

Deviations: Destiny

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Elissa Malcohn

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For more about the author, go to <http://home.earthlink.net/~emalcohn/index.html>

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Also by Elissa Malcohn in the Deviations Series:

Volume 1: *Covenant*

What people are saying about the *Deviations* series

“If you are looking for something different with a great story line, I would suggest reading these books. They are very well written and draw the reader into the story, possibly against their will.”

-Rachel Baker, Old Musty Books

“This is a dark series with a hidden deeper meaning. Malcohn’s books are a look at the world we live in. This is not an easy read but it is an important read.”

-Debra, at Goodreads

“The world is rich, believable and consistent. The situation is brimming with potential. And I, for one, have never read anything quite like it.”

-Scott T. Barnes, editor, *New Myths*

What people are saying about *Covenant*

“Rich character development and fascinating central conflict quickly addict the reader to this story....the moral issues are so compelling, so thought-provoking, you’ll thank the author for presenting this perspective.”

-Lady Emily, Redbud Book Club

“Take Ms. Elissa Malcohn ... whose novel *Covenant* shows some killer talent, and reminds this reader of that paragon of science fiction and fantasy: Robert Silverberg; and her oeuvre doesn’t stop there.”

-Julianne Draper, Miami Examiner

“This novel is the first in a projected series, and there is definitely enough material for series of books, series of movies, television series, fan-fic, etc. ... I recommend the novel and the author.”

-Jean Roberta, in her blog

“This book is a must read for any literary enthusiast. Elissa does a wonderful job in creating this world where the Masari and Yata live in this symbiotic relationship that is based upon ritualistic cannibalism (hence the term Covenant). In spite of the subject matter the novel is not some horrific blood bath, but a thoughtful look into the relationship between these two people groups. This balance that was created by the Covenant to preserve both races is threatened by forces from outside and within their own hearts to free themselves of this enslavement to their DNA and ecology, but may lose their societies should it be successfully destroyed. As heart wrenching as the Covenant is, extinction is worse. Join this journey of faith, doubts, heroic actions, and questionable ethics as this saga is played out upon the backdrop of this primordial world where anything can happen...”

-Glenda Finkelstein, in her blog

“I state this with all due honesty and with as little bias as humanly possible. Read this woman’s work. She’s one of the best indie writers out there.”

-K.L. Nappier, in a MySpace comment

“This is just the kind of book I like: too good to put down, but when it’s over, you wish there were more and are sorry to see it end ...”

-Gypsy Wynd, on Amazon

“Malcoln has built a very interesting and very well developed central conflict, and the development of the story is second to none...”

-Alan Petrillo, on Amazon

“The author’s tone coaxes and guides the reader to judge the ethics of the situation instead of dictating right and wrong. Without revealing the surprising plot, I can say that the story had me creeped out at first, in the way many vampire novels do. But it has a much higher path to it. It’s so well-written that once you’re caught up in the action, you can’t put the book down.”

-FatChickDancing, on Amazon

“This novel is, in a word, riveting.”

-L.W. Rogers

_For all those who persevere
against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Keep the faith._

_In memory of Nelson G. Williams,
friend and workshop-mate._

and a word of caution

I'd finished drafting *Destiny* in 2005. A short story written 20 years earlier had evolved into a trilogy. Or so I'd thought.

I set about looking for a home for the *Deviations Trilogy*, but the characters refused to leave me alone. Soon I was scribbling notes detailing their lives after *Destiny*. In 2008 I finished drafting what had become a six-book series.

Self-publishing for free distribution presents its own challenges, and I am grateful to everyone who has agreed to step outside the box with me. Thanks to all of you who are joining me on this journey.

I am indebted to the MobileRead Forums for sending readers my way; to Matthew McClintock's Manybooks.net for carrying *Deviations*; to sites like John DeNardo's SF Signal, Quasar Dragon, and others for bringing word of the books to readers; and to reviewers willing to consider the work. I want to again thank friend and workshop-mate Lakisha Spletzer for handing me the metaphor of social cannibalism, which brings an important undercurrent of the series into sharp focus.

Thanks also go to *Andromeda Library* hosts Glenda and Tony Finkelstein, *Chronicles* host Mark Eller, and *Conversations LIVE!* host and The Write Stuff Literacy Campaign founder Cyrus A. Webb, for their airtime support.

The members of Inverness Writers have stuck with me throughout, and I am grateful for their patience, their generosity, and their abiding friendship. Thanks again go to workshop-mates Belea Keeney, Joyce Moore, Loretta Rogers, and Meredith West - and to Citrus County Library System director Flossie Benton Rogers and her staff for their unwavering support of local authors. I am also extremely grateful to have known the late Nelson G. Williams, friend and workshop-mate from 2003 until his death in October 2009.

