused, lifting a tender chunk of carp with thick, silver tongs, "but it is much different there. It is a contest of strength, to see who lasts the longest without eating. It never goes so far as to become dangerous for the Masari." She laughed. "It is like a drinking contest. They probably takes bets on who is the first to pass out from the deprivation. I hear that afterwards, they simply gorge themselves on Yata."

Ghost nodded and picked absently at his food, beyond shock. Piri gave his hand a reassuring squeeze and wanted to tell him everything would be all right. The tales of both interrogator and interrogated circled in her mind like wary cats.

She had known only the quality of life at Destiny Farm, inside Ghost's cabin, and out in the open. The different traditions blended into the immense tapestry she wove in her head. One of irony and contradictions, filled with tangled threads.

Piri concentrated on drinking her broth. The sooner she finished her meal, the sooner she could take her place behind the scribe. She no longer touch-talked to Ghost underneath the table, but rested her hands on its surface instead. She knew the scribe glanced her way when her fingers spoke to Ghost's arm, in full view. Benign comments. *Tell the story about the diseased hawk. Tell the story about the rancid cheese.* When Shabra asked Ghost to translate, the scribe hesitated, listening, before she resumed her recording.

The scribe's smile changed, almost imperceptibly, when Piri rose from her meal to begin her own observations. It became more relaxed, more genuine. In this small way they communicated with each other. Piri watched closely from her post behind the scribe, making mental note of repeating words. She burned their sinuous images into her brain.

But, like Piri herself, the words were silent. They were spoken Masari translated into written Yata, whose sounds she did not know, save for three:

P. Eer. Ee.

Ghost named her in his recitations; the scribe wrote her name down. On occasion the word appeared in a different context, and Piri remembered that BrokenThread had given her the word for “hope.” Piri searched out the separate phonemes, finding the parts of her name in the words for “valley,” “sleep,” “sacrifice.” And many more, that she could not yet match to Masari.

“I must cut our time together short today.” Shabra called to a servant to clear the table. “I have a meeting with the other deputies; there are extra security measures to be put in place. Don’t be alarmed at the changes. You’ll be safe here.”

Ghost roused from his torpor. “Why the changes?”

“The Games.” She took a final sip of tea. “You call it Meat Day. Rudder’s hunt is approaching.” Shabra studied Ghost curiously, her fingers laced together. “The days surrounding a hunt are always tense because many prisoners still have relations here on the Cliff. Some servants become violent when their kinsmen are killed, but our crime rate peaks even among non-relations.” She rose, smoothing down her uniform. “All the observation posts are very well guarded. Feel free to use ours. If you’d like to wager on the outcomes I can advance you a small token.”

Piri saw the effort Ghost made to conceal his dismay. She looked from him to Shabra, who motioned to the servants and the guards, barking orders. Piri latched onto a unique word when Shabra dismissed the scribe.

Bodasa.

Before she could think, Piri touch-talked the sounds to the scribe’s back while Shabra looked the other way.

The scribe froze, but recovered quickly. She gathered her parchment to her chest and strode from the room, falling in step with her mistress.

Back in their room, Piri took Ghost’s arm and counseled patience when he decried their stay in Alvav as house arrest. She told him their lives were being spared in return for his stories. She told him she was learning many things.

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Ghost couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying and concluded he was doing both. Up and down the corridors he dragged, muzzy-headed, as the hazy sun rolled slowly toward the west. Soon he would start talking to the bas-reliefs that gazed insipidly from the walls, asking their advice.

How could he stay here when he was losing his mind? How could he leave when the food in his satchel was gone, leaving him prey to another insanity entirely?

The numbers slid into and out of his grasp as his attention ebbed, but he knew enough to understand, finally, the spacing of the Meat Days. He realized the wisdom of his own deprivations. He understood the controlled sacrifice of Crossroads, its ritual feast followed by its longer, disciplined fast. He'd thought the fast to be only a religious restriction, like the prescribed quotas of Yata to be killed, a delicate balance meant to keep both their peoples viable.

But Masari bodies were *born* to go without. His ancestors had subsisted on nutrients stored away until they once again went on the prowl, answering an internal, primordial rhythm. The Covenant had refined that rhythm into a calibrated clock that continued to beat inside Ghost despite all his attempts to alter it.

Now Shabra had altered him in the other direction, providing a daily, succulent dose until it became habitual. His body expected it now. Even Ghost's daily consumption of BrokenThread had left him with a sharp edge, a hunger-not-quite-hunger that kept him vigilant. Though heartbreaking, the child's remains had been light fare compared to these rich breakfasts infusing his blood and blunting him.

He wanted to pull down the paintings, the poems, the fine weavings, and put up the bones he had cursed throughout his life. He wanted the weight of Basc on the walls of this genteel prison. After all his years of banning the ubiquitous Covenant from his cabin, he wanted those infernal scriptures here. They would burn away this perversion. They would cleanse him.

How often had TripStone gone into Rudder to barter for his laboratory supplies? How often had WindTamer gone there looking for body parts, staying to slap backs and raise frothing mugs? Rudder was a good neighbor, seen as being no different than Crossroads except that it hauled more fish and ground more shells for its fertilizer. Different mountains ringed its valley, but they were still

mountains.

Small changes. Not fasting bouts followed by shameless gorging. Not hunts deemed recreation, freed of penance.

Alvav was supposed to be like Basc. Masari were Masari; Yata were Yata. Held in the Covenant's grip even as he broke its cardinal rules, Ghost had always assumed its traditions were universal, a force of imposed, secondary nature to ensure mutual survival.

Piri had disabused him of that notion early on. But he had not expected this. He did not know which was worse, his fading faculties or the culture that had quietly seduced him to this state. Suddenly he wanted to proselytize in this place of prisons and bondage and wagers taken on "the Games." Some heretic he was.

His brain atrophied. He had been deprived of his lenses and laboratory, even of access to Alvav's puzzling ecosystem. Tiny creatures must scabble within the rock, but he was blind to them. Animalcules unknown to him must course in the water trickling toward the Marsh, feeding the roots of strange plants. There must be different gods here, twisting different strands of fate for their amusement. How should he pray to *them*?

Piri stood before the Ozal, tracing its Yata calligraphy with her finger. Ghost shuffled to her side. His powers of observation had faded, but hers had become acute. She pointed to several of the words, drumming their Masari translation on his skin. They were scattered randomly throughout the poem, the great gaps between them still unknown. Blurts without syntax.

*The scribe, she added, I think her name is Bodasa.*

Ghost took Piri in his arms. Her discoveries excited him, almost as much as the changes her body underwent. They became a tonic to the flood of speech, to Shabra's scrutiny that reduced him to novelty. Piri gathered her information in secret, one word at a time, while the deputy's interviews eroded more and more of Ghost away. Reduced to parroting detail after detail, he hungered for Piri's knowledge rather than her flesh.

The steady diet of Yata mollified his instincts and dulled his senses. Shabra would feed him for as long as she found him interesting, but how much of his mind must ultimately drain away to keep his belly full? How much could he dare

to cut back, if he could muster up the strength to do so?

Did the other deputies even know that they were here? Were he and Piri secret pets whose information Shabra might use to better her own position? Or did she merely crave amusement, keeping him sated and docile?

Piri reached beneath his tunic and his questions melted. His mouth covered hers with renewed urgency as she pulled his tongue into her. They parted long enough to fling their borrowed clothes into a corner. Cool evening air raised goosebumps on their skin as they dove back toward each other's heat.

Piri's waist already began to fill; Ghost could taste her changes in the air. He felt the weight building in her breasts, the flush wherever he touched her. How much could he cut back and still protect her, and the child she carried, from himself?

He eased his knuckles into her, parting, stretching. She was a furnace closing around his hand. His fingertips brushed the entrance to her womb and pulled back, easing into a slow pump. His thumb, outside, made small circular motions until her heavy breathing thickened into a luscious moan.

He shuddered as her thumb answered, drawing a milky bead from his hardened tip. She reached further and cupped him in her palm, massaging, meandering. She gathered moist drops, sliding them with a firm grip along his length.

"Now," he gasped, "or I will add my own calligraphy to the wall."

He withdrew his glazed hand, grasped Piri's buttocks, and lifted her off her feet. Her swollen breasts filled his mouth, her nipples twin berries against his teeth. She crossed her ankles behind him and eased herself down his tree of a body, her small hands grasping the pelt along his sides, her teeth teasing his own nipples. Then her buttocks shifted in his hands and he groaned as she enfolded him, pushing toward his groin, her heels squeezing his fuzzy backside.

It was nothing to hold her aloft. She was an angel floating in air, pulling Ghost out of himself. They thrust against each other, the beating wings of a butterfly straining toward the light. She carried their shared poem, his calligraphy already embedded, spelling out new words as they cried out. Their mingled nectar trailed down his thigh and ducked into a thatch of fur.

He swayed on his feet, softening inside another world. His pallet was a short

stagger away.

This time they lay together, Piri blanketing him, radiating enough heat to keep them both warm. Ghost's worries rose briefly into his consciousness before they dissolved into a place where all his appetites were abruptly sated.

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Lamp light speared the room, traveling over entwined legs and bodies. Smaller limbs sprawled across larger ones. Torsos filled and emptied with slow breaths. The air smelled of sex.

Piri shifted in her sleep as the unsteady glow pulled her from a dream. She opened her eyes and followed the light's turns and hesitations. Her heart rocked when she spied the servant.

She lifted herself from Ghost—carefully, quickly—turning toward the lantern as he turned away. He rolled onto his side, still slumbering as she eased a blanket over his nakedness.

Bodasa squatted, set her lamp on the floor, and laid out parchment. The scribe's serene smile was gone, replaced by apprehension. She sat straight-backed on her heels, still wearing her bland tunic. A thick, black ponytail dropped between her shoulderblades.

Piri looked from Bodasa's narrow face to the writings, the notes from the morning's interview followed by their translation into Masari. She tried to quiet her nerves as she studied one and then the other, hungering.

The scribe extended her hand toward a blank sheet. Her fingers cast long shadows as they tapped slowly, spelling out the pattern Piri had drummed onto her back. Bodasa rested her pen on the sheet and looked to Piri for confirmation.

Piri wrote *Bodasa* in Masari. She pointed to the name, then to the scribe, questioning. The scribe nodded. Piri took Bodasa's hand and tapped *Piri* on her wrist, then indicated the name amidst the notes.

They hunched over the sheets, matching sound to sound to sound. Yata to Masari to fingerpress, back to Yata. Fractions of words repeated, one alphabet to another. Tiny parts of a greater whole waiting to be strung together. Bodasa's

taps became urgent, driven by an undercurrent of fear. Even without words, Piri knew the scribe was in this room illegally, risking much, for what must be more than a mere language lesson.

She wanted to ask what was wrong. She could write the question in Masari; they would both understand. But they were using both their hands now—pointing, tapping, reflecting the sounds back to each other. They spoke to each other's arms with drumming sequences singing inside their heads, their lips closed, their throats subvocalizing.

Bodasa leaned in, intent and nervous. She jabbed, *More words. Talk to me.*

The pattern was Yata, but Piri understood. She tapped in Masari, *Let me help.*

Bodasa reflected the words back to her in Yata; Piri could hear the unspoken sounds through their touch. The scribe added, *You are helping. Help more. Words.*

They immersed themselves in silent exchange, skin tingling from the unrelenting press of fingerpads. Voices spoke endless repetitions in their heads. Only much later did the patterns begin to expand, cleaving to one another. The Yata voice inside Piri's head became stronger as she started to think in full sentences. Tears of gratitude sprang to her eyes, tempered by a growing sense of alarm.

The covers rustled behind her; she knew Ghost watched them both. Bodasa's gaze shifted toward him for a moment. Then it returned to Piri.

Teach him Yata. Let no one know of this.

Bodasa's hands trembled as she removed her pen's nib and then its ink, kept in a wondrous internal reservoir. She tilted the barrel, spilled a narrow blade onto her palm, and bent to the translation.

Piri watched the Masari words vanish as they were scraped away. Bodasa's forehead shone with sweat. The scribe blew on the cleaned sheets, slipped the blade back into its secret compartment, and fitted her pen back together.

She slipped the pen into a pocket. Her fingers staccatoed on Piri's bare shoulder, *Tomorrow is like any other day. Yes?*

Piri nodded.

Almost inaudibly, Bodasa whispered, "Thank you."

They were the first words Piri had heard spoken by a servant. Bodasa lifted her sheets and lantern, bowed briefly toward Ghost, and rushed from the room.

CHAPTER 9

Basc

Nothing stopped the two Masari of Crossroads from traversing the quiet meadow, picking their way through charred earth. Nothing ever had, save for the ancient texts condemning such trespass. One made the journey only to repent after the hunt, or to bestow tribute on the Thanksgiving Days, and only if one were a consecrated killer of Yata. Now both hunter and scribe advanced on the troubled settlements of Basc.

TripStone stepped on numb legs through ruination. She'd known these lands when they were green, turning as the seasons changed, sporting latticeworks of hard branches draped in snow. Now bare, blackened ground extended to its vanishing point, and her boots and HigherBrook's trod a wide, worn road. The last time she was here she had pulled a great cart of produce, seeking an audience with The Honorable One and looking for Zai.

The canopy that once shaded this road had fled in smoke. Small clumps of organic life still stood, isolated and misshapen trunks bearing ugly battle scars amidst their few remaining leaves.

Yata prowled among these, armed with small knives and nets, in search of vermin. Those who raised their heads stared only for a moment at the pair of Masari and then looked away, too exhausted or too apathetic to be afraid.

Only HigherBrook, whose first exposure to the hunting ground was to walk through its corpse, stared back. "This is not the sacred contact I had dreamed of."

"There will be militia at the border," TripStone answered, curtly. "I wish you'd listened to me and taken a rifle. Mine might not be enough."

"*Look* at them, TripStone. Those are desperate people, not the militia. *They* are what's important. I have no training in firearms, and I will not carry one simply for the sake of putting fear on the negotiating table." He shook his head.

"Someone has to come at this from the standpoint of faith."

TripStone studied his dismay. She was empty of faith, left only with her mission. Trudging beside her, hauling his big book, HigherBrook seemed an innocent boy.

No. Not innocent. He could be dangerous, considering what she was planning to do.

The open sky yawned above them, a washed-out blue. They were exposed completely to the elements, surrounded by neither shade nor refuge. Walking across this char was like taking the spiraled walk to the Rotunda, encircled by unrelenting flatness.

But the Rotunda design was deliberate, and humbling. This journey was merely gruesome.

TripStone appraised the deep brown contours of the great tome lashed to HigherBrook's back. The thick leather bindings with dozens of names embossed on the spine represented a myriad of Yata lineages. Her StormCloud must be light compared to the hundreds of parchment sheets causing her companion to tilt forward, shuffling under the weight. "It must be painful to let something like that go."

"More painful for it to go to Promontory."

TripStone nodded, with an involuntary wince. She saw the deep-seated sadness beneath his anger and knew a great hole had been left behind in the Rotunda's shelves. "Basc's huts are not built to preserve something like that."

"No." HigherBrook shrugged the book toward his shoulders, tightening knots. "I want to know how much that preservation is worth to them. So does the rest of the Chamber."

They plodded on in eerie silence. TripStone hung onto the sudden trill of a distant warbler, but then it was gone, leaving only the scuffles of Yata and small game, and soft Masari footfalls.

"The hunt had so many distractions," she murmured. "You had so much life around you—sounds, smells. All the wild things that grew here. I wasn't just a hunter here, I was a part of the forest." She nodded toward the Yata. "Just as they were." Her hands clenched into fists. "Their attack on us was completely

senseless.”

“It made perfect sense to Promontory.”

“I want to know how it made sense to the militia!” she spat. “I want to know what made our destruction so damned attractive.” She pointed to a shallow line of white, far ahead. “There. The first of the outlying huts.”

HigherBrook’s face was a mask of longing as a heavy sigh escaped him. “I never thought I would actually see this place.” He tried to smile. “I dreamt about it when I was a boy. I still do. Though not, believe me, under these conditions.”

Off the trail a small group of Yata encircled a sick and injured raccoon, closing in. TripStone looked in their direction. Her limbs tensed, her steps quickening. She licked her lips and forced herself to look away, stifling the sudden urge to run them down.

From behind her, HigherBrook said, “You have food in your pack.”

“I’m not hungry.” She took a slow, deep breath, willing her heart to quiet and her hands to unclench. “It is a need to practice, like shooting targets. It is what I was born to do.” She glared at him. “Don’t worry about me. I can control it. Just make sure *you* control your dreams before they blind you.”

But, oh, she could remember the taste, the potency of live food. The shrunken jerky in her pack was a poor shadow, the deception of a meal. The other meat in her pack, the marked one, would never touch her teeth.

It was good the Covenant instilled in Masari the fear of their own power. That it gave people like HigherBrook sweet visions of Yata so esteemed as to be unassailable outside the rigors of the hunt. TripStone knew better. She heard the whispers of the cold time, when the land ran thick with meat.

HigherBrook’s voice sliced into her reverie. “We both dream of different pasts, TripStone, neither of which will come again. We’re here to make sure we have a future.”

They neared the outskirts of town. A line of soldiers interrupted that of adobe.

“They’re either expecting us, or they’ll think we’re invaders.” TripStone scanned

wary bronze faces. “We’ll hold our position at shouting distance.”

How delicate the moment, yet how complete the calm. Their tension dissipated. TripStone heard the change in HigherBrook’s step, his gait relaxing as much as it could beneath his heavy load. If they were felled now, the dreams would simply go on without them.

No one reached for a gun. TripStone halted, halfway across the clearing where Yata once waited to see who returned from a Reckoning. She and HigherBrook stood in a place of joyful reunions and pious grief.

She called out in Yata, “We’ve come to meet with The Honorable One.”

A soldier nodded. He and a second guard strode to meet them.

TripStone studied the other sentinels, whose gazes were elsewhere, checking for the approach of additional Masari. “We are only two, as I have specified. There are no reinforcements.”

HigherBrook added, softly, “Our intentions are peaceful.”

The soldier narrowed his eyes. “You’ll come with us.”

Except for the militia, few Yata were out on the paths, a smattering of thin, pinched faces and sagging skin. Once, TripStone had wailed with them over the deaths of their own. She’d been filled with their stories, unarmed and helpless, cinched between duty and shame.

Now she felt neither. She was a changeling. The old TripStone sloughed off her like a dry, split skin. Basc was naked before her, its hardships presented in stark clarity, yet somehow immaterial. As she was.

HigherBrook moved beside her in a cloud of awe and sorrow. TripStone wondered about the vicarious life of scribes, their attachment to secondhand recitations. At least she had lived these encounters and not been shut up in a marbled room.

Now both ways of life, his and hers, were gone. HigherBrook had only his texts to guide him, and the memories of survivors whom he beheld for the first time as he and TripStone followed the guards. He might be looking even now at an

individual whose words he carried on his back, retold by a hunter whom the soldiers escorting them have killed. The equations filtered through TripStone's mind like rain draining through gravel on a riverbank. Many tiny droplets, the illusion of solidity, floating away.

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The Honorable One lived in a honeycombed hut. Riotous pictograms covered its walls, painted and repainted against the ravages of time. The original walls holding ancient scriptures had long since crumbled, the work of writing and rewriting fallen to countless spiritual leaders. Bloody handprints by the door recalled the marks of Ata and his daughters, the deranged hunters of their own people.

TripStone examined the red paint as they passed inside. Tiny hands.

She watched HigherBrook, who read the pictures in silence. His scrutiny trailed across the ceiling, jumping to different parts of the room in patterns whose meanings TripStone could only guess. His face relaxed into a profound peace as the soldiers departed, closing the door behind them.

"She would be waiting for us in the inner chamber," he said. "We're being directed there."

"You know what all of this means."

He nodded. "She does us a great honor by receiving us here."

Simple lamps lit their way, increasing in number as they spiraled toward the interior. One guttered out, sending up a plume of acrid smoke. HigherBrook led TripStone through a maze of bright colors. She tried to follow his gaze, which traced non-linear paths from one abstract image to another. "What do they say?"

"Nothing I can translate into modern Yata," he answered, "let alone into Masari. I would need to speak with a hundred mouths simultaneously. Ultimately it reduces to a single voice." He stepped into another room. "Like the library in the Rotunda. Like the people of Crossroads." His boots traversed creatures etched into the floor. "She is timing our arrival, to see how much we understand."

TripStone raised her eyebrows. "How much *you* understand."

“Don’t underestimate yourself.”

“My mother tried to read these,” TripStone whispered. “She knew a little bit about what they did—the way the meanings changed—but nothing was clear.”

HigherBrook nodded. “Conflicting voices never are.”

She followed him to the outer bend of a sharp turn, which he made without hesitation.

They found The Honorable One in a straight-backed, cushioned chair, sitting in silent judgment. Her long robe matched the walls. Her silver braid swirled in her lap. TripStone noted the deepened lines in her face and a new thinness only partly hidden by the kaleidoscopic dress.

Another woman stood behind the elder, tall for a Yata, her short hair flecked with gray. Militia from the look of her, dressed in a dun-colored tunic and pants and with a rifle slung across her back.

The soldier gazed at TripStone with a knowing, admiring smile. TripStone stared back, unperturbed.

HigherBrook loosened the knots across his chest and lowered his broad book to the floor. He knelt beside it and touched his forehead to cool ground. The others waited through his silent prostration.

His linens rustled as he straightened and faced the elder. “My name is HigherBrook, Honorable One. I lead the Crossroads Chamber. I’ve come to ask for your help.”

“What help I can give, you shall have,” she said. “The gods have handed us both a conundrum.” Her eyes glinted with a sudden flash of recognition when she lifted her chin. “TripStone. How readily the noble *yatanii* craves the diet of a beast. I am not surprised.”

Startled, the soldier behind her whispered, “*You.*”

“Yes, Gria. She. The one who proves your ‘natural order’ is the same person who awakened Zai to *her* murderous nature, to which you so eloquently gave voice. You and TripStone both share the blame for that.” The elder turned back to

HigherBrook. “I see you bring an impressive volume. A bargaining chip, as though the lives of our peoples are not sufficient. Let us begin with them. If we are successful, then we can remember the dead.”

He rested his palm on the tome. “What do you propose?”

“Gria here would propose independence, which is why we are in such dire straits.”

TripStone blurted, “Tell me about Zai.”

“She did not start Gria’s revolution,” the elder said, “but she has tried to finish it, thanks to your unassuming list. Gria sought only to destroy the Covenant. Zai would destroy the Masari as well.” She shifted in her seat, squinting up at the hunter. “It was Zai’s raider who introduced you to your dormant appetite. She perhaps does us a service by splitting Gria’s forces down the center. That failure of the militia gives me hope, if we can survive our internal strife.”

Gria murmured, “We have contained them.”

“For now. They are all the more dangerous for being penned.”

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TripStone.

Gria couldn’t take her eyes off the Masari who stood armed and ready with the discipline of her best lieutenant. The hunter remained unfazed in the presence of The Honorable One, before which even the leader of the Crossroads Chamber knelt. Behind the calm in TripStone’s eyes lay wildness. This proud being was far removed from the repentant Masari who once wept, groveling on the floor of the visitor’s hut.

Yet this same creature had delivered a child’s rejections to a woman gripped by her husband’s death. For what purpose? Certainly not to free the multitude of demons bottled like fermenting yeast in the cloying pressure of Zai’s soul. Zai, who would gleefully kill them both.

“Honorable One.” HigherBrook sat back on his heels and folded his arms. He plucked at his goatee, worrying it. “I will be blunt, we are at each other’s mercy

now. Crossroads can rebuild in time, because we know how. Basc does not. We can help you rebuild as well, but only if we do not starve first.”

The Honorable One shook her head. “I’m afraid more than the militia is torn. My people are in disarray and there is nothing left to support a ritual hunt. Even the few who would still willingly sacrifice themselves are outnumbered by their neighbors, who have joined those in arms.”

“We can rebuild on our own,” Gria said. “We don’t need Crossroads’ help. The price of servitude is too high.” She strode to TripStone and craned her neck, scant inches away, mesmerized. In another time, under different rules, this woman would have Gria by the throat if she ever got this close. Within this extravagantly-decorated hut, this place of tenuous decorum, Gria gazed on a calm bearing that hid more than she dared imagine, a blending of terror and magnificence. “The Masari seduced us onto their tables once, but we are free of that now. I saw the bites you inflicted, TripStone; I know what battle you wage. The Covenant went against the creature you really are. You know it was doomed to fail.”

She forced herself to turn away and squatted by HigherBrook. “For generations the Yata have been weaponless by decree. We’ve been forced to breed for you, confined to a primitive existence in return for your ‘gifts,’ which have robbed us of even the simplest skills. In return, we were complicit in our own murders. You did not honor us. You *poisoned* us.”

She looked upon his tameness, his position of supplication. It didn’t fool her for a second. In the end he would become like TripStone. Eventually they would all realize they were animals. For now she gazed upon a well-dressed official who clung desperately to his illusions. The looseness of his clothes was working, she knew, to strip those illusions away.

Gria turned back toward the elder. “These Masari offer us nothing. With our weapons and our will, we can defend ourselves and rebuild on our own. The balance of power has shifted.”

“Yes,” TripStone said, softly. “It has shifted, but not from your initiatives.”

HigherBrook flashed the hunter a warning look.

TripStone answered him with defiant calm. Puzzled, Gria studied one and then

the other as tension rose in the room.

“Honorable One,” TripStone continued, “Gria’s militia has torn the fabric of Basc. It has no less torn the fabric of Crossroads. But it has one fatal flaw.” She looked at Gria. “You believe in a natural order, an independence from Masari, yes? Believe me when I say that the power behind your army is far from natural, and far from independent.”

“I warn you, TripStone,” HigherBrook growled. “Do not take this further.”

His warning had no effect; instead, the hunter’s eyes darkened. They held an emptiness that Gria hadn’t noticed before. A great pain that all the same dropped away.

Gria shrugged. “I’m sure we can debate semantics. The fact is, the Covenant has collapsed under its own weight.” She savored the charged air, no less between the two Masari as between herself and the *yatanii*-turned-beast. “Look at us, TripStone, both of us armed, both killers. We are more alike than you would admit. All I ask is to reclaim the skills of my ancestors.” She tried to contain the excitement building in her voice. “To meet you evenly in the hunt, your life versus mine. Not to be slaughtered unarmed so that you can put me into a false pantheon while you keep my people in a permanent state of helplessness.”

TripStone took a long, slow breath, her voice low and even. “Yet you have aided the slaughter of unarmed Yata who are not put into a pantheon, but are kept helpless in a state worse than beasts.”

“Enough!”

Gria jolted at HigherBrook’s shout. She stared as he sprang to his feet and grasped his associate, trembling with rage. It was an outrageous claim, nothing to justify his sudden and irrational panic.

“Explain yourself,” snapped The Honorable One.

TripStone shoved HigherBrook away, breaking his hold, her voice thick. “Don’t try to stop me.”

The Chamber leader moved in to stand toe to toe with her, breathing hard. His fists clenched and unclenched, and for a moment Gria wondered if the Masari

would come to blows. The hunter looked ready to pounce, all her muscles locked in place.

An eternity seemed to pass before HigherBrook backed off, his face a tangle of anguish and betrayal.

Gria burned under the elder's gaze and ignored it. The Masari were suffering. Under those conditions, who wouldn't employ trickery? This spat could be nothing more than elaborate theater. "I defend nothing, TripStone. You accuse me of a ludicrous crime."

"You wanted independence from Masari." The hunter towered over her. "Then tell me you have manufactured your own guns. Your own gunpowder. Your bullets."

"Independence does not preclude trade." Gria looked to HigherBrook, confused by his heaving chest. When she faced TripStone again, the pity in the hunter's eyes chilled her. "There were traders who wanted spice."

"They wanted *Destiny*." To Gria's horror, the hunter blinked back tears. "You know what *Destiny* does to Yata."

"It was not for Yata."

"No—and I suppose BrushBurn also told you the Covenant is alive and well in Promontory." TripStone shrugged off her pack. Her fingers flew to its laces. She tugged back its flap and pulled out a hefty bundle, unwrapping. "I bought this from him not long ago. I'm sure you can read the branding."

HigherBrook blanched. He fell back against a wall.

TripStone shoved the meat forward. Clammy flesh dropped onto Gria's palms. Yata script blazed from it, the branding indelibly inked in blue on a pale layer of fat.

The room spun as the meat fell to the floor. Gria swallowed bile and managed to wheeze, "I saw the bodies of my comrades borne away to Crossroads. Your butchers and artists produce a clever hoax." Her hands began to shake. "That barbaric attempt at shock is no way to negotiate."

“Then this is.” TripStone whirled away and planted herself before HigherBrook. “We have a choice, don’t we? We can leave this minute, take no more lives from Basc now or ever. You would have them believe we’d starve without them, but we would not. We can go home and let Basc try to exist on its own while we serve Destiny Farm and bury the Covenant for good.”

HigherBrook closed his eyes. He moaned, “That is not why we came here, TripStone.”

“No. It isn’t. But they’ve been lied to enough. I won’t compound that lie, even if it means that Crossroads must answer to a new and much more brutal master.” Her boot nudged the book by his side. “Gria, your people have given us these stories. You may as well take a look at them before they’re gone.”

Gria bent toward the tome and opened it. She ran her fingers along neat, bilingual script. Countless Yata voices, identities stolen from Basc and spirited away, now finally returned.

TripStone turned to her, a tower of calm fury. “This book would buy several meals, Gria. I’m sure you can remember the dead without it. You have successfully, so far. But there’s a difference between knowing that your history lies safe in our Rotunda and knowing that we have had to sell it to Promontory, who then sells it to Skedge in return for more Destiny to keep caged, muted, branded Yata in thrall, breeding mindlessly for the slaughterhouse. Every time you bought a gun with a sack of ‘spice’ you condemned those Yata to death, and then you turned those ill-gotten guns on us.” The hand cupping Gria’s cheek was ice. “Promontory applauds your success. You have served them well.”

It couldn’t be. It was too horrible to imagine. Yet the hunter’s body shook and the Chamber official slouched, devastated. Gria looked down at the Yata flesh, at the book, back again. One filled with voices, the other a hacked slab.

TripStone knelt by the elder’s side. She took wrinkled, painfully thin hands in her own. “Honorable One, the Covenant has died all across these mountains. We are the backwater. We are the last holdout. Once we lose it, it’s gone.”

Gria’s legs buckled. She sank to her knees next to the meat and clasped her hand against her mouth, gagging.

TripStone swiveled back, speaking low to her ear. “You’re right, you know.” Her

warm fingers smoothed back the warrior's hair and wiped cold sweat from her brow. "We are alike in some ways. I hated the Covenant, maybe as much as you do. I saw what it did to my family." Her voice dropped. "That was nothing compared to what *you* did to my family." The hand moved lower and settled around Gria's neck, squeezing. "I will hunt you like an animal if that will validate you. If it will make you feel strong and powerful and free."

Gria's heart pummeled the inside of her chest as she glanced at HigherBrook, his face tinged with green.

Then it all happened too quickly. TripStone let her go, plucked the Yata from the floor, and dumped it into her lap. Grease wept onto Gria's thighs.

She pitched forward, spewing explosively over and over. Demons howled with uncontained glee from the pit of her stomach, the sounds of her own sickness echoing loudly off the walls. Pictograms and parchments alike reeked with splatter.

Gria knew only that it was better to be empty. Empty and forgotten. Her hands shook too hard as she flailed again and again, before she could finally slap the meat away into a noxious puddle where it mocked her, sitting in her own filth. Only the barest thread of hope stopped her from arching her back before TripStone and presenting the tender flesh of her throat, awaiting the quick bite that would crush her windpipe. To die a natural death, freed from the weight of faceless Yata strung and gutted in a land she had never seen.

"Gria." The Honorable One's fingers were in her hair, less gentle than TripStone's. Her scalp stung at the roots. "You once asked for my cooperation. You wanted me to help you maintain Basc's soul, to nurture its strength." The pain intensified until it was constant and oddly comforting. "You were going to save us from complacency, give us a chance to fight back. I will grant you that opportunity."

Gria hiccupped, trying to catch her breath. Her life was forfeit now. It didn't matter.

"HigherBrook."

His voice was thick with nausea. "Honorable One?"

“Inform your people that we will transport you our dead, which you will treat with reverence and respect. Whether or not we are your gods, we *are* your salvation. In return, you will send us Masari to teach us the skills we require.” The old woman sighed with an air of defeat. “We will have to maintain our weapons. That, unfortunately, cannot be undone. They will remind us of the price we have paid for them. Gria, you will make sure that every Yata is aware of that price.”

Nails bit into Gria’s scalp and withdrew. The voice behind her said, “Stand.”

She pushed against the floor, her arms rubbery, her hands slipping in the muck.

“Unassisted, Gria.”

Her legs felt broken, her lungs aflame from coughing. Lamp-lit symbols from the time of the Dirt People gleamed beneath vomitus on the floor. Messages from the cold time covered the walls and ceiling.

Gria climbed toward them as demons jerked her body from side to side. She locked her trembling knees, struggling to hold still as her muscles spasmed. Finally, red-eyed, she faced The Honorable One, surrendering to a long, almost unbearable silence. It was all she could do to keep standing. Her rifle pulled heavily on its straps, trying to topple her.

“Gria, you will realize your dream of predator and prey.” The elder knotted her fingers together. “You have sent us into a primitive time. Until we can provide for ourselves with Crossroads’ help, our people will be forced to forage outside our borders.” She looked beyond Gria, toward the hunter. “TripStone, the lands outside Basc will remain open to your citizens and ours at all times. That includes Gria’s camp in addition to the hunting grounds. The Masari may take what they need to survive and no more. If our people elude yours or defend themselves successfully, you will have to choose between hunger and the high price of Promontory. Either way, you will find this ‘natural’ state of affairs to be a far crueler covenant than what has gone before. Our checks and balances are gone. Basc might still die out.”

Gria teetered as the walls began to tilt. A staff slipped into her hands as arthritic fingers guided her to the padded, vacated chair. The warrior dropped into it, her bones like scattered twigs. Her cold rifle pressed across her back.

One gun, one large sack of Destiny. The frigid hands of countless dead Yata clasped the length of her spine.

The Honorable One stood over her and squeezed her shoulder, pressing bone. “This hut is yours. From this day forward you will be the strength and soul of Basc.”

Gria stared openly at her. She shook her head. “No...”

“This is your penance. It is not yours to decide.”

Gria swallowed and choked. Her throat held brambles. “Honorable One—”

“I have surrendered my post to you; my name is Erta now. We have negotiated a settlement. I leave its particulars to you.” Erta turned away, leaning a gnarled hand against the wall for support. She hobbled past shaded, stylized beasts pointing away from the center. “You will have my public support. It might aid you against Zai and her cohorts.”

The old woman looked back toward the chair. Only then did Gria see the tightly controlled horror in her eyes. “Whether you detest your name enough to sacrifice it for a title is up to you.”

Gria watched helplessly as the elder shuffled past the Masari.

“Leave her,” the old woman called to them. “She has work to do. We will send a runner when we are ready for you. Make sure he is not killed before he delivers his message.” Erta glanced down at HigherBrook’s spattered boots and malodorous parchments. “The book will remain here.”

CHAPTER 10

The Cliff

“You once asked me the way to the Marsh.” Shabra led Ghost and Piri to a great stone block on the far side of her terrace and pointed to its chiseled map. Her tapered finger traced a stream at the edge of the clearing. It turned atop the engraved granite, following rivulets that led through thick stands of pine, oak, and birch. Its direction wavered further in, bending to the left until it reached a heavy line. “This is the west gate.” She followed a neat outline. “North, east, south gates. Those enclose the Marsh.” Her trimmed nail ran down a broader scrape. “The east gate faces toward Rudder. Masari are responsible for guarding that. This is the east road, the line of first attack.” Another broad line angled off, closer to the clearing. “The northeast road, ending in the bridge to Rudder.”

Ghost looked at Piri and saw her drinking the knowledge in, memorizing. He eased a protective arm across her back as a sad smile bowed her lips. When she touched his waist he wondered if he comforted her as much as she was comforting him.

Shabra pointed above the map and over an alabaster balustrade. Far below them stretched an expanse of green tinged with the colors of fire. Leaves drifted down to mingle with older mulch. Beyond lay a string of small lakes, and beyond those, sedge. A distant chorus of waterfowl faded beneath the hubbub of crowds beginning to gather on the terraces. “My guards have already opened the north gate. We give the prisoners until midday to come into the clearing of their own accord.”

Ghost asked, “Why would they?”

“Because Rudder’s gas cannons are stationed on the east road. At midday they start firing volleys into the Marsh.” Shabra’s finger circled symbols on the map. “The smoke is not generally lethal, but it’s very unpleasant. Some do suffocate. Many prisoners would rather take their chances in the open, or with the Masari sharpshooters already stationed in the woods. Escapes are rare, but not unheard-of. That in itself gives the prisoners something to hope for, and it adds some life to the Games for those of us up here.”

He took in her crisp uniform, her neat braid and shiny pendant. Her composure.
“How can you stomach this?”

“It’s justice, Ghost.”

Piri scanned the landscape, watching for signs of movement.

“You have a curious friend,” Shabra mused.

“She is stronger than I am.”

Piri’s fingers drummed briefly at his waist. He held her more tightly.

Their breakfast had been long and torturous. Ghost’s hands had trembled in his lap, aching to clean his plate and pop the last, tender morsels into his mouth. He’d steeled himself against the urge and struggled to get his mind clear again. He made excuses, feigning indigestion and blaming it on the Games.

He knew that Piri subvocalized the words scratched onto parchment, her lips twitching as she stood behind Bodasa. He’d reached the point where he could translate Shabra’s curt messages to the servants. Piri’s understanding was greater, her immersion in Yata more complete.

The servants they passed in the hallways smiled at them as before, but now they tapped out brief greetings on occasion. Simple hellos. Benign messages. Concealed messages. Tests.

“We will have to bind her hands and feet at the observation post,” Shabra was saying. “You understand.”

Ghost bristled. He opened his mouth to retort, but Piri reached up and laid her finger across his lips.

My love, he drummed onto her shoulder, *I will not let them treat you like this.*

She lowered her hand to his chest. *Tell me in Yata.*

“It’s for her own safety,” Shabra added. “My guards are already on high alert and she is not a citizen. The slightest movement on her part could be misconstrued as hostile.”

Piri answered the deputy with a somber nod. Ghost gripped her hand in his.

“Except for free citizens, most Yata are banned from the observation posts. Even trusted servants have sometimes reacted badly, especially if they know the prisoners.” Shabra led them toward a series of steps, up to a platform. “One tried to destroy the clarifiers six seasons ago. He injured a guard before we could subdue him.”

Ghost shook his head at the unfamiliar term. “We have no clarifiers in Crossroads.”

“They bring the Games closer to us,” Shabra said. “They clear our vision because everything in the distance is too small otherwise. Too blurred.”

Piri’s hand clenched Ghost’s, but his eyes were already wide open. He forced himself to relax as they climbed the stairs.

A line of sentinels waited at the top and around the perimeter. One drew a pair of chains from a low barrel.

“We’ll use the lighter restraints,” Shabra told him, in Yata. “Give them to me.” She switched to Masari. “Put your feet together, Piri. Ghost, you will carry her.” She squatted and wrapped padded rope around Piri’s ankles, tying off several knots. “I’ll need to bind your wrists behind your back.”

Piri drummed quickly on Ghost’s arm.

He translated. “Fingers facing out.”

Shabra gave Piri a wan smile. “Cursing is not a crime here. Very well; fingers out.”

She took Piri’s wrists and drew her arms behind her. Fabric tightened. Shabra slowed her winding of rope as she spied a small but unmistakable mound.

A gun reported loudly, deep in the woods. Piri flinched.

“Sharpshooter.” The deputy secured a knot. “Successful, from the sound of it. Is that his child you’re carrying?”

Piri flinched again.

“Yes,” Ghost said. He didn’t know which was worse—the barbaric restraints, the untimely disclosure of Piri’s pregnancy, or the spectators on the platform who rushed to long, lensed tubes, jabbering excitedly. Well-dressed citizens layered in finery against the chill pointed fingers, exclaiming about prisoners massing at the gate and a line of hunters crossing the bridge. They burred their recognition of familiar faces, both predator and prey, comparing the odds of each against the last running of the Games. Now that Ghost understood what they said, he wished he were ignorant again.

“On rare occasion a mix-child appears in the Marsh.” Shabra tied the final knot and shook her head. “They don’t live long.”

Piri’s fingers stabbed the air behind her. Ghost covered them with his palms. “She wants to know if the children are fathered by guards. If so, the guards probably kill them.”

“Most likely. That, and the conditions in the Marsh.”

Ghost’s palms tingled again. “And if such a child is born on the Cliff?”

Shabra glared at him. “It won’t be.”

Then we will go to the Marsh.

Ghost caught his breath. Piri drummed it again, this time in Masari.

“I can see why you’re a fugitive,” Shabra added, plainly. “Come this way.”

She headed toward the clarifiers. Ghost lifted and cradled Piri in his arms and whispered, “You don’t have to watch this.”

She jerked her head impatiently toward Shabra.

“All right.” His lips ticced into a tiny smile. “But perhaps we can distract them a bit first.” At the confirming twinkle in Piri’s eye, he kissed her long and deep, enjoying his own mild arousal as she shuddered with pleasure. His eyes mirrored the defiance in hers.

When he looked up the spectators were still glued to clarifiers, jockeying for position. Only the vigilant guards had noticed the embrace—and, by the looks on their faces, seemed not to care.

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Smatterings of gunfire rose from the woods. Repeating rifles, guns Ghost had never heard before. He squatted to adjust the eyepiece, making mental notes about the lenses in the tube as he discerned a mirror. They were like his lenses, ground in different sizes and arranged in different configurations.

He broke from studying the apparatus and used it to scan the Marsh. A few ragged prisoners moved cautiously on crude boardwalks. They had to live where the ground was more solid, hidden by the trees. Cattails rose from lush wetland beneath the floating wood. Ghost offered the clarifier to Piri, who shook her head.

Instead, she leaned into him. He extended his palm toward her bound wrists.

The screws should be easily removable. You can have tools again.

He tapped back, *The guards are on constant watch.*

They will be tired after a few days. They will think the danger is over.

The sun climbed toward zenith.

I will find a way around the Marsh, Ghost drummed. I will bring you into Rudder, hide you there.

Again her sad smile. *And then what?*

Whatever happens, we'd be free. He tried to still the trembling in his fingers, as much from anger as from fear. *We wouldn't be incarcerated, facing—this.*

Piri looked down at her belly, her arms testing their restraints. Ghost eased his hand around to cradle her with his palm. He would not feel movement from the child so soon, but he could measure Piri's swelling with his touch. Was it her swift Yata gestation or his bigger bones that made her perceptibly larger by the day?

Excitement built as the crowd pointed toward Masari loading the gas cannons and toward wagons waiting by the bridge. Several bodies had already been conveyed there and were laid out flat. The first layer of corpses.

Piri narrowed her eyes and Ghost realized why she wanted to go into the Marsh. He wished they had never learned Yata.

The sun reached zenith. Bright light flared from the cannons accompanied by gleeful shouts from the observers. Projectiles thundered above the prison walls and rained into scattered groves, splashing into water thick with vegetation. A flurry of wings blackened the air, and for a moment the urgent sounds of honking eclipsed even the cheers of the people at the posts. Clarifiers swiveled on well-oiled tripods.