Thanks also go to Tracy A. Akers and Kathy L. Nappier, for both their support of the work and for friendships born of the convention circuit, that now continue beyond it.

And to Mary C. Russell, whose love and influence go beyond words.

A word of caution:

Destiny takes its title from an aphrodisiac possessing an unsettling history. In the course of workshopping the book, the question arose as to whether some of its scenes were gratuitous. Opinions among readers differed.

The disclaimer on my website reads, “The *Deviations* series contains mature themes and situations. It has been called both science fiction and dark fantasy, but it is not young adult fantasy. Please download and share responsibly.”

That warning has applied throughout, but it is especially true for this volume. Every book in the series has a vision that I didn’t want to write, but felt I had to for the sake of the story. *Destiny* contains what was for me the toughest vision of the lot. In writing it, I took part of my cue from Farrah Fawcett’s performance in the 1986 film *Extremities*.

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.”

Elissa’s work also appears in publications that won awards in 2009. IPPY Silver Medalist *Riffing on Strings: Creative Writing Inspired by String Theory* (Scriblerus Press) contains her story “Arachne” (originally published in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, Dec. 1988). Bram Stoker Award winner *Unspeakable Horror: From the Shadows of the Closet* (Dark Scribe Press) contains her story “Memento Mori.” Hugo Award winner *Electric Velocipede* published her story “Hermit Crabs,” which is on the recommended reading list in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction, 26th Annual Edition*.

More publications news may be found on her website:

<http://home.earthlink.net/~emalcohn/index.html>

CHAPTER 1

Early Spring

Crossroads

TripStone awoke from forgotten dreams, her nose twitching from the smell of smoky tea steeping in a pot. She listened to a crackling flame beneath a modest awning. The sky beyond, a uniform gray, made it impossible to tell what time it was.

At first she didn't remember where she was, either, but then her eyes adjusted to the light. BrushBurn sat breakfasting by the fire with his back to her, already dressed in traveling clothes, observing the rain. He had unfolded her coat and set it by the heat to dry.

"You seem to have slept well," he said, without turning around. He lifted the pot from its tripod and poured her tea into a tin mug, turning back from the gloom. "It's warmer out here."

TripStone bent to her pack to retrieve her own meat and slipped a small piece, hard and dry, into her mouth. The morsels in BrushBurn's hands were soft and succulent, and they were the last things she wanted to touch.

Her muscles ached. She stood and stretched, grimacing. Her own clothes were still on her, muddy and rumpled but left intact overnight. Her feet sweated inside her boots. Blinking and unsure, she cast her glance about the tent.

BrushBurn said, plainly, "Behind the curtain."

She looked at a man preoccupied with his tea. Perhaps he always kept the chamber pot discrete, given the bartering that occurred here. The small, earth-toned sheet blocking it from view was a distressingly thoughtful gesture.

When she had finished, she retrieved more Yata from her pack and stepped to the fire. The strong tea drove the cold from her fingertips. She drank deeply, both hands curled around the cup. "The roads will be bad."

“At least two days to Rudder, even with both of us pulling. We’ll have to camp.” Rust-colored pelt peeked out from beneath his sleeves as he drained his mug. “Leaving for Promontory before the rains would have made more sense, but your numbers would have looked even worse.”

She glared at him. “Better to instill false hopes, then.”

“False hopes accomplish nothing. I believe in being accurate.”

Bitterness rose. “More profitable that way.”

BrushBurn nodded. “Always.” He licked the last trace of Yata from his lips and stood. “When you’re ready, I could use your help with loading the cart.”

TripStone looked away as he shrugged on his coat and pulled up the hood, but she could still picture his outline beneath the fabric. Alone in the tent she found only clothes and furniture, camping necessities and structural reinforcements. His papers must be safeguarded in the cart, along with the relics her people had been forced to relinquish. She heard chains being unlocked outside, a hinge creaking.

She could douse the fire and gather up the cooking utensils. If they were to leave before the Rotunda stirred, she would have to handle other objects as well.

BrushBurn pulled up the cart as she uncoupled and lowered thick, striped drapes. TripStone looked upon an enclosed transport divided into sections. The compartment filled with bones remained secured. The other wagon, the one with the meat, gleamed in early morning light beside the smaller tents of BrushBurn’s still-dozing accomplices.

She chewed listlessly on Erta’s remains. Her body would need the energy.

The trader took the chamber pot outside, then returned and dismantled his pallet with efficient, well-practiced movements. Together they removed the other layers of curtains, shuttled the pillows, rolled up the rugs. TripStone focused on inanimate objects as she and BrushBurn passed each other. The more the tent emptied, the more crowded it became.