White smoke rose in a murky fog. Several geese seized up and dropped. In a moment prisoners began pouring through the north gate as Masari hunters raced down the northeast road, toward the clearing. Two lines formed, one a narrow procession fanning out across the grass, the other branching wildly among the streams, trying to escape the fumes.

Wagers continued to be bandied back and forth as more fingers pointed. Names and statistics filled Ghost's ears with stunning rapidity. So many kills. So many survivals. Long-awaited match-ups between this red-haired hungry beast, that wily outlaw. Somewhere chalices clinked and someone guffawed. Another terrace broke into a wave of applause.

No sense trying to use a clarifier, they were all mobbed. Ghost clutched Piri to him, his fingers against her palm, tapping. He towered over the tallest Yata there, gazing above dozens of heads.

Both sides have weapons, he reported. The prisoners have homemade clubs, shields. Knives. They are fighting back, but they don't stand a chance against those guns. The hunters can squeeze off more shots than I can count.

Let me see.

He shook his head. *You don't want to see this.*

She caught one of his fingers in hers and twisted, digging a nail into his flesh.

He jerked his hand away, smarting. He whispered, “I can barely watch it, myself.”

Her wrists strained against the ropes, her fingers jabbing against nothing, futile. Her bronze cheeks darkened. It was too much. Ghost couldn’t silence her like this, but he was too afraid of what she would tell him. He bent to kiss the top of her head before he eased his arms around her and lifted, supporting her legs. “Kick me when you want to be let down.” He rested his head against her torso. “Kick hard.”

He watched the pattern emerge. Bands of Yata in the clearing teamed up with nets and lances, armor made of tortoise shells, fibrous whips. They picked out their own quarry, forming circles around isolated Masari. Occasionally a hunter went down. More often the Yata were picked off, the lucky ones creating enough of a distraction to escape gunshot. Several sprinted back to the gate as the gas began to clear, risking vulnerability. A hunter pivoted quickly and shot a Yata in the back only a few steps shy of the north wall.

Ghost waited for Piri to kick him. She did not.

More bodies piled up in the carts. A pair of hunters carried one of their own off the field, harried by more Yata. The boisterous crowds on the Cliff cheered as much for the prisoners as for the Masari.

Ghost closed his eyes in the midst of the revels up top, the blood spurting and pooling below. He cradled Piri on his shoulder and breathed in the scent of her, laying his cheek against her roundness. They were a microcosm surrounded by bedlam. The terrace seemed to fall away until he was floating in air, buffeted by the wind. The shouts of the crowd sank into obscurity beneath the roaring in his veins.

At long last a gentle nudge prodded his side. He opened his eyes as the terraces began to empty. Carts grown gruesome trundled back across the bridge. Guards obscured by foliage locked the gates. Forcing his arms to remain steady, Ghost lowered Piri back to granite and worked to untie the knots at her wrists. He rubbed her freed hands before he bent to her ankles.

A quick glance told him the guards were distracted, collecting on their wagers. Shabra engaged in spirited discussion with her constituents. Above them, the sun had moved two of Ghost’s handbreadths toward the rear settlements of the

Cliffs. The entire ordeal had taken less than half a day.

He gave Piri's legs a brisk rubdown and took her hands in his. "Can you walk?"

She nodded. He snatched the padded ropes from the floor, hurled them over the balustrade, and spirited her down the stairs.

CHAPTER 11

Crossroads

BrushBurn raised his awning, opened the wagon gate, and waited for customers. Few would be out so early, now that his initial flurry of sales had ended. The more prudent citizens imposed their own rationing despite their malnutrition. The less prudent impoverished themselves quickly, given over to the pleasures of habitual consumption.

He had tried to limit half-portions to those; gluttony was bad for business. Even the rich eventually exhausted their resources, and desperation bred threat. All the more dangerous to indulge oneself here, given the modest economy of Crossroads.

That economy was changing fast. Most of the able-bodied were at the communal farm maintaining greenhouses and cold frames, trying to expand the growing season past its accustomed limit. Others ranged farther afield to gather wood. The people around him stockpiled dung for heating as well as for fertilizing, so he kept his cart upwind from the stink. Even those who weren't good with guns took their chances in the wild.

BrushBurn didn't envy them, but he hadn't expected to feel awe. Despite a growing customer base, his sales were lower than anticipated and the Crossroads Chamber still refused to endorse his product. It had been easy to laugh at their misplaced fanaticism from afar. Now he knew better.

Then again, they hadn't tried to stop him from conducting business, either. Even fanatics were sensible when they had to be.

The Covenant had always seemed an unworkable solution, too elaborate and forced to maintain its cohesion. Traders from Rudder had come to Promontory with stories of the despair they'd found in Crossroads. Sooner or later that despair would have to yield to dissent. Sooner or later that dissent would have to reach its natural conclusion.

This town had been a ripe fruit and Promontory was content to wait for it to fall. Who knew that a rebellious group of Yata would suddenly help shake it from the

tree? Given that delicious irony, the temptation had been too great, and Promontory's Chamber had voted to hasten Crossroads' decline and increase its own Destiny stockpiles in the bargain.

BrushBurn had been pressed into service over his objections. He was a trader, not a smuggler, but after a string of initial protests he'd learned to enjoy the job. Now he was a trader again, taking the well-worn paths rather than skulking in the woods. Meeting with officials, not outlaws. The outlaws had merely been a means to an end.

He laid out his wares and rubbed his gloved hands together. He'd planned to bring these backward people into the fold, establishing avenues of trade with initial assistance until Crossroads got back on its feet. Other advisors from Promontory would then begin the work of acquiring the rich fields here. Those fertile soil and water resources were just as important as the Destiny.

Some destruction from the Yata attack was unavoidable, but no one had expected a village in shambles and a Destiny supply chain virtually burned away. Easily-obtained Destiny from the factory in Skedge had emboldened too many in power. Promontory's leaders had seen only an inexhaustible source for the drug, manufactured quickly and unattached to the seasons. They had goaded the Little Masari into working extra shifts to compensate for the ravages of this campaign.

Promontory had underestimated the Little Masari's tempers. As liaison to the factory, SandTail had his hands full.

BrushBurn was not the only one dealing with resistance. Knowing that made living in this cesspool easier.

A shadow advanced across the empty market square, a figure wrapped in loose woolens and ducking her head against the wind. BrushBurn smiled at his favorite fanatic, the one who'd almost shot him when he first arrived. Who had sent him imperiously to the Rotunda with a cryptic message for HigherBrook.

She had come around quickly after that, petitioning him for a generous cut of Yata. BrushBurn laughed softly to himself. *Not quite. Stealing. Then petitioning.*

"Good morning, TripStone," he called to her. "I trust you are enjoying your purchase."

She ignored him, neither quickening nor slowing her steps. It was too soon, still. She would be one to ration her meat.

Their barter had been less than ideal, profitably and otherwise, and he didn't begrudge her the snub. In an odd way, it pleased him. He'd had to get her name from HigherBrook because she hadn't said what it was.

It usually took only a single sale to ensure repeat business, and TripStone had property in the Rotunda's safekeeping. BrushBurn relaxed against his cart. He could wait.

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Four days earlier he had watched her waiting until the crowds dispersed. BrushBurn had seen the look in her eyes and alerted his partners. Then he pretended to nap in a warm puddle of sun.

He listened to her stealth, her trained movements. Not all the hunters had been killed, but TripStone's kind had become a rarity. BrushBurn enjoyed his surveillance of her, feigning a snore.

He was a trader; catching thieves was part of his business. This one was better suited to the forest and its ease of concealment. Her skills were less useful in the open marketplace. He caught a whiff of nervousness.

He'd waited until her hands touched meat before he cocked his revolver. Two clicks echoed around him before his partners emerged from cover. Grinning, BrushBurn rolled to his feet and ambled toward TripStone.

He laid his hand on her arm. "We've met here before, haven't we? Only, this time I have three guns to your one—all aimed and loaded."

He could tell she was mulling alternatives, even outnumbered. He hoped she wouldn't do something stupid. She had somehow known SandTail's name and she had the ear of the Chamber. She was too important to engage in a losing firefight.

"Slim pickings in the hunting grounds, I hear." BrushBurn lifted a slab and held it out to her. "I welcome you as a customer, but you will have to pay for this."



“My home is empty,” she said, flatly. “I have nothing for you.”

“You have something.” His glove trailed suggestively along her woolens and touched the fur on her cheek. He could see he didn’t need to elaborate further.

She rewarded him with only a blink, her eyes the same dull gray as before. He had come to expect a slight trembling, a flash of anger. Less commonly he received a pathetic smile of gratitude. This one hid her emotions well, neither flinching nor pulling away but holding her ground, giving him her full attention and no more.

“Tonight, then,” he said. “My tent.”

He watched after her as she turned quietly away, heading toward the fields. No argument, no acknowledgement. He kept his partners on duty, but there was no need. TripStone didn’t return for a second attempt on the wagon. He was glad she’d decided not to risk her life.

She had appeared at the flap as he arranged his mound of cushions after raising the wicks in his lanterns. Their combined heat sent fingers of warmth into a chilly night. For a moment he considered changing his routine, but curiosity won out. He wanted to see all of her.

“Come inside, TripStone. It’s warmer here.”

Her boots crunched on hard ground, quieting as they reached thick rugs. She stood loosely before him in her closed coats, fixing him with a passive gaze.

Even silent, she had filled the room. BrushBurn savored a pleasant tingle as he measured her stoicism. “I’m a civilized man, TripStone. If I can satisfy my customers, so much the better. The quality of your evening is up to you.” He motioned toward the coats. “Take those off.”

Calmly she unwrapped her woolen layers. Handsome pieces; BrushBurn considered offering an exchange. But there was more cold weather to come and she was thin. He needed his customers alive. He watched her lay the wraps carefully by a glowing lamp, until she had gotten down to her vest, shirt, breeches.

“Take off the rest. Your boots, too.”

She reached into a vest pocket and drew out a trimmed, knotted sheath of entrail. She walked up to him without a word and pressed it into his hand. It was a startling gesture that spoke volumes.

He nodded. "I agree. I doubt Crossroads could support another child right now." BrushBurn opened his pants, lightly stroked an eager cock, and fitted the sheath.

TripStone observed his ministrations briefly, then turned and added her vest and shirt to the pile. BrushBurn frowned at her thinning pelt, the ribs showing beneath her skin. But her breasts remained full, gleaming invitingly in the shifting light. A pleasurable ache spread between his legs.

"You're a very attractive woman," he told her. "But you've been fasting. It's a good decision you make by coming here, buying back your health."

He knew she'd heard him, but she gave no indication. Instead she bent unceremoniously, unlaced her boots, and pulled them off. She unwrapped the woolens from her feet. He followed her dangling breasts and waited for her breeches to fall. Saw a moment's hesitation.

"Allow me." BrushBurn stepped softly up to her, erection bobbing between them. He unlaced her pants with one hand and caressed her nipples with the other. She watched him impassively, unresponsively. He smiled down at her spreading flush. "A naked woman can keep only so many secrets, TripStone. Your body can't lie to me."

Her face remained a mask, betraying nothing. He marveled at her willpower.

"You make this hard on yourself." He slipped his hand beneath the loosened ties and explored her labia in a lazy circle, drawing moisture to her clitoris. She still breathed evenly, but barely so. Most would have closed their eyes by now, either in pleasure or in fear, but this one kept them open. Dead pools, bereft of feeling, but BrushBurn knew better. His fingers told him otherwise.

He drew the pants down and lifted her feet one at a time to free them. He felt her gaze on him and could tell by looking at her how hard her heart thumped. Still, she said nothing, revealing nothing but a biological reaction. BrushBurn could only guess at the urges she was fighting.

"You hate me but you need me, and so does Crossroads. I don't pretend to drive

an easy bargain, but even you must admit that I am being generous here, with both my Yata and my temperament.”

She answered him with a blink.

“As you wish.”

He turned her around, bent her over the cushions, and spread her legs. He entered her slowly, reaching around to cup her breasts in his hands. Gentle pushes at first, rocking her into the pillows.

Her head was turned to the side, the pools of her eyes still dead.

She was open for him, her muscles lax; he slid too easily inside her. He thrust harder, eased partway out, teased. He squeezed stiffened nipples. Her arms dangled, inert at her sides.

“You’ll come around,” he whispered to her, easing into a rhythm. “We have all night.”

It was an unsettling conquest, like humping an empty sack. He’d received more pleasure from his hand. No sorrow crossed this one’s face, no anger. She was fulfilling her part of their bargain, that was all.

The pillows moved easily beneath them. He drove harder, seeking friction. He found her wrists, lifted them above her head, and lay his body full against hers. His shirt pressed against a knobby spine. Her calm breaths were the only indication she was alive; that, and her occasional blink. He slipped against nothing and began to falter.

“You can’t hide from me,” he panted. “I’ll find you. You won’t win this.”

Nothing.

He moved his hands. He manipulated her, keeping himself barely swollen from tiny, hard-won responses. Otherwise her steely passivity remained intact. He knew he would lose her completely if he tried pain.

He pressed her head against the cushions and breathed into her ear. “I admire your fortitude,” he told her in a smooth whisper. “I really do. Even after they

realize it's me, the Farm Yata are much more responsive.”

TripStone's dead eyes blazed instantly with rage. Her muscles clenched.

He had her. He drew back quickly before the moment passed and rammed her with a shout. He didn't care what made her tight as he thrust with renewed vigor, faster, harder, exulting. There was no going back, she was his now. The pillows quaked.

No cries came from beneath him, no whimpers. But her breathing was no longer calm, her body no longer still. BrushBurn finally controlled it, driven to a fever pitch by TripStone's involuntary gasps. Her hands clawed the cushions. When he exploded inside her he knew it had been worth the trouble.

“I will keep you fed,” he breathed into her ear. “But after tonight you will have to pay me with more than this. I refuse to believe you've already sold your possessions.”

Even now, even bested, she refused to close her eyes.

He covered her for a time, inhaling her sweat, listening to her ragged breaths, and basking in his triumph. Then he gradually withdrew, careful of the sheath; he was nothing if not conscientious. Who knew how many bodies were already growing his seed? He didn't need to impregnate another customer, especially here.

BrushBurn staggered from her and repaired to a corner of the tent. He found a hefty slab of well-marked Yata. If the Chamber saw it in her hands it might grant him an endorsement.

“Here.” He set it down by her boots. “You've earned a good piece.” He backed away, sat on a simple chair, and began peeling off the sheath.

TripStone raised herself from the cushions. Her face remained static but her body moved with pain. She bent to the meat first, scrutinizing the inking on its fat. It was a curious choice. Most customers were more interested in the weight, or the quality of marbling. Most of them got dressed first.

He asked, “Satisfactory?”

She looked at him. “Yes.”

At least it was a word. She could speak.

She gingerly drew her breeches up. Calm, resolute. Slow. She was a marvel to watch. BrushBurn absently cleaned himself with a cloth, amazed when his blood rushed back and his cock came alive again in his hand.

She was folding her shirt around her when he coughed and said, “My silence is also negotiable.”

Her hands hesitated. She looked at him. He followed her descending gaze.

She said, simply, “That offer is worthless. You have a reputation for lying.”

“Part of the cost of doing business.” Perhaps this was an opportunity. She had not yet rejected him outright. “Your purchase would be enough. No one need know about our time here.”

Still, it would make good tavern talk. But no. He wanted this one to himself. If she bought his silence, he would abide by that agreement.

Her breeches remained unlaced, her shirt open at the front. What thoughts could possibly be racing through her mind, what vast inventory? She blinked, blinked again.

Her gray eyes looked into his—not dead, this time, but not fully alive. Calculating. Idly his palm began to slide, before he realized he needed no help. He was quite ready.

She padded to her pile of clothes, found her vest, and withdrew another sheath. How many did she have? BrushBurn accepted it from her. He bent to rearrange the pillows as she slipped her breeches from her legs.

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Now he stood in the marketplace, watching her depart. Four days should have been enough time to help flesh out her bones. He couldn't tell, gazing at TripStone's layers of coats, her red bush of hair wrapped in scarves.

He couldn't tell, but he could imagine. Thin, yes, but solid. Lithe. Taut.

Some had avoided him after a night against his pillows, while others came clamoring for another handout. Which, without something in return to sell to Skedge, is what it was. BrushBurn turned those petitioners away. One did not repeat charity once a business relationship was established. You used sex to open the door, not to hold it.

Every day since that night, TripStone had passed him on her way to the fields. Each day he had greeted her cordially and been ignored, and today was no different. The longer she dismissed him, the sweeter the wait became. Eventually the meat would run out. Eventually she would go to the Rotunda for her belongings.

BrushBurn had no way of knowing that his product rested, intact and preserved, in a honeycombed hut. He did not witness its unveiling, brought out into the streets and passed from hand to hand to hand throughout the suffering village of Basc.

He had no inkling of the conviction his generous slab of flesh instilled.

CHAPTER 12

Crossroads

For the first time in uncounted days, TripStone felt as though she were home.

She cut and de-boned. She soaked pieces of Yata in brine, adding to the great vats in RootWing's spacious kitchen. The tables belonging to Ghost's father were plain, not sacrificial. His tools were functional and unadorned. The dead came to them not with written blessings but with small pieces of parchment bearing only names, and the meat on the bodies was too sparse to feed a village.

But it was enough. It was more than enough.

Around her she heard gentle rips and tears, quiet voices raised in benediction. The prayers encircled the room until they reached her and she added her soft chorus, drawing down her blade. She touched fingertips to the cheek of the girl beneath her, whispering thanks.

It was good the child had been delivered from her misery, but never before had TripStone performed the rites over such a small body. She wanted to put her knives away and hug the tiny corpse to her chest.

She had taught Ghost's kin the hunters' prayers, verses reserved for those who made the first incisions in consecrated flesh. The farmers had learned the ritual preparations in less time. Those were not so different from the dissections they already performed on the animals.

Not so different, yet entirely so.

The walls echoed. It was an odd sensation, this multitude of voices. In the past, she had intoned the prayers alone over a single table, paying her last respects to her gods with whom she had shared a brief communion, speaking face to face. They had spent their last moments together under the watchful, benevolent eyes of the gods, first out in the hunting grounds and then in a private room.

Those whom TripStone killed had known death much better than she. It had been their companion. They had walked to meet it, calm and unafraid, while

TripStone had been the one in agony. She'd held her rifle steady while her heart split open as assuredly as the ones her bullets cleaved.

This dead girl never had a chance to come of age. Her heart was a full, ripe plum, for which even her tiny body, rent by famine and exposure, had proved too much. TripStone laid open a chest cavity filled with signs of distress.

The prayers circled again on gently beating wings. TripStone called out to them. Birds alighted from her tongue, soaring upward. Simple names, remembered to the gods. Simple names, simple prayers wrapping around her own cleaved heart and desiccated soul.

Other sounds carried through the walls. Ghost's brothers, sisters, and cousins loaded carts and readied equipment. If TripStone listened closely, she could hear HigherBrook's voice, raised to direct not just farmers but weavers, carpenters, masons, draftsmen, smiths, papermakers. They were few but they, too, were enough. The meat prepared here was for them, ensuring they would not step hungry into Basc.

Ensuring continued cooperation on both sides would be much harder. HigherBrook had called this gathering to the Grange on the edge of town for good reason. He couldn't use the marketplace, not with BrushBurn and his abominable cart stationed there.

And too many Masari still hungered for revenge. It was too soon to tell them about this new covenant, this attempt at reconciliation.

Opening up the hunting grounds to average citizens presented its own problems, requiring controls on the rate of execution. In the meantime, BrushBurn kept peddling his wares while HigherBrook left his options open.

TripStone set more meat into brine, whispering scripture. She would reconcile with Basc but not with Destiny Farm. A hard, black seed lay beneath the meditative chants floating through her on the warmth from RootWing's hearth. It was a seed holding a hundred-headed weed, each flower holding the pollen of a thousand warriors. It had rooted in her soil and she cultivated it with a gardener's care, waiting for the season when she would transplant it under the Promontory sky. Waiting for its tendrils to cross a broad, slitted canyon, choking the life from demon farmers on the other side of the world.


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“This is meant for you, too.” RootWing pushed a plate of Yata across rough-hewn wood. “I know there isn’t much to go around, but you must have something.”

TripStone scanned the great table, where Ghost’s extended family dined on scraps. Subsistence portions, not just of Yata but also of other meat and produce. She couldn’t help but smile to herself, wondering what Ghost would think if he knew his kinsfolk were doing what he did. A forced deprivation, an attempt at weaning.

But that had been in the cabin. What was he doing now, in Alvav?

She touched a knife to a gleaming morsel. “This is your family’s meat.”

“Yes, it is. You’re family.” Ghost’s mother DewLeaf pushed TripStone’s hand closer to the plate. “You always have been. Eat.”

TripStone laid light fingertips on a thinning arm, noting that the woman’s wispy pelt had grown increasingly gray. RootWing and DewLeaf paid her an honor far beyond her worth. She should not be flanked by Ghost’s parents like this, when he had siblings and cousins who were more deserving.

“Stop it, Stone. I know that look.” Since when did RootWing start calling her by her shortname? “You deserve this as much as anyone, probably more. You’ve done an invaluable service to Crossroads.”

TripStone speared and lifted the meat. “HigherBrook would disagree.”

“Whatever passed between the two of you in Basc, I know it was not your fault.” The eyes that colored Ghost’s looked into hers out of a seamed, craggy face that had frightened her as a child. Now it was a comfort. “I also know that HigherBrook couldn’t have done this without you.”

RootWing took a bite of Yata and chewed it slowly, thoroughly. TripStone could almost read his mind. She knew which prayer graced his thoughts as he swallowed.

“We’ve convinced him to let you return to Basc as an advisor,” DewLeaf added,

her voice low. “He was adamantly against it, but this family has held Crossroads together for a long time. Longer than he has. We were finally able to change his mind.” She sipped goat’s milk from a plain wooden cup. “We’ve known *you* a lot longer than he has.”

*Yes. But I’ve changed.* TripStone bit the thought down. “Thank you,” she whispered. She settled the Yata on her tongue and felt a film of lightness coat her mouth. She moved it to her molars and let its juice anoint her throat. It was a subtle ecstasy, far removed from the piercing joy her ravaging in the field had brought her. Better to be subtle, she told herself. At least here.

Conversations ebbed and flowed around the table, interrupted by extended silences as the Yata was consumed. Ghost’s voice resonated in the distant echoes of his bloodline. His kin carried parts of him in their bones, their faces, the way they moved. *Dear friend, what is happening to you?*

“What was he like?” DewLeaf asked, softly. “Ghost. What was his life like, before he left for Alvav?”

“Difficult.” TripStone took DewLeaf’s hand in hers, brushing against papery skin. “I know HigherBrook may pardon him if he returns, but I am still sworn to secrecy. I can tell you, though, that in his own way he was happy.”

DewLeaf nodded. “I was hoping he would have come back if he was not, even as a *yatanii*.”

“Actually, we’re eating now much the way he did.”

DewLeaf tried to smile. “That makes me feel closer to him.”

TripStone swallowed around a lump in her throat. “Me, too.” She patted DewLeaf’s hand and returned to her plate. “You know he mixed rabbit in with the Yata when he was a boy.”

“We know,” RootWing said. “There wasn’t much that he could get by us.” He frowned. “Maybe that’s why he left.”

“No. There was more. He didn’t want to endanger you.”

“He wouldn’t have.” Tightness gripped his words. RootWing drained his cup and

licked milk from his lips. “This is a large farm, with many sheds. And family to guard them.”

TripStone bent to her dinner. She whispered, “If I ever see him again, I will tell him.”

“I know you will.” RootWing looked around the table and surveyed the plates emptied too soon, the shuffling of kin returning to chores made more difficult by assaults on the land. “We’d had hopes of a different life for the two of you.”

“I know.”

TripStone sipped her milk, tasting sweetness. She held the liquid in her mouth, its thick blanket a soothing distraction.

Childhood trysts at the windbreak had been one thing, but what kind of a life would two *yatanii* have had together? She couldn’t bear to look at Ghost’s animalcules and he couldn’t bear to live with a hunter. How soon before they would have both starved?

She closed her eyes and swallowed. The taste lingered.

# CHAPTER 13

## Early Winter

### The Cliff

The guards relaxed their stance as memories of the Games began to fade. Ghost walked through Shabra's compound while Piri slept, past shadowy sculptures and out into the cold, up to the observation post. A dozen clarifiers stood in a shallow, curved line by the balustrade, motionless sentinels gazing down at a black, empty clearing.

Thin lamp light played across the platform. The Cliff's fountains quieted to a trickle in the dry air. Wrapped and hooded in a slate-colored blanket, Ghost advanced toward the first clarifier under the severe gaze of a night watchman and held his hands up. He wished mightily for gloves, trying to remember his Yata. "See? Hands empty. No bad."

"Bad, no," the guard growled. "Crazy, yes."

Ghost thought for a moment and nodded. "Agreed."

But the guard was out here, too, in this bitter chill; they may as well both be crazy. Ghost cast his gaze about the dark as the watchman left the lamp's questionable warmth to stand beside the blanket. His uniform didn't look thick. The man must be freezing.

Even gruff, the Yata's voice was high-pitched. "What are you out here for? Nothing to see."

"Wait. I show you." Ghost found a lever and traced its connection to a fulcrum. He shifted his weight against the clarifier and pushed the lever down, tightening screws. He yawned, as much to return circulation to his cheeks as to stay awake, then pointed upward. "Hunt goes on in the sky."

"You're drunk."

"Wish I were. Alcohol make warm."

What in the gods' names was he doing? Probably there were animalcules up there, too, floating in the fluids of the heavens. If the lenses magnified what was down, could anything prevent them from magnifying what was up?

Ghost didn't much care. He was here to steal them, as soon as he figured out how. If he and Piri were destined for the Marsh, he wanted to know about all of its dangers, including those too small to see with the naked eye. The hunt was bad enough. He had to do something to increase their chances of survival.

Shabra's patience with him was growing thin. They couldn't stay here much longer.

He'd been livid the morning after the Games, screaming at breakfast. Piri had not stood behind Bodasa that day but remained by his side, her fingers stilled. The guards had hovered close by, hands poised over the hilts of their curved knives.

Shabra had watched him serenely before declaring in a clipped voice that their meal was finished. From then on, her questions to him had grown shorter and fewer. She became more dismissive, sending him and Piri away from the table as soon as he laid his tongs back down on the burnished wood.

The chunks of Yata he left behind mysteriously appeared inside his satchel, wrapped in a thin cloth. Someone in the kitchen was looking out for him.

And more. His satchel and Piri's filled with slips of parchment bearing abbreviated, scribbled lines. Crude renditions of plants and animals, mountains and rivers, lay scattered throughout the papers in no patterns he could discern.

Food. Messages. The signs of an upcoming journey. More and more he spied brief touches among the servants, their fingers grazing each other's arms and backs. Those tending Shabra's breakfasts seemed to listen in as Ghost detailed what he knew about Crossroads, the Covenant, Basc. They had not understood Masari before. Now he could swear they did.

Out on the platform he shivered, drawing his blanket closer. The watchman rubbed his hands together, frigid but entertained as Ghost manipulated the tube. At least the hands were nowhere near the knife, and the guard seemed disinclined to call in reinforcements.

The clarifiers were built close to the ground for Yata, not Masari, and they were built to point toward the grass instead of the stars. Ghost squatted down almost to the granite floor to fit his head beneath the eyepiece. He looked upon a large blur, like sunlight skittering across a pool.

He adjusted the focus and jerked his face away, startled. How much up there had been invisible until now? Ghost gazed at the unmagnified stars, then peered again through the eyepiece. He let out a soft whistle. “*Big* hunt in the sky.”

The guard chuckled. “Your Yata ridiculous.” He switched tongues. “I do speak Masari.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Ghost grinned with relief. He moved away from the tube. “You really have to see this. I won’t try anything, just tell me where you want me to stand. Here, have this.”

He unslung his blanket and immediately wished he hadn’t. How could he carry on a conversation with chattering teeth?

The guard threw the wool eagerly over his shoulders, holding it close to his body for what seemed an eternity. Finally his hand reached underneath his tunic and removed a streamlined wineskin, easily concealed. “Alcohol make warm,” he said, laughing again. “You crazy Masari. Here.”

Ghost swore his blood congealed in the cold. He stuttered until he could get the words out. “Crazy, soon-to-be-drunk Masari.” He opened the wineskin and tipped it to his lips. His blood began to thaw. Sweet fire spread through his stomach. Some day he might even be able to feel his fingers and toes again.

Reluctantly he sealed the neck and wiped his mouth. “Good drink. What is it?”

“Goldberry brandy. From the Marsh.” The guard looked into the eyepiece and yelped. He spluttered a string of curses in Yata.

*That* language might come in handy. Ghost couldn’t conceal his delight. “You’ll have to teach me those.”

“What *is* that?”

“Same as the Games.” Ghost clutched the wineskin and shoved his hands into

his armpits. “It’s the sky, but closer, clearer, less blurry. How do you get brandy from the Marsh?”

“Prisoners make it, sell it to us.”

“*Sell it?*”

The guard reached up. “Give.” He took the brandy from Ghost and downed a healthy swig, then handed the wineskin back. “I have more of this in my room. We’ll talk.” He looked again into the eyepiece, swearing in amazement under his breath.

Ghost began to shiver again. A new infusion of brandy unkinked his muscles. “I’ll be—I’ll be looking through the clarifier over there.” He pointed. “Get me. Get when you’re ready.” A short giggle escaped his lips. “*Me* when you’re ready. Never mind.”

He didn’t know if the cold or the drink made him stagger. Better to think it was the brandy. He took another long swig, just to be sure. *Don’t fall over the edge.*

More to the point, he had to figure out how to get the lenses loose, before his eyesight blurred completely. He almost didn’t want to. That guard would catch hell from Shabra. The three of them might end up headed to the Marsh together. *Well, we’d know someone there, then.* The prospect seemed hilarious and he squelched a nervous titter. The stars wheeled above him. *Concentrate.*

Tilt. Tighten. Scrunch impossibly against the cold stone. Focus. Brandy. See where it all fit. See where it all came apart. Commit to memory for later. Keep an eye on the guard. He was occupied, good. Enjoying his new blanket, the bastard. More brandy. Screws, clips, a shiny ring, and the glass would drop into Ghost’s palm. He just had to make sure his fingers still had feeling in them.

The clarifier swiveled and stopped at a shimmering glow. Oblong, diaphanous. Hanging above the world. Ghost focused, refocused. It refused to sharpen. *\_Gods, there really is a portal to the afterlife! How’d it get way up there?\_* He blinked hard and stared at the wineskin, shaking his head.

The lensed tube sucked the heat from his hands. The stars closed in and draped him in light, then darkness. He could see them through his eyelids; how wonderful. No, that wasn’t right...

Wool tumbled about his shoulders. How long had he been sleeping? He opened his eyes and wanted to scream as bitter cold knifed through his heart. His innermost core shook uncontrollably.

The guard's face appeared, lips pursed. "Crazy drunken Masari." He pried the brandy from Ghost's clenched hand. "You're with me."

A fool's grin widened across Ghost's face as he tried to stand. Where'd his fulcrum go? The guard muscled him up; that couldn't be possible but it was. Hobbling from cramped limbs, shivering wildly, Ghost draped himself over his new friend, amazed that the small man could even half-carry him. He forced his mouth to work. "Strong Yata."

"Don't test it." But the man's tone was cordial. He called to a newly-arrived watchman as they shuffled past. The other guard grunted back as he peered through the clarifier, ogling the heavens.

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Light seeped into the room. Piri stretched luxuriantly, pulling herself from heavy sleep. Her fingers meandered over her belly, tapping out declarations of love.

How often had she wanted to speak to the others she carried, forcing her tongue to carry her thoughts? Instead, she had settled for the soothing touch of her own hands and the sounds that were within her power to make. She had hummed with the women in the nursery, their closed mouths weaving soft songs, harmonies circling and spiraling away from slaughterhouse dissonance.

Those had been the most dangerous times, when they were heavy with child and ate diluted Destiny from the troughs. The drug was enough to keep them all sedate, able to fulfill themselves and each other, while leaving behind a thin edge of awareness. Truth filtered in like an aftertaste, birthing questions previously unasked and thoughts previously unconsidered. Every tiny kick had drummed a message into Piri's palms, then. *Escape*, the children's feet told her. *Find a way*.

They'd all been taken from her for their subterfuge. Snatched from her at birth, given to nursemaids who had not felt them grow. Increased doses of Destiny had answered Piri's hysteria, shooting through her loins like quicksilver and sending her with their blessings of orgasm back into the breeding pens. A multitude of arms had pulled her in and enfolded her, opened her, flooded her. Her dreams

had drifted back to the lazy bottom of her brain, choked again with shifting silt.

Now she caressed this child from without and imagined the sheen of her skin mingled with the down of Ghost's fur. She tried to envision eyes, cheekbones, hair color. So many variables, as Ghost would say. So many possibilities in this time of equal danger, when the only promise of her people rested in yet another prison.

I will kill whoever tries to take you from me. Her fingers pressed, warm and confident.

The door yawned open. Ghost staggered in, snickering to himself, each hand curled around the neck of a wineskin. He leaned back against their door with exaggerated care until it clicked shut.

He blinked bleary, besotted eyes at her. "Godsyoulookbeautiful." His blanket was missing, his clothing and hair mussed. Parts of his pelt stuck out at odd angles. A third wineskin extended from beneath his breeches like an obscene appendage.

In time he was able to push himself from the door. Piri watched his slow, cautious progress across the room and the delicate way he placed the skins in his satchel, as though they were newly-laid eggs.

She had seen Masari drunkenness before, usually through the mesh of a fence. She had known it through poorly-executed gropes in close quarters.

She had known Yata drunkenness as well. Had heard howls of pain from the Masari farm hand caught inebriating the livestock, suffering under the lash.

She didn't know what to expect from Ghost, could only wait and see. She raised herself to a sitting position, letting her blanket fall to her belly.

He crawled to her pallet and collapsed. He grinned up at her, then sat up abruptly and cupped his cheeks in his hands. "Head."

Hurt?

He cradled her fingers to his chest. "Hurt."

She waited. There was a reason for this. Good or bad, it would come from his lips or his fingers in time. His chest was clammy against her palm, the reek of his sweat strong.

“I can—” He moved his hands, trying to describe shapes in the air. Piri watched him push through pain. “They come out. The small ones, lenses.” He breathed deeply. “Big ones, too much. Can’t carry those.” He scowled. “Too *vyakkak* cold.”

Her brow furrowed. *Vyakkak?*

Ghost tapped the Masari translation on her arm, his eyes sparkling with mirth. She couldn’t help but smile.

“See?” he said. “I’m learning more Yata.” He groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Ohh, this hurts.”

She held him gently and listened as the pieces of his broken narrative fell into place. One of the wineskins would bribe their way past the compound. Another would buy safe passage off the Cliff. The third would get them into the Marsh without a check of their packs by the guards. The brandy was part of a healthy underground economy. The night watchman thought Ghost was a drunk visiting from Rudder. And there were more stars in the sky than anyone could imagine, and portals for the dead, and vast animalcules.

Piri queried this last point, wondering whether she’d understood correctly.

“A diversion,” Ghost whispered into her ear; her stomach roiled at his breath. “So I can get the lenses.” He nuzzled her ear and giggled, then hauled himself to his feet and wove unsteadily toward the chamber pot.

She snuggled beneath her blanket while he cursed the loudness of his piss. More light brightened the walls, warming her pallet. Soon they would be summoned to Shabra’s breakfast table. Piri suspected that, this time, Ghost’s inability to eat a full plate of Yata would be genuine.

For once, she wished Ghost could touch-talk to Shabra instead of opening his mouth. She’d have to clean him up.

CHAPTER 14

Basc

Timber rolled in from the far woods, up precipitous trails. Work crews fanned out into the burned hunting grounds, churning ash into soil and clearing dead husks away. Two languages intermingled under a crisp, clear sky, into a single voice of hunger and fatigue.

HigherBrook stood over a wide parchment map spread on a raised board over dry dirt. Next to him, Gria's finger delineated more secret paths to and around her camp. She showed him the remote valley, her hiding place where the forest still lived. In time, supply lines would bring its bounty here.

Faded ink showed the locations of access roads and supply depots, soldiers' quarters and combat arenas, the training ground a village unto itself. Its existence alone was nothing short of numbing; but soon that, too, would end. Even if he had to supervise every demolition, HigherBrook would make sure the militia camp was taken apart piece by piece, then rebuilt and rehabilitated within the safe confines of Basc. The gun smithy would produce farming tools. The armory would hold silage.

He straightened his spine and surveyed a changing landscape. Split-rail fences were already in place around future planting fields. More and more Yata stepped forward to learn about crop layout and rotation, tree-tapping, and pest control. Wagons from Crossroads hauled in hay, trays of onion and garlic bulbs, fava beans and lamb's lettuce. Seeds for the spring plantings would come later.

HigherBrook had spent the morning hauling sacks of winter wheat and rye, barley, and oats to the furrows, joining an already spent workforce. Whether Masari or Yata, large or small, furry or smooth, they all bore the same blisters and departed the new fields at dusk with the same bent backs.

Their days grew short. They were already out of time. HigherBrook tried to will the weather to change, but that was futile. He knew he was on a fool's errand. Everything they planted now was at risk. But a new infrastructure was rising, and his advisors imparted knowledge that would yield its own crop in time. He could not alter the seasons, but perhaps he could reinvent traditions that would

preserve Crossroads. What choice did he have?

The exhaustion in Gria's face mirrored his own, but beneath those deep lines ran an undercurrent of disgust. She was being cooperative, assigning her own soldiers to work with Zai's breakaway forces under watchful Masari. It was an uneasy peace, but so far it seemed to be working.

His own breakaway advisor was another matter. During the day, TripStone combed the streets of Basc, meeting with Yata door to door to determine skill sets and assign teachers. She gave her rigorous memorization practices new purpose. Everything that had gone into recreating Yata stories now went into coordinating a village, weaving new patterns of interdependence. In this, he admitted, Ghost's parents spoke well when they insisted that TripStone accompany him.

Her devotion warmed his heart, but her meetings with Gria chilled his bones. HigherBrook watched the lamp leave TripStone's tent during her stealthy exit from their small Masari outpost. He followed her in secret as she padded at night to Gria's honeycombed rooms, and discerned the spectral light in her eyes when she emerged hours later. The night he finally stepped forward to take her arm, she had smiled as though she'd expected him. As though she wondered what had taken him so long.

He'd hissed, "If you are negotiating with Gria about the future of our peoples, don't you think it's best I knew about it?"

"Of course." She glided by his side. "The negotiations are your purview. You are head of the Chamber."

Their lamps had swung easily, throwing shadows. The night smelled of industry: sawn wood, distilled oils. All around them an adult chorus coddled needy infants whose cries rose into the chill. When TripStone turned her eyes on HigherBrook he squelched a sudden, strong urge to look away.

He asked, bluntly, "If not negotiations, then what? What do you discuss?"

"Destiny Farm."

The words fell from her tongue like sizzling lead. HigherBrook could see the tightly-coiled muscles beneath her calm. "That is no longer your concern. You

have done your damage there.”

Her arm relaxed against his. “I’ve just begun.”

“*Damn it, TripStone!*” He lowered his voice, directing her away from a circle of huts. His hold on her tightened. “You see how short-handed we are. You know what little meat gets from Basc to Crossroads. The Masari are my responsibility, and I will *not* let half our population starve when there is a way to preserve them.” He swallowed. “Destiny Farm is as repugnant to me as it is to you, TripStone, but more repugnant to me is the death of Crossroads.”

“Crossroads is dying with every purchase it makes from BrushBurn.”

“No.” He gazed into unblinking embers. “It is *surviving*. However it can.” He folded his arms back into his coat. “Let it go.”

“Gria leads Basc, now,” TripStone had answered smoothly. “I will continue to meet with her if she requests it.”

And therein lay the difficulty. Gria began sending a runner to fetch his associate after that night, making that request openly clear. It did not matter that Basc’s new leader, standing over the worn map and showing HigherBrook the way to her shooting range, had systematically destroyed everything he held dear. They were allies by necessity now. The sacred land of his dreams was now a sovereign community demanding not his worship, but his respect.

He had no choice but to give it. Destiny Farm was a stopgap, but to rely completely on Promontory was not an option, not if HigherBrook’s people were to survive this ordeal as anything other than empty physical shells. The future of Crossroads depended in great part on the general beside him, who chose to keep her name and her notoriety. She wore no spiritual raiment but remained dressed in her dun tunic, whose pockets now filled with seed and textile samples rather than with gunpowder and bullets.

Gria was trying to save her people as much as HigherBrook was trying to save his. But she and TripStone had shut him out. Whatever they were planning, his instincts told him to stop it.

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Gria waited in her outer chamber for an exhausted and ravenous TripStone to stumble inside. Masari weakness had been another Covenant lie, she knew that now. She saw how they dealt with pain.

She smiled grimly to herself. What did that say about Yata strength? The ancient handprints glared from just inside the door for a reason, facing back through the ages toward each revered occupant of this hut. Gria couldn't help but look at them, her people's roots in a family's madness.

She rose at a single, heavy knock and opened the door, slipping her arm across a quivering back.

"I can reach the chair today," TripStone whispered, easing her away. The hunter shuffled past Gria with eyes half closed and dropped onto a small, Yata-sized stool. Thinly-furred hands grasped a dainty table for support. In a minute TripStone gained control of her muscles and reached shaky fingers into her coats, toward a vest pocket.

"Every Yata should see this, you know." Gria poured bitter root tea for them both. "They would understand the Masari better." In all her years of living among nature, she'd seen nothing so striking as a Masari's transformation by a few mouthfuls of meat. "You torture yourself by waiting until you get here."

TripStone squeezed her eyes shut while her teeth ripped jerky from a small, dark slab. Gria knew the hunter craved fresher fare as much as she craved retribution. A lesser person would simply have lunged across the table, and their time together would be over.

She had watched the less discrete advisors gulp down their allotment to keep from attacking their audience. Idly she wondered about HigherBrook's diet, how much he needed to maintain his narrow, civilized veneer. Sitting in these close quarters, in this heavily-illustrated room filled with Dirt People ghosts, Gria looked upon a hunter's strict discipline. That self-control had allowed TripStone to face her prey with an unclouded gaze and unsullied appetite.

When Gria targeted Crossroads' hunters, she had targeted their code of restraint as well. Only a few remained alive to rein the others in. The very people she had sought to destroy were somehow saving Basc. The Masari invasion for which she'd girded herself and her troops was finally happening, but Gria had never imagined herself inviting them in.

TripStone dropped the last of the jerky into her mouth, meditating as she chewed. She raised her face, her eyes still tight-shut, to the high ceiling. She would be moaning by now if she were alone. Had the Dirt People seen such displays all the time, or had they fled from them? How had they organized to strike back?

At long last TripStone leaned forward again, regarding Gria with barely concealed animosity. "All right. I'm ready." A rock-steady hand lifted the tea to her lips. The hunter swirled it around her teeth, cleaning her breath of Yata.

Gria steeped her fingers, thinking on the crude map TripStone had drawn during their last summit. "We must be patient. I was blinded by the passions of my followers or I'd have waited, myself, and not given both our peoples this winter to endure. We've got to regain at least some of our strength."

"I agree. This is the time to plan, not act." TripStone drained her cup and stood.

TripStone's large hands had outlined the hidden, meandering trail through Alvav's woods and meadows, the steady climb into Skedge, and the steep drop into the salt pan. The way into Promontory had been less clear. The hunter could only guess where the angels, the Masari transporters of Skedge's dead, had taken her in their cart of Yata corpses.

Beyond Promontory lay a vast canyon. Within the canyon lay their target.

Gria lifted a lamp and led the way to the inner chamber, wondering how much the design of this hut had to do with secrecy rather than sacrament. Each room served as a sentinel, the echoes so exact they informed Gria of where she had a visitor, welcome or not.

This was a house of demons, just as certainly as the Soala was. The more one spiraled in toward the center, the greater their concentration.

Drier now, pinched and odoriferous, the slab of meat from Destiny Farm lay inside a closed stone box. Neither of them needed to see it; it made its presence known. It reminded Gria, as TripStone had done, that Promontory would not stop at Crossroads in its conquest but would cross the boundary. Likely, Gria and her people would face the same fate to which her actions had inadvertently condemned so many others.

They sat down at a larger table covered in old parchment partially eaten by decomposers and scraped of words. The manifestos written at the camp had served their purpose and were making way for new ones.

“I’ve heard stories about the rains in Promontory,” TripStone said, leaning over pages of notes. “Its mines and factories have eroded the land. There are no trees to hold the soil in place.”

“Mudslides, then.”

TripStone nodded. “And flash floods. That’s when the farm would be most vulnerable if the canyon is passable. The salt pan would be flooded as well, maybe deep enough to get boats across. We could lower them from Skedge if the Yata there will let us in.”

“You said they believe they are really Masari.” Gria shook her head in disbelief. How deep did Ata’s sickness go? “What would make them turn on their—brethren?”

“They don’t know about Destiny Farm, either. They think they’re making ‘bed snuff’ for the Masari.”

Gria buried her face in her hands and waited for her head to clear. Each revelation brought with it a new wave of vertigo.

“They have no Yata heritage,” TripStone continued. “They don’t know the language and they wouldn’t recognize the branding as you have. It may take time to convince them Destiny Farm really exists.” Her voice dropped. “I know less about Alvav. Has your scout returned?”

“No.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, except that the hunting grounds were too empty when I went through.” She scratched onto the parchment.

Gria knew Masari but TripStone wrote their notes in Yata. The gesture did not escape her. What must life have been like before the deaths of the ancient herds, when food had been everywhere for the taking? When giant, lumbering beasts provided everything both their kinds would ever need or want? Yata and Masari could have sat together like this, planning shared hunting expeditions over a



primordial fire. With a start Gria realized the fruits of that cooperation. The blame for the great extinctions did not rest with the Masari alone.

TripStone turned the sheet around and pointed. “HigherBrook knows I tracked BrushBurn and SandTail to get my evidence from Promontory, but he knows little beyond that. He knows that Promontory buys Destiny from Skedge, to store in their old Rotunda.”

“You said it’s called the Warehouse there?”

TripStone nodded. “I couldn’t get there. I was told it’s heavily guarded.”

“Then it’s holding more than just Destiny.” Gria walked toward the plain stone box and reeled from the stench of decaying meat; she could only imagine the maggots incubating inside. That grisly reminder sat beside the other relic that guided her now. She slid the book into her arms and brought it to the table, teetering under its weight. It fell from her grasp with a slam.

She sank back into her chair, pausing to catch her breath. The tome was unwieldy even for Masari, but Gria knew her muscles had atrophied from hunger. Once she could have lifted and carried its stories more easily. “How many of these books are in your Rotunda now?”

TripStone frowned, counting on her fingers. “Thousands.”

“I don’t want to know about lineages, I want to know about size. Volume.” Gria worried a sheet out from beneath leather. “I don’t know how Skedge makes its Destiny. You said it uses a factory, so its product might be different from ours. Our Destiny was highly concentrated, with a limited period of potency. You could stockpile only so much.” She pushed the sheet toward TripStone. “Draw me a layout of the Rotunda. Show everything.”

Gria rose from her chair and stepped up to a parti-colored wall. She touched the dancing inscriptions, history lessons laid out in plain view. The scratches from TripStone’s pen sounded like the rodents whose meat was feeding Basc, tiny claws scrabbling in an attempt to escape the snares.

Basc could solve its starvation problem. Make the snares larger. Meat was meat.

“You haven’t seen the Warehouse,” Gria said, talking to the wall.

“No.”

“But you were told it’s guarded.”

TripStone’s voice edged around her back. “DamBuster told me. DevilChaser compared it to a fortress.”

“Then that’s what it is.” Gria rested her palm against the painted adobe before turning away. She stepped up to TripStone, looking over the hunter’s shoulder at crude depictions of libraries, offices, meeting halls, dormitories, inner and outer passageways, underground caverns. She followed the calculus, dimensions of a single book multiplied to fill a massive egg of marble and granite. Gria balked at the numbers filling the page.

“If I didn’t know any better,” she murmured, “I’d say you were showing me an armory.”

TripStone turned on the small stool to stare at her.

“Promontory produces your firearms and Rudder’s. It makes sense for them to have a central supply depot.” Gria rested her hand on the Masari’s massive shoulder. “It’s good your belongings are protected inside the Rotunda. HigherBrook can’t keep you from them and they give you access to the building. We need to know where the Rotunda’s vulnerabilities are before we can think of getting close to the Warehouse.” She looked across the room, toward the rancid box. “Look for where and how it can be breached. When do you return to Crossroads?”

“In a few days. I’ll be teaching more of my people how to hunt.” TripStone frowned. “Effectively.”

Gria nodded. “Teach them to defend themselves against us as well. We are becoming good trappers, and I can navigate the far woods in my sleep. That gives the people *I* teach an advantage.” Her fingers grazed fur. “And, TripStone—keep your advisors away from the hunting grounds unless absolutely necessary. We are as hungry as you.”

## CHAPTER 15

### The Cliff

The servants no longer bade Ghost and Piri hello. They tapped only: *Soon*.

“I need a clear night.” Ghost paced within their room. “I can’t create a distraction with these damned clouds. Tell that to Bodasa the next time you stand behind her.”

He never thought he’d be fleeing from freedom into imprisonment, but now he had trouble distinguishing between the two. Worse, he didn’t know what *soon* meant, except that they had to leave. More and more frequently they found provisions left in their packs when they returned from breakfast.

He knew the servants were organizing, but there was another reason for their warnings. At the rate of Piri’s gestation, the only way for Shabra to terminate a pregnancy would be to kill her, too.

He’d leave without the lenses if he had to. He’d think of another way to protect his family. He’d learn something else to do, some other way to be of use.

The guards came to lead them down the smiling walls and into Shabra’s dining room. Ghost’s slippers whispered onto the plush sunburst rug, when suddenly Piri shivered hard and dug her nails into his arm. He looked beyond the table and saw why.

Shabra directed them to sit as usual, without introducing them to her new scribe. “It’s been a long night. You must be hungry.” The new servant smiled placidly down at them as he readied his parchment and pen. Poised and unassuming, prepared to do his job.

Ghost’s mind raced as he looked past goblets and candelabra, toward the tapestries and paintings on the walls. He heard the delicate clink of Shabra’s fish set before her, the modest thud of Piri’s simple bowl of broth.

*What would I think if I were a slave, knowing there was a place where my kind were held sacred?* The Covenant, which he had described at so many meals with

newfound reverence, whose tenets he had outlined in the excruciating details of his life, became more than a simple, backward religion. It became forbidden knowledge, a catalyst, a threat. In the possession of a servant who understood Masari, it became sedition.

He looked down at succulent chunks of Yata, suppressed a shudder, and picked up his tongs. How long before his beloved and their unborn child ended up on someone's plate?

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Cloud banks receded. The last diaphanous wisps sailed east, toward Rudder. The universe beckoned like an omen, but Ghost couldn't risk trying to steal the lenses now. He knew what was at stake.

It had been a nice dream.

He wrapped Piri in her blanket and then in a second one left by the servants. She unwound the extra wool and pushed it back into his hands.

“Okay.” He hugged her before layering himself in warmth. “You're right. I won't be an idiot. Try not to, at least.” He tried to slow his breathing. “You have the brandy?”

She pulled the wineskin from her tunic and showed it to him, then nestled it back between her breasts.

Their packs extended behind them underneath the wraps, giving them ungainly humps. If the bribes weren't sufficient to get them away from Shabra, they would need to find another way. Ghost took Piri's hand in his and tried to give her a brave smile.

She smiled back and gave him an impatient shove, then jerked her head toward the door.

They padded down the deserted hallway and into the open, toward the first guard huddled by his lamp. Piri squeezed Ghost's fingers. He knew she asked if he was ready.

He had to be, whether or not he was. He squeezed back.

The guard stood at weary attention, blocking their way toward stone stairs leading down to the fountains. Beyond those, across the vast expanse of terraced cliff face, lay the great steps extending to the clearing. Ghost studied faint lights diminishing in the distance, curving along granite like lines of dim stars before the precipitous drop into blackness. The sky overhead sparkled.

The sentry's hand hovered by his knife. "Back inside."

A lamp flickered inside the guard house. Ghost couldn't tell how many waited to relieve the sentry or come to his aid.

Piri squeezed Ghost's fingers a last time before she worked her hand free. She edged toward the guard and held her palms out, displaying their emptiness. She touched the fingers poised by the knife.

The guard smirked. "Have me freeze my balls off, would you?"

"She doesn't speak," Ghost said, quietly. "Injury."

Piri guided the watchman's hand up, into the folds of her blanket, toward the wineskin. Ghost's heart hammered as the wool shifted, the hand wandering. The sentry took his time withdrawing the brandy, then extended Piri's blanket around himself as well.

Ghost said, voice thick, "We pay only the price of passage."

"You'll have it."

Piri gave Ghost a long, reassuring look before she turned her attention back to the guard. The wool undulated and other cloth whispered open under the silent stars.

Ghost tried to shut his ears against the rest. In their journeying he had almost forgotten where she had come from, how often she had done this, and with how many. He couldn't stop his fists from clenching and unclenching, reminding himself the pressure kept his hands from freezing. He counted stars until the guard was satisfied.

Piri waited for more cloth to shift. She wrapped her blanket back around and wiped her hand on a corner. She pecked the sentry on the cheek, then motioned

for Ghost to follow her. The wineskin breathed open as they passed by. They descended the stairs before fishing out the second bladder.

Piri tapped his palm. *Are you all right?*

“Don’t worry about me.” Ghost took Piri by the shoulders and planted a long kiss on her forehead. “We haven’t been thrown over the side.” His arms enfolded her, touching the sides of her pack. For once, she didn’t hurry him on.

They made their way quietly to the second guard. Ghost counted more stars, concentrating on the burbling fountains. Whatever happened, they had to remain safe. That was the one certainty he could hold onto, the one truth around which his life contracted.

He was still counting, lost in the heavens, when Piri took his hand and pulled him toward the broad, recessed stairway. He lowered himself first, clutching the iron spikes. Despite their deep scores the steps were slippery with the first hints of frost. Ghost braced himself, ready to catch Piri if she fell. He leaned forward into the rock as gravity pulled on his pack. The lanterns above them faded as they descended.

“We’re losing the light,” he whispered. “Stay close to the steps.”

The stars advanced, but Ghost could not see them. He heard only his own labored breathing and erratic pulse. Their slippers scraped against the rock. At least they were no longer barefoot. Their passage into open air told Ghost that the grass wasn’t far below, but they were still careful. They had no handholds left to grab.

If Ghost were alone he would head back toward Crossroads and take his chances. Find another spot, build another cabin. But the ridge held the bones of a *yatanii* who had died while under his care. Evidence of his crimes waited to be found, if they hadn’t been found already. He had to move forward.

He was not alone. Thank the gods.

He almost cried out with relief at the touch of hoarfrost melting onto his ankles. “We’ve reached the bottom.”

Piri descended the last step. Her body was a silhouette against the sky. It was too

dark for Ghost to see her face when she turned around.

Then she sagged against him. He caught her before she hit the ground.

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Piri opened her eyes and squinted against the dawn. The distant cliffs gleamed pink and gold in the west. Colorful striations played across their terraces as trickling water shot rainbows against the gray. At least the rock was beautiful.

Ghost's breath moistened her neck under doubled blankets. His fur warmed her skin, his arm hanging across her waist. His chest rose and fell against her back with slow regularity. They had slept beneath a hemlock, draped by needled branches. Their packs sat by their heads, glistening with frost.

He must have carried her here, across the clearing. A long way. She wanted to hold him against her, wanted to thank him, but he needed sleep.

One more guard. Then she would know whether she had come home.

Shadows diminished. Ghost stirred as needles drifted down. Piri guided him onto his stomach and reached beneath his tunic to knead knotted muscle. She fished Yata from his satchel as he rolled upright and leaned against the bark.

He took what he needed and drummed gratitude.

Then he added, *You are sure?*

*I only know that I must go there.* She leaned against him, sighing. *No, I am not sure.*

How could she tell him that, in the end, she wasn't sure of anything? Only her dictates and her need drove her, and those had once been enough. Now, wherever she went, she pulled him in with her. It was a bittersweet truth.

*Then we will go.* Ghost eased her from him and rose stiffly to his feet. Piri gathered her pack as he stretched and brushed himself off. She lifted and shook her blanket, wrapping herself against the cold.

His palm caressed her cheek. *Can you walk?*

She held her hand against his. *Yes. Can you?*

He chuckled and bent to kiss her. She accepted that as his answer.

They followed the contours memorized from Shabra's granite map, walking beside streams covered in films of ice. The streams multiplied and drained into lakes. Mortared boulders meandered across the landscape, rising into high walls.

The last guard they had to pass stood beside a tight latticework of metal. His eyebrows rose at the sight of large humps beneath their blankets. He asked Piri, "You are entering of your own free will?"

Ghost took a deep breath. "Yes."

"All right, then. Leave her here."

"I'm going in with her." Ghost towered over the guard, stone-faced. "We're taking our supplies with us."

Piri reached into her tunic and removed the last wineskin.

"Thank you," the guard said, wryly, "but I have as much brandy as I can stomach right now. If those 'supplies' are for the Games, you'd better give us a good show."

He unbolted and ushered them through the gate. Piri's breath caught in her throat as it clanged shut behind her.



## CHAPTER 16

### Crossroads

BrushBurn's business picked up as more and more people abandoned the wild for his cart. Tracking Yata became near-impossible for citizens hampered by woolen coats, now that their malnourished pelts were too thin to withstand the colder days.

The Masari knew what they needed and how to get it. With relief he found difficult to hide, BrushBurn again dispatched a runner back to Promontory for more product.

But not everyone in this town possessed common sense.

More than a few potential customers were trundled back into Crossroads, victims of wounds instead of the starvation BrushBurn had come to expect. More were reported missing. Senseless, unnecessary deaths came at the hands of Yata who were fighting back.

That was not completely unexpected, given the militia's existence in the first place. Once Crossroads was secured, subduing Basc would be a challenge, even with Promontory's superior firepower.

That did not concern him.

TripStone's return from her extended absence made him sigh with relief; she had not gone missing after all. Her meat must have run out, and a hunter's first instinct would have been to return to the woods.

BrushBurn was glad she'd resumed her daily walks across the market square. She still didn't answer him when he bade her good day, but now she returned his gaze. Sometimes she watched him openly, a still figure wrapped against the wind. Spying on him, probably for the Chamber. What could she possibly learn from that distance?

He had watched her go to the Rotunda with increasing frequency, but not to bring something back to trade as he had first hoped. In the beginning he barely

hid his disappointment when she emerged empty-handed from its broad, spiraled walk, bypassing his cart to head toward the fields. Her possessions remained beyond his reach.

No, she visited the Rotunda for another purpose, not for what she carried in her hands but for what she carried in her head. SandTail's activities had been as covert as BrushBurn's, but somehow TripStone had known about them both. HigherBrook must have told her, but how would he have known about the arms for Destiny trade and their smuggling operation? Somehow the Crossroads Chamber must have learned the details of Destiny Farm's operations, this far from home.

What else did they know? What else were they learning, and how?

HigherBrook remained tight-lipped, revealing nothing, but TripStone might be another matter if one probed deeply and subtly enough. All the better that she had stayed alive in the wild, in her noble quest to catch her own food.

BrushBurn did not begrudge her that. She was more valuable for the information she might provide him.

What could she be reporting back? The sales he made, his business practices? All she had to do was ask. He would gladly give her his figures, within the warm confines of his tent. BrushBurn was not unreasonable. He would willingly divulge some of his own information in exchange for hers.

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“Good morning, TripStone.”

TripStone studied the sky; it felt like snow. She looked back down at villagers proffering their valuables at the cart and grabbing chunks of Yata in return. Some now handed BrushBurn writs of debt, a sure invitation to Promontory to come and collect. Crossroads' shared resources were in danger now, but she could do nothing until the rains. If she could do anything at all.

She called out to him, “Good morning, BrushBurn.” A noncommittal echo. TripStone smiled inwardly at his surprise. She pivoted on her heel and walked away.

His voice began to lodge within her with its simple, insistent greeting repeated over time. He wanted something from her. No one else received such attention who wasn't a regular at his cart. He had enough business now that he didn't need hers.

It couldn't be the result of her single purchase from him. Certainly she wasn't the only citizen he'd fucked. It was something else.

She knew he watched her as she spiraled in toward the Rotunda. Her inspections there yielded disturbing information. She did not have to find ways for it to be breached; it *had* been breached. The great books so far remained untouched, but she had come across raided storehouses and pitiful attempts at reinforcements.

It must be someone from inside, likely a member of the Chamber succumbing to temptation. At least now HigherBrook allowed her more freedom of movement within the Rotunda's walls. She informed him of structural and procedural weaknesses and suggested ways to improve security.

Perhaps he thought he kept her busy and distracted from Destiny Farm, when she was not teaching her countrymen how to survive.

In the meantime TripStone would secure her belongings and secretly move what she could, a few pieces hidden in her pack at a time, to Basc and to Gria. Return the bones to their rightful resting place. Tell Gria what she knew about the Rotunda and what she could assume about the Warehouse.

She looked back toward BrushBurn. He didn't need to assume anything about the Warehouse. He'd been inside it; he knew.

She nodded to herself. She would have to greet him more often.

CHAPTER 17

Promontory

The tavern in Promontory's main square was packed wall to wall with patrons. It looked like a holiday crowd except for the long faces and the incessant twirling of chops between nervous fingers. Each day embellished the rumors a little further. And they'd been embellished to the point of a bright, blinding sheen.

DamBuster leaned heavily on the counter and drained his ale. He listened to the voices rising around him, the squeaks of people who panicked too easily. "Over here, my friend," he boomed at the bartender. "I need to cure an empty mug. And I'll take a bucket, too. Your fine brew is running its course and I'm not leaving my seat. The gossip's too good today."

The bartender tilted a large steel pitcher until foam spilled onto the wood. "Tell me when you're numb enough. I'll start pouring you your piss." He grinned. "Austerity measures."

"Not you, too." DamBuster accepted the bucket and set it between his legs. "Everyone's been overreacting for days. Equipment breaks down all the time."

"Not that equipment. And not twice since the last culling." The bartender's seamed face twisted like putty as he searched for words. "You think hard enough, you get to put it together. More Yata goes to Crossroads but there's no more Destiny coming back to us. More demand, less supply. How hard do you think the Little Masari are working to increase that supply?" He shrugged. "You don't like the extra shifts, you break the machines. That's what I would do."

"Maybe they don't like the trinkets from Crossroads."

"They love the bones. They hate the extra work."

DamBuster took a long quaff and licked the foam from his lips. They turned into a pensive frown. "Sad thing about Crossroads."

"They did get more than they bargained for." The bartender poured himself a finger of spirits. "Damn place nearly burned to the ground."

“Sad thing about the people, too.” DamBuster finished his mug and pushed it forward for more before opening his pants. Relief flooded him for a few brief moments. He found his hook under the counter lip and hung the bucket up. “Met a woman from there. They really are that backward.” A sigh heaved his barrel chest. “Were.”

Voices rose higher at the door behind him, questions shouted so rapidly DamBuster couldn't tell them apart. “That our friend back from Skedge?”

“No one else parts the crowd like that.”

“I wouldn't know.” DamBuster helped himself from the pitcher. “I'm looking at my beer, not at him.” He muttered under his breath, “Pipsqueak.”

“And what would *you* like to be called?” The nasal tone was unmistakable. SandTail hoisted himself onto a suddenly-vacated stool. He peered cagily up at DamBuster. “I'd consider that question seriously if I were you. Bartender, a snifter of that imported brandy.” The squat Masari smiled, waiting for an answer.

DamBuster considered replying with his fists, but that would be unwise. SandTail stood not much taller than a Yata, but he was a giant to Promontory's Chamber. So much the worse for them.

The apothecary lowered his voice to a growl. “To what do I owe the honor, SandTail?”

“Same as before. Your reputation's good in this town, so we thought we'd drum you up a little more support.” He accepted the snifter, rolling the amber liquid beneath his nose. “You're good with ingredients, DamBuster. We've made a deal with our suppliers to procure you some dandy ones. We want to see what you can do with them.” SandTail tilted the glass to his lips.

“Again, the answer is no.” DamBuster retrieved his bucket from its hook and wished his bladder would hurry up so he could tilt his aim. “I don't know how to make Destiny and I'm not about to try. If you can't force the formula out of a bunch of Little Masari, that's your problem.”

“You don't understand, my friend. We're not giving you a choice.”

DamBuster's lips curled into a smirk. “Chamber's that desperate.”

“You tell me.” SandTail climbed his stool and sat on the counter. “Listen up, folks!” His dusty clothes trapped errant smoke. “I’ve got a man here says he’s not interested in helping us past this crisis. You know who I’m talking about. You came to me about him.” Murmurs echoed across the bar, an appreciative chorus. “You’ve been spending your hard-earned money on the rising cost of food while he keeps his talents to himself. What does that say about his loyalty to this town?”

“Just a minute!” DamBuster lunged toward SandTail’s lapels. He heard with dismay his bucket clattering to the floor, drowned in the rising swell of curses from the crowd. “Whose idea was it to strip Crossroads apart like a Yata?” he bellowed to them. “Who got us into this mess? Look at the people you’re dealing with!”

“We’ve got other folks can treat the sick and injured,” SandTail replied smoothly, freeing his collar. “You and DevilChaser are relieved of those jobs as of now. We’re sending your customers elsewhere, and the good people in this bar will make sure they stay away.” He called out, “Isn’t that right?”

DamBuster glowered as the bar roared assent. Even his loyal patrons were caught up in the heat of the moment. Desperate, all of them. Who created a new market that put a strain on the one they already had? Who the hell got the Little Masari up in arms? It sure wasn’t him.

He reached over to pour himself another beer and found the pitcher gone. The bartender was busying himself elsewhere. *So this is how it begins.*

SandTail popped off the counter and took his brandy back in hand. “You’ll be paid based on what you produce. We’ll be wanting reports for every stage of your research. You’ll meet with our other—” he smiled, “—our other new employees of Destiny Farm. They are also working on the formula, but they’re not as good with a beaker as you are.”

DamBuster laid his hand on SandTail’s arm and stopped the snifter halfway to the little man’s lips. “What’s next? An invasion of Skedge? Torture your suppliers for their secrets?”

SandTail offered a slight tilt of his head and pursed his lips. “You must have been speaking with the Chamber.” He eased his arm free. “You can’t get everything from your high-priced angels, DamBuster. The Skedge Yata don’t die

on their own that fast. Even you and DevilChaser need the Farm, so helping us is in your best interests.” The snifter emptied. “I’ll stop by your place in the morning.”

CHAPTER 18

Alvav: The Marsh

Ghost listened to water lapping against wooden poles beneath the raised floor, backdropped by a distant, mournful quack. Piri stood beside him, her eyes blazing while a room full of prisoners questioned the sole Masari in their midst.

Two days of interrogation and restraints seemed mild discomforts compared with Ghost's ordeal on the Cliff. For all her rage at his treatment, Piri seemed relatively sedate. Besides, the incessant questioning had improved Ghost's Yata considerably.

The Marsh felt more like a village to him than a prison, down to the rows of huts suspended over the water, their lodgings a mixture of strong beams, mud, and thatch. The Yata here were well-fed and dressed in simple but functional clothing. Ghost had seen no signs of squalor.

And there were tools here. Pliers and chisels, distillery tubes, lamps. Ghost recognized a stamped imprint from Rudder and wondered how far the underground economy reached. Heated rocks in the corners of the room dispelled the cold and more. Piri kept wiping the sweat off his forehead.

The Marsh provided ready materials for making strong rope and Ghost's wrists and ankles were rubbed raw. At least his hosts had tied him upright in a way that let him sleep without strangling.

He understood their caution, hoping the chunks of Yata in his satchel made it clear that he had not come to chase down a meal. Piri's shielding him from a half-circle of drawn knives had made a favorable impression, particularly when Ghost's would-be attackers had glimpsed her middle. Such was his first exposure to the Marsh Yata, shortly after he and Piri had passed through the gate.

Several prisoners rummaged through the heavy packs. They picked out the messages left by the Cliff's servants, laying dozens of illustrated parchment slips across the floor. They'd arranged the slips into a mosaic, held in place by small rocks. Ghost still didn't know what the drawings said, but the ambient conversation confirmed his suspicions of impending rebellion on the Cliff.

“All right. Untie him.” The prisoner named Yucof, his carrotty braid as odd as Piri’s sand-colored hair, leaned back from the drawings. “That’s too bad about Bodasa. She was of great help to us.” He frowned up at Ghost. “I’m sorry about your countryman as well.”

“Countryman?” Ghost felt Piri’s hands hesitate at his wrists before she continued freeing the knots. “We came alone. I don’t know who you mean.”

“The Yata from Basc. Shabra had him killed as soon as she learned where he was from. You’re lucky you left the Cliff when you did.”

Ghost massaged circulation back into his hands, trying to ward off shock. “I don’t know anything about this. Why would anyone from Basc come to Alvav?”

A young woman stood over the mosaic, glancing from slip to slip. “This says he was a scout of some sort. Basc wanted to establish relations.”

Ghost shook his head, rubbing the crick from his neck. His joints complained when he lowered himself to the floor. “Something’s changed, then. Basc has never interacted with any other village but Crossroads. Why would they start now?”

“Maybe somebody from Rudder knows.” A child, lanky for a Yata, looked from Ghost to Yucof excitedly. “Rudder trades with Crossroads all the time.”

Yucof patted the boy’s knee. “You’re right. Thanksgiving Day is coming soon. We can ask someone from Rudder then.” He turned to Piri. “I’m sorry we couldn’t have given you a better welcome. Masari rarely come here outside of the Thanksgiving Days. When they do it’s because they’re hungry or just reckless. We usually have to kill them.” He rose from the parchment mosaic and squatted by her side. “No one from Rudder mentioned anything to us about Destiny Farm. Is it true, what Ghost says?”

Piri nodded. She took Yucof’s face in her hands and opened her mouth wide. Yucof’s expression changed from one of curiosity to one of sadness and then anger. Others came around to look. Those closest to Piri laid tender touches upon her.

Ghost eased his hand onto Piri’s shoulder. “She was mutilated in infancy. I examined her when she was brought to my cabin.”

Piri tucked her tongue back into her mouth and turned to drum on Ghost's arm.

"She says she saw no sign of Destiny on the Cliff. She wants to know if any is used here."

Yucof shook his head. "I never heard of Destiny until you mentioned it. The Marsh is a very rich environment and we have a large pharmacy. But we've had no need of aphrodisiacs."

Tears nestled in the corners of Piri's eyes. Ghost wrapped his arms around her. He rocked her back and forth, holding her like a child as she wept with relief.

~ ~ ~

A tangle of boardwalks linked vast networks of huts above the wetlands, extending onshore into thick groves. Flocks of hardy fowl remained, congregating in oases of water yet to freeze. Some left, soaring above the enclosing walls. At night Ghost heard them call to each other, passing overhead, their giant vee cutting a black swath against the sky.

In the morning Yucof led the way, dressed in woolens. Ghost followed Piri as she navigated wood planks, surrounded by dried sedge immobilized in ice. Riches lay beneath, held in stasis until the thaw. Ghost examined a splash of flowers, pretty pink stars trapped in the freeze, deep purple berries swimming on suspended tendrils. One stanced bleeding, another relaxed muscles. He would have to wait until the spring rains to harvest them.

For all the colors splashed on the Cliff walls, Ghost examined an even greater spectrum as he cinched his blanket tighter and lay across the boards, gazing past hardened bubbles. Winter was a quiet time. Summer would bring burgeoning life, including the parasites that had populated Ghost's worries ever since their arrival. But generations of prisoners had discovered and refined ways to survive even those.

Several paths converged. Yucof angled off toward solid ground. "I'm taking you to the pharmacy," he told them. "Familiarize yourself with the medicinals." He helped Piri navigate a stretch of mud. "Not everyone is a combatant during the Games. Some want to be, to prove themselves, especially since we have admirers on the Cliff. But we also need doctors."

Piri reached inside her blanket, resting her hand upon her belly. Ghost asked, “What do you do about the gas?”

“We breathe into wetted cloths and keep close to the ground.” Mulch crunched underfoot. “In the warm weather some dive into the waters, but I don’t recommend it. We can’t treat them for everything that they swallow.”

They reached a wood frame partly open to the air, nestled in a small clearing and surrounded by fallow herb gardens. Leafless trees extended skeletal branches between conifers. Dried brown vines hung from the beams.

The promises behind the wood were almost too much to bear. Ghost restrained himself from rushing ahead and flinging open the doors.

Piri’s hand found his and drummed, *No cairns*. He laughed.

“You’ll have to teach us that,” Yucof said. “What did she say?”

“It’s hard to explain. But yes, we’ll teach you.”

“Explain to me over dinner.”

Ghost stiffened. He said, softly, “You know what I eat.”

Yucof faced him. “Yes, and you will still dine with us. When you run out of your stores, we will save our dead for you, beyond what goes to Rudder.” He pointed to his orange scalp. “I’ve been told I’m probably part Masari. Frankly, I don’t know and don’t care; there are probably more mix-children here than not. Maybe I’m lucky I don’t need what you need, but that would be just luck.”

All sensation drained from Ghost’s legs as the words seared into his brain. Yucof’s skin showed no trace of fur. He was of average Yata height, small-boned, with a graceful build. Nothing about him was unusual, except for the color of his braid.

Piri stopped walking as well, but did not seem quite so stunned. When Ghost looked at her he saw only great inquisitiveness and a tiny smile. “I haven’t seen any mix-children here.”

“You haven’t seen anyone with a *pelt* here. That doesn’t mean we have no mix-

children.” Yucof gestured, heading for the door. “From what you’ve told me about Destiny Farm, Piri could have had a distant Masari ancestor. The Games don’t leave us much chance to study lineage. Too many of us die too soon. That’s why I also brought you here to meet someone.”

Piri was already across the threshold. Ghost forced his legs to move. Suddenly he was hobbling again as though still debilitated, still in need of his walking stick. Hysteria bubbled up in his throat. He stared at Yucof’s receding back and ached for his lenses. For a sample of blood, spit, piss, anything.

They passed into a spacious room dominated by a central table. Dried herbs hung overhead. Thick glass bottles lined broad shelves and held seeds and leaves, whole and crushed, tinctures, flowers, stems. Solutions, suspensions, distillates. They extended from floor to ceiling, layers deep.

Ghost looked around, giddy, seeking a cousin to his large tapestry of a farmer at his plow, a Masari harvest dance, copious ears of corn. But nothing needed hiding here. He saw no front room, no laboratory to conceal behind the weave.

Piri drummed on his arm, but his arm was numb. Ghost answered her with a blank look and finally managed to whisper, “Is there a chair?”

Yucof slid one under him and eased him down.

“Yucof—” He could hardly speak. He looked up into eyes that could be Masari. Or Yata. Or something else entirely. “I have tried for years to find a way to end my dependence.” He coughed. “To end Masari dependence. I looked for the cause. I used clarifiers. I collected—”

He stopped, unable to speak. He had collected things other than herbs. Other than seeds and leaves. None of that other material was here.

He knew Piri touched him but he couldn’t feel her. Out of the corner of his eye he watched her mime the rest.

“Body parts,” Yucof said. “From dead Yata. Did you make any headway with them?”

Ghost shook his head, shuddering. “No. But there was a young girl. *A yatanii*, who completely abstained from eating Yata. She lived until—” His chest

tightened. “She saved my life in more ways than I can count.”

Yucof nodded. “She may have had mixed blood as well.” His hand rested on Ghost’s shoulder and squeezed. “We have a child here who does have a pelt. Her father is Masari. Her mother died during delivery.” He turned to Piri. “There are ways to help birth such a child, but they are dangerous. If you come to fruition here we will do what we can for both of you.”

Piri motioned for Yucof to come closer, then hugged him long and hard.

Ghost feared he would never be able to stand again. He felt pulled and twisted into new shapes, but the world twisted faster, pulling him out of his skin. Winter ice encased him but he couldn’t thaw, afraid that the world would melt away, evaporating into thin air.

Their host left the room. Piri and Ghost regarded each other with quiet wonder for only a few moments before Yucof returned, holding the hand of a child half his size.

“This is Brav.” He led her toward the chair. “She is four seasons old. Brav, say hello to Ghost and Piri.”

Piri lowered herself to the floor and parted the scarves around the child’s face. Chubby bronze cheeks glistened with a hint of ruby chops as red curls escaped the wool. Down meandered across Brav’s neck. Piri rolled up a sleeve, revealing a pudgy arm striped with crimson tufts. Black Yata eyes glinted happily. A small, smoky Masari voice said, “Hello.”

Ghost dropped to his knees. He raised trembling fingers to Brav’s face.

Brav smiled at him. “Like Daddy.”

He hugged her to him and didn’t want to let go. He breathed in her scent of milk and a maze of unknown passageways underneath. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t see beyond them. His heart was already lost. “We’re not alone, Piri,” he choked.

“You should know,” Yucof said, “that Brav has already shown a need for Yata.” He looked into Ghost’s stricken face. “That may not be the case with your own child. There’s no telling how the traits will align.” He eased his arm across the

girl's shoulders. "I must get her back to her hiding place and to her caretakers. The guards *will* kill her if they see her."

"Because of the pelt," Ghost said.

Yucof nodded. "Because of the pelt. Because of her size. In Rudder they'd object to other things. We'll protect her here for as long as we can, against the guards and against the Games." He adjusted the scarves around Brav's head. "Her father visits with her each Thanksgiving Day. I don't know what happens between Crossroads and Basc, but we carry on brisk trade and revels here. The Games occur again the next day. We share a great deal of drink and passion before we try to kill each other in the clearing."

Brav gravitated toward Piri's rounded belly. She leaned her head against it, her arms already long enough to encircle Piri's hips. Shyness infused her musky voice. "Baby."

Ghost saw the worry in Piri's eyes as she rested her hand against the child's head. "I'd like to meet the father."

"If he agrees," Yucof said. "I think he will." He coaxed the girl away. "Come, Brav."

Brav waved a tentative goodbye before she was led from the room, leaving Ghost and Piri alone among the bottles.

CHAPTER 19

Basc

Seed lay in the hardening ground as light dwindled. Tiny fingers of green struggled toward a pale sun only to wither and die. Their slow decay fed the plantings that waited, sleeping and sheltered, first beneath hay and then under the snow. Smoke rose from the completed barns of Basc amidst contented clucks and impatient bleats.

Small children gazed up at TripStone unaware of her differentness, but their parents knew. She was the Masari who had brought the truth to Basc, evidence of abominations that had changed all their lives forever. Most of them didn't know whether to love her or hate her as she advanced from hut to hut, checking their progress. Chronicling needs and capabilities. Collecting the dead.

They knew they would follow Gria regardless of their feelings for her. Gria the duped one, the destroyer, Ata incarnate. The one who was saving them.

TripStone dragged wearily down empty paths, passing lines of adobe, living between the worlds. So familiar now, this Yata architecture and its communal sprawl, so different from Crossroads' smaller, self-contained homes of stone and wood. As she ranged across two ravaged lands, this shared vista of fatigue divided by ash, TripStone was not surprised that the houses, rather than the people, reminded her of where she was. Sometimes, as they all became more alike in their quest to survive, she forgot.

She and the other advisors circled the valley in shifts, splitting their time between Basc and home and converging on the Grange for brief respite. In time the village dyad would become strong again. Until then, it was best to hide Basc's transformation from Promontory. There was no sense inviting more trouble.

TripStone preferred Yata trickery in the hunt to that trouble. She learned their inventions of necessity, their traps and decoys scattered where game had fled throughout the far woods. While peaceful cooperation guided life within the village boundaries, her people and Gria's waged respectful war in the forest, hunting each other down. The new covenant between them twisted in the snowy

wind, folding back in on itself.

Her path diverged. So many households to cover, so many families. It was one thing to be borne away by a grieving throng during Atonement, lost in what seemed a single, massive body. TripStone had not expected so many individuals, the sound not of a sole, collective voice wailing to the gods, but of multitudes swelling the valley. For the first time she understood the work of piety and Destiny. The fruits of another time. So many starving.

Her repeated visits finally led her as far as the Soala and yet another outcropping of huts. The place of demons rose like a great black bullet from the drifts. Even through the famine its torches were kept alive, consuming resources already stretched thin.

She shouldn't be here. Even muffled by the walls, the screeches and lamentations reaching her were not meant for Masari ears. But she had to pass the Soala to reach the households beyond. Once again TripStone would duck through low doorways and into rooms teeming with progeny, to sit before hollow-cheeked Yata as the domesticated beast in their midst. She hurried past the black building, trailing a predator's bootprints.

She still nursed an undercurrent of sorrow when the rattle of a release mechanism and the snap of a bow came from nowhere. TripStone dove to the snow ahead of a shaft that never appeared. Instead, a net-thrower showered her with thick, knotted cables.

It was the wrong use of a net. It hadn't enfolded her and could be pulled off easily enough. But she was inside Basc, where hunting was not allowed; it was the wrong *place* for a net.

Screaming masses descended on her before she could reach the cables. High-pitched shrieks stung her ears. Her coats blocked the passage of knife points but she heard fabric rip.

Someone tore her breeches at the seams. Cold air and then sharp bone bit her leg. Tiny teeth nipped at the wound before the bone returned, carving a lump of flesh from her thigh. She clenched her teeth and twisted, pressing her wound into the snow, trying to turn her head. Many fists pummeled her everywhere; she couldn't see past them. High-pitched curses assailed her.

Alarmed shouts rose from a nearby hut. In a moment her attackers were plucked from her. TripStone heard the scolds before she registered the names.

Abri. Evit.

She heard other children called, but the first two riveted her to the ground. Hateful screams still emanated from inside the hut.

Someone lifted the net from her. She struggled to her feet to face a man with a thick black beard and a short braid. He pressed his lips tightly together. Bruise-dark circles puffed beneath hard eyes and an undercurrent of pain.

He said, “My nephews were expecting you. We were told you would get here eventually.”

At last, after all this time, she had found him. Descending lines of blood tickled her legs as the names flooded back.

“Ila, sole sibling of Zai.” She touched the net with its many knots. “Son of Elam and Doret. Grandson of Tanat.” Before she could stop herself she intoned them all—the dead whose lives remained locked inside the Rotunda’s library, the living who had told the tales. The names left on pieces of parchment handed to mournful hunters sitting calmly in a forest, rifle lying peacefully in the dirt, watching careful strokes made by meditative prey. The comforting snare of the Covenant and its tightly-woven pedigrees. She was clutching the cables by the time she finished, the last of the ancestors fallen into silence.

“TripStone,” Ila said, quietly. “Killer of Ulik. *Yatanii* who destroyed my sister.” He pulled the net from her hands. “Come inside.”

His shoulders hunched as he made his way back to his family. Numb and relieved at once, TripStone limped after him.

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She was smaller than Ila had imagined. The thought surprised him. Perhaps it was because TripStone sat not on a chair as he did but on the floor, her leg extended outward with a poultice wrapped against her thigh. She swam in her coats the way he swam in his. The same exhaustion that gripped him tried to close her eyes. Or was that because she did not want to look at him?

No. She was watching his nephews wield Ulik's knife, slipping morsels of her flesh into bloody little mouths. At least it would hold them for a while and keep the pangs from their bellies. It was not a deep wound the Masari suffered. They did not cut much from her.

Zai's arrest had freed Ila's second hut back to him. Now Antal and Deena herded the other children there. Teza boiled bark in the next room, spilling the last dregs from a cache of acorns. Her stomach had remained flat ever since she came of age. Perhaps it was best that she was barren and that the Meethouse now lay abandoned.

Ila felt barren himself, a shriveled man, but the world came clearer to him these days. He owed his life to the arms that welcomed him, regardless of their number.

Standing beside him, Lani cradled her baby to her breast, but she was dry and the infant fussed. She asked, "Do you want to be alone with her?"

"No." He leaned forward in his chair, hanging his hands between his knees. "She's here to find out what we need."

"After."

Ila nodded. "After." He raised his head and called, "Do you like what you see, TripStone?"

"They will make good hunters," the Masari said, dully. "That will help you during the lean times." She looked away from the children and leaned her head against the wall. "Be grateful they don't bear the guilt of dependence."

Ila bristled. "Is that what drove you to write your list? Guilt?"

Her eyes closed. "Yes, actually."

"It seemed more like hubris." He took the baby from Lani and tried to quiet its whines. "I don't know what possessed you to bring heresy to your Atonement. I am not a violent man, *yatanii*, but when I saw you out there I wanted very much to hurt you. I'm glad the children reached you first."

A soft sound, part laugh and part moan, burbled past TripStone's lips. A sound of

bewilderment. “I don’t know why I brought the list, myself. I didn’t mean to give it away.” She opened her eyes and turned a blank gaze to the ceiling. “Maybe I wanted to show Zai how much the Masari suffered for our dependence. How much some of us wished we could break it. We become so filled with your stories that there’s no room for our own. Maybe I just wanted to tell mine.”

Lani said, tightly, “You can tell your stories once you’ve suffered the deaths of your families as we have. They’ll mean something then.”

The Masari met Lani’s scowl with a look so disturbing that for a moment Ila forgot the baby. “Then I have every right to do so.”

She closed her eyes again. Her shoulders sagged and she almost looked asleep.

Ila listened to acorns clattering in the pot and held himself still. The baby had quieted and he was afraid to move it. Lani stepped behind him to massage his shoulders. Abri and Evit wiped each other with messy hands.

“Lani,” he whispered, “get the knife from them now. Put it away and take them from the room.”

“That was Ulik’s knife.” TripStone’s eyes were open again. She grasped her uninjured leg and drew her knee to her chest, resting her chin on her arms. “I remember it.” She faced Ila. “He was the last to meet me in the hunting grounds before all this happened.”

“Ulik was a good father to those boys.” Ila looked down at his new child, asleep but not sleeping well. The spent little body breathed irregularly and was too flaccid in his arms. Milk; he must tell TripStone they needed milk. Their neighbors could no longer help them. “We bring them to visit Zai when we can. She is not allowed here.”

“I looked for Zai when I realized—” TripStone swallowed, looked away. “When I couldn’t find her I tried to find you.”

“You know where she is now,” Ila said. “You know where she is detained.”

TripStone nodded. “I’ve been occupied.”

“You’ve been afraid.”

The Masari studied the infant in his arms. She said nothing for a long time.

Finally she whispered, “I will try to bring your sister back to you.”