They collapsed the frame. TripStone slipped into her coat and bent for her rifle and pack.

“There’s an open area in the front for those.” BrushBurn dropped his own pack at the head of the cart and pointed to the harnesses. “That one’s ready for you.” He checked the gears a last time and came back around to strap himself in.

TripStone worked buckles that needed virtually no adjustment. She hazarded a look at him from beneath her hood. One evening, two copulations, and already he had memorized her shape.

He asked, “Have you pulled in tandem before?”

She coughed. “No.”

“Follow my lead, then,” he said, “and we won’t seize up. I’ll keep my stride to yours.”

A yoke rested over and between them. BrushBurn slipped his hood back and nodded at her to do the same; they would need the visibility. TripStone positioned her hands by the levers.

“You’re doing the right thing, you know,” he told her. “Your people need all the help they can get.”

“Tell me that when Promontory is in a state of servitude.”

He offered a wry smile. “We’ll let the chains out on my signal.”

Drizzle matted thick curls to his head. TripStone looked away and out to the Rotunda, then to the thick clusters of squat houses that blocked her view of the hunters’ training yards. She pictured straw Yata standing upright against the rain.

Her hands responded to the sound of his voice, working the controls and advancing the gears. His instructions were clear and exact, her execution immediate. The cart moved easily behind them, clattering on the cobblestones, its passage remaining smooth until they began to climb.

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A wild-eyed RootWing answered HigherBrook’s knock, pulled him inside the Grange farmhouse, and forced him onto a chair. It was obvious neither of Ghost’s parents had slept.

“TripStone’s gone with BrushBurn.” RootWing pinned the Chamber leader’s arms to his sides and knelt, bringing his weathered face close. Dark, plum-colored chops twitched. “We freed her. Now tell me about my son.”

The shock HigherBrook had expected curiously did not register. He felt dismay at the hunter’s departure, but not surprise. “I have no news, other than what I told you before.” He looked into eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Ghost had gone into the central valley and the Yata territory of Alvav. He was a guest on the Cliff and was being treated well. If you have other information, I’d like to hear it.”

RootWing pushed away from the chair and stood, disgusted. “Either your ignorance is dazzling or you are the vilest creature to cross my threshold, and I include the meat trader in that.”

Ghost’s mother DewLeaf sat half-collapsed on the other side of the table, exhausted. HigherBrook looked from her to RootWing. “I assume you know the real reason TripStone is headed into Promontory,” he said, as gently as he could. He’d known that his pretense of her capitulation to that city might breed further distrust, and anger. He had not expected anguish. “She did not hide her mission to destroy Destiny Farm from me, but neither was she forthcoming about other things. What did she tell you?”

“She told us to see Gria.” DewLeaf struggled upright and walked painfully into the kitchen, returning with a velvety sack. The soft fabric muffled the clacking of bones inside. “You’re going to take us to her.”

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HigherBrook ran them into Basc himself, momentarily relieved to employ his improved fitness in something other than hunting exercises. He took little comfort in the fact that TripStone had told Ghost’s parents only enough to secure her own release.

Their fugitive son and the Yata woman with him, pregnant with his child, had left the Cliff and descended into Alvav’s prison, the Marsh. HigherBrook hardly believed the news, but TripStone would not lie to these people merely to bring them into close cooperation with Gria. The hunter might be impulsive, she might be secretive and obstinate, but she was not slanderous.

That had been his job.

The soldiers guarding Gria's door looked questioningly at the farmers, but deferred to HigherBrook's request for an audience and sent a message to their general. RootWing and DewLeaf were not complete strangers to Basc. As advisors, they had helped set up the planting fields.

Gria arrived after a considerable wait, flushed and begrimed, her salt-and-pepper hair slick with sweat. She smelled of gunpowder.

The warrior blinked away tears when DewLeaf proffered the soft bag containing Erta's bones. Gria turned smartly on her heel and led them to the inner chamber of her hut. There, she eased the bones down and lit a lamp beside them, whispering a brief prayer.

HigherBrook frowned at her angular profile. Gria had led the massacre to destroy the Covenant. Her piety now was unsettling.

She asked, "Has TripStone left Crossroads?" and then studied them all to establish agreement on their answer. A guard brought benches from an outer room. "My lieutenant informed me that you are asking about Ghost and his consort, Piri." The tall Yata turned to regard HigherBrook, her mouth working, then faced the others. "Your leader knew nothing about the Marsh, or about conditions on the Cliff, because we chose not to tell him. We said the Yata from there had come to Basc to assist us and to help establish a trade route. HigherBrook didn't know they were escaped slaves."