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Zai placed another log on the stump, raised her axe, found the grain. *Thock.*

The wood split cleanly from the force of her blow, her actions automatic now. Even after her work was done, the sharp cracks and dull thuds to the ground followed her into the woodshed. She heard them through other people’s conversations, through directions shouted across the fields. She heard them through modest suppers consumed in silence in a crowded and boisterous room. The logs took her to her pallet at night and built high woodpiles in her dreams.

In the beginning each one had borne the same face. A tear-stained, repentant face, driving Zai to smash the skull, scattering bits of brain about the stump. At first she hadn’t looked for the grain at all, shrieking as she brought the blade down and showering herself with splinters. She exulted in the soreness of her muscles as she pushed toward collapse, the axe so like a gun.

Now she stretched her back and looked beyond her guarded, barbed-wire enclosure, toward the fine lines of smoke curling from chimneys. She may have loved only one man and borne only two children, but she had birthed kindling by the thousands. Finally Basc had found a use for her. She set up another log, wrapped gloved palms around the haft, swung a tight circle, and let gravity pull her down.

The *thocks* cushioned her, a constant lullaby echoing in her brain. She was done grieving, filled now with this simple task. Outstretched hands welcomed her but clapped her shoulders unfelt. Zai provided for a village that thanked her and otherwise left her alone.

At the end of the day she watched her tired raiders mingle with their jailers and even with the Masari. Those who stayed passed freely between the buildings, rehabilitated, as much a part of the new farm as the resin caulking its walls against the wind. This was their home now, a family with whom she could not compete.

Thock. Memory dulled and sharpened again as Evit's fingers laced behind her neck and Abri hugged her waist. She smelled like sawdust; they buried their noses in her woolens. She lifted her shirt to feel their breath against her skin. Even bundled, they could not hide their ribs from her. Even blistered and callused, her fingers could still tell how little they had eaten.

She provided for the farm. She'd provided for her troops. But she couldn't provide for her boys. *Thock.*

Ila pulled them from her arms at the end of each visit to carry them back through the gate. Their bawling chopped through her heart as mercilessly as the day Gria had taken her away from them. *Thock.*

The logs split cleanly. Zai piled firewood into her barrow and wheeled its many pieces away. A narrow path cleared of snow delineated her life into a stump, a shed, a place to eat and sleep. Covered in burlap, a pile of dismantled trees awaited her work. Her companions.

She set them up and reduced them to a state of utility. The sun hung overhead, providing a thin film of warmth. She kept moving, didn't want her sweat to cool.

"Take a break, Zai."

She brought her axe down and pulled it from the stump. Her former lieutenant stood by the shed. "If that's your advice, Lotzil, then I decline."

"It's not advice." He stepped up to her, arms outstretched. "I must take the axe."

"You don't need to. It's recently sharpened."

"I know."

His gentle smile stopped her. Mixed emotions flickered across his face, too fast for her to read. "Tell me."

"We'll return it to you." Lotzil eased the handle from her gloves and gave her shoulder a squeeze. She stared after him as she freed and shook her bare hands, puzzled as he retreated to the farmhouse. Several of Gria's soldiers moved about the field.

Zai heard metal against metal, the gate behind her being unlocked. A low voice carried to her, insisting, "*Alone.*"

The repentant tone was gone but the sound was unmistakable; familiar scent carried on the air. It slammed into Zai's chest, knocking her breath from her. She fought to get it back, spasming.

"You demon," she whispered. Heartbeats rocked her wiry body. She shook her head slowly, turning. The axe inside her ceased, its dull blanket of *thocks* drifting away. When she saw TripStone her eyes began to stream. "You Woolie demon, you have killed me." She cast about for something, anything. A sturdy branch leapt into her hands.

Closer now, TripStone limped tentatively toward her on hardened snow. Unarmed, hands loose at her sides. Thin.

Zai charged, screaming. The branch whistled in a tight arc, driving into TripStone's side. The Masari slid to the snow.

"You *yatanii* devil. You filthy *monster!*" Zai stood over her, swaying on her feet. She didn't care what the Woolie did, didn't care that TripStone could dispatch her with a single bite. It didn't matter any more. She had nothing left. "You couldn't just kill my husband. You had to spit him out and kill me, too."

"Zai—"

She dropped and mashed her knees against the Masari's chest, grabbing hair, gasping. Sobs rose in her throat. "You couldn't rob me of my children through the hunt but you found other ways, didn't you? You take my memories and then you rip me to shreds." She threw off her coat and reached into her shirt, shaking. Mangled pieces of parchment, blood-stained, dirt-encrusted, crushed together in her fist. Zai flung them onto TripStone's chest. "YOU FILTHY YATANII! TAKE BACK YOUR ABOMINABLE LIST!"

It was over. Zai let gravity claim her, falling onto TripStone's shuddering frame. "Go ahead," she moaned. Her lungs heaved. "Finish me. Finish what you started. I can't do anything for my boys any more. Someone else can chop the wood."

TripStone whispered, "I wanted to kill no one." Bony fingers brushed Zai's scalp. "I tried to do without, don't you understand? I wanted to end the

suffering.”

“*End it?*” Hysterical laughter gripped her. Tears streamed harder. “By telling us we are poison. Not worthy to grace your *shit* when we lose everything we have to keep you alive. *That’s* how you end our suffering.”

“I never meant to give you the list.” The breaths beneath Zai came in gulps. “I wanted to explain it.” Tears nestled into chops. “By the gods, Zai, I never meant to hurt you.”

Zai sat up, digging clawed hands into the loose coats. Her howls pierced the sky until her lungs were spent, until her claws became fists. She raised them high and slammed them down onto breastbone, feeling TripStone’s body jerk. “Oh, TripStone, what you did to me.” Her muscles were cords, her spine a serpent. She slammed down again, and again. Again. Looking for the grain, trying to cleave bone in two. The skeleton below her refused to break. “You hideous beast,” she hissed. “I can’t even touch you.”

“Touch me? *Yata were everything to me!*” The wail from below chilled Zai’s blood. Broad hands cinched her wrists and held them fast.

TripStone’s face twisted in agony, her shoulders shaking. “You touched me from the day I was *born*, Zai! Every single hunt ripped my heart out because I knew what it meant. Did you think I didn’t know what it did to you?” The hands released and dropped to the ground, clawing snow. The Masari choked on sobs. “My gun was my demon, Zai. It claimed me. I tried to walk away but it claimed me. I needed you so badly it tore me apart. *_I couldn’t shoot, but I had to!_*” TripStone turned her head to the side and groaned. “I tried to stop it once, and then I couldn’t stop it any more because I was too afraid to die.” Her lungs rattled. “You finished me when you killed the Covenant. I have no one left, Zai. I am as dead as you are.”

Zai’s body was stone. TripStone’s body quaked, her mouth slack, her eyes closed. The Masari didn’t move when Zai thawed her limbs, rolled to the ground, and stood, dusting the snow from her clothes. The beast didn’t flinch when a breeze carried the shredded parchment away.

The air smelled of wood smoke. Zai looked out across empty brown fields, then down at a body writhing in grief. Cold shivered her. She retrieved her coat and wrapped herself in it quickly. She buried her hands in the thick weave, delivered

not by Masari but fashioned now by Yata hands.

She turned away, walking to warm her legs until weariness overtook her. Zai sat on her stump and leaned over her knees. She held herself, letting her gaze wander before it returned to TripStone, drawn back by the great emptiness hanging between them.

After a while the writhing stopped. TripStone struggled to her feet.

Zai watched her, expressionless. “So. We are both dead.”

“You can live.” TripStone limped toward the stump and dropped down beside it. For a moment Zai wondered if the Masari was about to bend her head to the block, but then the image disappeared. “I told Ila I would try to bring you back.”

“Forget about me. My children need food.”

A curious smile twitched the hunter’s lips. “They helped themselves.” The great head fell against Zai’s lap, startling her. “I know what they need now. They will get it.”

Zai swallowed around a lump in her throat. She whispered, “Thank you.”

“They will make good hunters, Zai. They’re already showing skill.” TripStone breathed deeply, rubbing frozen tears from her chops. “I am so sorry.”

Zai rested cautious fingers in red frizz and flicked a bit of snow from TripStone’s hair. Her muscles drained of tension. Instead, a great sadness began to fill her bones. Slowly it formed within her, a new blanket beneath the skin. She caught her breath and forced the words to come. “Do you ever think of him?”

“Ulik?” The Masari looked up at her. “I remember everything.”

Zai closed her eyes. The sadness spread. Fur touched her cheek, gathering her tears. Phantom arms slipped around her, calm and strong, never to let go.

CHAPTER 20

Promontory

“We should have left this place a long time ago.” DamBuster paced in his kitchen, stopping to peer out his door at SandTail’s men. “We should have packed up everything and headed upriver. I’m sure they could have used our services in Rudder.”

“Rudder has the Games.” DevilChaser stood by his medical cabinets, frowning at the doorway freshly cut into their wall and the empty room beyond. “That’s hardly an improvement over the Farm.”

“At least the Yata there have a fighting chance.”

“Faced with ridiculous odds.” The lanky doctor turned from their new hole in the wall and stepped into the kitchen. He stopped DamBuster in mid-stride, sliding an arm across his broad back. “We stayed here because buying meat from the angels seemed the best alternative as long as we could afford it. And the Yata in Skedge still live free.”

“But for how much longer?” DamBuster shrugged off DevilChaser’s arm, grabbed a rifle from its hooks, and made for the yard.

DevilChaser called after him, “You don’t need that.”

“Yes, I do.”

Every day DamBuster had watched the laboratory walls go up. He watched SandTail’s men heap wood and stone and mortar as they whistled happy tunes, their coat pockets filling with pay. Every day he had sat calmly in his yard, keeping his gun trained on them, waiting for someone to give him an excuse to shoot. It was better than feeling helpless. Holding the rifle kept his hands steady.

Then SandTail came on site, smiling broadly and striding almost into the muzzle. DamBuster had steeled himself against flinching from the little man’s hearty backslaps afterwards.

He gazed out across a wide swath of arid brush. A lone road cut through scrub and nettles, a ribbon wandering toward the salt pan. Beyond them Skedge rose into the dry winter sky, crisp and clear as a target. What was to stop Promontory's Chamber from setting up camp in this unobstructed view, establishing a base from which to attack?

The men applied a final coat of paint to the clapboard and hung the last door inside, closing the wall. For now the room beyond it was benign and hung with empty shelves, but soon it would fill with the instruments of servitude to Destiny Farm. From that day forward DamBuster would have to walk to that door and force himself across the threshold.

Two workers huffed toward the entrance, hauling a wooden monstrosity dangling wide leather straps. DamBuster hastened to them, his rifle angled up to block passage. "I'm not having that in my house. Take it away."

"It's not for the house. It's for the lab."

"Yes, it's a lab. Not a jail." Heat rose, purpling DamBuster's face. "I don't need a damned restraining chair."

A young worker, already aged well beyond his years, strained under the load. "It's for your test subject."

"What test subject?" he boomed. "There was nothing in the agreement about a test subject!"

"That's because our agreement didn't itemize your equipment." SandTail sidled up to DamBuster, smiling contentedly. "Destiny Farm has gone to quite an expense to ensure your success, my friend. We want to make sure you're fully stocked. It's taken some effort to bring a live Yata up here, but he should arrive soon."

DamBuster pulled his cocking lever and aimed. "I won't perform experiments on a Yata, SandTail. I'll kill you first."

Clicks echoed across the yard. DevilChaser sprinted out the door, stopping short at the sight of the arsenal surrounding his partner.

"Hardly," SandTail mused. "My men are ready to defend their salaries. Chances

are excellent that you will die first.”

DamBuster didn't waver. “You'd sacrifice your best apothecary? I don't think so.”

“Why should I care, if you're no good to me alive?”

DamBuster spotted DevilChaser out of the corner of his eye, breathing hard. For once he wished they had set up homestead in the center of town, not here on the outskirts. Not in a place where secrets were so easily kept, drifting out of sight over the wasteland.

He knew his partner wanted to tell him to put down the gun but remained stoically silent instead. It was the price of sharing a life. They were in this together, but the final decision was DamBuster's alone.

He took his time lowering the muzzle. The longer he stayed alive, the more he could think. SandTail gave his arm an affectionate pat and motioned the men to bring the chair inside.

Others set upon a wagon teeming with wooden crates. They hastened the boxes into the house, through the new door, and into the laboratory.

DevilChaser appeared at his side. “So help me, I never thought I'd be this ready to commit murder.” He rested his hand on DamBuster's rifle. “You did the right thing, but there may come a time when we both will have to use that.”

DamBuster squeezed his hand. “You're a healer, my dear, and you're about to get a patient.” He frowned at his companion. “Unfortunately, you'll have to save him from me.”

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It was almost nightfall when the other, much smaller wagon arrived, wearing the markings of a full day's travel. The transport had climbed from far below, navigating the canyon's red dust and a chalky, switchbacked trail. Its carriage had covered a hidden route through brambles and shale. It had wheeled circuitously to the overlook and edged onto the dusty main road. It turned from the main road onto a rutted dirt path, its gears whirring past homes shuttered against the cold. One runner, one passenger.

A gaudy sunset spread through the Promontory smog. DamBuster hunched in the chill, watching the clouds crimson, when he felt DevilChaser's hand on his shoulder.

"Brace yourself," the doctor said. "They're here."

"All right, then." DamBuster hitched up his collar and gave DevilChaser a searching look. "Let's just make sure we can beat these bastards before I do something I can't live with." He turned from the dusk and followed DevilChaser to the transport.

The runner was busy brushing caked particles from his sprockets and chains. He squirted solvent and applied grease. A persistent knocking rattled a closed crate roped onto a narrow wagon bed.

SandTail interrupted the runner's maintenance to slip coinage into his hand before turning to the apothecary. "Good, you're here. We still have enough light for a proper introduction." He called to his workers, "Light the hearth in the lab; I want that room warm enough. And be careful opening that crate! He's clean." He smiled at DamBuster. "We made sure the Destiny was out of his system before bringing him here. I doubt he's very happy right now."

"Fully cognizant of his torture," DevilChaser mused. "If the gods exist, SandTail, they have big plans for you."

"I'm doing your friend a favor, doctor. I'm making sure he'll get accurate results."

"Yes. Minus the effects of trauma."

Long iron nails complained beneath a crowbar. A wood panel dropped away.

DamBuster stepped forward. He gazed into furious black eyes above a taped mouth, at a body wrapped in layers of burlap and tied with rope. "You have him trussed up like an animal."

"He is one," SandTail said, smoothly. "He would destroy your lab in an instant, then find the sharpest blade and slit your throat. We're putting him in the chair to protect both our investments—him, and you."

Two workers grasped the Yata and carried him like cordwood into the house. DamBuster followed, smoldering. He and DevilChaser watched as several hired hands forced the young male into the chair. They took their positions, snipping rope and slicing cloth. Each grabbed a limb while another held the Yata's head, pressing it back. The man flailed, grunting around his gag when each binding was cut. His muscles strained as SandTail's men slipped leather straps through buckles, tightening them into place.

SandTail slid a bucket beneath a hole cut into the seat. "We'll leave you with feeding instructions. He's had no food today. We didn't want him voiding his bowels during the trip." He turned to his men. "Remove the rest of the burlap." His eyebrows tilted up at DamBuster's horror. "They're all used to living naked, my friend. Our winter pens are very well heated. We've left you with enough fuel to keep him from freezing to death."

He pointed to the crates. "Those contain your equipment, a sample of Destiny, and what raw ingredients we could get. More will arrive soon. They're hard to come by, so our supplier will deal with you directly from now on. Someone will be back regularly to check your progress and make sure you get what you need." Grinning, SandTail pointed to the Yata. "You may have your way with that one as long as it doesn't bias your results."

DamBuster lunged at the short Masari. DevilChaser held him back, whispering, "You can't do anything to him right now."

More men unloaded the boxes, moving bottles to the shelves.

"Leave those," DamBuster said through his teeth. "I'll arrange them myself." He tried to still his rage, stepping up to the crates and bending to examine their contents while behind him burlap ripped. DevilChaser squinted, studying the instructions.

SandTail pointed to the door. "Let's leave him to his work. I'm sure these men will want to become acquainted." He clapped the apothecary on the shoulder. "I look forward to your reports, DamBuster. Welcome to the Farm."

Blood roared through DamBuster's veins. His fist carried him in a tight pivot.

Revolvers flashed out of holsters as SandTail staggered back, his hand flying to his face. "Let it go," he called to his men, working his jaw. He touched it

gingerly. “He knows what he has to do.”

The men filed out, swapping jokes that assaulted DamBuster’s ears. When they were gone he turned from the shelves. “What were we doing last season, love? Calling *Crossroads* backwards?” He stepped up to the Yata, noting the shorn black hair, the tattoo clearly showing at the back of the neck. The man’s bronze skin glowed in light from the hearth.

DevilChaser pulled up a chair to sit beside the Yata, who regarded him with unconcealed hatred. “Do you understand Masari?”

The man continued to stare at him, revealing nothing.

DamBuster retrieved another chair from the next room. “Let’s assume he does.” He looked into blazing eyes. “You have no idea how sorry I am for what I am about to do, and you have every right to hate us. Believe me when I say I do not want to succeed in this task.” He touched a small, smooth hand at the edge of the chair arm. “I will fix you some broth. I have to remove the gag. I’ll do my best not to hurt you.”

“Let me,” DevilChaser said. “I can soak the tape, make it easier to remove.”

The Yata looked from one to the other.

DevilChaser headed to his cabinets. “We’ve got to find a way to change his position and exercise his limbs. It’s bad enough he has to sleep in that thing. We’ll need to prevent him from getting sores.” He brought back a tray of tinctures as DamBuster headed into the kitchen.

DamBuster returned to the lab when the broth began to simmer. The gag was off. The Yata regarded the men with icy calm. His mouth hung open, tongue dangling.

“The instructions say that’s a trick,” DevilChaser read. “They say to put his tongue back with a stick, otherwise you could lose a finger.”

“The surest way to discourage trust.” DamBuster turned the small head to face him. “I’ve been making up my own instructions for a long time. I’m going to gamble that we can understand each other. If not, my finger is yours.” He gentled the Yata’s tongue back into his mouth, smiling at a still-intact hand.

“Thank you.”

Staring intently at DamBuster, the Yata answered with the smallest of nods.

“We’ll get through this,” DamBuster whispered. “Let’s get you some food.”

# CHAPTER 21

## Midwinter

### The Marsh

Masari guards swung open the Marsh's great east gate and heavy carts spilled in. Their runners belted out lusty songs, pressing against harnesses and already tipping flasks. Piled high behind them were textiles and tools and sweet ale, still-flopping fish from the river, thick coats and sturdy boots. The river choked with laden barges. More carts poured over the bridge and wove down the northeast road, delivering tribute to the base of the Cliff. Couriers bounded up its broad stone steps as the clearing filled with festive color and song.

The Marsh boardwalks teemed with prisoners hauling their own offerings on their backs. Wood planks groaned beneath the weight of turtle soup and spiced duck, goldberry brandy, and heady perfumes distilled from the bog. Convicts turned traders crossed over the ice and strode onshore, hurrying through the groves. Shouted greetings rose in steamy puffs, filling the air. Prisoners and visitors fell into each other's arms, whooping with joy.

Ghost marveled. So many tight embraces, so much raucous laughter. He forded the thick crowd, drinking in the passion between Masari and Yata brought together for a day inside the high walls. Piri smiled broadly beside him. She drummed on a wool-swathed belly that pushed her coat before her.

Ghost felt kicks now when he touched her, trying to decode the child's muffled messages. Perhaps that hidden life was why she was not surprised at the pairings whirling before them, as though the coupling of predator and prey on this day before the hunt were the most natural thing in the world.

Yucof took Ghost's arm, pointing. "Brav's father is WoodFoam; he should come over the bridge soon. He preserves the dead for storage and relies heavily on our pharmacy. I've arranged for you to be there, now that you know how to get him what he needs. Brav's guardians will bring her to him when you've finished your trade."

"What am I trading for?"



“He’ll bring extracts that we can’t produce here, including curatives. And he brings extra, preserved meat for Brav.” He looked up into Ghost’s wide eyes. “We don’t mind. It’s better when you can’t recognize who it was.”

Mixed couples and clusters were already spiriting off to heated huts. Others haggled by the carts, while still others gave gifts freely. Birds in white-feathered winter plumage beat the air above and descended onto richly-dyed awnings, calling their own. Flocks skidded between tangles of legs, fighting over dropped food.

Yucof tried to peer over the crowd, his face lit with eager anticipation. “I envy you your height, Ghost.”

“I could lift you.”

Yucof laughed. “Yes. Yes, you could. Oh, she would like to see that.” He waited for Ghost to kneel, then climbed onto his shoulders. “The first time BubbleCreek carried me like this, I felt like a kid again.”

Piri slipped her hand from a pocket and eased it up Yucof’s sleeve. *Do you and she have mix-children?*

He shook his head. “None that I know of who lived.”

Ghost straightened his legs. Only a season ago he had used a walking stick and now he carried a full-grown Yata. Better to remember that than to dwell on the odds facing hybrids and the dangers of living here. He looked upon desperate jollity on this crisp morning, on a day with only so many hours of love and laughter to spare before the citizens of Rudder headed back across the bridge with empty carts and growing sobriety. Even combatants who would face each other in the Games broke bread together, hurling good-natured insults about their adversary’s prowess in the hunting grounds and elsewhere.

Yucof canted forward, giving Ghost only a moment to brace his legs. “There she is.”

“*Masari-head!*” A tall, broad-shouldered woman wove through the crowd, quickening her pace. She plucked Yucof from Ghost and pressed him to her, running her fingers through orange locks. Her amber eyes twinkled. “I’ve missed you, sweetie.” She flashed him a wicked grin. “You look good enough to eat.”

“I’ll bet I do.” Legs dangling off the ground, Yucof grabbed onto BubbleCreek’s woolens and crushed his lips against hers.

Ghost couldn’t help beaming. Given the right conditions, just how much was possible? He reached into Piri’s warm pocket and took her hand in his. The look in her eyes was triumphant.

Their host disengaged from his lover, his feet slipping back onto solid ground. “Bubbles, I’d like you to meet Ghost and Piri.”

BubbleCreek knelt by Piri. “May I?” She eased a large hand beneath Piri’s coat. “You’ve got a healthy one. Feels like you’ll deliver before the rains if both of you can stay alive.” She looked back at Yucof. “Keep an eye on her tomorrow.”

Yucof nodded. “I’ll have the safe room ready.” He touched her back. “Bubbles, what do you know about Destiny Farm?”

“I know it’s why I don’t eat in Promontory.” BubbleCreek straightened with a sigh. Her gaze darted around clusters of merriment. “Whenever I dread the hunt I think about what they do over there. When did you hear about it?”

Yucof tilted his head. “Piri’s from there.”

“Oh, sweetie.” BubbleCreek slipped long arms around Piri in a gentle hug. “I’m so glad you got out. I hope you survive the Games. Do that and the rest is not so bad.” She turned to Ghost and smiled. “May they both still be hearty by the time you’re here next Thanksgiving Day.”

Ghost tried to smile back. “I’m not leaving. I live here.”

Amazement crossed her face. “Gods, but you’re brave.” She looked from him to Yucof. “It’s been a *very* long time since someone from Rudder crossed the river to stay. Not since my grandmother’s day.”

“He’s not from Rudder,” Yucof said. “He’s from Crossroads.”

Ghost wondered at the sudden look of understanding on BubbleCreek’s face.

“That explains it, then,” she said, softly. She grasped Ghost’s hands. “What you must have gone through. I wish this were a better refuge than it is.”

Ghost shook his head. “Crossroads was fine last I knew. I left for my own reasons. What happened?”

BubbleCreek gazed skyward and sucked in a long, deep breath, then pulled a flask from her coat. “Here.” She pressed it firmly into Ghost’s hands. “Start with this and start drinking now. Yucof, let’s go someplace warm that’s well-stocked in spirits. I must explain some things to these people.” She kissed the Yata’s orange scalp and hugged him to her. “Then, my sweet Masari-head, I am going to give you the ride of your life.”

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Fire blazed in the pharmacy’s stone hearth. Ruddy glows infused the long, broad table and its brazier, chafer, crucible, scales. Up and down the cavernous room, row after row of stoppered bottles reflected dancing flames.

Sitting on a low stool, leaning far in toward the crackling wood, Ghost couldn’t stop shivering.

Destroyed. It was too large a word to fit his brain. Crossroads destroyed, the Covenant gone, the hunters killed. An attack waged by a highly-trained band of Yata whom no one had seen coming. A caravan from Destiny Farm polluting Rudder’s main road as it hauled choice cuts over the passes. BubbleCreek had politely stopped her recitation at the sight of Ghost fallen into shock.

“Why?” he whispered. “How?”

There are hunters here from Rudder. Piri stood behind him in the pharmacy, her hands under his woolens, drumming on his chest. *Some probably helped defend the border. We must ask them what they know before they go back.*

Ghost closed his eyes and fought a cold kernel in his heart, the part of him afraid to know. His kin could be dead. And TripStone was a hunter. What were her chances of survival?

All the stories he’d told to Shabra, all his proselytizing in spite of himself, had painted a picture now turned to dust. A bitter laugh escaped him. The deputy need no longer be threatened by his tales of Yata godhood.

And where was he? Trapped with Piri in an Alvav prison, believing it to be their

best alternative when their own survival was uncertain. A fresh wave of tremors made him pull his stool closer to the heat.

You'll burn yourself.

"I want to burn myself!" He held his fists to his forehead. "That kind of pain I can understand. Not this."

Piri's fingers laced into his pelt. They gripped Ghost's fur and yanked, forcing a quick indrawn breath.

Listen to me. Her nails dug into his skin. *You must use the pain or it will kill you.* She stepped to the front of the stool. Ghost scooted back to protect her from the flames.

She knelt before him and eased his hands to his lap, then caressed his cheeks. *Ask the hunters from Rudder. Get all the information you can and see what choices we have.*

Ghost grimaced, unable to quiet the flailing in his head. He never thought he would grieve over a village that had been ready to execute him. He knew what it would have cost him to stay, but how much had it cost to leave them all behind?

After all his labors against the Covenant, a brutal, twisted cruelty of the gods has finally led him to lament its collapse. He didn't know how many were dead, how much was razed, what if any government remained. "My gods, Piri, it's winter. How can they sustain themselves?"

She grabbed hold of his chops and pulled, her brown eyes shining with rage. *What is lost is lost.* Her nails pricked him, stopping just short of scratches. *Do you think I was so drugged that I didn't know what was happening on the Farm? Do you want to know how many people I lost there? How many babies? My pain almost killed me, too, and it would have if I'd done nothing. They would have culled me. I would have been carted over to Crossroads in pieces.*

Her breaths hit him in short, hot bursts. She dug into his cheekbones. *If you can't protect yourself, you can't protect a mix-child.* She hauled herself to her feet and paced the length of the room, hands on hips.

Ghost watched her retreating back; she already showed a slight curvature of the

spine. He had to go to her and sluice the ice from his veins. He forced himself off the stool, away from the fire. "I'll ask WoodFoam," he said. "I'll see if he knows anything."

Still facing away from him, she nodded.

"You're right," he added, his voice small. "I'm sorry."

She turned around and reached for his cheek as he stepped up to her. This time her touch was tender. *Don't shrink from the pain. Use it. Let it guide you.*

He gathered her into his arms. "Your pain is guiding me, too."

She held him more tightly. Suspended between them, their child quickened.

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For a time, Ghost's work in the pharmacy had been blissful.

It had given him a new kind of experimentation, not with Yata body parts but with flora and fauna alien to Crossroads. Preserved pollens, ground roots, strangely-colored insects.

Other prisoners trained in the chemical arts had kept copious records, and Ghost had added his own to a thick sheaf of formulae. He had mixed potions as needed, creating new and better poultices and pastes, burying himself in his research. He had chronicled the results of his own skin exposure, ingestion, inhalation.

It had almost been enough to make him forget the true purpose of the Marsh, within which the weakest or unluckiest Yata became Rudder's food source. The Games were a ritual as institutionalized as Crossroads' Meat Day had been. Even as they fought against it, the Yata here still embraced death, but with gusto rather than piety. New prisoners came regularly through the gates, faced on their arrival with a welcoming wineskin to begin their acclimation.

Now even the pharmacy's comforts crumbled under the onslaught of news. Piri sat, half-napping while Ghost arranged his wares on the table and tried not to think. Faces peered up at him from inside the bottles, returning again and again after he blinked them away. Finally he let them stay. *Use the pain.*

TripStone's words came back to him, whispering through his cabin walls the day she had disappeared. *I wish I could stay here with you now. I can't.*

"Tell me you're alive," he whispered to the air. "Tell me you've escaped."

Was there nothing here that he could use to make an explosive? Nothing he could devise to shatter these walls?

He set to mortar and pestle, curling his lips back to measure scent. The table's Yata height had him bent almost double.

"With that kind of pressure you'll be grinding your tools."

Ghost looked up into forest green eyes and bright, ruby chops. Sitting on a corner stool, Piri roused from a light nap.

A mirror of Brav's curls formed a halo around WoodFoam's face as he removed his hood. "I heard a Masari was living here, but it's hard to believe a story when you hear it slurred."

"I'm feeling pretty slurred, myself." Ghost rounded the table and greeted his customer with a brief bow. "My wife and I had the honor of meeting your daughter."

WoodFoam stepped up to the table and began laying out provisions. "Every time I visit I'm tempted to stay behind, at least while Brav is still alive. She's at risk here, but she's at greater risk outside." He shook his head. "It will be hard when she's gone."

"What makes you think she won't survive? There are other mix-children here."

"They don't have to live in hiding. Brav's in danger even in a safe room." WoodFoam pulled a pair of lists from his satchel and handed them over for examination. "This shows what I'm offering from Rudder. The other list is what I need—as much of those items as you can spare. I'd rather pay the Marsh than the chameleons. They're too damned expensive."

Piri stirred from her stool and stretched her back. She walked to stand by Ghost's side.

He slipped his arm around her waist. “I don’t know about chameleons.”

“That’s probably because you’re a Masari.” WoodFoam smiled at Piri with a trace of sadness and sighed. “The chameleons are illicit traders. They make their living from dealing with Masari, but only after they establish a level of trust. It’s too dangerous otherwise. They could be killed for food in an instant.”

He fished out a slab of dried Yata and laid it on the table. “This is for Brav.” WoodFoam squinted critically at Ghost. “I’m sure you’re trustworthy, but I want to see this meat pass into her hands, myself.”

Ghost nodded. “I don’t blame you. Yucof makes sure I get what I need. Tell me about the chameleons.”

“Bravest people I know.” WoodFoam annotated the lists as Ghost and Piri retrieved powders from the shelves. “They’re escaped prisoners. They run a clandestine trade network that includes all the territory from here out to Promontory. They’ll probably expand into Crossroads as soon as it’s feasible.”

Ghost and Piri exchanged glances. Ghost brought bottles to the scales, willing his hands to remain steady.

“They know how to avoid the sharpshooters and how to bribe the guards.” WoodFoam pushed his payment across the table. “Some officials look the other way, but not all, especially during lean times. Economically the chameleons are more valuable to us alive. We’re allowed in the Marsh only once a season. They represent us the rest of the time.”

Ghost lowered his voice. “Tell me what else you need, in addition to what you’ve paid for. I ask a favor.” He pulled a sheet of parchment and began to write. “I need a message delivered. I have family in Crossroads. I want them to know I’m all right.” He swallowed hard. “I want to know if *they’re* all right.”

WoodFoam shook his head. “Crossroads is in bad shape and their resources are almost gone. There’s no telling when the chameleons will consider them fit for trade.”

“I can wait.”

“It’s better that you speak with someone directly.” WoodFoam added items to the

bottom of his list. “If you can give me these, I’ll arrange a meeting.”



## CHAPTER 22

### Crossroads

TripStone sipped tea alone, sitting in her coats at a small table in an empty common room. Behind her lay an unadorned pallet of woven straw, enough to afford her brief snatches of sleep while she was home. The other pallets were gone, and the tables and desks, and the other chairs.

Bare walls of wood and stone closed in, bearing faint outlines and discolorations where the family relics once hung. Even without such reminders, TripStone remembered where everything used to be. She had almost memorized their new settings inside Gria's hut. Just a few more visits and she would see them, securely in place, simply by closing her eyes.

Black hooks near the hearth held FeatherFly's plain training rifle and NightShout's elaborately engraved one, set above TripStone's outsized StormCloud repeater. Sometimes she hefted one ancient gun and then the other, but even her father's was too light for her now. She had grown too accustomed to the StormCloud's power and its added weight in her hands. The other weapons felt like toys.

Sacred toys.

Her old rifle and her mother's rested somewhere inside Basc, spoils from the militia's attack. One of them might fall her some day if she wasn't careful. Chances were they'd already claimed a Masari life, either in battle or in the new, sanctioned hunting grounds.

She swallowed cold tea. *And they'd all be useless against an armory of StormClouds.* Even fully-armed, the Basc militia would be as impotent against Destiny Farm as Crossroads' hunters had been against Gria's forces. She and Gria had to find a way to shift that balance.

Her footsteps echoed as she bent to the hearth to uncover more embers. Soon the house would be chilled again. Maybe she should take RootWing up on his offer of permanent lodging, take up residence in Ghost's old room. Be around people rather than here, where she lived among ghosts of another sort.

No. Other than the draw of the Warehouse, TripStone didn't know exactly why she walked past BrushBurn's cart on her trips to and from the fields, exchanging simple greetings with the man who would destroy her village. His unlikely attention commanded her, making her return the gesture. The lines in his face betrayed a mixture of curiosity and unease when she stood in the marketplace, watching his light-hearted banter with citizens grown increasingly poor.

On this day he was nowhere to be seen. His assistants were the ones bartering meat when she reached a market square empty of all carts but one. She drew her coats more closely around her and hurried toward the farmhouse, ignoring the sting in her leg. An occasional flurry drifted down as she passed fallow fields.

The ground gleamed with a thin pack of hard snow, almost indistinguishable from the sky. Underneath the fields lay her family, WindTamer, RainTree, the parents of BrokenThread, so many others slowly reclaimed by the soil. Or by animalcules or by the gods, it didn't matter. In the spring they would be reborn in flowers, in honey, in the fruits of hard labor. They and Yata would share the same dinner plate. They would all sustain the living together.

Voices reached her through the farmhouse door, sharply pitched. Their words blurred through the resined wood, but TripStone heard an undercurrent of threat followed by reasoned insistence and somber proclamation. She paused outside the threshold and closed her eyes, holding her ear closer.

The threats came from RootWing and DewLeaf, their arguments the most raised. HigherBrook was with them. TripStone heard anger in his tone as well, but he was trying to mediate. Trying to reason.

She had trouble hearing the next speaker at first, whose speech was low and gravelly, with a manner not threatening but firm. But recognition took only a moment. The touch of concern, coupled with a certain smoothness, gave him away.

She tightened her rifle straps and pushed inside. The others looked up from RootWing's broad table and its scattered records of work schedules, equipment maintenance, yields.

HigherBrook's voice was drum-tight. "This is a private meeting, TripStone."

"I don't mind," BrushBurn said. "I think she should stay."

TripStone nodded at him, making a mighty effort to keep her expression neutral. She loosened the straps and set her rifle against the wall. Her layers of coats came off. She draped them across the back of her chair and sat, facing the trader. His rust-colored curls caught the light.

Across from her and to the right, HigherBrook struggled to maintain his own air of neutrality. Ghost's parents sat to her left, ashen-faced. She gave DewLeaf's hand a reassuring squeeze. "What is this about?"

"It's about communal property," BrushBurn said, with an air of conciliation. "That is all."

"No, it is about the seizing of this farm." RootWing scowled at HigherBrook. "You and the rest of the Chamber know that as well as I do. I will not have inspectors from Promontory overrunning us during spring planting. That's not information gathering. It's the beginning of a takeover."

HigherBrook shook his head. "I assure you, RootWing, we are not about to hand over the Grange. We will find another way."

"I don't see that you have much of a choice." BrushBurn set his own sheets before HigherBrook. "This is the debt Crossroads is already in and winter's only half gone. You have two major parcels of community property, and you can empty the Rotunda only once." He nodded toward the parchments. "Let TripStone see those, too. You've had her watching me long enough. She may as well see the numbers for herself."

TripStone choked down her surprise, then suppressed her amusement. Perhaps it was just as well that BrushBurn believed she was a spy for the Crossroads Chamber. She cast a quick glance at HigherBrook, who betrayed nothing.

HigherBrook pursed his lips, tapping his goatee. He passed her the records without a word.

"TripStone." DewLeaf took her hand. "You understand what the man is saying. It would make us slaves to Promontory."

BrushBurn snorted. "Overreaction."

"Tell that to all the citizens who work our land!" DewLeaf's diminished body

rose from her chair. She shook parchment in his face. “It’s not enough that Promontory wants our produce, they want control! *Community property*. I know what that means!” Trembling, she slammed parchment to wood and sat back down.

TripStone studied the columns and forced herself to remain calm. Little wonder that more and more citizens tried to break into the Rotunda. Even those who safeguarded their property within its walls entered the storage rooms to deplete their own assets. Some had been caught trying to smash other people’s locks.

Crossroads could slow its expanding debt only by buying less meat from BrushBurn. More Masari had to learn to hunt, it was as simple as that. The orphaned, underage hunters had to learn quickly how to teach the new techniques. *It is good they are young. They have fewer old traditions to fight against.* CatBird had already proven herself a gifted teacher. TripStone would have to speak with her.

But much more than property was at stake. Control of the Grange meant control of the new covenant’s base of operations. Without further strengthening, Basc would be wide open to Promontory’s next expansion. If BrushBurn’s employers learned of the other function served by this place, they would grasp control of it that much sooner.

She whispered, “How much time do we have?”

“I’ll refigure your debt at winter’s end.” BrushBurn’s steel-blue gaze burned into her. “I’ll bring my report to the Chamber in Promontory. They’ll decide the rest.”

“Does Crossroads have no representation, then?” She could pick his scent from the others as easily as that of a fox among hares. Her breath became ragged. “Is Promontory looking for conquest or for partnership?”

“Don’t let him fool you,” RootWing growled. “We know what they’re looking for.”

“I know what they’re *looking* for.” TripStone measured the glare of warning in HigherBrook’s eyes against the twinge of hunger in BrushBurn’s. “What they will *get* is another matter.”

BrushBurn flashed her the slightest of smiles. “You are hardly in a position to

threaten, my dear, but you make an intriguing proposition. Just how do you envision such a partnership?”

“Before anything else,” she said, levelly, “you need a representative from Crossroads in Promontory.”

HigherBrook spat, “That is out of the question. We can’t spare anyone, least of all someone to be a puppet for Promontory’s Chamber.”

TripStone studied his barely-concealed rage, realizing with a start that he was angrier at her than at BrushBurn. The trader was fully alert, his fur lifted, looking from her to HigherBrook and back. Wondering, no doubt, if their so-called collaboration had begun to crumble.

Better that both men be confused. TripStone regretted only that she must seem like a traitor, or at best a naïve fool, to Ghost’s kin. It couldn’t be helped.

“Of course,” BrushBurn mused, “simple tithes may be sufficient if my estimate is wrong.” He gathered his papers together. “I doubt it will be wrong.” He stood and bowed graciously to his hosts. “If there is nothing more to discuss, I will check back with you at season’s end.”

He shrugged on his coat and eased on his gloves, turning from the farmers’ cold stares to HigherBrook. “I don’t envy you, my friend. You have a community to support. You and your Chamber must choose your priorities carefully.”

“Indeed.” HigherBrook sat, erect and stiff. His eyebrows ticced up. “Bear in mind, BrushBurn, that my priorities are greater in number than the ambitions of a trader.”

“Ambitions.” BrushBurn chuckled to himself. “Interesting.” He rounded the table, his eyes twinkling. “Always a pleasure, TripStone.” His broad hand rested squarely on the shoulder of her vest. He gave it a slight squeeze, then made his way out the door.

RootWing and DewLeaf began gathering their records, moving as though in a dream. TripStone noted with dismay that Ghost’s parents allowed her to help them but did not meet her gaze. Her hands faltered as she passed them the pages.

HigherBrook hurried to the door and waited, fuming, for BrushBurn to pass out

of sight. After several minutes he turned back to the farmers. “I must speak privately with TripStone. An unattached shed would be preferable.”

“One of our seed storehouses is close to empty,” DewLeaf said, “considering the raids and our support to Basc.”

“I know where it is.” TripStone looked into the woman’s sad eyes, wanting to wipe shadows of doubt away. *Dear people, you’ve got to trust me.* “I’ll take him there.” After a moment’s thought she added, “I’ll come back for my gun.”

She lifted one coat and then a second from her chair as HigherBrook bundled up. She arranged scarves around her face before stepping into an icy wind.

He was tight-lipped beside her as their boots crunched, traversing the path by an older burial ground. Nourished by the dead, wisps of winter wheat perforated the snow.

She could agree with HigherBrook on one thing. Outside control of these fields was not an option.

Her shoulder still felt warm where BrushBurn had grasped it, as though the cur had branded her himself. Phantom fingers traveled beneath her clothes. She tried to drive them away with thoughts of the Rotunda, overlaying its weaknesses on the Warehouse. How alike were the buildings? How much of Promontory was penetrable?

A small shed rose from gray flatness, as snow-covered and colorless as the rest. It was a waystation during spring plantings, one of many stocked with the year’s rotation. At least no one tried to rob the supply now that the raids had stopped, though that was not particularly surprising. The Rotunda was much more vulnerable, its icons fetching a higher price. Even the hardiest remaining seeds would founder in Promontory’s dead soil.

No, Promontory would not come after the seeds. Promontory was coming after the soil itself.

She knocked the snow off her boots and opened the door. HigherBrook followed close behind, letting it slam. The shed’s well-caulked wood displayed hoes and rakes and shovels; a pitchfork reclined between spreaders. Only a few burlap bags lay neatly stacked, leaving a floor as empty as TripStone had ever seen it.

The interior was heartbreakingly bare.

She was mulling over the emptiness when HigherBrook snapped, “Turn around.” For an instant she wondered if he had taken something into his hands. There was certainly enough here for both of them to grab. *No*, she reminded herself. *He is too much a diplomat. He’ll seek other ways.*

She squared her shoulders and faced him.

He hissed, “You would sell this town just to get near Destiny Farm, wouldn’t you? Who are you working with? Gria? Basc can barely feed itself, let alone raise a new army. We don’t have the luxury to even *think* of destroying a major food source.”

He moved in close, his breath on her face. “We can barely feed *ourselves*, TripStone! I will handle the spring when it comes, but we’ve got to survive until then.”

“I agree,” she said, softly. “I am training as many hunters as I can, HigherBrook. You should learn the skills, too. The healthier Basc gets, the less likely that Yata will die of other causes. We can’t rely too strongly on deliveries of the dead, even for advisors.”

“Not everyone can belong to your caste.” He grasped her collars. “And *what* is going on between you and BrushBurn? What’s led him to believe I’ve had you observing him?”

“I don’t know.” She tried not to smile. “I *have* been observing him, that much is true, but I haven’t learned anything. How could I? I already know what our people are giving away.” She shook her head. “He’s been greeting me every day, waiting for me to buy more of his meat. I find that strange. He obviously thinks I can give him something and I don’t know what.”

HigherBrook growled, “Let me remind you that we run a secret operation here.”

“It’s not that.” She met him glare for glare. “The new covenant is safe with me. BrushBurn singled me out even before our agreement with Gria.” Her eyes narrowed. “He’s interested in me. Maybe he thinks he can use me to get to you.”

“It’s obvious he’s already gotten to *you*.” HigherBrook leaned in closer. “I’ve

seen your own property dwindle in the Rotunda. I saw how you looked at him just now. I don't know what's going on between the two of you, but I assure you it's more than just a quest for information."

Her blood thrummed, chest tightening. She whispered, "Don't push me."

"I'll push you as hard as you've pushed me, TripStone. We could have re-established our old lines of dependence with Basc, but you put an end to that." HigherBrook tightened his grip. "You're the one who gave the Yata evidence of Destiny Farm, not I. I'm not the one who lowered myself to bartering with him."

With a yell TripStone rammed HigherBrook's chest, driving him across the floor. Metal vibrated as they slammed into the far wall between sharp tools, inches from impalement. HigherBrook struggled to regain his breath.

TripStone's collars fell in ribbons as she pinned him to the wood. "If you value your life you will not raise that subject again."

"Kill me," he answered evenly, between gasps, "and you will be dealing with the rest of the Chamber. They will not treat you quite so respectfully."

She peered at HigherBrook's closely-trimmed hair and fur, his smoldering brown eyes. Desperation was dismantling his fear as much as it had erased hers. He had more hunter in him than he gave himself credit for.

She couldn't keep a smile from her lips as she released her hold and backed away. "You should meet with Gria in her hut more often instead of just out on the roads. That's where I've been bringing my property." She brushed herself off. "That's where it belongs."

HigherBrook pushed himself away from the wall and straightened his clothes. "Much more goes on in that hut than your simple delivery of relics."

"Yes, we talk. You know that much."

HigherBrook nodded as he stepped quietly to the door and eased it open.

As TripStone followed him outside he turned and backed her up against the doorpost. "I also know, and am telling you, that however I can I will stop you from going to Promontory. I will hold you in irons if I have to."



She raised her eyebrows at him. “You can increase your chances of that by learning to shoot.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“I’m inviting you.” She slid past him. “If you won’t learn from me, then go to CatBird. You told me yourself she’s a good teacher. There was a time when you thought you’d never butcher a Yata. Hunting skills are just as important now.”

She shoved her hands in her pockets. HigherBrook stepped up beside her as she ambled, still limping slightly, back toward the farmhouse.

She turned her head to study his profile. It was pensive now, blank of emotion. Almost likable. Still, she had to be careful. When he met her gaze, she wondered if she wore the same expression he did.

She murmured, “We really are on the same side, you know.”

“I know.” He frowned. “You make things damned difficult.”

“Thanks.” She flashed him a broad smile. “So do you.”

## CHAPTER 23

### Promontory

Mornings were the worst time of all. DamBuster awakened from a weary sleep, basking in the cushion of ambiguous dreams. Then he remembered.

He did not know which troubled him more, having to leave the susurrus of DevilChaser's quiet snores and the warmth of his body under blankets, or rising and padding from the bedroom to find his partner awake and grim.

Today DevilChaser was awake. A simple breakfast adorned the table while a fine gruel warmed on the stove. DamBuster caught a whiff, knowing that the Yata in the lab had not yet breakfasted and was probably still asleep. He dropped into a chair, his back to the laboratory door.

"I've lit the fire." DevilChaser poured tea, then sat at the table and ran his fingers through short, wispy hair. The shadows under his eyes had deepened. "I've emptied the pail and changed the urine towel. I didn't want to touch the blankets. I can remove them when the heat wakes him up."

"You don't have to do all this."

"Yes, I do." DevilChaser speared a chunk of Yata and held it above the plate. "I live with you. I can share the responsibility with you. Shoulder the guilt, too." He popped the morsel into his mouth and spent a long time chewing before he swallowed. "The padding we put under his restraints seems to be doing some good. His rash is gone."

DamBuster shook his head. "That must be one hell of a drug if it can arouse a man trapped in a torture device." He pushed food around on his plate. "I sampled a bit of it, myself, tried to figure out what was in it. The stuff is almost tasteless. Didn't do a thing for me."

Even DamBuster's keen sense of smell had afforded him only a hint of decayed plant material and other things that might once have been alive. The brown powder smelled partially burnt, partially distilled in some kind of solution, then dried. Its elements melded together into an amalgam so tight he wondered if he

could ever isolate its components.

He had opened the small bag out of sight of the Yata, but could still see the man's neck muscles tense. Quickened pulse, shallow breaths. DamBuster had shut the bag, hurried to the restraining chair, and looked into a face caught between desire and fear. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He'd set about making a mask to block the smell.

At the breakfast table DamBuster moved equally tasteless food around his mouth, washing it down with strong tea. "Honestly, I don't know why he isn't fighting us more."

"He probably knows they'd just bring someone else if something happened to him." DevilChaser pushed his plate away. Grease shone in the morning light. "Maybe he's just biding his time." He sipped, leaning back in his chair. "How many of them do you think we'd be able to set free before SandTail caught on?"

"SandTail?" DamBuster frowned. "One."

He downed his tea in a gulp. *Get up. Turn around, walk to the lab door. Open it. Step through.* Even moving freely, DamBuster was loaded down with his own restraints, cinched by invisible buckles.

The Yata opened a sleepy eye and yawned. Without hesitation DamBuster released a forearm restraint so the man could tuck his own tongue back into his mouth. The bronze hand reached across, grabbed the blanket, and flung it to the floor.

"I agree," DamBuster said. "It's gotten warm." He handed the Yata a cloth and took another one in hand, wiping sweat from places his prisoner couldn't reach. "Hungry?"

The Yata nodded.

"After breakfast we're going to exercise your limbs a bit, walk you around the room."

For a moment he considered getting the gruel himself without strapping the forearm back to the chair, but even trust had its limits. The small, naked man before him could probably free himself in an instant if given the opportunity.

And setting a restraint only to release it minutes later was absurd. DamBuster called to the door, “We’re ready.”

DevilChaser brought a bowl and spoon, a mug of water. So far the Yata had eaten cooperatively with his freed hand and hadn’t tried to cause any trouble. His acquiescence was almost disappointing. There should be more resistance, more testing of his captors’ resolve.

*Right, DamBuster thought. I’m expecting you to do what I can’t do, myself.*

He held up the bowl. The Yata spooned gruel, careful not to drop any food as he studied the room.

“If it makes any difference to you,” DamBuster told him, “we try to avoid buying from Destiny Farm as much as possible. When we can go without, we wait for someone to die in Skedge.”

The test subject gave him a quizzical look.

“Skedge is an independent colony of Yata,” DevilChaser explained. “They manufacture Destiny but they don’t realize they’re making it for the Farm. DamBuster’s being forced to recreate it because Skedge is—” He smiled. “Rebelling.”

The Yata thought for a moment, then offered a slow nod.

“If there’s anything we start saying that you don’t want to hear, just grunt,” DevilChaser continued. “We’ve been trying to decide whether to eat in here, but sometimes that means we would eat Yata in front of you. We figure right now you’re uncomfortable enough.”

The small man answered with a slight smile that was pitying or condescending or both. DamBuster wasn’t sure. The Yata replaced his spoon in the bowl, pointed to the door, and made a motion of waving in.

“We’ll take our meals in here, then,” DamBuster conceded. He set down the empty bowl and handed over the water. “Do you have a name?” he asked. “Do you *want* a name?”

The Yata sipped, studying his drink. After long consideration he shrugged, as

much as his bicep restraints allowed.

DevilChaser mused, “The only names we know are Masari.” He smiled at DamBuster. “You realize the instructions expressly forbid assigning a name to an experimental subject.”

“Yeah,” DamBuster said. “Fuck the instructions.” He added, after a moment, “No one knows Yata, either at the Farm or in Skedge.” He took back the proffered empty mug and looked his prisoner up and down. “Ever hear of a mud adder?”

Slow shake of the head.

“No reason why you should. They live in the salt pan, which I’m sure you’ve never seen.” DamBuster moved the dishes to the side. “They stay mostly in the lower layers, which retain moisture even in dry weather, but every so often they come to the surface. You don’t know they’re there until you’re right on top of them. Nasty bite, can be bad enough to kill a person if the toxins stay in too long.” He met the Yata’s attentive gaze. “You have to know what signs to look for, otherwise you never see them coming.”

The Yata’s eyes showed a hint of amusement. He gave another slow nod.

DamBuster patted his hand. “Pleased to meet you, MudAdder. Welcome to our asylum.”

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The name, DamBuster realized, was a reminder to himself and to DevilChaser. They could let their guard down only so far and needed to know what signs to look for. They used themselves as restraints, holding MudAdder as they freed his other forearm strap, his bicep straps, chest and waist straps, thigh and calf and ankle straps. A loose belt spanned the Yata’s forehead, holding his skull against a head rest and providing limited movement. Wryly, DamBuster observed that the only thing not tied down was the man’s cock, the one part of his anatomy expected to respond to a successful Destiny formulation.

The two Masari secured MudAdder between them as they walked him around the lab, keeping a safe distance from equipment and supplies. What must it be like to sit strapped to a chair for hours on end, pissing into a towel and shitting

through a hole into a pail while one's jailer looked for a way to wrest away what little control remained?

Then again, how far away was MudAdder from being culled? What would happen when they were done with him and he was brought back to the Farm? DamBuster studied the man's supple skin, his firm musculature. He was too young to be culled. SandTail had given them an experimental subject meant to be sexually potent. DamBuster forced his eyes away before his own body could respond and started idly counting the bottles lining his new shelves.

"I'll be examining Destiny under the lenses," he muttered, still looking at the bottles. "I need to see how it interacts with substances whose structures I already know. That will give me a place to start." He maintained a firm hold on the warm, smooth-skinned arm. "I'll give you the mask before I begin."

The small hand squeezed his fingers.

"Don't thank me."

He restrained MudAdder while DevilChaser stretched the arms, one leg and then the other, massaging knots of muscle. Reluctantly they guided the Yata back into the chair, then re-buckled the straps and checked the padding. DamBuster fit charcoal into a pocket of cloth and tied it loosely over MudAdder's nose. "Grunt if you need it to be tighter."

DevilChaser lowered his voice. "You realize that this is the easy part. Eventually you'll have to test your theories on him."

"After many, many preliminary tests, including that of SandTail's patience." DamBuster looked into MudAdder's calm, wary eyes and sighed. "Time to go to work."

~~~

The hearth burned deep into the night. DamBuster straightened from his lenses and rubbed his eyes. His notes filled dozens of pages, but they were disconnected observations with no discernible pattern to them. Good. He hoped the others assigned this task were at least as perplexed as he. At this rate, SandTail would be apoplectic soon.

DevilChaser had been by twice to change the urine towel, stopping to talk to MudAdder about anything that came into his head. How to set a bone, deliver a baby, treat a chest infection. DamBuster couldn't help smiling as he bent over his lab table. Pretty soon the Yata would be a healer in his own right if he could remember it all. Then again, he'd also know how to build a birdhouse and stitch together a tunic.

A light snore rose from the restraining chair. Soon it would be time to snuff the fire and set a blanket around the Yata's narrow shoulders, taking care to tuck him in. See whether DevilChaser was still awake. Fall into the embrace of arms or pallet.

The sound of whirring gears caught his attention. DamBuster left the lab to see lights wavering outside his small kitchen window. He hurried to the back door, threw on his coat, and grabbed his gun before stepping outside.

Save for dim lanterns the landscape was pitch. He could almost make out the hooded silhouettes but they moved too quickly, blending into the night. With deft efficiency they unloaded wooden boxes that made soft thumps on the ground.

DamBuster started toward the lamps. "What are you—"

"Stop where you are." The voice was light, soft around the edges but firm in tone. DamBuster couldn't tell which of them spoke. "This is more of your delivery."

Four boxes. Five. The silhouettes jumped into the wagon and sped away. The runner must never have unharnessed.

Standing under a great bowl of stars, DamBuster listened to echoes and wondered if he heard right. The wagon seemed headed for the salt pan, not farther into Promontory. Blowing on his hands, he stepped back inside to get gloves and his own lantern. He'd bring the boxes into the kitchen, move them to the lab in the morning.

So those were SandTail's suppliers. They seemed more like fugitives.

Even odder, the one who spoke to him sounded far too young.

*No, not young, DamBuster thought. Small.*

He had never spoken directly with a Yata, at least not one able to speak back.  
But if he were to imagine a Yata voice, that would have been it.



## CHAPTER 24

### The Marsh

“Piri.”

In her dream she sank into the sedge. The ice melted and became a warm, fleshy membrane. The membrane held her, rocking with a lullaby rhythm. It formed hands and feet, a beating heart, a tiny penis. A face floated above her own, in the sky and water at once, smooth and furry at once. Its kiss was sticky as sundews. It floated placidly down to her breast, clamped onto her nipple, and began to nurse.

“Piri.”

A hand shook her shoulder like the kiss of a breeze. Slowly, reluctantly, she rose above the sedge and into lamp light. She rolled onto her back and yawned, holding her hand over her mouth. When she opened her eyes she saw Yucof’s face. The others in the hut were wrapping themselves in coats and stepping out into darkness.

She glanced around, confused.

“Ghost is in the pharmacy,” Yucof said, “gathering medicinals. He’ll meet us in the safe room.”

She rested her fingers on his arm. *So soon.*

“I promised Bubbles I’d keep an eye on you. To do that, we’ve got to reach our safe room in time to get you a spot. Ghost is guaranteed a place because he’ll be treating the wounded.” He helped her to her feet. “It will be crowded. We need to leave now.”

She grasped the cloth and waterskin he offered, bundled her woolens around her, and followed him out into the cold. Lanterns swung in uneven lines along networks of wood, the boardwalk slippery underfoot. They moved carefully above the ice, toward the forest. The frozen sky sparkled.

Piri tried not to think. Her muscles tensed with heightened alertness. She was in the canyon again, baking under a relentless sun, clawing her way up craggy walls away from the trail. Here it was cold and dark and yet the same, each cell in her body straining toward survival.

Only this time, she was not alone. Many shadowy figures moved with her, some toward the scattered safe rooms, others toward the weapons. Even in her own body she was not alone.

She reached out convulsively. *You're sure he knows where the room is.*

Yucof nodded. "He knows."

*Our room.*

"Yes."

She did not expect panic to grip her so readily, not for her own safety but for Ghost's. Suddenly she was trying to survive for two, for three. Her center was off, there were too many variables. Easier to fight death in solitude, without distractions sending chills beneath the wool. A shattering wind blew through her, that only Ghost's presence would break.

He would join them later. She latched onto that promise and clutched it like a living thing.

She knew the wind blew through Yucof as well. Hours from now, while they huddled against the gas, BubbleCreek would again stride across the bridge. Only this time she would be armed, at once dodging Yata attacks and shooting to kill.

Hours earlier, Piri and Ghost had witnessed the other side of Thanksgiving Day, the goodbyes as tearful and prolonged as the hellos had been joyous. Masari and Yata had grasped each other in crushing hugs, exhorting each other to live through another Games. Yucof and BubbleCreek had shared a long, tight embrace, radiating waves of both bravado and anguish.

The combatants had been the most emotional of all. Warriors from opposite sides of the river had anointed each other with kisses and gripped each other fiercely, promising both spirited resistance and merciful death, the toughest among them choking back sobs.

Piri squeezed Yucof's arm. He held her across the back, guiding her toward the groves. The stars vanished beneath evergreen canopies.

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Resins and wax caked the safe room walls. Prisoners extinguished their lanterns and left them outside in the snow as others piled into a large open space. One of the last to arrive would snuff the single lamp hanging inside on a high hook, to preserve the air after the door was closed and sealed. Despite every precaution there would still be light leaks, air leaks. Gas would permeate the wood.

Only a few safe rooms dotted the Marsh, the others destroyed by the guards during security sweeps. A pile of boots grew on hard ground outside this sanctuary, next to a pile of coats. The inhabitants already produced more than enough heat.

Except for the single lamp, the room held nothing but bodies. Anything to help support weight would take up too much space. The rooms were designed to fit the maximum number of people, Yucof had explained, including those who would be crushed. Almost none of the floor remained when he and Piri arrived. Others would hold them up.

Less gas would drift closer to the ground, but more weight would press down from above. They could either gag or smother.

With shaky breaths Piri curled into a fetal position, forming a barrier around her belly. The man beneath her continued to sleep despite her added weight. The smell of sweat, strong and sharp, would prove sweet in retrospect.

The gas cannons would not fire until noon and the new day had barely begun. Piri could sleep if she tried hard enough. Yucof already began to nod off. They would be wide awake when the Games began and they would lose at least a night's rest afterwards. She willed her body to relax.

All around her the room whispered with low, soft voices and shifting forms. In the breeding pens Piri had floated inside the press of flesh. She had thrashed inside a vast, loud organism, not weighed down but bursting from herself as pleasure throttled her. Now, as then, she could not tell one body from another.

But now gravity clamped down in the dim light. She held herself still and

remained quiet, taking slow breaths against the pressures on her ribs. Her eyes opened at the weight of a pair of legs on her hip. Smooth legs, short legs. Her eyes closed again.

The pile of people grew and Piri began to understand why so many in the Marsh chose to take their chances in the clearing, or in the woods among the sharpshooters. A head rested on her shoulder. She held her water skin and cloth close to her tunic. She began to drift toward sleep but then the chills returned, pricking the base of her spine and planting imaginings in her brain. She would have to slow her breathing further, and further still once the door closed.

She wanted to ask Yucof how many died in the safe rooms, but she did not want to wake him.

The bodies around her shifted under more weight. Fingertips touched her hand, reaching further in. The fingers curled. Fur brushed her knuckles.

Her eyes sprang open. She blinked back tears as her fingers grasped Ghost's and held on tight.

"My supplies are just outside," he whispered. Someone already reclined on his back. "I'll need to move quickly with them once we're unsealed."

She nodded, raised Ghost's hand to her lips, and cupped his palm against her cheek. She could no longer see his face, but she had his touch.

She closed her eyes again and the cushion of sedge returned. It closed over her like a blanket, sinking her underneath the ice. Pressure built from above as the waters deepened. She plummeted to the silt bottom and thickening mud pulled her down; she grew gills to filter out the dirt. Pockets of air glowed around her in blue iridescent patches.

The child's face wavered before her. She guided it to the light. *Breathe.*

From deep within her dream she heard the distant sound of a Yata warrior closing the door from the outside. The rhythm of resin slapped into cracks reverberated softly, like the gentle wash of a wind-pushed lake.

~~~

Her muscles screamed as she awakened, her breath catching in her throat. Everything itched. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to float away from her body. Her nose wrinkled at the stink of excrement. She focused her energies on a tight core, a single imperative. The rest would matter later.

Ghost's hand was gone. She imagined him curled up as she was, holding his limbs close to his trunk to avoid broken bones. Knowing he was here with her, inside, gave her a thin shield against panic.

From high above her someone murmured, "Daylight," and then, "Mid-morning." Bodies shifted amidst quick indrawn breaths and short moans of pain. Piri saw only darkness and felt the occasional flare of fire up and down her spine before she faced it down, paring it to a dull ache. Sweat—no, not sweat—trickled down her legs. Only after a moment did she realize it was her own bladder emptying.

They had scant hours of rest left. She closed her eyes again.

~~~

More movements awakened her, deliberate and unstoppable. The pile of bodies writhed. Piri joined them, forcing her arms to move, bringing cloth and water skin close to her face. She swallowed saliva, fighting thirst to save the water for other means. She was too numb and too exhausted to worry.

"Piri," Ghost whispered, "I'm still here."

She answered him with a soft hum. The Farm had taken her tongue but not her voice. She resisted more tears, knowing she could not afford to shed them.

Another voice from above said, "Very soon now." The room listened with one ear, one soul. Quietly. Waiting.

Then it came, a distant explosion, followed by incoming trajectory.

Whoosh.

The room filled with the motions of skins uncapped, cloth wetted. Piri pressed coolness to her nose and mouth as her heart thumped in her throat.

Whoosh.

A canister thudded to the ground outside. Piri's eyes began to burn before she saw the haze. She pressed the cloth tighter. Her body bucked out of her control as the gas slipped through. What little she inhaled tried to lacerate her lungs even as she held her breath to re-wet the towel.

If anything more flew overhead, she couldn't hear it above the deafening surge of coughing and choking. A heel dug into Piri's lower back and she rolled herself tighter. She flailed with new convulsions and re-tightened. She jerked beneath the ravages of poisoned air, battling muscles that no longer obeyed her.

As one the bodies became heavier, pressing toward the ground as the gas rose to the ceiling. Piri poured more water with a quaking hand, swallowing the spittle squirting up into her mouth as she felt her insides burn away. She could not distinguish Ghost's gagging from the rest and took thin comfort in that. He probably didn't recognize her own.

Bodies slipped in foulness and tumbled. Several tried to rush the door, but too many others cluttered the way and the warriors had sealed the exit well. Despite the safe room's torments, the fumes were much stronger outside. Everyone not sealed in had escaped the Marsh and fled through its gates.

Somewhere the air filled with yelling and gunshot, clashing metal, and citizens cheering from the Cliff; but those sounds could only be imagined. They were part of another world. The world around Piri was one of bodies turned inside-out. The child shifted hard within her and she turned her head as best she could, emptying her stomach, then slapping her wet cloth against dry heaves. With a shudder she realized that the body beneath her had stopped moving altogether.

By the time of the next Games she would be enormous, her ribs and limbs able to protect her only so much. She felt as though she were dying now, but what would happen then? How could she leave her body when someone else remained inside, sharing this agony with her?

Perhaps it was only coincidental that Brav's mother had died in childbirth. Piri tried to distract herself from what passed out of her, fell upon her, splashed against her. Her mind raced, leaving the rest of her to convulse. Her body became a foreign entity attached to her by strained, wispy threads of spirit.

~~~

Few were conscious by the time the gas cleared. Those still alive pressed toward the back of the safe room as a surviving Yata warrior hacked the door down. Beaten and raw, Ghost awakened to the sound of splintering wood.

His nose still ran. When he wiped it the fur on his hand came away matted with blood. He scanned the tangle of bodies, searching for Piri, but she was buried beneath them. Something unrecognizable passed from his throat when he called her name, but then a painful, guttural grunt replied.

Relief flooded him. He swallowed, wincing. "I must get out." Phlegm filled his mouth. "Treat wounded."

He marveled that he could move at all. Everything hurt. The tangle of Yata shifted as best it could, clearing space. Without his services, they would have killed him by now, not just because he was a Masari but because he took up space and air when they needed it most.

He slipped among them, swimming through waste. Nausea came and went but Ghost had nothing left to relinquish. At long last he crawled outside on his hands and knees, grabbing snow to wipe himself down as best he could. Others already outside did the same.

He struggled to the nearest tree, clawing its bark to pull himself upright. A shout passed his lips as muscles spasmed. Bruises covered him, but nothing felt broken.

Ghost gathered his strength, staggered to his supplies, and tore off his foetid clothes, screaming in the cold. He rubbed himself down with more snow before grabbing woolens and boots. Mucus filled his nose. He couldn't smell a thing, but he was certain he still stank.

He would be good to no one if he didn't eat now. Still shaking, Ghost submerged his head in his pack and stuffed his mouth with meat, forcing it to stay down.

He dragged his supplies along the boardwalks to where the wounded were laid out, just inside the gates. The Yata he had swallowed began to take effect, warming his body again and steadying him. He had to treat the warriors enough to move them safely inside.

Guns still fired in the distance, despite the closed gates. Sporadic reports echoed

off the rocks, well past the time when corpse-laden wagons from Rudder would have crossed back over the bridge.

The Games should have been over. Even the sharpshooters should have finished their work, but he couldn't think about that now. Ghost retrieved his instruments and bent over one Yata after another. Body parts. Amputations.

He knew the anatomy but had not cut into living flesh until now. So many specimens had filled the bottles in his destroyed cabin, but they'd been brought to him already removed from surrounding skeleton and tissue. Now he looked to others for guidance, following their example.

TripStone must have performed these acts thousands of times, slicing through skin and muscle, cutting pieces away, and setting bones aside. Sheltered on the outskirts of Crossroads, Ghost couldn't bear to envision it. Now he used crushed roots to anesthetize his patients and applied pastes to help blood clot as he drew his blade, laying flesh open and exposing organs. Cleaning wounds, stitching.

The sound of gunfire continued as gore drenched his woolens, but no new bodies came through the gate. Ghost glanced back at the guards as he moved among the fallen. Their gaze was trained on the Cliff.

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The previous night had crept with agonizing slowness in the safe room, but this night raced once the injured were brought inside. Ghost's movements became automatic. When not treating wounds, he hauled corpses to the gate for delivery to Rudder. Some of the meat remained behind, to be preserved for him and for Brav.

He tried not to think. How could he shy away from butchery, when the Yata here willingly dissected their own? He could at least spare them that much.

His body gave out some time after sunrise and he slid to the floor of the makeshift ward. He awakened hours later, naked and warmed by heated stones, his bloodied woolens removed. A sponge scrubbed the gore from his skin. Brushes teased the rest of it from his hair and pelt.

He opened his eyes and looked up into a mélange of bruises, flesh wounds, and tired smiles. Warriors, from the patterns of scarification. After a day spent

battling Masari, these Yata were cleaning one up.

He coughed and immediately regretted it. His throat still burned. He whispered, “The Games—why so long?” At their confused looks he added, “Gunfire.”

“Those weren’t the Games,” one said. “That was rebellion on the Cliff.”

“I saw only knives when I was there. No guns.”

“The Cliff uses guns to quell rebellions.” The warrior rolled Ghost over and started scrubbing his back. “It’s happened before. Many times.”

Ghost pillowed his head on his arms. Somehow he had to get back on his feet, find clean clothes, and return to his hut. He felt the sting of a dull blade scraping filth from his legs and murmured, “You are very kind.”

“You’ve worked longer than we have.”

Ghost let the words sink in. It was a simple equation. He had saved Yata lives, seeking to slaughter no one. He had earned his own life among them by helping them survive a hunt waged by his own kind, the first Masari in generations to endure the Games from *inside* the Marsh.

Gas canisters littered the ground outside. He would retrieve one to take to the pharmacy. He wanted to study its residue, see if he could devise an antidote. If his insides were still inflamed, the gods only knew what was happening to Piri and their child. He had to get back to them.

Ghost’s head swam as he rocked to his knees. On the other side of the hut, almost out of view, someone gathered clean linens and plucked his washed woolens from where they hung, drying over the heated rocks.

CHAPTER 25

Promontory

Nothing warmed the cold, dry night better than a hearth filled with Rudder's cured, fragrant wood. That is, nothing so far as SandTail knew.

More knowledge was coming. The world was about to widen, building new assets to support this hard-working town. From the sound of BrushBurn's communiqué, accompanying a fresh delivery of trinkets and requesting more meat and preservative, SandTail wouldn't have to wait much longer.

He leaned back into a chair upholstered in supple Yata skin, letting his fingers meander over coppery gradations in the bronze before he lifted the parchment again. BrushBurn's neat, block lettering was meticulous but simple, almost afraid to stray off the page. SandTail smiled at that cautious hand and found it comforting. No surprises there.

The interim report on Crossroads looked promising despite the sheer waste of its forest, but that would regrow in time. Underneath all that destruction the land was still good, and if anything the ash should increase its fertility. The Crossroads Chamber remained noncommittal but the people became more cooperative, save for those few who clung tenaciously to the old traditions.

As though that would save them. Faith was odd, that way. It held so much power, yet broke so easily. About time.

SandTail looked beyond the report, to a wall hung with proclamations stamped onto linen, as though even in its dusty infancy this town had known it was going to be something. Even his father's tattered factory gloves became a statement, worn and stained and outliving by a good many years the man who had worn them. The proclamations were pretty, but the gloves were real.

That was at least as important as BrushBurn's sales. Crossroads needed to learn what was real; only then could Promontory ease that town's transition. Its assets would make life a little better for all the men and women out here who still died too young—whose ancestors had built this place up from less than nothing and died younger.

SandTail scanned a gallery of memorabilia. The first blasting of the earth, the first frenzy of stacking bags filled with tailings to protect early, crude homes against the floods. If any faith was to be had, it was faith in Promontory. Enough offerings of blood and sweat had been heaped up on that altar. If SandTail had to twist more arms and demand more blood to sustain this city, then so be it.

He straightened in his chair and leaned over a simple, sturdy desk to put pen to parchment. *I agree with you it's odd my name was mentioned in Crossroads, but anyone familiar with Promontory's history would know my family's involvement here. You tell me that HigherBrook had been a scribe. Scribes have a love of history. I don't know how he would be aware of my connection to Destiny Farm, but I remind you that the Farm is as much an industry as our other factories. It would be an intelligent guess on his part.*

And savvy, too, something to make BrushBurn sit up and take notice. Perhaps Crossroads knew more about Destiny Farm than it let on, but what good would that do? The town was hungry, like everybody else. The gods its citizens prayed to have not spared them their appetites.

I don't know what HigherBrook stands to gain by having the hunter mention me to you instead of telling you himself, but it makes sense in light of her surveillance. TripStone's wish to send a representative to Promontory and her superior's refusal is simple manipulation, my friend. He does not want to seem too eager. He already has her keeping an eye on you and he wants to continue that. We can't blame them for wanting to learn more about our operations.

But let's see if we can't turn this to our advantage.

Firelight danced in SandTail's snifter. He lifted the glass of goldberry brandy to his lips and let its smooth amber liquid coat his throat. No doubt the good people of Crossroads believed Promontory was nothing but a polluted desert of mine and foundry, filled with hardened laborers unable to think past the next ale. It was easier, that way. Had been from the beginning.

Easy to look down one's nose when tilling arable land, filling books and stippling bones, but who had supplied the tools? Who manufactured the chains to make their wagons light? Who cast the guns for shooting those Yata over whom they so excessively grieved?

Yata sacrifice was an unfortunate necessity, but it paled in comparison to the

Masari sacrifice that continued to enrich Promontory's distant, ignorant neighbor. Unacknowledged *Masari* sacrifice was the true tragedy. Let the hunter think she learned about Destiny Farm, but teach her about Promontory. See if she was as noble as purported. Crossroads had forgotten the past. It needed to remember again.

Of course, some of the most unappreciative Masari lived right on SandTail's doorstep. *The chameleons have made their first deliveries to our favorite apothecary. He is a very unhappy man, but he is cooperating.*

What would DamBuster say if he knew that part of his pay came from SandTail's own pocket? Bastard would probably laugh. Still, every last coin would count if it meant finding the formula for Destiny. SandTail had grown up in a shack and he could live in a shack again for as long as it took to buy independence.

Crossroads feared becoming a slave to Promontory, but Promontory was already enslaved to Skedge, and Skedge was flexing its muscle. Each new episode of sabotage decreased Destiny Farm's backstock of the drug. The unrest had forced SandTail to order an extra culling, decreasing the herd to keep it better under control.

Better to stockpile dried, preserved Yata than create a temporary glut in the market from the killings. At the rate things were going, Promontory might need that extra meat some day.

Despite increased tensions, SandTail still found friendship among the Little Masari, who didn't have to crane their necks to speak with him. He and they had more than just smallness in common. He'd grown up steeping his hands in slag, just like his father, and in the end one factory was like another. He and the Little Masari understood each other. They had for years.

That didn't matter any more. Not the workers who adored him as they would a cousin. Not his mixed-blood lover in whose pelt he buried himself, who felt like a Masari in the dark. Who had no idea what she was, or what he was.

He couldn't blame the Little Masari for their discontent. He just wouldn't tolerate it. He didn't have that luxury.

CHAPTER 26

Basc

Gria sat in the visitor's hut, poring over recorded narratives and fighting another bout of vertigo. When she couldn't read any more, she looked up at a room filled with people who sat too quietly, too obediently, and too patiently. But she did not want to hear them speak again.

She did not want to look back down at the narratives, either, but she forced herself. Her only consolation lay in knowing that her guests' shock equaled her own.

"Your informer was quite right," she said, at last. "We did have a Covenant here, and it was everything these pages say it was. But that is gone, now. As you can see, we are quite free of it, but we are struggling." Gria gazed across a sea of servants' tunics. "I can offer you an absence of slavery but not an absence of hard work. You will have to earn your way."

She walked past the throng and up to her lieutenant standing armed at the door. "Find a runner to go to the Crossroads farm. Send a message that I want to meet with TripStone, as soon as she can get here."

She returned to her chair as the soldier departed. On her way she scanned dozens of faces. The refugees were packed tight, overflowing into the hut's multiple rooms. Gria sank against her seat back and raked fingers through her graying hair. "I have a little trouble understanding your dialect, so let me make sure I have heard you correctly. You say that my scout, along with your prior leader, Bodasa, were killed by a Yata official and fed to the Masari who supplied the information on the pages you've given me. And you say that *he* had traveled to Alvav with a Yata woman who carries his seed."

"Yes." The man who spoke wore an insipid smile bearing no relation to his words. The smile was as unnerving as his news. "The Yata woman, Piri, taught us to speak silently. It helped us coordinate our escape. We can teach you if you think it would be useful."

"I have a great deal of trouble believing what you've told me." They all wore the

same smile. Gria had a great deal of trouble simply looking at them. “And, frankly, were it not for your mention of Destiny Farm I would not believe a word of it. But TripStone—the only name that I recognize in your stories—brought us evidence of that farm, so I will check your information with her.”

Sighing, she flipped through the pages in her hands. “I will take these with me. And, yes, the touch language can be valuable. Pick someone to come with me back to my hut. I have old Covenant relics there whose stories might interest you.”

A handful of her troops still lived in the visitor’s hut. They would keep watch over these disquieting people. The last thing Basc needed right now was more mouths to feed, but these Yata should be effective in the hunting grounds if they were anything like their imprisoned comrades in the Marsh.

She offered a wry smile of her own. “I don’t suppose any of you have heard of Ata.” Heads shook. Gria snorted derisively. “It’s why we devour ourselves. It’s in our damned blood.”

It had been a scary tale when she was a child, meant to terrify believers. As an unbeliever Gria had found it entertainingly gruesome, a man and his daughters so insane they killed their own kind to feed to the creatures who preyed on them. It had made absolutely no sense.

Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined she would witness so many permutations of it.

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Even after sleepless nights, even in snow, Gria paced incessantly outside her hut in nothing but her uniform. Her body threw off waves of heat and a scream had lodged in her head for days. The Masari thought *they* were the accursed people, but she knew better.

The escaped slaves from the Cliff were indeed hard workers, both at Basc’s nascent farm and in the hunting grounds. They had jumped at the opportunity to set traps in advance and to carry guns. Their inventiveness, gleaned from their covert watching of the Games, was highly impressive. Yet they treated the Masari advisors in Basc with a friendliness that Gria found utterly baffling.

At least they had dispensed with the little smiles, once they realized they were in a place of safety.

Even from a far distance Gria recognized TripStone's gait. Arms held close to the body, fists shoved into coat pockets, the slight hunch of her shoulders as she pressed into the wind. The long, loping stride that could break into a run at any moment.

Gria wanted to run, herself—to meet the Masari halfway, grab her arm, and drag her impatiently to the honeycombed hut. The general shifted her weight from foot to foot, then shrugged and let her momentum carry her, almost loping, herself.

She must have been a sight, coatless and crazed, to judge from TripStone's look of surprise when they neared each other. Gria grabbed woolens and blurted, "Give me your hand." She turned it over to the smooth palm. *Can you understand this?*

The Masari's arm twitched. "Yes," TripStone whispered, amazed, "but you're tapping in *Yata*."

"I was taught by a *Yata*." She hurried the hunter down the path.

TripStone freed her hand and shoved it back into warmth. "Who taught you?"

"A slave from Alvav." Gria rounded the trail to her hut, flung open the door, and still had enough energy to thrust TripStone inside. "No tea. Just follow." Unable to stop or slow her feet, she hastened toward the center. Pictograms raced backward. "If the gods exist, they are far sicker than I thought. And *Yata* keeping their own people as slaves is the least of it."

Behind her, TripStone murmured, "They must have learned it from Piri, but she knew only Masari. They must have taught her *Yata*."

"Piri, yes." Panic bubbled in Gria's throat. She forced it down. "Yes, they mentioned her name." She swung into the center chamber and dropped into a chair by a small table. She lifted its stack of narratives. "And Ghost. This is his dictation. He mentions you quite often. Why have you never told me about him?"

TripStone blinked. “It was none of your concern.”

“Then I suppose you know that Piri is supposedly carrying his child.” She slammed the sheets down. “Which, I don’t hesitate to tell you, is an impossibility.”

The astonishment in TripStone’s face softened to a crinkle at the corners of her eyes. The Masari lowered herself slowly into the small chair opposite Gria and covered her mouth with her hand, but not enough to hide a growing smile.

Then she saw Gria’s shock and began to chuckle.

“The slaves told me this in utter seriousness,” Gria insisted. “I can see you find it as amusing as I find it outrageous. Good. Maybe the rest of what they said is equally false.”

The smile became an unabashed grin. “No, you don’t understand.” TripStone’s eyes glimmered with euphoria. “I’ve never known anything Ghost wouldn’t try. He and Piri would do this. It’s absolutely *right* for them.”

“It’s complete *madness!*” Next someone would tell Gria that a fox had coupled with a rabbit or a hawk impregnated a vole. Never mind that a Yata body was too compact to carry such an outsized fetus. What would the growing child do, eat its mother out from the inside? Feast with the father on what remained? One could just as well set fire to tinder and tell the flames not to burn.

Her horror grew when TripStone looked at her and began to shake with mirth. Gria stared, dumbfounded, as the highly-disciplined hunter abandoned herself to hilarity. Mouth open wide, shrieking with laughter.

“Oh, gods,” TripStone gasped. “Oh, bless him. Bless the both of them.” She used her sleeve to wipe tears from her eyes, holding herself across the middle.

Gria’s head throbbed. This went beyond all reason. The Covenant at least invented a reason but this was delirium. It was one thing to sacrifice oneself to be a putative god, but to gestate mixed blood? Not enough to be naked to the Masari as food. Not enough to have been forced by the Covenant to breed for them. Now she was expected to believe in a depraved pairing that melded both!

TripStone finished rubbing her eyes, took another look at Gria, and started



crowing all over again. She could barely speak. “Doesn’t quite fit with your ‘natural law,’ does it?”

“Whether it *fits* is not the issue,” Gria said, heatedly. “It’s not *possible*.”

The hunter whooped so hard she almost doubled over in pain. She grasped the table, gulping air. “Oh, Gria, you should see yourself! If you wanted to kill me, you’re doing it now.” Uncontrolled glee sent more tears streaming into her chops. TripStone struggled to catch her breath. “Ghost is another *yatanii*. He spent *years* trying to find a way to break Masari dependence on Yata. Piri escaped from Destiny Farm. She uses touch-language because she can’t speak. She was living with him.” TripStone folded her arms on the wood and laid her head upon them, wearing an exhausted grin.

Gria stared at shoulders heaving with residual ripples of laughter. “I know. I read the notes, and they would not be the first recordings of delusion. Predator and prey cannot have children together,” she persisted. “It’s ludicrous.”

Giggles bubbled into the wood. “Our dependence was bred into us a long time ago, Gria. Did it ever occur to you that maybe we could breed it out?” TripStone reached across the table and laid her hand on the general’s arm. “I can’t thank you enough for this news.”

Gria frowned, struggling to regain her composure lest the world reduce to complete bedlam. “Don’t be so sure. The slaves disclosed more. You might not want to thank me for the rest.”

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TripStone pored over the notes from Ghost’s dictation and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She didn’t know where to begin.

Whoever Bodasa was, she had captured him on these sheets. The ink spoke with his voice. Not only were his stories and Piri’s here, but also TripStone’s own, and BrokenThread’s, and those of other Crossroads *yatanii*. Stories of his family, of the Covenant, of her village itself. This was their history through his eyes, the tales TripStone had always ached to tell. It was one sheaf against all the thousands in the Rotunda, but it was so much more.

And it was torment.

It taught her how Rudder conducted its hunts, all the details that town had neglected to tell its neighbor. While Crossroads had sought sacred, heartbreaking communion, Rudder engaged in entertainment for Yata “citizens” who imprisoned their own people in a death trap and bound the rest in servitude.

Ghost could be sitting here beside her with his hand on her arm, his tenor warming her cheek. The words carried his voice, but his tone had changed. The realities of the Cliff had made him a Covenant believer, even as he continued to resist its strictures. TripStone read his vehement defense of his former nemesis in narrative upon narrative, forced from him by a Yata who had killed her own kind and fed him the remains. Faced with that alternative, he had clamored for the laws that once would have silenced both those stories and himself.

But the narratives were only part of the reason TripStone had been summoned here.

Gria had struggled while repeating the slaves’ words, at times looking physically sick. TripStone’s veins had iced at the news that Ghost and Piri were now in the Marsh by their own choice. They’d been in clear danger on the Cliff, but what were their chances of survival in a prison designed to keep Rudder fed?

“At least the prisoners fight back,” Gria muttered. “They don’t just walk away, waiting to be shot. They don’t spend every waking hour trying to have children.”

Did that mean that Rudder bought from Destiny Farm to supplement the hunt? How did Alvav remain viable without maintaining a high birth rate? TripStone’s eyes glazed over. What other information never made it across the border into Crossroads?

She pushed herself to her feet. “Stand up.” Her hands clenched until feeling returned to them. TripStone licked her lips, willing her nervousness to dissipate. She took a deep breath before slipping the StormCloud from her back. “This is larger and heavier than the training rifles you’re used to. I want you to feel the weight and dimension of it.” She held it out to Gria.

“I already know.” Gria took the rifle from her. “Zai’s raiders captured a few.” Her voice dropped. “And we’ve acquired a couple from the hunting grounds.” She set it down quickly when her arms began to tremor. “Even in better days, I had trouble holding it.”

“Train yourself to hold it.” TripStone swung the rifle back over her shoulder and tightened the strap. “Train yourself and your troops to move with it. I assume you already know its capabilities.”

“Yes,” Gria said, her eyes narrowing. “But I don’t know why you’re telling me this.”

TripStone sat back down, fighting numbness. “Your weapons will have limited effectiveness against Promontory if we try to take Destiny Farm. If the Warehouse is an armory, and if we can breach it, you need to know how to handle larger guns with greater firepower. Just capturing them won’t be enough.”

Gria touched her hand. “You’re trusting us not to destroy you. I wouldn’t make that judgment.”

“I have to make that judgment.” TripStone studied Gria’s small, smooth-skinned fingers. “Once you’re self-sufficient and no longer need our advisors, there is little we can offer you, but we will still need Yata. And if I cannot train enough hunters in time, Crossroads will belong to Promontory and so, eventually, will Basc. You will lose any independence you’ve gained with us. If we can’t take down Destiny Farm, you will become its livestock.”

“I know that.” Gria sat opposite her. “I also know that I’ve never seen you so frightened.”

“Of course I’m frightened.” TripStone gazed into worried black eyes, odd compassion for one convinced Yata and Masari were natural enemies. “We have always been at your mercy. If Yata become extinct, so do we. If we die out first, you can live your lives happily without us.” TripStone shook her head. “Giving you the power to destroy us is not so great a leap.”

She took Gria’s hands in hers, enclosing their sinewy strength. “If farming drugged Yata becomes our only way to live, we may as well be dead. That’s why I’ve got to trust you, and it’s why I’m praying that Ghost and Piri can survive the Marsh and have this child.”

Gria shuddered. “And if the child still eats Yata?”

TripStone looked down at the parchment and tried to stifle her own shivering. “Ghost stayed alive by consuming BrokenThread, who was the strongest *yatanii*

I'd ever known. He said she and Piri had similarities in their blood." She swallowed hard and forced her gaze back to Gria. "You told me that your people are getting used to our presence. That the slaves from Alvav socialize freely with Masari." She whispered, "If there is another cross-blood pairing, don't try to stop it."

Gria eased her hands free. "And what about you?" she asked, quietly. "Could you mate with one of our men? Would you try to produce a child free of your dependence while hunting down your husband's cousins to keep yourself alive?"

"I don't know." TripStone turned her attention to the pictograms tinting the walls and the scrimshawed bones from her family's shrine hanging beside them. Both bore the same patterns, a magical overlay in which she could gladly lose herself. She burned it into memory and turned back to the table. "First I have other tasks. BrushBurn is leaving Crossroads at season's end." Her heart began to hammer. "I've proposed that Crossroads send a representative to Promontory. If I can travel with him I might be able to learn more about the Warehouse."

Gria nodded, then peered closer. "You've just grown very pale."

"I'm not looking forward to that journey. He's been picking Crossroads apart with every sale of meat."

"Which means he's picked you apart as well. I'm sorry."

TripStone shook her head. "Don't be. I gave him nothing he could trade for Destiny." Sudden warmth spread through her. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Her skin jumped when Gria reached out to her across the table.

Black orbs shone with an understanding hardness. The warrior was almost inaudible. "I became an exile years ago because I taught knowledge about ways to prevent or stop a pregnancy."

"I have sheaths." TripStone tried to smile. "I'd sooner bear the child of a Yata than the child of *that*." She patted Gria's hand absently, then laid a palm on the parchments. "I would take these to the Rotunda, but it's no longer safe."

"You've been preserving our history. The least I can do is preserve yours."

TripStone—” Gria’s narrow palms felt like children’s hands, but with a soldier’s strong grip. “Your people’s dependence on us is a physical weakness. Our weakness is more subtle, but it exists. Don’t be too eager to die out. We need you more than you know.” She grimaced. “And more than I realized, but I’m beginning to learn.”

TripStone’s breath caught in her throat as she squeezed back. She beheld Gria and recognized the pain of assumptions falling away, floating out of reach. They both navigated the same searing void. Perhaps, at the end of it, they could reach a place where their peoples were no longer killing each other.

She rose from the small stool. Together they wordlessly spiraled toward the outside. She watched as Gria read the walls and ceiling, the floor. The warrior’s face changed and TripStone didn’t know whether Gria argued with herself or with the pictures. Perhaps she responded to something else entirely. By the time they reached the door the general looked fatigued.

TripStone saw her wince at the handprints. “You stay alive, too, Gria.”

The warrior craned her neck to face TripStone. Her voice turned husky. “I didn’t give the gods the satisfaction of dying before. I won’t do it now.” Her nervous gaze darted to the rifle. “Keep me informed before the rains come.”

TripStone nodded and stepped outside. She would have to talk to one of the escaped slaves about Ghost and see what else she could learn. See if she could do anything in Rudder.

The winter had turned, leaving a heaviness in the air. The ground remained hard but the snow began to soften. Fog swathed the mornings. Even chilled from malnutrition, TripStone was almost ready to leave one layer of woolens behind. She had begun to rise from her pallet drenched in sweat, her dreams fleeing like insects from the dawn.

CHAPTER 27

Late Winter

The Marsh

Shallow puddles formed on the ice, but few prisoners noticed the change. Tiny buds began to swell and then stopped, waiting for the world to turn. Ghost heard protracted squabbles over nesting rights long before he looked out into lengthening days.

The most able-bodied among them tended to the heat. They moved quietly about the huts, delivering food and water. The chamber pots they carted away still reeked of chemicals long after the safe rooms had been scrubbed down.

Ghost counted the days his body and Piri's held the smoke. He measured the effects of diminishing residues, dipping into urine and spoor and bringing samples to the pharmacy.

Piri and the others had been cleaned up by the time Ghost returned to their hut after the Games. When he saw them he wished again for the filth that had hid their true condition. For days Piri had lain in a cold sweat, her skin dulled gray, and he fretted. She lay clammy fingers against his arm, tapping weak reminders that he was just as sick.

He had answered by snuggling against her back and drawing blankets about them both. He held her lightly, drumming reassurances against her fullness. A muffled reply made his palms tingle. Piri carried a fighter who still kicked.

Ghost gathered her closer to him. Time slowed as he lay by her side. His world became one of wood and thatch and steaming rocks, of water beginning to lap once more against the stilts.

Stumbling from pallet to pallet, Yucof checked on survivors until he, too, collapsed. Strength had fled from them all once the frenzy of the Games had passed, leaving them stupefied. Even those voices crying out in the night were thin. Sleepers rose sluggishly from nightmares only to sink near-comatose back into the straw.

Ghost's fear of permanent damage was slow to fade. The toxins passed out of them and their chamber pot became less acrid. When Ghost's head cleared enough for him to stand without swooning, he returned to the pharmacy for more medicinals. He continued to treat those who were still sick, passing empty pallets and remembering the dead.

Now the air became noisome around the boardwalks, the blue sky interrupted by distant flurries of wings. Prisons of ice cracked beneath Ghost's footfalls, freeing stems and leaves. Once-frozen blossoms twirled lazily between the remains of whirligig beetles and caddisflies. Sedge grasses bent.

His boots sank on shore, leaving deep imprints in the snow. He wrinkled his nose at the faint scent of loam and turned his head in the direction of courting frogs. Beyond them, still visible before the trees leafed out, a craggy pattern of stone and mortar rose high above the horizon.

Ghost walked past the empty herb garden, noting a hint of buds on the vines. He wouldn't have to light a fire if he kept his woolens on. He was here only to gather what he needed to take back to the hut.

Others had already come here for curatives. Ghost flipped back through the records, looking for similar patterns of use that would tell him the spacing of the Games.

The data puzzled him. Rudder had always been a larger community than Crossroads, but the Meat Days in Crossroads had been more frequent. Did they differ in their rate of consumption, or did something else account for their diverse calendars?

The Games did not impose a quota of bodies. Perhaps the carts filled with more Yata who then were dried and preserved for a longer period of time. WoodFoam was a meat preparer. Ghost would have to ask him on the next Thanksgiving Day, midseason during the rains.

He pored over the ledger, working out the dates. He and Piri would have to survive the Games twice more before then—the latter with an infant, assuming that infant lived.

In a sudden flash the burning inside him returned, this time unattached to poisons. The calendar danced before him, taunting. A deadly calm descended.

Bent over the neat Yata script, Ghost was reduced to one word, and the word was No.

It stripped him to a white-hot center. Everything extraneous dropped away, leaving only a feral hyper-awareness. The bottles surrounding him gleamed with a reflected sun grown too bright. Their colors shimmered. Molecules of scent bombarded him. The air echoed with frogs.

Ghost put the records aside, his movements slow and steady and sinuous. He glided to the task sheets and scanned requested formulations, looking for any sign that Brav's father had contacted the chameleons. Nothing resembled WoodFoam's material needs, but an unusual order addressed to Ghost lay half-crumpled in the pile.

He would have to gather the ingredients himself, scraping lichens and lifting fungi from the forest, fishing carapaces from the wetland's dissolving ice. He could access the rest from the pharmacy.

The list was well-worn and stained. It bore traces of the river and the woods beyond the prison walls. Ghost held it to his nose, still able to smell the sweat of fear. It spoke to his own animal instincts, Yata to Masari. Whatever their differences, he and the chameleons shared a brotherhood of desperation.

The request gave him generous time for gathering, instructing him to go to the south gate when the Caterpillar rose at midnight, hours before the next hunt. He would have to ask Piri if she could travel then. If she couldn't, or if Ghost could not convince the chameleons to take them, he and Piri would have to return to the safe room.

He slipped the message unceremoniously into his tunic pocket, then set about gathering his medicinals.

CHAPTER 28

Crossroads

TripStone surveyed a field on the outskirts of the Grange and admired CatBird's patience. The girl—no, young woman, she would have come of age by now—repositioned HigherBrook's arms around a StormCloud. The leader of the Chamber scowled as he attempted to copy CatBird's full range of motion. She switched between offensive and defensive positions, battling an imaginary quartet of Yata.

They moved slowly at first, their black rifles loaded with blanks. CatBird called to him again to raise his arms higher and pivot more smoothly. In the actual hunting grounds this strategy was secondary. Anyone venturing there would have to deal with the traps first.

Farther away, in outlying groves, young hunters and their students practiced in teams, navigating each other's snares and tripwires. The lucky ones sprang release mechanisms from a safe distance, while the others called to their comrades for rescue. Many bore multiple flesh wounds that would have proved deadly in actual combat.

For now, that level of training was beyond HigherBrook. First, he would condition and coordinate muscles more accustomed to exercises of bureaucracy. CatBird had him envisioning Yata adversaries to teach his mind as well as his body. Outside Basc he had to kill them before they killed him. Getting used to the feel of a gun was not enough. He had to change his preconceptions.

CatBird encouraged his snappishness and his complaints of how much he hated these lessons. The more HigherBrook could express his anguish, the more quickly it would dissipate and the more focused he would become. She glanced at TripStone and offered an impish wink as he threw another tantrum, screaming at the gods when he wasn't yelling at her.

TripStone took comfort in his anger. Even if he never had to set foot inside the hunting grounds, even if enough Yata died inside Basc to keep the advisors fed, HigherBrook needed to know what predation felt like. Too many in Crossroads regarded its hunters with fear and awe, content to let their guilt extend only to

receiving sanctified cuts of meat. They had to find and reclaim the instincts of their ancestors. Who better to show them it could be done than a denizen of the sedate Rotunda? Who better than a man thrust into uneasy leadership in the midst of desolation?

Gone were the lessons using straw dummies that bore a heart spot marked on the back. Gone was reverence and precision. Instead, these new hunters learned to respect a power and cunning that their elders could not have imagined.

TripStone moved with unaccustomed caution during her own scouting and hunting expeditions. Advisor or not, she put her life at risk, adapting and honing her skills to better teach the next generation. Her alertness peaked in the unfamiliar contours of the far woods, around Gria's former militia camp. She'd learned to tame her fear and let it guide her. As HigherBrook was learning to be a predator, TripStone was learning to be prey.

What must it have been like under the Covenant, to be hunted without having the option of fighting back? If Gria had never been born, someone else would have taken her place. TripStone began to understand the history of Basc's tightly-controlled rage. And, underneath, its people's thin veneer of hope nurtured by deification and vanquished in the Soala, until their tumultuous liberation changed everything.

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BrushBurn lowered the awning on his cart, then bolted and chained its panels shut. Sales dipped again as the air began to warm, but not enough to cause him worry. More distressing was the cost to Crossroads, which lost more of its citizens in the wild.

He scratched his head. How could property compare with a Masari life? What possessed these people to bypass his product and risk everything? Promontory would not starve them out or condemn them to lives of hard labor. On the contrary, they'd go about their days as usual, and their days would be *improved*.

Instead, BrushBurn witnessed a new fanaticism. The Covenant had created a tyranny of guilt, but this was a death wish. Fortunately, it was still a death wish embraced by only a minority of townspeople.

*Vocal townspeople.* Even their groomed, studious leader now traveled with a gun

on his back, looking haunted. BrushBurn refused to believe the man could be that irresponsible, risking his life when he had a community to lead. Merely considering a trip into the wild was senseless enough.

SandTail had written that these backwoods people should learn the truth about Promontory. He had no idea how right he was. Crossroads needed to learn the truth before they all sacrificed themselves to the Yata. Promontory had to do more than improve its fortunes here. It had to save this village from itself.

A low sun bloated behind the shattered black fingers of burned trees and the sky faded to purple. Footsteps neared the marketplace as BrushBurn locked his last chain. Even without looking up, even upwind, he still knew who it was. He spent a moment listening to the tread, muffled by melting snow but still sharp and heavy at once.

Still facing his cart, he smiled. “Good evening, TripStone.”

“Good evening, BrushBurn.” Her tone remained noncommittal, almost dismissive.

He looked up as she passed him, answering her curt nod with his own. He watched her measured pace across the market square, her turn onto the road toward home.

Slipping his gloved hands into his pockets, he followed.

Tendrils rose from chimneys into the increasing dusk and the windows around him gleamed with faint yellow light. Few here had invited BrushBurn into their homes. He conducted official business in the Rotunda and at RootWing’s farmhouse, but the only hospitality from anyone else had more to do with currying favor. He was a pariah for his exacting of *bones*; it boggled the mind. Without his meat, these people would have starved.

This village was a maze. BrushBurn followed the hunter’s footfalls on cobblestones, but their echoes bounced deceptively. He could lose her if he didn’t move closer. As soon as she passed back into his sight, she angled onto a dirt road leading away from the close cluster of buildings, toward small fields and squat houses spaced widely apart.

More than one field retained a single, straw figure the size of a Yata. Almost all

the adult hunters were dead. Their children persisted in saving these relics that looked like lone sentinels, each guarding an empty expanse. They could have been burned for heat instead of left uselessly upright. These were not planting grounds. The dummies didn't even serve as scarecrows.

Ahead of him, pitching her voice into the night, TripStone intoned, "You release an interesting scent when you're confused."

How long had she known he'd been tracking her? From the beginning?

BrushBurn quickened his steps until he walked beside her, matching her unerring pace. "I have news that might interest you. I thought I might convey it privately."

She glanced sideways at him, her voice clipped. "If you are selling this news, you could have invited me to your tent instead of following me home."

She eviscerated with her words as accurately as with a blade. BrushBurn edged past the sting. He found her own scent curious and not confused in the least. "I'm here for purposes of diplomacy. Not business."

"Which is why you've been slinking behind me until now." Her muscles relaxed visibly beneath her single wrap. "Or is this news you should not be seen delivering?"

"Perhaps. Your leader might object."

TripStone turned down a flagstone path. Her training field also bore a straw Yata. BrushBurn was not surprised. He wouldn't be surprised if she had kept a dozen of them.

She led him to a dark silhouette, opened her door into coldness, and lit a couple of lamps.

He almost offered to start a fire, but TripStone was deliberately ignoring the hearth. BrushBurn stopped himself from sighing aloud. If she could keep her coat on indoors, so could he. His days of smuggling had taken him through harsher environments than this.

She carried one lantern to a small table. "I have only a single chair. It's yours."

“I’ll stand.”

At first he mistook the discolorations in the wall for shadows cast by the lamps, but then BrushBurn recognized the outlines. “Explain to me,” he said, softly, “why you would rather risk dying than give over a handful of bones. I honestly can’t fathom it.”

TripStone sat and drew her woolens more tightly around her. “You said you were here for diplomacy, not business.”

He looked down into a face of calm expectation and wondered what TripStone would have become if she’d been born in Promontory instead of here. Which would have shaped the other first? “I raised your proposal to send a representative from Crossroads to Promontory come spring. I had not expected a favorable response, but I was mistaken.” BrushBurn tried not to smile at her increased pensiveness. “I thought you might have a representative in mind.”

She nodded to herself, again consulting that vast, hidden inventory. BrushBurn wanted to lift her scarves and look past her fiery hair, down through her scalp. He would be happy to glimpse only a fraction of the thoughts she had locked away.

“You already view me as a spy,” TripStone said, gauging her words. “Would you prefer someone else?”

This time his smile was unconcealed. BrushBurn bent his knees until his head was level with hers. “That would mean passing up the chance to discover what you know. I don’t dare prefer someone else.”

He didn’t need to remove her clothes to see the flush spreading across her chest. He could smell it. “My associates will remain in Crossroads to conduct business. We’ll be into the rains. Passage will be difficult and I will need help pulling all those bones you value so well.” He studied an expression kept diligently blank. “I would ask that you travel with me. I doubt you could manage to steal much on the road. Do we understand each other?”

After a moment TripStone gave him a slow nod. She coughed lightly into her sleeve. Her voice still sounded husky after she cleared her throat. “You’re right to come to me in secret,” she said, her eyes trained on his. “HigherBrook would not be in favor of this. He believes I pose a danger to you.”

“He believes the obvious.” BrushBurn returned to his feet, taking a moment to consider the archaic weapons hanging by the hearth. His attention shifted to the StormCloud still strapped to TripStone’s back. “You were ready to shoot me, once. You did not.” He rested his gloved palms on the table and leaned forward. The lantern flickered warmth across their faces. “You follow a credo, and I will trust in that. I won’t ask you to leave your gun behind.”

He straightened, savoring a taste in the air that told him he could make an honest promise. If the gods existed, they possessed a wiliness BrushBurn could appreciate. A twisted sense of humor fit for the taverns. “We will suspend any business between us on the journey,” he said, flatly. “Rest assured that I won’t touch you unless you want to be touched.”

BrushBurn gave TripStone a short bow and turned away, fighting the urge to look back at her face. He didn’t have to. Her scent told him everything he needed to know. “You needn’t stand,” he added, quietly. “I’ll see my way out.”

He strolled to the door with easy nonchalance, eased it open, and stepped outside. He closed it with exaggerated care. Only once he was ambling down the flagstones did BrushBurn bask in his amusement.

He paused at the end of the walk, beside the inert straw, looking back at the windows. Counting off measures of time as he waited to see how long it took her to light the hearth.

## CHAPTER 29

### Promontory

DevilChaser's sharp voice rang from the front door. "There's been another breakdown in Skedge. Rumor says we'll be rationing." Bag in his arms, he peeked into the lab. "I had a hell of a time getting this meat. Even people who can't afford the angels have started chasing after them. Good thing we're loyal customers, but I'm not the most popular person right now." He shook his head. "It's nasty out there."

"Nasty in here, too." DamBuster corked vials and replaced stoppers. "SandTail tells me these are the same ingredients that get delivered to Skedge. Forget about sexual arousal, I don't know how the Yata can ingest this stuff." He raised his eyebrows at MudAdder's shallow smile. "Far be it for me to speculate on their constitution."

"We'd better start our own rationing and eat only what we need. This is no longer a question of economy." DevilChaser ducked out the door. DamBuster heard him putter about the kitchen.

He returned to his lenses. The acid he dripped into four different, rancid compounds caused them to bond together and become something else entirely. Pressed oil from the latest delivery disappeared into the resulting sludge. Thickening bubbles rode a grainy slick. DamBuster added ground chitin and tried to decode chemical reactions in his new and quivering amalgam.

The procedure confounded him, but the numbers looked right. The structure beneath his lenses began to align with that recorded for Destiny. Its odor did nothing to MudAdder, but DamBuster's stomach roiled. Maybe he should make a mask for himself. "This is disgusting."

He placed the mixture by the hearth for drying, fighting the urge to simply throw it into the flames.

He'd been happy when nothing made sense and each formulation remained an isolated mistake. He would gladly have spent his days cooking up one failure after another, going through the motions of testing every combination, altering

quantities and treatments and media. Testing the interplay of light and heat, dark and cold, stagnation, agitation. His pages had filled with beautiful notes, elegantly detailed and meticulous, and seductive in their very meaninglessness.

Except for his having to keep MudAdder strapped mercilessly in the chair, DamBuster might even have had fun.

Then, insidiously, the patterns began to emerge. Secondary patterns of chemical relationships glided into his notes as links began to form. Tertiary patterns emerged, lines of connection drawing themselves in DamBuster's dreams. He suffered nightmares of agonizingly exquisite puzzles, of molecular flowers unfolding and telling him their secrets.

"Go away!" he'd shouted in his sleep. "I don't want to know!"

Dutifully, DevilChaser had shaken him awake every time, but the damage had already been done. DamBuster's brain dissected the puzzles as he ate, made love, and pounded the walls with his fists.

"If I were a braver man I would slice through every one of those straps," he had confided in MudAdder, "and let you destroy every piece of equipment and bottle in this place. I don't want to win this battle, I want Skedge to win it. We can manage."

Part of him wondered whether the Yata would smash the lab as he hoped or would simply dive for the sample bag of Destiny. He didn't want to know the answer to that, either.

In the end it wouldn't matter. The knowledge hung like nettles onto his brain and he couldn't shake it away. The lab could be replaced.

DevilChaser entered with MudAdder's gruel and water, then disappeared back into the kitchen. The doctor returned with ceramic plates and then with mugs of tea. The plates held a stew of different meats, hiding decreased portions of Yata among the other flavors.

DamBuster said, "You don't waste time."

"No. Not after what I've seen today." DevilChaser shook his head. "Half the people in Skedge could die and the angels would still run short." He stooped by



MudAdder and released a forearm binding. He handed the Yata a spoon and held up the bowl. “I don’t know which you would want more—to be trussed up here or be back at the Farm.”

The Yata sampled the gruel with a careful swallow and looked from DevilChaser to DamBuster. He gave no indication one way or the other. The spoon dipped back into the bowl.

“DamBuster is making progress,” DevilChaser added, looking grim. “I don’t know if we can stop it.”

MudAdder nodded and took more food.

DamBuster said, “Fatalism. What choice do you have when you’ve spent your entire life cooped up in a pen?”

“I can’t accept that,” DevilChaser snapped. “Don’t you accept it, either.”

“Then show me a way out. I’ll be the first one through the door.” DamBuster leaned against a table and shoved stew into his mouth.

There was always a way out. They could leave. He could set fire to the lab, and then to the next one, and the next. He could let SandTail’s men shoot him through the skull.

But others also worked on this project, and he’d seen their notes just as often as they’d seen his. They weren’t as skilled or as insightful, but it was only a matter of time before they knew what he knew.

And they were not looking for a way out. They were pressing inward, toward the core.

He looked down at DevilChaser. “Put his bowl down for a moment and eat. Your stew’s getting cold.”

MudAdder leaned toward an outer wall, pressing against his forehead restraint. His breathing turned ragged, his lips a tight line. His eyes narrowed, then smoldered.

DevilChaser washed down a bite of stew with tea. “You hear something.”

MudAdder nodded.

DamBuster moved to the wall. "It's a passenger wagon. Must be SandTail's."

"I'm not offering him dinner."

DamBuster's smile turned macabre. "I could add something to the pot that would make it worth our while." He reluctantly strapped the Yata's forearm back down as DevilChaser headed for the door.

"Evening, gentlemen." SandTail strode into the lab ahead of DevilChaser. "It's rather heartening to see all of you eating together." He peered at the stew. "Including some Yata. I'd have thought you'd be more sensitive, but I see you've toughened up a bit. That's good." He smiled down at MudAdder. "The hands eat Yata in front of them all the time at the Farm. There's nothing like a good cookout."

DamBuster growled, "All the more reason to burn that place to the ground."

SandTail jerked his head toward MudAdder. "You'd be taking a lot of them with you." He progressed down the lab table, surveying DamBuster's work. "I take it you've heard about the latest equipment failure."

"Yes," DevilChaser murmured. "We find *that* rather heartening."

"Tell that to your neighbor who comes home from her own factory shift and doesn't have enough to feed her children." SandTail gave his hosts a cool appraisal. "You think you're working for me. You're not. You have a contract with me and I pay you, but you're working for this town. Feel free to share your sentiments with its citizens."

He straightened his leather jacket on compact shoulders and advanced toward a series of diagrams. DamBuster wondered if the man even knew what he looked at, but the pictures were intuitive. SandTail could glean their implications even if he couldn't translate their meaning.

Without a word the small man flipped through DamBuster's written notes and graphs, poring over documentation. He spied the steel dish planted before the hearth and looked back up at the apothecary. "Is that it?"

DamBuster nodded.

“Feed it to him.”

“It’s not a complete preparation.”

“You’ll complete another one,” SandTail insisted. “Feed it to him or I will.”

DamBuster shook numbness from his hands. He plucked a cloth from the table, stepped up to the hearth, and lifted the hot metal. “This needs to cool. His tongue is mangled enough. Let’s not burn it as well.”

SandTail angled his chin. “I’ll wait.”

DamBuster looked down at MudAdder and wished he could convey how sorry he was. The Yata probably knew. Over the many days of his imprisonment here, MudAdder had spoken to them with gestures and facial expressions. Even with his movements severely restricted, he had told them volumes, in calm and intelligent and silent discourse.

Even now, the Yata reassured him simply with a look. One was forced to live in certain ways. Whether Yata or Masari, a man could control only so much. Live for another day and see what presented itself.

DamBuster shuddered under the serene gaze. Maybe he over-interpreted, telling himself stories. He glanced at DevilChaser, whose stew congealed on its plate, shoved to a corner of the floor. The doctor’s eyes were bright with anger.

The metal was no longer too hot to touch. DamBuster left the lab to retrieve a clean spoon and spotted SandTail’s coinage left on the dining table, the way one paid a whore. But accepting money directly from his hand would have felt far worse.

“Forgive me,” he whispered to the ceiling, hoping for the first time that the gods really did exist.

He returned to find an expectant SandTail leaning against the lab table, arms folded. DevilChaser seethed from the other end of the room. MudAdder seemed to have passed into a state of meditation, observing the others with a look of detachment.

DamBuster returned to the dish and brought it to the restraining chair. He spooned up a bit of the vile syrup, trying to speak to the Yata with his eyes. For as long as SandTail was here, MudAdder was no more than a test subject, a nameless animal bereft of sense. They couldn't afford to show their benefactor more, giving him any excuse to destroy what little dignity they could preserve.

He lifted the spoon to the Yata's lips. The lips opened, followed by a brief wince, but MudAdder showed no further response. One taste of this and DamBuster would have lost his dinner. The Yata swallowed and gave an almost imperceptible nod.

The room seemed to tilt. Someone else guided the spoon. Someone else heard SandTail's terrible words of praise for what had been accomplished thus far. Someone else scraped the last drops from the bottom of the dish, feeding the last mouthful to a calm, fettered captive.

Someone else looked down between the Yata's legs, but the small part left that was DamBuster rejoiced at the softness that persisted there.

They waited. DamBuster reached for his cold tea and sipped. DevilChaser retrieved his stew and busied himself stirring it slowly around the plate.

SandTail walked before MudAdder, who looked up at him with naked contempt.

"Repeat your steps." SandTail turned from the Yata, his voice tightly controlled. He raised his eyebrows at DamBuster. "Complete your preparation this time. Then give it to him again. Have a copy of your notes ready for me when I return." He smiled. "I *will* check them against your originals."

DamBuster took another sip of tea, letting its coldness seep through him.

"Enjoy your dinner." SandTail adjusted his jacket and followed DevilChaser to the door.

After a moment the lock clicked back into place. DamBuster slid down the wall until he sat on the floor. He folded his arms across his stomach and closed his eyes until his nausea faded. Maybe he should pray more often. It worked this time. Dimly he heard the passenger cart pull away.

He struggled back to his feet. "Your gruel is cold, and you need food more than

the slime I've just given you. Let me warm this up." He reached for the bowl.

MudAdder's face answered him with calm. Acceptance.

Resignation.

The door behind DamBuster opened. He swallowed hard at the touch of DevilChaser's hand on his shoulder. He examined the cold porridge and set it down on a work table, then turned toward his partner. "I think I'm about to look for a way out."

"It's your choice," DevilChaser replied. He enfolded DamBuster about the waist. "We'll handle it. Do what you think is best. I won't try to stop you."

DamBuster shook the tension from his hands again, then tipped DevilChaser's chin and kissed him long and tenderly on warm lips. "We need to cook a fresh batch of gruel," he whispered. "I'll join you in the kitchen in a moment."

He watched DevilChaser's back recede and waited until the door to the lab closed again before he returned to MudAdder. "Your dinner will take a while to cook." He unbuckled the forearm restraint and let the straps drop. "Make yourself at home." He released the other forearm restraint, the bicep and chest restraints, waist strap, forehead strap. "Leave if you want to. Break everything if you want to. I won't mind." He bent to the ankle restraints, unlatching. "We have clothes if you want them. I'm all thumbs, but DevilChaser is a good tailor. He can cut them to your size."

Delicate fingers rested lightly on his curls.

DamBuster whispered, "Don't." He unbuckled the calf restraints and watched the thigh straps drop beneath the action of MudAdder's hands. "I'm doing what I have to do. I don't deserve your thanks."

He stepped back from the restraining chair. The Yata stood and stretched.

DamBuster's blood began to thaw. The world would end either way, so it might as well end in the best way he could think of. He spent a moment drinking in a diminutive liveness, a ballet of simple motions. An exhilarating freedom of movement.

He turned quietly on his heel and joined his beloved in the kitchen.

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DamBuster returned to the lab, steaming bowl in hand, to find MudAdder seated on the floor with his blanket spread beneath him. His bucket had been moved from underneath the chair and set near the opposite wall. The room smelled faintly of fresh urine. Otherwise, nothing had changed.

DamBuster handed MudAdder the bowl, surprised by the depth of satisfaction he felt just watching the Yata eat with both hands. He lowered himself to the floor. DevilChaser entered with re-warmed stew and sat down by the apothecary's side.

DamBuster studied the young man. "You know what will happen if you stay."

MudAdder nodded, concentrating on his food.

"We can take you to Skedge," DevilChaser offered. "You'd be free there, and I can think of no better way to inform the Little Masari about Destiny Farm."

The Yata looked up from his bowl. He answered with a sad smile, shaking his head.

"Why the hell not?"

MudAdder looked intently at the healer. His fingers traced the outline of a breeding pen on the blanket. Then his hand moved over his heart.

DamBuster translated. "His people aren't in Skedge."

DevilChaser scowled at the Yata. "It's suicide to go back to the Farm. You know that."

MudAdder nodded. His shoulders gave a tiny shrug.

What must it be like to be so intimate with so many, barely aware of anything else? To be present when they were taken away, to hold on dearly to the remaining survivors? DamBuster observed the quiet man communing with his porridge and wondered if MudAdder was actually homesick. He tried to imagine

what the Yata would say.

Everybody dies.

Perhaps the breeding pens were places of love and kindness, however briefly. Certainly they were the only world this Yata had ever known, other than the lab and hours of bound torture inside a box, carried on the creaking wagon that had brought him into Promontory.

MudAdder set down the empty bowl and flashed a shy smile at his hosts. He stretched out on the floor and folded the blanket over himself. Time to empty the bucket, extinguish the hearth.

DevilChaser grabbed the pail. He hastened from the room, visibly upset.

DamBuster lit a lantern before dousing the hearth flames. He stood over the well-wrapped bundle on the floor, trying to read drowsy eyes. "Wake me if you need anything."

Anything at all. Anything to keep DamBuster from dreaming.

Anything to keep the patterns from unfolding further, showing the way to imprison MudAdder's extended family inside a world of metal fences and fatal, ecstatic compassion.

CHAPTER 30

The Marsh

The boardwalks resounded with pounding boots as arrows whizzed through the woods. Winter quickened toward spring, leaving in its wake the old and the sick shot and tumbling from the air, scooped from the water, and snared within the groves. Cooking fires dotted the Marsh. Drying racks wove the landscape. Yata fanned out within the prison walls, culling the weak and leaving the strong to multiply.

All around Piri were the sounds of trickling. Flowing beneath the hut, dripping from melted snow, spilling from nipples darkened and mottled against her bronze skin. The child swam inside her. Her own waters rose as surely as the streams swelling with mountain runoff, along with filling lakes and percolating aquifers.

This could have been a paradise.

The safe rooms lay ready. The weapons were repaired and secreted away and the Marsh returned to the business of production. Seeds quickened into early crops as stills burped with fermentation. Decomposers scabbled in the warming earth, fattening the soil. The Marsh became a blur of hunting and gathering and cultivation, rushing through the narrow window between winter's lethargy and the rains. Over everything the promise of the next Games hung, an eternal taskmaster driving the prisoners on.

Full-throated song filled the air, dictating the rhythm of work. Strong arms hauled heavy nets. Cleavers chopped. Early morning rang with yells and laughter, and gossip flew around the lamps at night. The prison thrashed with industry before the weather began to steam and the wetlands bubbled with parasites.

The stars marched their paces. The Caterpillar tilted ever closer to the eastern horizon, rising earlier each night, still hanging in the sky when it faded beneath the dawn. Piri watched it, barefoot on the boardwalk, leaning against the hut's outer wall unable to sleep. A celestial pictogram emerged, an imaginary larva fat with devoured leaves, pushing toward metamorphosis. The child inside her

squirmed, churning her like butter.

Pouring sweat, ever hungry, she wanted to scream into the darkness. This could have been a paradise. Instead her people rushed together and apart, racing toward battle, toward sustenance, toward clandestine exchanges executed by the prison gates. They fed the Masari in Rudder and the citizens on the Cliff. One with their bodies, the other with their souls.

Ghost greeted her with strong embraces and haggard eyes. When she could she hauled herself with him to the pharmacy, where his duty split him in half. She looked through the chameleons' crumpled parchment while he mashed roots and insect parts and odoriferous products of decay, filling bottles and vials, cushioning everything with leaves and swelling his satchel with peculiarity. Or he struggled over the scrapings of gas canisters, testing their residues, and cataloging their properties in his search for a filter, a repellent, an antidote.

They had two choices. Seek passage outside, or protect themselves inside. Piri wanted to move with him, to be another set of hands and eyes and reasoning. But the waters in her rose up past her navel and her waist. They lapped against her ribs and floated around her lungs. Bigger bones knitted inside her fine-spun body. Her dreams dragged her down onto the stool, pressing her back against the wall. She heard Ghost labor from beneath layers of submersion...

Until she awakened to nocturnal calls, snapped back to awareness, standing barefoot on the boardwalk and catching her breath. Animals bickered on, above, and below the surface, as frenzied during the night as the prisoners were during the day. Everyone and everything prepared for a dizzying fusion of life and death. The air itself was ambivalent, shifting from warm to cool to warm, shoving clouds across the sky as spring strained from winter. The world became a massive, multi-bodied organism echoing with the ache to mate.

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Ghost rose from his pallet in response to Yucof's quiet prodding. The others in the hut slept on. Piri stood outside, staring worriedly at the sky.

She had communicated little during dinner, instead reaching time and again into a large bowl of cooked goose, skimming off fat with her fingers. She sought out and tore apart the softest pieces to guide around her tongue. She swallowed them whole, with a bland, faraway look on her face.

In the days since her recovery she had turned ravenous. Her breathing became shallow as the child ballooned her, demanding nourishment. Ghost hated to leave her side, whether to gather his strange ingredients or to slink through the woods, grasping at a chance for freedom. He wanted her fingers to talk to him and tell him what was wrong. He wished he had been born small.

She turned from the stars and smiled at him, trying to look reassuring as he followed Yucof in the predawn. Ghost knew better. He forced one foot before the other, swallowing his fear.

Yucof led him down a soft, worn trail to the south gate. Beneath their uneven footfalls and differing strides he heard a quick skittering over damp mulch. The woods began to rouse.

Yucof held his lantern out before him and bent beneath a heavy sack of wineskins. Ghost hauled larger bundles filled with gutted fish and fowl. He glanced sideways at the Yata. “I hope the Cliff pays handsomely for this after what they’ve done to you.”

Yucof grunted a laugh. “It’s not pay we’re after. It’s information.” Liquids sloshed inside burlap as he adjusted his load. “The chameleons bring delicacies to our comrades on the Cliff, who prepare them for people like Shabra. The information you and Piri brought us when you arrived would have been part of a similar trade. Your serving as a messenger saved us considerable expense and the chameleons considerable risk.” He looked up at Ghost. “You know only part of what you carried here, and I won’t tell you the rest. But it may be enough to help you secure passage for Piri.”

“For both of us.”

“You’re a Masari. You can leave the Marsh any time you want.”

Ghost studied the orange braid half-hidden beneath Yucof’s sack. Part Masari or not, Yucof was still potential meat. So were the mix-children who were predominantly Yata. The lanky boy who had shared their hut when Ghost and Piri first arrived had vanished during the Games and was probably long-digested in Rudder.

Seen through the eyes of Rudder and the Cliff, Masari held no value in the Marsh. On the contrary, they consumed the Marsh’s most precious resource, the

reason this prison existed in the first place. Despite the friendships Ghost had formed here, his hosts would probably be glad to see him go.

“The chameleon we’re meeting tonight knows he’ll be dealing with a Masari,” Yucof continued. “WoodFoam would have told him that. But you need to negotiate Piri’s freedom and establish a level of trust. That’s why I’m having you come with me now.”

The trees began to thin. The silhouette of the south wall rose up ahead, blotting out the stars.

“Do you have any idea what I’m making for the chameleons?” Dead animals slid along his back; he could feel their outlines beneath the burlap. He tightened his hold on the sack. “They must be medicinals, but I can’t determine what they treat.”

“I don’t know, but I believe they go to Skedge.” Yucof nodded at Ghost’s confusion. “It’s a colony of free Yata. We get good metalwork from them.” He grinned. “I’d like to get there myself some day.”

“To escape the Marsh.”

Yucof forged ahead, saying nothing.

Ghost followed the swinging lantern, listening to the first songs of morning birds. How far did the Yata settlements go? How much more traveling, how much more running would he and Piri have to do, before she finally reached a place that she could call home?

They passed into a clearing. The south wall gained depth, a bulky blue-gray in the early dawn. Outside the latticework gate a Yata guard jimmied open a wood box and inspected a neatly-folded pile of plain servants’ tunics under dim lamp light. Another Yata stood farther away, cloaked and hooded, his back to the gate.

Yucof pointed. “Leave the sacks here; I’ll pay off the guard. Go talk to your contact.”

Ghost slid the burlap to the ground and stood still for a moment, perplexed. The chameleon neither moved toward the walls nor turned around. Surely they didn’t expect any dealings to be shouted across the distance, in full hearing of the

guard.

“You’re a Masari,” Yucof reminded him. “You can walk out the gate.”

It was a jarring contrast. The diminutive watchman would simply let him out. He could step into freedom unhindered. He could cross the bridge into Rudder, take the road back to Crossroads, and see if his family and TripStone were still alive. No one would lay a hand on him.

And Piri would be trapped inside. The Yata guard would shut Yucof back in as soon as items were exchanged, preserving him and the others for the hunt.

“You don’t have much time,” Yucof said, sharply. “Move now.”

Ghost glanced at the guard and whispered, “He’ll let me back in?”

“Yes! *Go.*”

Ghost stepped uneasily to the gate and passed thick stone walls as easily as the flocks he’d heard honking overhead in the dark. The world dropped away. It was suddenly too big, too limitless.

The chameleon stood, motionless and calm, waiting with his arms folded across his chest until Ghost came close enough to hear. Then he murmured, “Follow me.”

The words sounded strange. It took Ghost a moment to realize the man had spoken in Masari.

He let himself be led, looking back toward the walls, afraid to lose his way. With a start he realized the chameleon carried no light. Even as day began, Ghost tracked a dark silhouette, following the sound of whispered steps on dead leaves, the rhythmic brush of the cloak. Forest canopy blocked out a meager sun.

“Stop here.” The command was firm, sounding softly efficient. “You wanted to send a letter.”

Ghost swallowed. “There is more.”

Other footfalls surrounded them. The chameleon said, “We’re listening.”

One Masari could overpower a single Yata, but a sniff of the air unraveled a multiplicity of scents, including gunpowder. Ghost had to trust them, not the reverse.

The world snapped brutally back into place. “I have a Yata wife,” he said without hesitation. “She carries our child and is coming close to term. I must get her out.” He could almost count the shadows, but they blended too well into the woods. “I’ve been preparing the formulations. Tell me what else you need.”

The chameleon cursed under his breath. “The guards inspect everything that leaves the Marsh. There would be no way to conceal her.” His cloak scratched against weeds. “She will have to leave when the gates are deliberately left open, during the Games. We can provide you passage, but you will have to reach us first.”

Ghost was thankful the Yata couldn’t see him. “What do I do?”

A morning breeze rustled young leaves. A warbler sang happily for agonizing moments before the man replied.

“Make your delivery to us as arranged, at midnight. Then return to your hut and wait for morning.” The chameleon stepped up suddenly. Small hands measured Ghost’s height. They spanned his breadth, girth. Just as quickly, the Yata moved back. “You’re a tall Masari; that’s good. Listen to me carefully.” He pitched his voice low. “You must carry your wife, concealed, on your back. The south gate will open shortly before they fire the gas. It will spread quickly, including beyond the walls. Go through as fast as you can.

“Make sure the sharpshooters see your pelt. If they know you are Masari they will let you pass, but you could come under attack by Yata. Be prepared to defend yourself. Do not reveal your wife for any reason if you want her to live. Is that clear?”

“Clear,” Ghost whispered.

“Head for the river,” the chameleon continued. “Continue south until you find a small barge that looks abandoned. We will be inside the hold, with the freight. Bring your wife to us. Pole the barge away from the shore and follow the current. We will come on deck once we have crossed Rudder’s boundary.” He paused. “A cart will be waiting for us at the foothills. We will take you to our

delivery point, but no farther.”

“I understand.”

“And, Ghost—I would advise you to get your wife to Skedge as soon as possible once you disembark.”

Ghost reached out convulsively for the cloak and grabbed air. “Wait. I thought we were going to Skedge.”

“We’ll be close.” The chameleon glided past Ghost, his footfalls leading back toward the Marsh. “You’ll be within a day’s journey if you’re careful on the salt pan. We’re going to Promontory.”

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The morning dragged Piri back into the hut and under blankets, where she lay uncomfortably on her side and watched the activity around her with half-lidded eyes. Her hut mates lifted tunics by the dozens, turning them inside-out to read tiny stitches of code. They dismantled the wooden box, each slat a piece of carefully-hollowed wood. Yucof pulled delicate fish bladders from the hollows. He split the membranes, spilling gunpowder into a metal canister.

Piri listened to Ghost’s uneven breaths as he reclined behind her. She had flinched when he first touched her arm, his fingertips ice. Beneath the covers and against her fluctuating heat his hands remained cold, underscoring his news.

Her sluggish mind tried to keep up. *Tell me again.*

Again he drummed. She followed the patterns. There was no mistake, they were the same as before.

She drew his hand to her face and tried to warm it with her breath. She laid her cheek on his palm until the fog of sleep began to rise. She could feel the cushion of sedge. Her fingers made lazy trails across his arm. *We have a heavy son.*

He nuzzled her neck. Even his lips were cold. They kept her awake.

His other hand encircled her shoulder. *There must be another way.*

She struggled to stay alert. *WindTamer brought me through Promontory. Through the outskirts.* She shifted her legs as the child moved. She closed her eyes against the light, beginning to nod off again. *He was very kind.*

“Piri.” Her name became an expression of anguish.

No one discovered us then. The waters were drawing her down. She fought her way back to the surface. *I want to go to Skedge.*

Ghost’s tapping became blurry. *We don’t know what Skedge is like. It could be like the Cliff.*

Where then can we live?

“I don’t know.” His arms wrapped around her. He snuggled further beneath the covers.

Her body threw off waves of heat, almost enough to warm him. Only his chills kept her from tossing off the blankets entirely.

When she squinted into the light, she saw that the others were touch-talking as well, tracing imaginary lines on and between the reversed tunics and drumming on each other’s arms. Ghost watched them over her shoulder.

We need to choose, she tapped. We are in danger regardless.

“I know.”

I choose Skedge.

He caressed her breastbone. *It will be a hard journey. You know what we have to do.*

She nodded. Then she tapped, *You are very kind, too.* She felt his lips in her hair and heard a sob catch in his throat. *I only wish I were not so tired.*

“You are the strongest person I know,” he whispered.

Piri rolled onto her back with an effort, panting under the weight of her womb. She fixed Ghost’s eyes with hers and jabbed her finger against his chest. She

pointed at him again, to make sure he understood.

He managed a little smile. His lips brushed against her cheek and found her mouth.

The child shifted again, pressing her in all directions. She drummed against Ghost's arm with sudden urgency. She leaned heavily against him as he helped her to the chamber pot.

CHAPTER 31

Early Spring

Crossroads

“Sir.” CatBird eased a badly-stained loincloth back into HigherBrook’s hands. “Try to understand. These scents are *supposed* to quicken your pulse.”

They stood on opposite sides of a long wooden table filled with other pairs, the sons and daughters of hunters on one side and their trainees, mostly children, on the other. Torn, bloody clothing covered the wood. Shirts, loincloths, breeches. HigherBrook studied a grotesque sequel to earlier lessons that had filled these spaces with leaves and flowers, different forms of spoor, and scent-messages left on rock and bark.

Those had been puzzles he could appreciate. The lessons on tracking and on shifting winds had been intellectual exercises testing previously untapped dimensions of his awareness.

But this rattled him.

Children. HigherBrook stood head and shoulders above them all. The few adults who had stepped forward to learn had either departed in horror or advanced, determined in spite of themselves, to the next stages of instruction.

“Young lady, I realize the importance of knowing the hunting techniques.” He looked down into CatBird’s serene, serious, heart-shaped face and tried to keep his composure. “Practicing with a rifle is one thing. Knowing the woods is one thing. But this is barbarous.”

“It will help you to find your target,” she persisted. “Sir, you already have this ability. We’re all born with it. You must let it awaken.” She pointed to her peers practicing in the groves of RootWing’s farm, then to the students around the table holding remnants to their faces with their eyes closed and their lips curled back. “Especially now. If the Yata scent you first, you could lose your life instead of just a meal.”

The loincloth in his hands had belonged to somebody. Someone who had told stories once. Someone whose words HigherBrook might have inscribed as they flew to him, repeated out of a hunter's mouth. Someone now reduced to sustenance without reverence, taken down in the hunting grounds with no more than a moment's thought.

No words memorialized this Yata now, only scent. The sweat imparted a cloying intimacy. Its wearer had run a great distance before he was felled, probably separated from fellow aggressors. He had exerted himself, but had not felt much in the way of fear. Instead, he had managed to inflict some pain of his own. Alarmingly, a single whiff had established these facts, as succinctly as a narrative put down in ink.

"There is more information here," CatBird insisted. "You must let it into your glands."

"I will do no such thing." His innards rebelled as he slammed the cloth back onto the table. "I do not need to know how often this man bedded down before he crossed out of Basc and into this bedlam we've created."

"The smells of sex carry over greater distances," she said, plainly. "You need to recognize them in order to find him."

"He is *dead!*" Worse yet, what of the smells exuded by those still alive? HigherBrook had labored beside these people at the Basc farm, through hours and days of spring planting. But these same Yata then entered the far woods with weapons and traps in their hands. Until the farm became fully viable, the Yata's own hunger drove them into the hunting grounds. The thought of tracking them through such blatant voyeurism was almost as revolting as the thought of killing them at all. "This is bestial."

"Yes." CatBird regarded him with an expression both curious and sweet. "It is supposed to be."

Not many seasons ago she had been a little girl playing with an unloaded, single-shot rifle. That was all HigherBrook had seen of the Hunt Guild children. Their play-acting and rudimentary training had progressed as they attained better control of weapons small enough to fit their growing arms. He had watched studious circles poring over memorization exercises and felt the rapture of story. He had listened to their voices while practicing his own skills of endless

recording, overcoming cramps in his arm and wrist, and wearing calluses on his fingers like badges of honor.

He had not considered the rest. Now he gazed up and down the long table at young Masari concentrating on their lessons with a gleam in their eyes far removed from civilization. He looked back at CatBird, frowning at the still-soft down of her roseate chops, her unlined brow. “How long ago were you taught this?”

She said, softly, “In the crib. Babies are very sensitive to scent impressions.”

An adult emerged from the groves, striding toward the table, hands shoved into the pockets of her light wrap. HigherBrook watched as TripStone bent to consult with the first pair at the far end, gesturing and smiling, giving both student and teacher encouraging pats on the arm. A recent gash on her forehead had tightened to a thin, scabbed-over line. A mishap in the hunting grounds, she’d called it.

HigherBrook remembered the delicate corpse hanging limp in her arms, bearing no trace of a bullet hole. A great bruise had instead purpled the Yata woman’s neck. Signs of suffocation, of a collapsed windpipe. TripStone had demonstrated the technique to these youths of how to pinion the limbs and inflict the bite. How to rely on instinct if relieved of one’s gun.

He didn’t know which was worse, her recklessness with her own life or her surrender to the very tendencies CatBird tried to instill in him now. They were supposed to have risen above all this. Their *ancestors* were supposed to have risen above it.

“Sir.” CatBird lifted the loincloth and held it out to him. “A man in your position might never need to use these skills, but you must develop them. They will protect you if you have to hunt. You must at least try.”

A man in your position. HigherBrook squinted across the table at the young woman proffering her rank scrap and tried to fathom the depth of her experience. Fresh-faced though she was, she had already faced the dangers for which she was trying to prepare him. She had encountered them numerous times under TripStone’s tutelage.

Like it or not, Crossroads had been brought to this choice. The village looked to

him and the Chamber to provide direction, and the rest of the Chamber was leaning toward Promontory. Let the Basc farm become too successful, let its Yata withdraw from the hunting grounds altogether, and that left another choice: buying from Destiny Farm or attacking Basc itself for meat.

Just as Promontory would do. HigherBrook shuddered at the implications.

“How are we doing?” TripStone stepped up to their station and hugged CatBird across the back. Behind the hunter’s air of competency and calm lay a morass of impulses HigherBrook did not want to contemplate. What had she been like as an infant? What had she learned from NightShout, before she could even speak? What had ShadowGrass taught her as she nursed?

TripStone smiled across the table at him. “You’re still standing here. That’s a good sign. My mother had trouble with this, but she *wanted* to learn. That made her time easier.” She reached for the cloth. “Don’t just watch what I do, watch *how*. You, too, CatBird.”

Her lips curled back. Mouth slightly open, she lifted the fabric and inhaled sharply, followed by a slow, deep breath. HigherBrook observed her heightened awareness, bright eyes set within meditative stillness belied only by the slight flush creeping across her face. She breathed again, held the air, and let it go. Her demeanor remained deceptively tranquil.

“This was likely one of Gria’s men. He was very well conditioned.” TripStone handed the cloth to HigherBrook. “Take this. Get used to the feel of it. You saw my skin tone change?”

Holding tenuously to the fragment, he nodded.

“Biological reaction, nothing more. Think of each piece of information as a word.” She pressed the fabric into his palms, forcing his fingers around it and holding his hands shut. “Every scent. Every change in the wind. Everything you feel in response to what you smell.”

He glared at her. “Then the word is revulsion, TripStone.”

“It wasn’t revulsion that aroused you.” Her hands still held his shut. “Yes, this man had sex, with several mates in fact. That is a story. Not all the blood on this is Yata. Some of it is Masari. That, too, is a story. In fact, this man had recently

eaten some Masari flesh, and from his emotional state at the time of his death it may have been a ritualistic practice.” She nodded to herself. “They are getting very good. *We need to get as good as they are*, for as long as these hunts continue.”

Mercifully, she released her hold on him. “CatBird, when were you last in the Rotunda?”

The girl pondered for a moment and shook her head. “Two seasons ago, I think.” She sighed. “Before the war.”

The child’s words were almost as disconcerting as the cloth. “It’s not a war,” HigherBrook insisted. “We have peaceful relations with Basc inside their borders.”

“It’s a war,” TripStone said, flatly. “We try to make it as civilized as possible, but it’s still combat.” She turned back to CatBird. “Two seasons ago. Can you smell the difference between the lineage of Vabris and the lineage of Trea in the Rotunda’s books?”

The girl’s azure eyes widened. “No.”

“No difference in the inks? The parchment? How about the leathers?”

CatBird wrinkled her nose. “I never thought of them that way before.”

TripStone jerked her thumb at HigherBrook. “*He* can smell the difference.” She faced him. “I’m correct, yes? The books are different ages. They use different batches of ink. The consistency changes, too. One scribe wrote more thickly than another.”

“Yes,” HigherBrook said, “but you can’t possibly compare the books to *this*.”

“Of course I can. I’ve seen you with them.” TripStone leaned across the table, nostrils flared. Her voice rasped. “I’ve seen that same flush in you at the feel of the bindings. I can almost hear you remembering the voices. You know every scribe by penmanship, every book by its individual scent.”

“*They’re sacred materials, not bodily fluids!*” His neck fur bristled. Something twisted cruelly in his stomach. He shook the loincloth before her face. “You

can't possibly tell me that this is a form of *culture!*"

"Those books are as intimately detailed, as private and personal as this rag. I know, HigherBrook. I've dictated some of them. I know the pleasure they give you—as free of shame and revulsion as the pleasure these odors give me." TripStone's gray eyes blazed. She guided the scrap back toward him. "Learn to classify the odors. Memorize them as you have memorized the books. Enjoy them as much and let them teach you. They have just as many stories, including those that could save your life."

He said, through gritted teeth, "You would have me degenerate into an animal. I won't do that."

TripStone shook her head. "If that were true, there'd be no one left in Basc. CatBird and I were raised to control our natures only because we were taught to embrace them first."

"It can be strange if you're not used to it, Sir." CatBird beamed at him, looking helpful. "But you'll get used to it." A tiny line furrowed her brow. "How do the inks smell different?"

HigherBrook looked into the girl's expectant face. Would they be anything to her other than a different form of secretion? How could he possibly explain? "You'd have to come to the Rotunda," he managed.

How much of his own sweat had leaked into the cloth? Would he even recognize it as his own?

Remind me again how I am doing this for Crossroads. But no, he didn't have to ask. He already knew. He was faced with the choice of two brutal behaviors by which to set an example. He could avail himself of the convenience of BrushBurn's cart and its neat packages, or he could experience the honest depravity of the hunt.

Either avenue put his people at risk. *And I can't dismiss either one.*

RootWing and DewLeaf would want nothing better than to see Destiny Farm destroyed because their own farm with its vast, newly-planted fields, was now at risk. If they'd known of TripStone's true intent, they would never have agreed to a plan to detain her when the time came. But they feared that TripStone's trip to

Promontory to establish a so-called “partnership” could corrupt her, and that was a useful misconception.

HigherBrook hadn’t realized how much they loved her. Regrettably, that was useful as well.

He closed his eyes and lifted the stench to his nose. It took a mighty effort to open his mouth, to draw the air in deep. The scents began to unfold and he lowered the cloth quickly. He gagged not against the smells, but against the sensations they created.

“A good beginning,” TripStone said.

He opened his eyes against the sting. How could this obscenity possibly compare with ink?

It couldn’t. Only one was key to their survival right now.

The air all around him shimmered with studious curiosity and the thrill of discovery. HigherBrook recognized that thrill. It had come to him as he first pored over the ancient texts. Their interconnectedness and their beauty had driven his breath away.

What could this new generation possibly know of that subtlety? What could they absorb, when they were learning this savagery instead?

He gazed sadly at CatBird. “I meant what I said. Come with me to the Rotunda when we are done here and I will teach you about the inks.”

To preserve its culture, Crossroads had to hold onto its books. To hold onto its books, it had to resist Promontory for as long as it could. To resist Promontory, its people had to learn to hunt. The children’s introduction to civilization would have to wait, so that civilization itself could be preserved. Somehow they had to recapture the Covenant, even if only by a thread of grace.

HigherBrook took a long, deep breath of unsullied air before he bent back to the table. Swallowing hard, he raised the cloth again.

CHAPTER 32

Skedge

Destiny was proof enough that the gods did not exist and never have. No deities in their right minds would hinge the survival of two formidable peoples on such a foul and insidious powder. It took Yata ingenuity and Masari deceit to do that, and now the powder had gotten the best of both of them.

SandTail snorted explosively and sank into his cushion of generously-padded arms, trying to drive the thoughts away.

“So *that’s* the thanks I get.” AgatePool smiled at him, contented. Her night-colored chops rubbed lightly against his ocher-furred cheek. “A snort for my efforts.”

“It isn’t you.” He planted a kiss on full, dark lips and wondered, not for the first time, whether it was his seed that died or AgatePool’s luscious ground that proved infertile. His childhood of walking through billows of acrid smog or her wayward, tangled bloodline. “It’s Skedge.”

She wrapped her legs around him, warming his pelt with hers. “Give the laborers what they want, SandTail. Let them ease up on production; make peace with them again. Keep the machines at least running, if more slowly.” She tousled his curls with a coppery hand. “I’m running the factory as well as I can, but I need your cooperation. Promontory’s birth rate can’t be dropping that quickly.”

“It is.” He rolled off her and stared at pearlescent walls veined in marble, here from long before AgatePool was born. She probably thought they were carved by Masari.

He wasn’t about to say otherwise. For too many of his ancestors—and hers, in part—these walls were probably the last things they’d seen. At least SandTail spent his time in Skedge as a willing prisoner. “The factories befoul our blood, but there’s nothing we can do. Skedge needs them to survive as much as Promontory does. For all that we provide you, we ask that the Little Masari give us only one thing in return or to give us the means to make it. It’s a cruelty of the gods that my people need bed snuff to conceive.”

“And in greater quantities all the time.” AgatePool shook her head. “You’ve visited me for almost eighteen years and it’s never been as bad as this.”

“If you only knew.” In the dark SandTail swore he coupled with a Masari, one as small and compact as he, save for an abundance of flesh in which he could lose himself. The truth about Destiny Farm almost rolled off his lips in the anonymous night.

But then the morning came, and AgatePool’s glorious Yata coloration gleamed in the ruddy dawn, and he knew that even with her he had to perpetuate the lie. He reminded himself that Destiny Farm was more than Promontory’s survival. In the end, it was justice.

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No one knew how Destiny first emerged, except that it had done so by accident. SandTail had memorized the old Yata texts, captured along with the first samples of that hideous substance to slide between a Masari’s fingers.

The Dirt People had been scattered like dying embers, constantly battling or on the run from skeletal, starving Masari. Each new season had seen numbers dwindling on both sides in a world that had become one never-ending hunt. Together, predator and prey ranged from one territory to the next, grabbing any available sustenance and whatever poisons held the promise of becoming food.

Until one day a haphazard mash had gripped its inventor with such fever that the need to rut overcame the fear of death. The small band of Dirt People cultivated the secret of Destiny and quickly formed a two-caste system. Those who used Destiny were the Yata, the breeders, charged with rescuing their kind from certain extinction.

The protectors, forbidden the drug, formed an expendable line of defense against the Masari. Celebrated in life and deified after death, the Dirt People became food while the Yata burgeoned in secret.

Over time the Yata multiplied sooner and faster, overflowing their hiding places and expanding outward. Where they went the Masari followed, pressuring them into requiring yet more Destiny, bearing more children, and suffering more deaths as both populations escalated. Finally the land itself began to die, just as the big game had done, straining to sustain both peoples.

They had cheated extinction once with Destiny. They cheated it again with the Covenant.

The gods of the Dirt People faded away, yielding to gods of not just the Yata but the Masari as well. The caste system dwindled until only the herbalists, charged with producing Destiny, were spared both the burden and the elevation of sacrifice. Everyone else became expendable, but only in numbers sufficient to sustain a controlled predation.

The land recovered. The Masari bought Yata lives with an outpouring of tithes and the institutionalization of sacred guilt, worshipping and serving living gods. It had worked for a time, longer in Crossroads-Basc than anywhere else. But it had worked badly.

The marsh ecosystems of Alvav proved to be as delicate as they were diverse. The Yata had almost overwhelmed that valley as well, before they dispensed with Destiny altogether. Those who expanded onto the Cliff faced an even greater challenge, bypassing the valley's fertility for the sterility of rock. Soon all that remained of the Covenant was the trading of Yata lives for the fruits of Masari labor and the adoption of a new caste system. Those to be sacrificed became not gods but prisoners, rewarded the natural riches of the Marsh so that they could stay alive for the hunt.

Confined and free to work the land, the convicts had regained a self-sufficiency lacking in Basc. Open trade with the Masari of Rudder had led to more intimate exchanges, prompting Rudder's citizens to experiment with altering their appetites in the ongoing battle of love over hunger.

Until Skedge, the threat of Masari extinction had come only from the prospect of Yata extinction. Skedge had created a much more dangerous precedent.

Ranging past Alvav, the Skedge Yata had retained their knowledge of Destiny and used it to maintain their numbers, not against the Masari but against nature itself. First the floods had washed them away, driving the few remaining survivors from the flatlands up the steadily-eroding walls of a mesa. The droughts had killed more, and finally the poverty of the land itself.

For a long time the only richness to be had in Skedge was its lack of predators. No Masari had dared come this far.

Destiny aided population growth to stave off extinction until the Skedge Yata curtailed its use to keep life sustainable in the arid lands. They became expert at regulating the flow and ebb of fertility, employing Destiny when they needed it and discontinuing the drug when their environment demanded it.

But many components of Destiny itself required a more fertile environment than Skedge could provide. To maintain its stores, the Yata needed to trade with the Marsh, which meant they needed to furnish a product in return.

Surrounded by rock and finding ways to tame the flatlands, they began to mine.

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Naked, leaning against cool marble, SandTail gazed out the window of AgatePool's home. Past her gracefully-fluted columns lay a network of ornate walks cut into the monolith. Idly he counted the numbers of semi-precious stones and the varieties of their patterns, left from a time long before the Skedge Yata became Little Masari. From a time when they still spoke their own language, had their own identity.

He smiled at AgatePool, looking neither up nor down but head to head with her as she padded to his side and slid her black-tufted arm around his red-tufted waist. Too soon they would walk to the factory together, he to threaten the foremen and she to mollify them afterwards, with promises of more imported goods and a better way of life. Tensions should ease after the spring harvest when she managed the distribution of fresh produce, perhaps even a bountiful delivery from Crossroads.

They would make sure none of the workers went hungry—except, perhaps, for leisure. For sleep, if necessary.

But that hunger could be forgotten. Like history, a lifestyle could be erased and suitable substitutions put in place. It had happened with Crossroads. It could happen in Skedge, and not for the first time.

A gun hung in SandTail's study, a very old musket inscribed in pictograms. It was not a sacramental rifle of the Covenant. No ancient Masari inscriptions decorated its barrel. It was all Yata symbology, fashioned by Yata hands, in a form of metalwork then previously unknown.

The Masari of Crossroads and Rudder had farmed the land and hunted prey with primitive weapons or with their bare hands and teeth. It took the early Yata of Skedge to teach them otherwise, preparing for and awaiting the entry of the first Masari into what was now Promontory. Completing the transformation from prey into predator, the Yata of Skedge had taken their stations inside the mountain crags. They had spilled into the salt pan, hidden themselves among the nettles, and taken cover within the lip of the canyon wall. With the same talent for mixing Destiny, they had discovered how to mix gunpowder.

They had taken careful aim and fired, and then watched the buzzards for days.

CHAPTER 33

Basc

Fat raindrops splashed in irrigation ditches lacing the Basc fields. TripStone gazed down row after row of tiny cotyledons and listened to lambs bleating in the barns. Beyond the surrounding woods, Gria's troops practiced secret maneuvers in the distant foothills.

The escaped slaves trained with them. The Yata from Alvav had demonstrated their proficiency with rifles almost immediately, along with their readiness to use them.

Other citizens of Basc tended the fields in shifts, and the similarity to Crossroads was striking. This could be the Grange, teeming with Masari performing their accustomed labors, almost able to forget that everything else about Crossroads had changed.

But in Basc this farm *was* change. Wielding skills they'd lost long ago, the Yata again grew their own food, raised their own livestock, and wove their own clothing. The multicolored kerchief knotted in TripStone's hair bore only Yata markings, not Masari. It pressed toward her scalp, soaked by the rain that fell in fits and starts.

It was the first object from Basc that she had obtained without taking a life, an ornamental cloth unattached to ritual. It bound her thick frizz into place, a constant reminder of the potential for joy and the price that potential exacted.

She had bought it from Lani, freshly cut from the loom, the day Zai had come home. In exchange, TripStone had given over the framed parchment on which Ulik had written his blessing to her. She had watched Zai play freely with her sons and cried.

She may yet meet one of them in the hunting grounds some day. They may yet shed each other's blood. But here within the safe confines of Basc, in the growing warmth and moistness of spring, the gods had blessed them with the chance to share in each other's stories, interrupted by lusty yells of health from Lani's infant son.

It was a moment of tranquility TripStone would soon leave behind.

She had not come as an advisor this day, but as a suppliant. Not to seek blessings, but to confront affliction. To confront nature. To split herself in two.

Simply passing BrushBurn's cart awakened a wretched chemistry now, but it was one she had to accept. Her reactions were a tool, an instinct to be put to use. They were a way to scent out the Warehouse and its contents. Once she did that, she could arm an attack against Destiny Farm. She had to focus on that mission, letting what was left of her fly away from the rest.

If she could murder Yata for whom she'd felt love, she could hunger for a Masari she hated. Even when her stomach was empty, she had refrained from attacking her prey in the streets. Now her training kept her legs from quivering at the mere sound of the trader's voice.

She surveyed the Basc fields a last time, wondering which sprouts would emerge deformed or sickly, which would need to be culled so that others could strengthen. When Ghost still lived at the Grange, he had spirited the uprooted plants to his room. He had examined them until they shriveled and had then tossed them into the compost pile. So many failures for every survivor. So many little deaths.

Nothing is easy. How young had they been when he had told her that? Beneath his fascination, he had always treated the abnormalities with a quiet sympathy, a tenderness toward the exposed and starving roots.

Stay alive, my friend. I will find you.

She had to get to the Marsh. It was one more reason to duck into BrushBurn's tent. To leave Crossroads, helping him pull his miserable cart filled with her people's history over the muddied, rutted roads.

The rain thinned; clouds began to part. TripStone turned from the fields and walked an uneasy path, toward the forbidden. No Masari had ever set foot in the Soala. She would back away if they drove her out, but she had to at least try.

Before each hunt she had meditated for hours in her room, escaping into an embrace of reverence and sorrow. Beneath that embrace her senses had heightened, driving the steady pounding of her blood. Each muscle became an

independent creature, bypassing reason. She was no longer an individual but a pack roaming the hunting grounds, forced to coexist with the TripStone of the Covenant who grieved as she took aim and fired.

Her room, her entire house had been filled with the Covenant then. Wherever she stepped, the walls, shrines, and sacramental tools had reminded her of her purpose; but now all that was gone. Now another instinct overtook her and she awakened after short, fitful sleeps in a state of perverse readiness, the pack within her baying up and down her spine.

No matter where she sat, no matter how quiescent her thoughts, she still twitched with the memory of BrushBurn's scent. She had nowhere else to turn.

Under gray sky and intermittent drizzle the torches continued to burn within black adobe. TripStone stopped and stared at the threshold, wavering. She had come unarmed, not daring to breach these walls with a gun.

She could have recently killed the kin of someone inside, someone whose wails she heard through the walls. This was the hut-of-need. The Yata here had every right to kill her for her trespass. Everything civilized dictated that she should turn around and go back home.

But it was no use; she was driven toward the doors. Already she took comfort in the shrieks emanating from inside, in the complete abdication of control. The fury of strangers washed into her soul with the promise of cleansing. Half-aware, she rested her palms against the thick wood and leaned in.

Several Yata immediately blocked her way, knives drawn. Others in the large hut continued to howl, oblivious.

"Get out," one hissed. "*Now.*"

"This is a place of demons, yes?" A voice not her own rose in thick waves, up from her groin. She swayed as though drunk. "I have demons."

TripStone looked out above the gatekeepers. Suddenly she was every single Yata in the room. She sank to her knees, glued to the threshold. If she let all the screams inside, they would drive the demons out. Her spine arched, her mouth open to the sounds and smells of rage. Sweet agony stuck to her bones.

Then it flew away like frightened doves as the Yata became aware of her. The hut began to quiet. The throng inside seized up and became a single beast, its movements erratic and fearful.

She had to leave. Her presence here was terribly wrong.

A bony hand clamped down on her shoulder and a stern voice commanded, “Up, *yatanii*.”

TripStone’s limbs turned to liquid. Face flushed in shame, she struggled to her feet. “Forgive me,” she whispered. Docile and contrite, she let Erta lead her away.

They meandered down narrow trails. TripStone followed a dun-colored robe, disoriented, focusing all her attention on the old woman and a walking stick puncturing the mud. She did not know where Erta took her, but that no longer mattered.

Without looking back, Erta said, “You and Gria tread a very dangerous line.”

“I know.”

The huts to either side of them dwindled until only trees remained. The two women were not yet outside the village, but they would reach its border soon. The old hunting grounds, the burned forest, lay ahead. TripStone noted a stiffness in Erta’s gait due not entirely to age. The long silver braid dropped between deep, strangely-weighted pockets.

Erta asked, sharply, “How soon do you leave for Promontory?”

TripStone balked. “You know about that.”

“Gria is not inclined to approach anyone for spiritual guidance. When she came to me I realized even she has limits of conscience.” Erta passed a line of white adobe huts and stepped into the clearing from which Basc’s citizens had once departed, their pouches filled with pen, parchment, and ink. “You are leaving with the trader. When?”

“After we thin the seedlings in Crossroads.” TripStone swallowed. “BrushBurn will look at the land and then speak with RootWing and DewLeaf about

expected yields. He will compare that to his records on what we owe and prepare a report for Promontory's Chamber." She shuddered. "Then we will leave."

Erta nodded to herself. "That should provide enough time." She turned to TripStone in the center of the clearing. Her eyes darted up and down the height of the Masari. "Have you any idea of the power a rifle has over us? How torn Gria is over this mission after what she has already done?"

"Yes." Clouds sank around the mountaintops and settled their cottony bulk down slopes and into the valley. Without her StormCloud against her back, TripStone felt disturbingly weightless. "She knows what's at stake."

"She wouldn't continue training with such a massive weapon otherwise. But Gria has succumbed to her demons once and we have all paid dearly for it. You are asking her to succumb to them again." Erta rested her staff's gnarled, inscribed knob against TripStone's breastbone. "Almost everyone who has seen the meat from Promontory has offered to take up a gun, and you have already seen what we are capable of. Do not assume an attack on Destiny Farm can be confined there." She turned and continued her slow advance toward the border.

TripStone fell in beside her. "Are you against the mission?"

"No."

They crossed into ash. Small green shoots peeked out from desolation underfoot. At first Erta took to the broad path between Basc and Crossroads. Then she veered away from it, weaving through charred trunks, toward shrouded mountains.

They were both exposed here, outside Basc's protection. Most of the ongoing hunt occurred in the far woods, but Yata and Masari could still battle each other in this damaged land. TripStone's pelt stiffened with alertness.

"You are no stranger to defilement, TripStone, but I had not expected you to violate the Soala." Erta's calm curiosity bore into her. "What demons chose you, who are powerful enough to drive you there?"

TripStone burned under the elder's scrutiny, every inch of her skin prickling. The clouds hovered, vast white pillows before the mountains, swelling with unshed rain.

She could hold nothing back. The demons took hold of her again, insistent and suffocating. She had to speak them out. “I was trained to guide my pleasures and restrain my hunger so that I could steady my aim and show proper respect, but my training never prepared me for this. This consumes me.” She coughed and looked away, but the fever in her voice persisted. “The one from whom I procured the meat—the trader. My body responds to him. Even as I speak to you I feel him, smell him. Everywhere.”

Muscles clenched. TripStone’s arms wrapped across her stomach. “My reason flees me, Erta. I’ve hardly slept in days. I am accustomed to urges, but not this. Not him. I lust after a man I want dead.”

Her chest heaved. She looked into Erta’s wizened face and found it pensive.

“This is the man who would lead you to the Warehouse.” The old woman gave TripStone a hard look. “Be thankful your demons have chosen to anoint you. You will need their strength. Have you purchased any more Yata from him?”

“No! I went to BrushBurn for evidence only, not for food.”

Erta pursed her lips. For a moment her attention seemed elsewhere. “I hear it is several days’ journey to Promontory even in good weather, and you need to maintain your aim.” Her staff brushed TripStone’s arm. “It’s settled, then. I am coming with you.”

“It’s too dangerous, Erta.” TripStone looked upon wrinkled skin, the light veins beneath the bronze. She could trace the outline of bone. “Even if they allowed it and even though I can control my own need for Yata, you would still be at risk.”

“*Child.*” Erta gave TripStone a wan smile. “I am coming with you to help clear your mind, but the risk is yours. I cannot offer you much, but it will be enough to settle you there.” She sighed. “You will have to take your time with me. I am scrawny and my meat will be tough.”

The walking stick could just as well have slammed against TripStone’s heart.

“Gods, Erta, no.” Her legs refused to move. She gazed helplessly around them and whispered, “This is why you brought me here.” She shook her head. “Basc needs you. I can’t let you sacrifice yourself.”

“Basc has Gria,” Erta snapped, “and right now, *yatanii*, you need me more. If you take me today, you will have enough time to prepare me for the journey.” Her hands edged into her pockets. “Don’t deceive yourself, TripStone. Like it or not you will have to eat *something*. Sit.”

TripStone stared impotently at the clouds, blinking tears from her eyes.

“Sit, child,” Erta coaxed. “I have saved up some muscle. Do not make me pull you down.”

The hunter looked into a face of calm, almost happiness, and choked, “I will miss you.”

“I will be *with* you. Whatever passes between you and the trader, remember that. The stories you memorize about me will be your own, this time. Think on them. They will remind you of what you need to accomplish.”

TripStone let gravity pull her to her knees. Her breeches sank into mud. She stared, uncomprehending, as Erta fished pen, parchment, and ink from her pockets and knelt opposite her.

“You already have my verbal blessing,” Erta said, matter-of-factly, answering the Masari’s confusion. “I am making it clear that I relinquish my full carcass to you and express my deepest wish that there be no retribution for my death. You will need that testimony more than scripture.” She rested the sheet on her thigh. Her thick plait coiled loosely in her lap. “I told Gria my intent after I had listened to her concerns. She will give you no trouble over me.”

Once more TripStone watched in silence as smooth, unhurried Yata script flowed across the page, followed by its translation into Masari. Saliva wept around her tongue. She fought the urge to close her eyes and waited in respectful grief as Erta blew on the ink to hasten its drying in the moist air.

“Whatever you cannot say to me now, say to me through prayer. After.” Erta tested the ink. Satisfied, she handed over the parchment.

TripStone enfolded gnarled fingers and held them tightly. “Erta.” She took a shaky breath. How could she say that she didn’t know how to end the suffering of either Yata or Masari? That she could do only what she believed was right? How could she reply to this deepest, most deadly of honors?

Fear and longing quickened her heartbeat. She released Erta's hand, folded the parchment neatly, and secured it in her vest pocket. Her voice almost failed her. "Thank you."

"May our covenant preserve you, TripStone."

"And our peoples." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "And the gods."

Erta patted her hand and gave her an almost imperceptible nod. The old woman's shoulders relaxed. Eyes closed, her breathing slowed, she leaned back.

Language retreated into wordless, urgent mercy. TripStone leaned forward, easing back the silver braid and cradling the skull. Moving quickly, she crushed Erta's windpipe and jerked her head once, snapping the neck. Ecstasy surged through her, tempered by calm lament. Only after bronze faded to gray did her jaws relax their grip.

She laid the limp body across her lap and overturned the vial of ink, spilling its contents into the ground. A blanket of numbness descended as she took Erta in her arms and rose from the mud. Lovingly, and with great pain, TripStone draped the corpse over her shoulder and turned back toward Crossroads.

CHAPTER 34

The Marsh

Fog swallowed the lanterns. Piri watched them advance in a line down the boardwalk, dwindle quickly, and disappear. The sky itself roiled, dropping thick, pulsing curtains to the water's edge. Illuminated ripples expanded under the stilts, clear to her sight until they reached a wall of gray vapor trailing a ragged edge. Then they dropped into nothingness.

The hut emptied quietly. Paths diverged beyond the fog as warriors parted from those headed toward the safe rooms. No one spoke to her, or drummed. Instead they laid a light touch on her shoulder or her belly, telling her with their eyes that life continued. Or that life stopped, in time. She was not sure.

Ghost had awakened and come to her as she stood out in the warming night, leaning against the wall. They had watched the mist together, not needing sight to know that the Caterpillar pushed up slowly from beneath, oozing its starlight past the horizon.

He held her to him and then left, burlap bags filled with formulations hoisted over his shoulders, his lantern light pulled quickly into the haze.

She had begun to ripple like the water. Lightly, as though coaxed by a breeze. Again and again she swam through weariness to the chamber pot. Half-fogged memories returned as she emptied of all but the child. A small thickness dropped from her, swirled in a bit of blood.

She still had time. Hours, perhaps a day, but not much more than that.

The Farm's nursery had been warm and comfortable, its straw soft and welcoming. Piri sank eagerly into its sweetness. She almost forgot what would be taken from her as she breathed the pervasive perfume of milk, surrounded by smooth roundness, fullness mirrored on fullness. They had all midwived each other as each came to her time under watchful Masari eyes.

The births had been unhurried and safe, even the pain a strangely soothing repetition before each final bearing down. Full-throated yells sprang from tiny,

perfect mouths. Exhilaration peaked before the onset of much greater pain as the farmers and wetnurses moved in.

Now the warmth was cloying, no straw underfoot but wood. The marsh swelled beneath with damselfly naiads, with frog egg clusters buoyed in a delicate froth kissing the stilts.

The fog would burn off when daylight came. The sun would pierce the zenith and the air fill with smoke and gunfire. Piri would be hoisted up, wrapped against Ghost and struggling for breath through burlap weave, her memory all but useless.

She lifted her lamp and stepped inside the empty hut.

Once, when they had lain against each other in their sickness after the Games, she had dragged her fingers across his palm asking about the gods. What were they, where did they come from? How was it Ghost and the others had known about them when Piri had never heard them invoked at Destiny Farm?

His answer had been ambivalent. Ghost called upon them himself, yet seemed unsure of their existence. So far as he knew they were an amalgam, an energy intangible as the fog. Yata killed in the hunting grounds left their bodies to the Masari while their spirits crossed a threshold into the afterlife. The spirits merged and became something unquantifiable.

She'd asked if Masari spirits merged there as well. He didn't know.

Shadows flickered across blank walls and piles of heating rocks lay inert. Piri waited for Ghost's return and tried to still her trembling. The child stretched in his sleep, his head seeking the earth.

They marched before her, the women culled, the men culled. The mix-children pulled from weakened arms, their umbilicals quickly cut and their throats sliced. The embraces interrupted, the faces she couldn't remember.

They vaporized. They glided together, gossamer veils lifting in the dark. They passed through the slaughterhouse walls, glowing within the fog and penetrating through to the other side. Generations of them. Eons. Melding, combusting into blinding light, racing unstoppable toward their brothers and sisters. Swaddling the world, an invisible canopy glittering at the speed of love.

Gazing on her terror from a distance, palm cradling her bulging navel, Piri breathed deeply through parted lips and prayed silently to the Destiny Farm dead, the gods.

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Even in the dark, even in the mist, Ghost could almost navigate his way without his lantern. He knew the turns, the dips and rises as he traversed the same path over and over between the pharmacy and the south gate.

Burlap sacks, eased into stacked wooden boxes, filled the barge's hold. Ghost had picked through the ground until his back ached and pounded mash until his wrist burned. Now he packed everything away and left it floating on the water.

The chameleons brought bottles that Ghost hauled empty into the Marsh and delivered, stuffed with grindings, back into their hands. Carefully, at the last minute, he eased a dissected gas canister into one of the sacks. He was going with the cargo; he could retrieve it. He might be leaving the prison, but that was no reason to discontinue his work. If Ghost could counteract the poison's effect, if he and Piri ever came back here, he would need that knowledge.

Once again the guard had let him pass unceremoniously beyond the walls. He had followed the chameleons' dark cloaks through the forest to the river's edge, counting his paces as they brought him to the nondescript barge. He kept following them until he had memorized the way there.

They would wait only so long once the Games began, leaving if he and Piri did not arrive before dusk. Now, in the predawn, they made their final trip from the prison gate. Ghost watched them disappear inside the hold.

He stood in an isolated pool of light, unable to see beyond the closest trees. But sounds and smells carried in the moist air. Empty-handed, light-footed, Ghost darted half-blind down trails concealed even in daylight. Soon he ran headlong back to the wall, careening past the guard. He loped down the boardwalk, over the water, until his feet stopped pounding and he leaned hard against the outside of the hut. When his panting ceased, the silence stunned him.

Except for Piri, the hut was empty.

She sat on a pile of blankets, her back against the wall, her legs apart. At first

Ghost thought she napped, before he spotted the lines of concentration on her forehead. The cloth of her tunic shifted as the child moved beneath her skin.

Her eyes opened. She smiled up at him.

He sat beside her and gathered her into his arms. “Try to sleep.”

She shook her head. *If the gods will it, I will sleep.*

“I know the way to the barge. They showed me.” He stroked her hair, running his fingers down its short plait. “I’ll get us there as quickly as I can.”

He had tied her to him, trying out different positions, different ways of wrapping and securing her hardened bulk. Finally she had drawn her knees up against his back, making space for the rest of her. He’d felt her elbows pressing through the burlap against his scapulae, her hands at his shoulders.

He’d sewn pockets into the bundle in which to store dried portions of meat. He had fortified himself during his trips to and from the pharmacy, gulping Yata in solitude, enough to hold him during their escape.

The burlap, with its pockets and folds, seams and closures, rose from beyond Ghost’s pallet. Piri sighed, leaning into his chest. Minute changes in her breathing raised goosebumps on his skin.

He whispered, “How close?”

There is enough time for us to leave. He is only preparing to come. Her hand reached up to brush Ghost’s cheek. I had thought he might wait a little longer. But I have begun to clear the way for him.

There was no turning back. The safe rooms were filled by now and the warriors were sealing the doors. The fog lightened from lead to steel, thinning into razor lines of red.

All they needed to do now was wait.

Piri’s breathing slowed. Ghost cradled her to him as her cheek dropped to rest against his tunic. Her light, peaceful snores were almost enough to make him believe in miracles. He listened to the music rising from her throat until nothing

else existed. It wrapped around his chest, calming his jittery nerves.

She would become a thing, part of the bundle. The weight on his back would be nothing, but he had to clear his mind of worry when he ran. His muscles spoke to each other, rehearsing. They jumped within his legs and arms as though he already dashed through the *melée* of battle.

Both their bodies anticipated. Massed energies. Contracted.

Sunlight burned the fog away, turning the hut golden. Their lanterns still burned, but Ghost let them be. He held still, letting Piri sleep for as long as she could. When the sun climbed high enough he would roll out the burlap, knotting and cinching it into a hammock before she climbed inside. He would wait for her to shift position, until she was ready for him to draw the top folds around her head and then around her body once again, pulling rope through loops until all that remained of her identity was a bulge.

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It was almost time to wake her when she stirred against his chest, blinking. The waterfowl were up, nesting noisily. Those gathering food near the boardwalks would scatter at their approach.

Ghost whispered, “We must get ready.” His lips caressed hers. His hands warmed her heavy breasts, her hard belly. “I love you. Stay alive.”

Her fingers repeated back. *Get us to the barge*, she added. *Do not think of us until then.*

He snuffed the lanterns and waited while she squatted over the chamber pot. She reached between her legs and examined the blood on her fingertips. It was a barrier dropping away, she had told him. There will be more. No cause for concern. He chose to believe her.

He had to make his pelt as visible as possible to the sharpshooters. Ghost threw off his tunic and pondered for a moment, then removed his breeches as well. The boots stayed on. His shudders subsided as he moved about in the morning chill, preparing the hammock.

Piri built the pile of blankets higher and climbed atop them as he knelt. He

received her, reaching behind to help her into position. Her knees pressed into him, and then her elbows.

Ghost threaded his rope, lacing her into place. Her belly touched lightly against his spine before he secured another end, drawing burlap between them. She grasped his shoulders through rough cloth.

He tested the knots. “Are you all right?”

She hummed back, a soothing note.

Taking deep breaths, slouched just far enough to keep his center of balance, Ghost strode naked onto the boardwalk.

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A small crowd already waited at the south gate, eager to rush through ahead of the smoke. Armored, flashing iron and steel, the Yata warriors glanced up at Ghost’s bare skin exposed between broad tufts of plum-colored fur. Then they noticed the burlap.

Some gave him knowing nods. Others altered their positions, standing by his side. One commented, “You make an interesting shield, Masari.”

Ghost wondered what Yata would risk attacking their own and tried to smile. “So do you.”

The sun arced higher in the sky. The crowd pressed forward, listening for chains to be unlocked. Ghost reached up to touch the cloth at his shoulders, feeling for flesh underneath. The flesh pushed back. All around him metal scraped on metal, drowning out the birds left behind on the banks.

Chains dropped and were pulled away. A bronze-faced guard raised his curved knife high in the air and called out, “Live free or die well!”

A mighty shout erupted from the warriors. Their weapons flashed into the sky, their chants continuing in waves as the gate swung open.

They broke into a run together. Ghost heard distant cannon fire. Twice, three times. He shot a remorseful glance at the Yata shadowing him and extended his

long legs, pulling away, wincing as gunshot struck its target behind him. The sharpshooter was nowhere to be seen.

Reports echoed; bodies fell. The cannons fired again, but the breeze was southerly. Ghost plummeted into headwind away from the smoke. A shaft whizzed by him and he twisted, zigzagging between trees. Piri's knees bruised his sides. Burlap rasped against his skin, rubbing it away.

For one wild moment he wanted to turn around and head for the bridge into Rudder. He could climb onto the main road and rush over the pass, descending into Crossroads. But conditions were far worse to the east and north, where warriors and hunters clashed shoulder to shoulder and thick poison mist flowed beyond the prison walls and over the landscape.

It could kill them both. He had to continue south.

He swung around mossy boulders, slamming into them as a weighted rope thrummed around his ankle and a hard tug pulled him to the ground. Loud cracks split the air and the rope went slack. Piri's hands became claws at Ghost's shoulders as he freed himself, hauling them both upward, pushing onward. Tatters hung from him as his own ropes began to fray.

He planted his feet wide apart and slid down a slope toward the river, grabbing hold of tree trunks for balance. Wetness dribbled down his back, but he was still on land. Confusion paralyzed Ghost for a moment and he sniffed. He smelled no tang of urine.

Panic flooded him. He reached behind and let fluid drip into his palm, then brought it quickly before his eyes.

Thank the gods, not blood.

Water.

"Stay with me," he panted. "We're almost there."

The river bubbled south. Ghost staggered across gravel, stepping over branches and gnarled, exposed roots. A fish leapt up ahead, falling back with a loud splash. He could still hear distant gunfire, a scream cut short. The bottom of the burlap was drenched.

Dead tree trunks extended out from the shore. Ghost spotted a flash of rope, knots, a pole. The barge blended into the river, shimmering in light reflected from the water. He let out a small cry and climbed aboard. "It's Ghost," he called toward the hatch.

He did not expect a response.

He dropped to his knees and worked the burlap free, unknotting, unlooping, bending toward the deck. Unfolding. Piri slid off his back. He caught her limp body and eased her down.

She closed her eyes and winced, taking shallow breaths. Ghost counted them, waiting until she relaxed with a sigh. Then he lifted and rushed her through the hatch.

Even down here the chameleons were masked in cloth, only their eyes showing.

"We need something soft," Ghost said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Blankets, anything. She's in labor."

They combed through the hold, arranging a bed. "We'll keep her comfortable," one said. "Go above."

Ghost looked helplessly at Piri, who nodded in his arms. The skin around her tunic was rubbed raw. It must sting just to be held by him. "I must get us moving." He eased her onto the blankets and forced himself to turn away.

His own bruises could hurt later. He bounded to the deck and untied bowlines from the dead trunk. He grabbed the pole and pushed against the shore. The barge floated out into the current. Ghost willed strength back into his arms, driving his thick staff into silt and muck until the river caught up with him. He lifted wood from the water, watching for rocks as he steered toward the center. *Flow faster.*

Aching, smarting on the metal deck, he watched until the last of Rudder's settlements drifted behind. Walls of rock mounded smoothly to either side.

The river would narrow beyond, splitting into anemic tributaries. The mountains would rise up sharply, high enough to catch the clouds before their severe slant back toward the arid lands.

A cart waited at the foothills, ready to make the arduous climb to the pass before descending into Promontory.

Ghost called toward the hatch until a chameleon emerged from below. The Yata took the pole from him and said, "One more spasm."

Ghost squeezed the masked man's arm and fled the deck.

CHAPTER 35

Piri surrendered to the rhythmic slap of water on the hull, the mild rocking of the barge. Then other ripples took hold, slicing through her like a blade before they dissipated and sank away.

“There must be something here for pain,” Ghost muttered through gritted teeth. He leaned into the crates, opening the sacks and scattering bottles. “There’s got to be a calmate among all these things I’ve collected for you.”

The chameleon shook his head. “Our buyer didn’t say.”

“The others on deck, would they know? What are these for?”

“We weren’t informed. I’m sorry.”

Piri hummed, low and relaxed, until Ghost came to her. She reached for his hand. *It is all right. We all had pain. It was the same then.*

The same, but not the same. This child took up more of her than the others. He sought the world but was slower to emerge, testing the limits of her womb. Clearing the way took longer.

She rolled from her side, pushing up until her back met a pile of blankets. *Water.*

Ghost hurried a bladder to her. She took it from him as he guided it toward her mouth. Her arms still worked fine. Though maybe he would feel better if she let him hold the drink against her lips.

Welcome sips glided down her throat. *Ghost.* She caressed his arm. *You have been at births before. Think of those.*

Those were different. The touch of his fingers was almost too light; he was battling fear. *They were animals, not people.*

We are all animals.

She took another sip and put the bladder down. The hold’s thin light dwindled toward violet. She watched with half-lidded eyes as the chameleon lit a lantern.

“How much longer to the hills?” Ghost asked.

“We’ll reach them before midnight.” The Yata gazed through the hatch, toward footfalls and muffled conversation. “We’ll take to the cart immediately. Weather is good for traveling. We won’t stop unless we have to.” He looked back at them. The cloth shifted about his face. “These crates are going to an apothecary. We were told he lives with a healer. I don’t know how they would react to you, but they might be able to help.”

“When do we get there?”

“Mid-morning, if all goes well.” Even in dim light, the mask couldn’t hide a smile. “I’m the best runner among us. I’ll take you there myself.”

Piri grasped Ghost’s arm before she could stop herself, her fingers stabbing. *Your legs are longer.*

She winced at her own impulsiveness when she saw his alarm. She had not meant to give Ghost cause for further worry. But she was already stretched thin and she had to make yet more room as they crossed the mountain.

The child knew. He’d made his choice early. She became too small for him now.

The way you carried us here, she drummed, more calmly. *Think only of the destination.*

Piri. Ghost’s face was its own mask, his entire pelt standing on end. *What else can you tell me?*

She offered a tired smile and kissed his hand. *Only that this will be difficult.*

“What is the road like?” Ghost’s hand turned hot against her. He leaned toward the chameleon, his large Masari body suddenly filling the hold. “Will we be faster if you guide me in the dark?”

They conversed in low, urgent tones, ebbing and flowing like the river. It was a soothing hush, enough to distract Piri from the beginnings of a burn, a spreading line of flame.

Her eyes closed. She lifted her tunic and cupped her hands beneath her belly,

breathing in, drawing fingertips upward. Circling them around and down, breathing out. Slowly.

Their conversation stopped and Piri knew they were watching her. She wanted to tell them to keep talking. Their words were gentle massages, smooth currents. But to tell them, she needed to open her eyes, to stop what she was doing.

She had to wait. Just a few more breaths. She would need more of their soothing speech later.

A cloth gathered sweat from her and her muscles began to relax. She looked into Ghost's darkening eyes, wondering how to reassure him. A hum rose from her, rich and sonorous, vibrating outward and inward.

He nodded. She could see the pulse at his temples. His lips touched hers. Lingering, humming back.

~~~

The gunmetal bottom scraped on shale. Piri felt a small grief at the river's end, as the rocking stopped and the push of the water reduced to trickles over a pebbled bed.

She had drifted in and out of sleep, a few minutes of fuzzy dreams interrupted by assaults that increased in strength. The child's patience dwindled. He was more insistent now, sending more bits of her outward.

*I know.* Her drumming traveled beneath skin, through blood, onto his back. *I know what you want.*

Ghost frowned at the stain on her tunic, the ruddy clump between his fingers. He wrapped it in cloth and stuck it in a pocket of the burlap. "Let me carry you."

Her palm met his chest. *Better that I walk. But hold me.*

She slumped against him as they climbed to the deck and let him lift her over the lip of the barge. Halfway to the cart she clutched him while the wave of flame built, crested, receded.

The chameleons called to each other, rushing crates onshore. Clouds blotted out



the stars as the foothills rose in an amorphous silhouette, black on black.

She pressed against the warmth of Ghost's pelt and wondered if he was cold. He still wore only his boots. The burlap was too rough and the blankets too heavy, and nothing the chameleons wore would fit him. *Have you eaten?*

*Yes.*

*Have you eaten enough?*

He tightened his hold. "There are pockets in the harness. I will fill them."

Again he wore his strange look, discernible even in lamp light. As though she were every Yata who had ever lived, every Yata he had ever consumed. Constantly, without a word, he asked her to forgive him for a crime he had never committed.

He would sooner starve than harm her. That was the crime she feared, her crime, which might some day come to pass. They had been lucky so far. The dead had blessed them with abundance. She prayed to the Yata who washed her clean of her own guilt.

They moved on. Ghost helped her into the cart and rearranged the blankets. The chameleons lashed crates down, testing their bindings.

Piri counted the number and type of straps bolted to the wood. Handholds. *A steep grade.*

"In some places." Ghost swallowed hard. "Not everywhere." He knelt over her and took her face in his hands. "I'd give anything to be with you, but you're right. I can carry us faster. They told me the route and the gears and their runner will watch every step I take." He kissed her nose and flashed her a nervous grin. "I won't fall over the edge. Even in the dark."

She smiled back. *I will have to scream, then. Unexpectedly, to test you.*

The child heard her. He took her breath away, driving a loud moan into the dark. She jabbed Ghost's arm and smiled through pain at the surprise on his face; surely she had drummed that obscenity before. She grabbed hold of a strap and pulled until her muscles stood out in cords, until she could get her breathing

back under control.

Go, she told him. *Run.*

~~~

Ghost belted the leather straps across his chest, around his waist, over his hips. He had let them out to fit his larger, taller frame, then snugged them down against skin the chameleons had covered in grease. He wore a harness bulging with chunks of Yata, his water bladder slung over his shoulder. Lamps shone strong light behind him, their wicks high. The narrow road ahead of him ran parallel to the mountain before it twisted inward, climbing and switching back, like the path to his cabin.

But much longer. Much steeper.

The chameleons checked gears, sprockets, derailleurs, brakes. They replenished lubricant, making sure that everything would spin smoothly. They examined wheels, axles, drive trains. The cart wobbled slightly as they hopped in. Vibrations traveled to the harness as Ghost's guide moved to sit at the front, imparting instructions. How far to extend the chains, when to take them up, how tightly to turn. How not to burn out the brakes on the way down.

A soft *hoo* repeated from inside the cart, the sound of panting. It grew louder.

The chameleon said, "Ready."

Ghost jogged down the dirt road, letting the chains out and listening for them to engage the sprockets. He hardly felt the pull as they set gears in motion and the cart moved. When it gained enough momentum, he shortened the chains.

The cart was almost weightless compared to the transports he'd run from his family's farm, piled high with produce for Crossroads one day and Basc the next. Even before he could fit the harness, he'd worked out the gearing equations, learning the alchemy of energies. For once his lanky thinness didn't matter. He had raced to the marketplace as fast as the adults, let alone the other children. He'd spilled more than most, but he'd outrun the sun.

SunDog. Ghost mused; he hadn't worn that name in a long time. Maybe his mother had known what to expect.

He eased into a lope and picked up speed. He had to be careful. He couldn't afford to spill anything now. He had run transports in the valley, making a beeline down the flat roads extending from the Grange. He had mastered the horizontal, not the vertical.

Yes, Ghost assured the chameleon, he saw the curve. His body already prepared to lean, to ease out one of the chains. To nudge the derailleurs until links dropped down the sprockets and the weight lightened, and he climbed.

The grade wobbled like the cart, angling up, then leveling out, then slanting again. Ghost's fingers negotiated levers while his lungs negotiated air, taking deep breaths before each sharp ascent, quickening before the slope eased. The sound of Piri's struggles reached him from the back. They both panted at intervals now.

He smiled to himself in spite of his fear and pushed on as his thighs began to burn. He shoved a bite of Yata into his mouth and took a swig of water.

The chameleon called forward, "The top chest pocket has minerals."

Ghost fished out the crystal, drew some of it onto his tongue, and took another drink.

"You're doing very well," his guide observed. "You sweat much less than we do."

"It's the fur." Even so, rivulets ran where pelt yielded to skin. Ghost wiped his palms repeatedly to keep his fingers from slipping against the levers. His boots filled with moisture, chafing.

A wail built behind him, rising and cresting, followed by another. And another. The lamps lit only part of the terrain ahead, leaving the rest unknown. It didn't matter. Ghost grabbed the levers and moved the chains up, jerking the cart forward.

"Don't," the chameleon warned. "You'll exhaust yourself."

No. Piri's yells drove him on. He would use their energy.

Some day he would tell these people how he had once wobbled like the cart. He

would tell them where the bow in his legs had come from. He would explain how a sickly, underage Masari girl had taught him the value of stubbornness, and of overcoming the odds.

He would tell them how the Yata whom BrokenThread had named, and taught to communicate by touch, had launched him out of his skin, out of his nature, and out of his limitations.

But after he got Piri to safety. After he caught his breath.

Keep yelling. He rounded a switchback, climbing again. *Keep letting me know you're still alive.*

~~~

Thinning air seared his lungs. Lantern light diffused into thick mist, forcing him to slow down. Ghost eased his pace reluctantly, gulping. His stomach knotted. Some day he would curl up into a ball, sink into a pallet.

“Take more food and drink. Now.”

No, it would hurt too much. Better to press on. Then sleep.

Minutes later, the voice behind him sliced through the fog of his brain. “Ghost, you will kill your wife and yourself and the rest of us if you do not listen to me. Food and drink and minerals. Force yourself.” The chameleon seemed to call to him from afar as he strained to listen. “There is a steep climb to the pass, but that is not your main concern. The descent is what is most dangerous. Are you hearing me?”

Ghost nodded. He pushed a chunk of Yata into his mouth and wanted to spit it out.

“You will be fighting gravity. If you don’t keep control of this cart it will overrun you and plunge over the edge. Unless you stop, you will have little chance to eat on the way down. Do it now or your legs will fail you.”

Ghost chewed and swallowed, listless. After several minutes he registered a new wave of wails coming from the back. Piri’s voice was thinner than before. Despair ringed its edges.

It would have frozen his blood earlier, when he was not so weary. Now it goaded him on. He fumbled with the pockets of his harness and eased out more meat that turned tasteless, falling like lumps down his gullet. Despite the high altitude, Ghost felt as though he breathed water. The next switchback brought him up out of the mist and suddenly he saw the stars.

*Not mist. Clouds.*

He varied his gait to the pass, taking shorter steps and trading one set of screaming muscles for another. He sucked hard on the crystal, keeping it in his mouth until his cramps eased.

The slope decreased, flattening into level ground. Ghost worked the levers and slowed into a painful trot. He ran across the top of the world. The heavens could reach down and pluck him from the mountain, and carry him far away. He would be weightless, flying, a speck in a clarifier.

Piri's yell slammed him back into the earth.

"To the ground, then," he whispered. He licked sweat from his palms, took hold of the levers, and let gravity pull him down.

The cart raced him. He had to stay ahead, anticipate the turns, the inclines. His boots pounded the rock. He worried not about the speed but about the jostling and bumping he inflicted on the wood. If he didn't control his rate of descent he would shake the child free, or worse.

Dawn spread across the horizon. He'd gone without sleep for almost two days. Orange sky the color of Yucof's braid cut through brown haze. Beyond the mountain crouched a sprawling tangle of wood, stone, and metal. The tangle sat within a shallow bowl of scrub and great gray pockets blasted into the ground.

Then the ground dropped away, a deep slit withering to its vanishing point.

Behind Ghost, the chameleon said, drily, "Welcome to Promontory."

The words jarred his every bone, and suddenly he wanted desperately to die. Instead he slowed the cart, preparing for another switchback.

When he swung around again, the Yata leaned forward and pointed. "Ahead and

to your left, it's just light enough to see." The finger traced a bizarre, massive stain of milk. "The salt pan." It moved toward a broad, dark mesa rising beyond. "Skedge."

He had no way to reach Skedge before the child was born unless the child was born dead. Ghost heard not the sounds of labor behind him but the sounds of war. Not shouts of battle but the weak entreaties of its aftermath, of forces perishing. The chameleons were doing what they could, but they could do only so much.

At the next plateau he shook his hands free of the controls. He drained his water and slipped the crystal between cheek and gum. Rough road or no, burning muscles or no, they were out of time.

The road dropped down. Ghost took up the chains as much as he dared and moved the levers once, twice. If the cart overran him now it would be over quickly, but he was faster. His legs were not his own any more. They belonged to something else.

He was running in the grasslands. Eons ago, when the huge beasts lumbered. When everywhere one looked there was meat. He lived in a different body, with a serpentine spine that extended his reach and great muscled haunches, and enormous lungs that carried him effortlessly across the plains.

There was no Covenant. There were no Yata, no Masari. The distinctions were meaningless.

Distant mountains rose, their summits no longer below him. The buildings of Promontory floated up to meet the cart. The broad table of Skedge pushed into the sky. Ghost zigzagged down the mountain, descending a bolt of lightning. Skittering around turns, keeping the chains short.

One last descent, a long curve off a low shoulder, and he was in dry valley. He heard movement in the back, a call to mask Piri's mouth to keep out the dust. He was on flat ground now. He could let the chains extend, enough to lean forward and lengthen his stride.

Coughing, voice quavering, the chameleon directed him. Ghost took the long road in from the mountain, then jogged onto the fork leading away from the center of town. Narrow streets lined the outskirts. He continued on a path

through brush and toward the salt pan, out to a broad, low house with chicken coops out back and beds of imported soil from Rudder where the herbs were beginning to grow.

His mouth was wide open, his lips beginning to crack. It didn't matter that the air was fouled. His lungs would take anything.

## CHAPTER 36

### Promontory

It wasn't SandTail's cart. It rounded the corner too fast, came to a halt too quickly. DevilChaser rose from his breakfast and rushed to the kitchen window, DamBuster close behind him.

Outside, a naked, battered Masari strapped into a harness doubled over, spitting something hard onto the ground, but the rest was even more disturbing. The doctor cursed. "Get the birthing room ready."

Two masked Yata dumped crates onto rising dust. A third worked buckles and loosened leather straps, helping the runner free himself.

Without a word, DevilChaser sprinted to the cart and lifted the woman into his arms. The runner screamed inarticulately and lunged for him, trying to break through the last restraints.

The woman was barely conscious. DevilChaser hurried her inside. They had no time to boil sheets; their cleanest ones would have to do. He'd have to take extra care washing her. What skin he could see was dirt-encrusted and rubbed raw.

The lab door opened as he sped past, leaving MudAdder gaping at the commotion. The test subject was unbound, so he might as well be of use. The birthing stool was too big and DevilChaser had no time to set up a hammock.

"Follow me." He passed the bedroom, turned down a short hallway, and swung to his right and into the birthing room.

A crash resounded from the back door as DamBuster let them in. Someone careened through the kitchen and a heavy pot clanged to the floor, followed by sounds of stumbling in the dining room. Couldn't worry about the house being torn apart now.

DevilChaser looked to the pot on the hearth and thanked the gods for DamBuster's quick action. "We'll sterilize the rest later. Go see who's coming and keep him away from her." He motioned to MudAdder. "I want you to squat



behind her and hold her under the armpits. Lean against a wall. This will take time. It looks like multiple births.”

MudAdder took his position, arms open. He stared at the woman, then caught the healer’s eye and slowly shook his head.

“No, what?” DevilChaser scowled as he eased her down. He cut away a badly-stained tunic and rested his hand against her. “My gods,” he whispered. “What monster did this?”

Her contractions were weak, but the fetus was still alive. He had to hurry. “I don’t know if you can hear or understand me,” he said, trying to sound soothing. His hands moved deftly across her stomach as he probed. The baby’s position was good, but that wasn’t the problem. “I will wash up and examine you as best I can, and I’ll give you something for the pain. An injection is too dangerous now. I’m putting a mask on you and I want you to *breathe*. Do you understand?”

Her fingers jerked against him. He enclosed her hand with his and moved it gently aside before heading for the basin.

Scuffling escalated outside the room as bodies fell. DevilChaser recognized the runner’s yells. He called out to DamBuster, “Strap him in the restraining chair if you have to!”

A labored reply returned, “That chair’s too small for a Masari.”

“I don’t care!”

The woman angled her head toward the door and managed a low, weak moan. Howls of *Piri* penetrated from the hallway.

DevilChaser finished washing his hands and dipped a cloth in one of DamBuster’s herbal elixirs, then fit it into a mask. “This won’t put you to sleep, but it will help you to relax.”

He knelt. The woman squatted upright, but her body remained limp even as she spasmed. MudAdder kept a tight hold on her, his attention partly on the door.

DevilChaser raised the mask to her face, pressed it around her nose and mouth, and tied it at the back of her head. “Breathe. Slowly and deeply, if you can.”

She was alert, her gaze still trained toward the noise, but she did as he told her. At least she understood him. "I'm going to reach inside you to check the baby." He detected a weak nod.

She had a tiny birth canal, but then she was a Yata. DevilChaser exercised caution. How wide was full dilation for her kind? She *felt* fully dilated so far as he could tell, but that was a Masari-sized head behind her cervix.

He had to open her up. "How are we doing, MudAdder?"

His new assistant nodded. He seemed to have no trouble supporting her weight.

DevilChaser eased his hand free. "My dear, you need surgery."

First an experimental subject from the Farm and now this. And the ingredients for Destiny were coming from *Yata*. Did they have any inkling of what they delivered? What vicious deception was SandTail perpetrating this time?

Something rammed hard against the door; one more like that would pop it from its hinges. Growling, DevilChaser glided to his instruments and filled a syringe. "Hold him, DamBuster!" he called. "I'm preparing a shot!"

The woman stiffened. Her mask muffled a loud protest.

The door crashed open and slammed crookedly against the wall. DevilChaser stared as his patient convulsed, straining from MudAdder's grasp and reaching toward the crazed Masari. DamBuster's thick arms coiled around a grease-slicked chest, but the runner slipped free and dove to the floor, sliding.

"*Piri!*" Hands interlocked and the great head pressed against her shoulder. "I'm here," he gasped. His eyes blazed as he slid back down. "*She's my wife.*"

DevilChaser's hand wavered, but the woman's behavior gave him his answer. He laid the syringe aside and snatched up his instruments. "Whatever she is, you've put her in a life-threatening situation. DamBuster can assist me, but only if you don't do anything to jeopardize her delivery." He turned to his companion and frowned at clothes smeared with lubricant. "Take those off and wash up. I'll need analgesic plasters and coagulants. We're cutting this one free."

"Be careful." The voice from the floor was barely audible, words pushed out as

if through a thick fog. “Yata don’t have the anterior cartilage we do. You could rupture her.”

DevilChaser almost dropped his blade. What kind of madman was this? He looked to his partner, but DamBuster had stripped down and already busied himself, showing the same haunted obsessiveness that gripped him in the lab. They rushed to position sheets and basins, bottles, sponges, and steel.

The healer’s shoulders tightened. “I’m not a butcher. I know little about Yata anatomy. If you can tell us anything that will help save this mother and child, I’m listening.”

## CHAPTER 37

Fire crackled in the hearth. A lantern glowed on a table beneath windows covered up against the strong sun. Piri watched Ghost, her head buzzing. He lay half-collapsed at her side, dipping a sponge into a basin and stripping off grease, sweat, and blood with slow, painful strokes. He caressed her with one clean, dried arm. His fur blanketed her, warmed her.

Someone else held her up from behind. Someone her size, with a smooth-skinned chest. Bronze fingers interlocked against her sternum.

She tried to smile at the doctor because he was the only person still with clothes on; it was very funny. But all she could do was lean back against the naked Yata and be lulled by the chemical mask.

The one the healer called DamBuster spread a paste on her stomach that made her tingle; then the tingle went away and left her floating. He reached around, between her and the Yata man, spreading more against the small of her back.

Ghost's quiet voice vibrated through her. It didn't matter what he said, but Piri remembered many jars in a long-ago cabin as he spoke. Objects suspended in thick fluids. Strange appendages and veins. She had not seen the casualties after the Games, but she knew he also drew from that knowledge, instructing the others.

She wished the healer were not so serious. It hurt to look at him. He should take his clothes off.

Conversation yielded to a delicate ripping. Something tugged at Piri's insides as though she were cloth. The Yata man held her more firmly, his thighs trembling. He said nothing as the others spoke in low, urgent tones around her. She wanted to look up at his face, but she couldn't lift her head.

Besides, her eyes were closed. That would make seeing him difficult.

The world rearranged. Weight lifted from one part and descended on another as a wind blew through her. So much moving about.

At first everything inside had seemed still while they raced over the mountain, wheels clattering and axles straining until she feared the cart would shatter. She had been fracturing along with the rest, knowing only to hold onto the straps with all her might as piles of blankets absorbed the shock.

The child had been adamant. Agony burst from the soles of her feet up through her head as she tried to guide him out. Somehow, during the turbulent descent, they had come to an agreement before they killed each other.

Now she was held in place, unable to move, while everything shifted inside. She was folded and pocketed like the burlap, doubled back on herself.

Emptied. Lost.

A cord draped over her, pulsing against her skin. She heard a wistful sigh from the Yata behind her as Ghost called her name. A thin mewling arose from her chest and repeated, growing stronger.

The doctor whispered, "I'll be damned."

Her eyes fluttered open. At first the doctor's hands blocked her view as they wiped limbs and torso and cleared mucus away. Then they departed and she looked upon a squint, a blood-flecked face. Translucent down covered the warm, coppery mass Ghost held against her breasts.

Small lungs inflated and then deflated with a piercing yell. Piri looked into the gaping maw, at a tiny, perfect tongue, and began to shake. She heard another log tossed onto the fire.

Ghost grinned at her. Even kneeling he struggled to keep his balance. She did not know which of them was more exhausted. "He's beautiful."

She tried to lift her arm; he guided her hand. The child already wore a thick crown of colorless hair. Her fingers moved down silky curls, past light fuzz at the neck, until they rested between delicate shoulders. They drummed slowly, lightly.

*Tel.*

She waited for Ghost's nod, to make sure he had seen.

He said it softly to the others. “It’s the Yata word for ‘soul.’”

When he looked back at her she moved her fingers again.

*TelZodo.*

TwinSoul.

Ghost whispered, “Welcome, little one.”

Piri’s head buzzed again. Somewhere the umbilical was cut, the placenta drawn from her. She was lowered to the floor on a cloud, as though they were up in the mountain again. All the voices melded. Tiny jabs of pain flashed like the stars as she was joined back together.

TelZodo still rested in her arms. No one had taken him away.

At last the other Yata stood before her and she mustered up enough strength for a smile of gratitude, crinkling her mask. He smiled back, just as silently.

The healer’s hands traveled over her, making careful inspections. His voice floated down to her like mist. “DamBuster, MudAdder, keep an eye on that baby and tell me if there are any signs of distress. I will need to examine him eventually, but I doubt anyone could pry him from her right now.”

Ghost, half-conscious and snuggled against her side, murmured, “There’s a reason for that.”

A look of sudden, wide-eyed understanding crossed the other Yata’s face.

## CHAPTER 38

### Crossroads

DewLeaf dropped accountings before TripStone, then turned away and retreated from the long dining table and into the kitchen. Steam wafted in from the stove, carrying bright, green smells of spring tea. The lamps were already lit, dispelling gloom from a warm, gray afternoon and its steady drum of rain on the farmhouse roof.

TripStone shut her eyes against the numbers and didn't know which was worse, the harvest projections or DewLeaf's increasingly stooped back. Worst of all was the silence from Ghost's family, now that the hunter's trip to Promontory was set.

Their silence, and their painfully polite hospitality.

She had brought Erta's body to the farmhouse and shown DewLeaf and RootWing the note. They gave her sole command of their kitchen without a word, leaving her to labor alone for days among the vats and then in the smokehouse, reducing Erta to preserved meat that would be hers alone. Even with Erta's blessing, even in preparation for a long journey, to claim an entire carcass while Crossroads hungered represented the height of selfishness.

The prayers had echoed from TripStone's single voice as she mixed the brine. As she peeled layers of skin for bandages, sliced and knotted entrails, drained marrow. She polished the bones afterwards, gazing sadly on their unadorned nakedness.

Whether or not they would ever bear the stippling of scripture, they had to go to Gria. Something of Erta had to return to Basc.

Now that meat filled TripStone's pack. She bent over parchment, trying to draw some solace from the numbers. The weather could change; the predictions could be off. But Crossroads' attrition had taken its toll. The combined effects of the massacre, starvation, and now deaths and injuries in the far woods had left these fields largely untended, more than Ghost's kin could manage on their own. The sole act of training citizens to hunt took them away from their normal communal

duties at the Grange.

Members of the household continued to tend crops and livestock while RootWing walked BrushBurn around the property. TripStone doubted any direct observation of the fields could offset the information she held in her hands. Most likely BrushBurn was overlaying his own design for the Grange, devising suggestions to fit Promontory's intended plans. What to keep, what to replant, what to redistribute.

What to knock down, what to plow under, where to set up the pens.

Now RootWing, DewLeaf, and the others believed her to be a willing accomplice in those plans. Or a naïve one, ripe for corruption as part of her suggested "partnership" between Crossroads and Promontory.

Through it all they remained unerringly gracious. RootWing settled TripStone into Ghost's old room during the days she spent processing Erta's remains. Behind neat piles of mending and the stored belongings of random siblings and cousins lay numerous reminders of the life that had once been SunDog's.

Ghost had taken his *yatanii* list and his rudimentary experiments to the cabin, but he had left his toys behind. TripStone's fingers ran along odd wooden gears and perpetual motion machines, curious devices carved by WindTamer under the boy's excited direction. Standing in what now served as a storage room, she blew the dust from small, neatly-cut pieces of parchment on which her friend had written brief, innocent poems in a child's hurried scrawl about pollen, and spiders, and moths.

Even her pallet was the same one where Ghost had almost died, his bones softening and his fur falling from him. What little flesh he'd had to begin with had melted almost clear away. The bed's stuffing was long replaced, but the memory of his long limbs and bony joints remained. TripStone could swear they still dimpled the surface.

She'd almost fled from it. She was sure RootWing had placed her in this room for a reason, probably believing that her memories of Ghost would compel her to stay. To work within Crossroads rather than forsake her home as its so-called "representative." Simply being in this house, being treated as a dignitary while viewed as a traitor, filled her with a sorrow that often pinned her to the bed.



But she had slept. Ghost's room acted as a talisman against the dreams that shook her awake, against the heat that swept her up within her own, empty home. Staying here, she was spared her daily walks through the marketplace, back and forth, past the cart of the man who even now accompanied RootWing in the rain. The man who held this farm hostage.

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She looked up as the door opened. HigherBrook brushed back his hood and unwrapped his thin and dripping coat. He set it by the hearth, next to her own, and said, "Tell me you've changed your mind."

TripStone shook her head. "I'm sorry."

He sniffed the air and raised his eyebrows at her. She said, flatly, "Camouflage exercises."

"You're not training your charges now, TripStone. This is a closed room on a humid day and your aromatics are screaming. Or would you rather distract the rest of us?"

She turned back to the parchment. He couldn't force her to empty her pockets of the strong herbs. Better for the others to smell disrespect on her than the musk of one seduced.

DewLeaf brought tea from the kitchen. She returned HigherBrook's amiable greetings before she poured from the pot.

The head of the Chamber smiled at Ghost's mother as he raised his mug to his lips. "Spring tea. Delightful; thank you." His gaze rested on TripStone. "I couldn't tell what it was from here."

Men and women from Ghost's extended family filed in and took their seats at the table, greeting TripStone with reserved tact. They were friendlier to HigherBrook, despite the Chamber's reluctance to reject the meat from Destiny Farm.

Something had changed. Not long ago Ghost's parents had looked upon HigherBrook with distrust. Now the family treated him with a familiarity TripStone had not known existed. Without asking, they passed him the honey he

preferred in his tea and inquired about the tome he used in his current meditations. DewLeaf sat beside him, adding to the small talk.

How often had he visited here? How often had he stayed, in his travels between Crossroads and Basc?

The papers passed from hand to hand around the table. TripStone watched as the others consulted amongst themselves, trying to devise strategies against what seemed inevitable. She rose as DewLeaf returned to the kitchen for more tea. "Let me help you."

"It's all right, dear." DewLeaf's light touch forced her back onto the seat. "It's nothing, really."

She'd been allowed to help in the past. Ghost's family had treated her as one of their own, not as some delicate seedling unable to bear the breeze. She glanced at HigherBrook, who was preoccupied with one of Ghost's cousins, explaining the Chamber's scenarios of different loan structures to be proposed to Promontory.

She had those papers in her pack. They were worthless.

The door swung open and the room filled briefly with the sound of pounding rain. RootWing and BrushBurn removed muddy boots and eased slippers on at the threshold. Their coats trailed water to the hearth, where they dragged towels across their faces before sitting at the table.

TripStone was thankful that the seats around and opposite her were already filled. BrushBurn passed behind her on his way to an empty chair and murmured, "Lovely perfume."

He could goad her all he wanted, so long as the aromatics masked her true response. He knew why she wore them, but he was not her concern right now.

They spent hours discussing the future of the Grange. BrushBurn and HigherBrook were both conciliatory, dodging conflict and filling the table with hypotheses. The land was healthy. The yields would be better if circumstances were different. Investment rather than acquisition could prove more profitable. All Promontory needed was time and patience for Crossroads to pay its debt in full.

TripStone looked around the table and could see that no one believed a word of it, least of all the chief negotiators.

“You sound like you don’t need inspectors right now, but people to simply work the fields.” The concern in BrushBurn’s voice sounded sickeningly genuine. “Promontory can provide those.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you call them inspectors or laborers,” DewLeaf snapped. “They’d both be here for the same purpose.”

“We’re working to make our production methods more efficient,” offered one of Ghost’s cousins, a tall woman seated at the opposite end of the table. “There are redundancies we can eliminate.”

“Thank you for your offer, BrushBurn,” RootWing said, his voice hollow. “But we’d rather use our own people.”

“What do you think, TripStone?” Even from far down the table, the trader managed to lock his steel-blue eyes with hers. “You’re experienced in helping to maintain this farm. As the Crossroads representative, what would you propose to Promontory?”

TripStone looked from person to person, at faces kept deliberately blank. She knew none of them wanted to hear her. They would see whatever she said as caving in to their common enemy.

She cleared her throat and tried to speak past hoarseness. “We need time. We’ve got to determine what our strengths and weaknesses are and why the redundancies are there in the first place.” The image of FeatherFly fallen by a thresher rose unbidden, and the gash in his forehead healing beneath the bandage she had fashioned from a bit of Ulik’s thigh. TripStone closed her eyes against memory. “We can’t afford to hurt ourselves further.”

“In other words,” HigherBrook interjected, his voice hard, “you’re asking for extra personnel to study this farm’s operations before you try to decrease the labor force. Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that just what Promontory’s inspectors would do?”

“I’m going as your messenger,” TripStone shot back, “not to make policy. My suggestion is not the only one at this table.”

“And whom will you consult while you’re in Promontory? You’d be several days distant from Crossroads. Do you plan to send a runner and sit around waiting for each decision?”

“Let me remind you,” BrushBurn said, softly, “that time is one thing you do not have in abundance. And you are short both labor and product. Whatever agreements we make must start from there.”

The torturous negotiations resumed, circling around the table with the pervasiveness of buzzards. TripStone struggled to remain seated when every muscle in her ached to run to Ghost’s room and pluck her StormCloud from beside the pallet. Remove the parasite that had implanted himself in Crossroads, feeding off its misery.

But that parasite was nothing compared to the people who had sent him here.

In the end she was handed a list of proposals to review. Last stabs at dignity, offered without much hope. She watched in despair as BrushBurn retrieved his dried coat and slipped his boots back on, looking grimly satisfied.

He drew her aside before he left. “Do what you need to do here. I’ll wait for you.” His hood hid his smile from the others. “You know where to find me.”

She nodded, unable to speak. She breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped out into the rain.

RootWing ducked into the kitchen. The rest of Ghost’s family sat quietly around the table. It must have been the weather keeping them from their chores. HigherBrook sipped his tea in a manner that was slow even for him and looked almost sad.

Fur rose on the back of TripStone’s neck. She touched DewLeaf’s arm. “At least let me help you clear the table.”

“I’ll do that.” HigherBrook was on his feet, walking toward her.

Too late she spotted RootWing returning to the room with a veterinary syringe, but the warning from her instincts was too awful. “Trouble with another goat?” she stammered, unable to stop. “I can help you—”

HigherBrook grabbed her from behind, pinioning her arms and cinching her legs with his own.

“*Liar!*” She struggled in his grasp, seeking and finding the right pressure points. CatBird was a good teacher, but she didn’t know all the tricks. TripStone yelled to Ghost’s kin, “Whatever this man has told you, he’s been lying to you!”

She pressed harder until HigherBrook’s hold faltered, then broke free and whirled on him. “Don’t do this.”

He stepped back, shaking his head as more came forward. Others blocked the way to Ghost’s room, where her pack and rifle awaited. She could only lunge, trying to butt her way through, but then a dozen hands were on her, pulling her back. Several voices apologized to her at once, no longer polite but sincerely troubled.

“You didn’t trust HigherBrook before!” she screamed at RootWing. “Why are you trusting him now?” Her body jerked against strong arms. “What makes you think he can protect you when he’s got the rest of Crossroads to worry about?”

“I am so sorry, Stone.” RootWing’s craggy face loomed before her and she used all her strength to keep from looking away. “Promontory would eat you alive. We can’t let you go there.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispered, wincing as metal slid beneath her skin.

Soon her muscles became tardy, her reflexes numbed. She fixed HigherBrook with a venomous gaze for as long as she could keep her eyes open. His contrite expression only made things worse.

His words wavered as they reached her, as though she lay at the bottom of a lake. “I apologize for putting all of you through this, but it’s really for the best. I can transport her to the Rotunda, myself.”

“If it’s all the same to you,” RootWing said, “I’d rather keep her here. Our families go back a long way. Let me talk to her.”

Arms guided TripStone onto a chair, stopping her head from hitting the table. At first she thought several people still held her, before she realized the support came from DewLeaf alone. She’d thank Ghost’s mother if only she could speak.

CHAPTER 39

Voices still conversed around the dining room table when TripStone awakened, her head pillowed on her arms. The room spun when she tried to sit upright. Her arms flopped uselessly at her sides.

“Easy.” RootWing held her shoulders as she groaned. “I had to give you a pretty big dose. I know how strong you are.”

She had to fight to open her eyes. She whispered, “Is he still here?”

“HigherBrook? No.”

Her voice slurred. “You’re sure.”

“Yes,” DewLeaf said. “We checked outside.” She pushed a mug of astringent tea down the table. “This will help clear your head.”

TripStone’s arms remained stubbornly inert. Her head lolled toward Ghost’s father. “RootWing—I’m not *that* strong.” She took small sips as he held the mug to her lips and had to concentrate to swallow. Her head might be clearing, but the rest of her body was not so forthcoming. “I’ll speak only to you and DewLeaf.”

Chairs scraped. TripStone waited until footfalls dwindled and the doors closed.

“Okay,” RootWing said, softly. “Let’s hear your side.”

His eyes were so like Ghost’s. She could look into them forever.

But then she would never leave, and she had to. And to leave, she had to give them sufficient cause to let her go.

“I’ve always trusted you,” she said, keeping her voice low. “I want to trust you now, but you have no idea how frightened I am.”

DewLeaf massaged her back. “Whatever you tell us remains here.”

TripStone closed her eyes. Her body was not under her control. They could keep her disabled if they wanted to. If they did, she would have to find another way,

some other time.

She steeled herself. “The only reason I am going to Promontory is to destroy Destiny Farm. HigherBrook knows that. That’s why he doesn’t want me to go there.” Her limbs still refused to budge. “He hates them as much as we do, but he’s afraid Crossroads will starve without them.”

“You’re only one person, Stone.” RootWing rubbed her arms, trying to dispel her numbness. “What can you possibly do?”

“I’m not acting alone.”

She licked her lips. RootWing proffered more tea. TripStone’s limbs might be leaden but her heartbeat rocked her in the chair, picking up speed. No matter how much she sipped, her mouth remained dry. The silence settled around her like dust.

Before she could choke on it, RootWing asked, “Who else? Yata? Masari?”

She looked beseechingly into his eyes. “Yata.”

He put down the mug and took her hands in his. She wished she could feel them. “You know what they did to us.”

“I know,” she said. “I also know what Destiny Farm does to Yata. I know what Promontory would do here.” She saw RootWing’s hesitation and felt it in DewLeaf’s massaging hands. She had to tell them more. “And I know what they did, and what they would do again, to the mother of Ghost’s child.”

Now no one moved. She waited. Rain clattered on the roof, sluicing down windows.

Finally DewLeaf whispered, “Tell us everything.”

TripStone’s heart threatened to burst from her chest. “I have set Erta’s bones aside. I need you to take them to Basc and bring them to Gria. She can do with them what she wants.” It would be easier if TripStone could grasp RootWing, or comfort DewLeaf, but she couldn’t. “The people who came from the Cliff brought narratives. Ghost dictated them, but they’re written in Yata. Gria can translate them into Masari for you. The mother of his child is a Yata woman

named Piri, who escaped from Destiny Farm. I met her before she and Ghost fled into Alvav.”

DewLeaf kneaded her shoulders, her neck. Perhaps it was best that Ghost’s mother stood behind her. TripStone was afraid to look at her face. Seeing RootWing’s shock at war with his longing was bad enough.

She forced the words out. “They are no longer on the Cliff. They are in a prison called the Marsh. Conditions there—” Her shoulders tensed. She could move her hands, but not enough to make a difference. “I’ve got to find out if they’re still alive.” She closed her eyes and let the tears come. “Tell me you would welcome a mix-child into the family. One who might not need Yata meat. Please tell me it’s possible.”

Strong arms wrapped around her, front and back.

“Stone,” RootWing whispered. He cradled her head to his chest. “We’ll go there ourselves. We’ll get them out however we can.” His hand smoothed her hair. “You’ll be traveling with a cart and the roads are muddy and will slow you down. We can go faster. We’ll send someone to you with any news.”

She sobbed against his shirt. “I was afraid to tell you sooner. I’m sorry.”

DewLeaf’s palm caressed her cheek. “Now that we know, we can act. Let’s get you to bed so you can sleep this sedative off.”

“I’ve got to leave.” TripStone could barely push herself away from RootWing. Her legs were still numb. “What makes you think HigherBrook won’t be back here in the morning to lock me in the Rotunda?”

Ghost’s mother stepped up to the window, watching as the steady downpour turned the ground into a thick soup. Thunder repeated in the distance, growing softer in the late hour. “Go get her things. We can take the sledge up to the main road and carry her the rest of the way if we have to.” She turned back to TripStone. “I’m worried about my son, but I’m also concerned for your safety. You don’t have to travel with BrushBurn.”

“He has information I need.” TripStone reached for the table and pressed her palms against the wood. She still couldn’t stand. “He thinks he can get information from me as well. I don’t think he’d harm me.” A tiny smile crossed

her lips. “If he tries to, I’ll kill him, even incapacitated.”

She watched RootWing hasten from the room. In a moment he returned with her pack and her StormCloud.

“We’ll keep in touch,” he said, looking as anxious as DewLeaf. “I know a couple of good messengers.” This time TripStone could feel his hands holding hers. “No more secrets from now on, Stone.”

She whispered, “I promise.”

He nodded. “I’ll get the sledge.”

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TripStone listened to blades sliding through mud and the suck of boots, to the sound of rain hitting and slipping off the oiled leather cinching her. Her arm rested on the belongings she was still unable to carry. Ghost’s parents slogged up ahead, pulling ropes to either side of her and taking care to leave the sledge clear passage.

She cursed under her breath, frustrated with being an invalid, but then she saw DewLeaf’s shoulders. They no longer slouched. Both of Ghost’s parents looked more vigorous, though that could be a trick of the lanterns.

By the time they reached the main road, she was more than ready to try to stand. Rain pelted TripStone’s coat and hood as she pulled herself out from under the leather. Holding onto RootWing’s hands, and with DewLeaf’s arm across her back, she took her first shaky steps atop cobblestones, gritting her teeth against the strain.

As tough as that was, saying goodbye would be harder.

When her legs no longer threatened to collapse, she hobbled to the sledge, lifted her pack, and slung it over one shoulder.

DewLeaf retrieved and handed over her rifle. “Gods protect you, TripStone. We love you.”

“And you.” She secured the gun and gave Ghost’s mother a crushing hug.

“If you succeed,” DewLeaf whispered, “what then?”

“I don’t know.” Water coursed around them. “I would hope things get better than they are now. But I don’t know.”

She turned to RootWing and felt his arms enfolding her halfway around her pack. “They’ve got to be alive. We both know what Ghost can survive.” She barked a laugh. “Piri, too. If she could beat my father to a pulp, she could do anything.” She choked back a sob. Her hands clutched at his coat. “Help me, RootWing. I don’t want to let go.”

He kissed her forehead before he released his hold. “We’ll send news.” He retrieved a lantern from the ground and passed it to her. “Stone,” he said, softly, “you *will* come back.”

TripStone nodded, managing a half-smile before she backed away.

Then she forced herself to turn around. Her legs wouldn’t carry her quickly to BrushBurn’s tent, but they would carry her.

The rain had softened to a drizzle by the time she reached the flap and ducked inside, dropping exhausted and dripping to BrushBurn’s thick rug. She lowered her wick as he rolled over on his pallet, squinting.

Then she snuffed out the light. “HigherBrook rises a couple of hours after dawn. We should leave here before then.”

His gravelly answer was still thick with sleep. “I’m sure you’ll wake me. But you won’t be much good for traveling if you sleep in a wet coat.”

“Thank you, but I’ll decline the invitation to share your blanket.”

“Of course you will.” Cloth shifted and she could tell he rolled away from her. “There should be another blanket near you. I trust you can find it.”

She felt around the rug until her hand touched folded wool. Wordlessly she unslung her pack and rifle, then removed her coat and laid it aside. The blanket felt luxuriant and dry against her shoulders.

Its heady scent drifted into her lungs, lulling her to sleep.