The new faces in the fields had been hard to ignore. HigherBrook had seen more and more people erecting sheds, bending their backs to break new ground. He'd heard strangely canted inflections, like Yata spoken with a Masari accent. The people from the Cliff had been cordial, even affable. They'd been industrious. He'd never suspected that they were part of a new and growing militia.

He wanted to squirm under Gria's scrutiny as she made her disclosures. Even if he found where her forces trained, he couldn't stop them. If what she said were true, almost every able-bodied adult in Basc was contributing in some way to maintaining her army.

More than that. Even diapers were collected with the chamberpots and their contents distilled into saltpeter for gunpowder. Crossroads might still be dependent on Promontory, but Basc kept finding new ways of declaring its independence.

HigherBrook tried to mask his amazement. How distant were Gria's factories that they could hide even that kind of stench?

Through her candor, Gria challenged him to subdue and perhaps destroy her entire village. She was demonstrating how well she knew him.

"If the refugees had told your advisors the truth, it could have compromised our mission," Gria told Ghost's parents, frowning. "I'm sorry we had to withhold information about your son. The blame for that rests with me."

"Not entirely with you," HigherBrook said, sourly.

Gria's eyes blazed. "*Entirely* with me, HigherBrook."

The practices in Alvav, and in Rudder by extension, shook him to his core.

How often had the Chambers of Crossroads and Rudder met at barn-raising and over ales, sharing in each other's civic holidays? How often had they talked innocently about the niceties of trade, the trails to be re-blazed, roads to be re-cleared, seeds to be exchanged? Even the frequent interactions among the guilds had touched only on Rudder's bright surface and on the superficial resemblances between Masari neighbors.

The StormCloud rifles now strapped to HigherBrook's back and to Gria's had been the first indication of how different Rudder was from Crossroads. But Crossroads was dying then. The powerful repeaters that Rudder's shooters employed at the border and then left behind had kept HigherBrook's village from extinction. To challenge their use would have been suicide.

He was already half-mad by the time Gria retrieved Ghost's narratives from a far table. The loose sheets of parchment rested inside a badly-stained cloth bag frayed from brambles and scorched with gunpowder burns.

"Your son was interrogated on the Cliff," Gria explained to the farmers. "No Alvav Yata had ever heard of the Covenant. The slaves came here looking for godhood." Her face pinched. "Our own godhood was long gone by the time they arrived. They took great pains to smuggle Ghost's testimony here, but that testimony had driven them to freedom."

HigherBrook translated the dictation, alternating with Gria when each of their

voices began to crack. They flanked Ghost's parents. He held DewLeaf, while the general nearly lost her fingers to the grip of RootWing's hand.

Scant seasons ago, HigherBrook would have condemned to death the scientist who now spoke of the Covenant so eloquently and so agonizingly. This was what it was like to be a *yatanii*, rejecting Yata meat to the point of starvation. This was what it meant to be a fugitive, a heretic, an abomination experimenting on sacred body parts in an attempt to free Masari from Yata dependence.

This was what it meant to leave one's family behind. To live alone in self-imposed exile, and then to criminally shelter a Masari runaway whose horrible death had helped save Ghost's life.

From out of the pages, a voice HigherBrook could only imagine detailed the healing of a Yata woman who had come to Ghost half-dead, and his torturous restraint from killing her at the height of hunger. Fluid script, sober and unsentimental, described the loss of everything but her, followed by an act of ultimate indecency committed out of an almost inconceivable love.

Inconceivable to the Covenant. Mix-children lived in Alvav, endangered though they were.

The mixture of joy and grief in Ghost's parents threatened to rip HigherBrook apart. They were beyond dictates and tradition, beyond philosophy or sacrament. This was their blood. This was their son.

And this was Crossroads. Not just the stories of Ghost's life and of his family's, but of WindTamer and BrokenThread and NightShout and so many others. And of TripStone, who had slipped from HigherBrook's grasp on her quest for destruction. Who had worked to undermine him at every turn, yet submitted to a Yata warrior whose actions had already caused so many deaths.

How could he lead his people and not have known this? He had been a scribe, filling pages with the details of Yata lives dictated by the survivors of prey. He could have written Masari stories down as well, not just from the mouths of hunters but from everyone.

The Covenant had left no room for those. It had taken a pariah, a man whose hands had been worse than unclean, to give Crossroads its history and its unique, harrowed voice.

More, so much more than the Rotunda's great tomes were at stake as his people faced Promontory's incursions.

HigherBrook looked red-eyed at Gria and found her face haunted. Beyond the sack of Erta's bones hung a vast selection of scrimshaw. Those illuminated remains had come from Yata who had sacrificed themselves to TripStone's family. She had moved her household's relics here, out of BrushBurn's reach.

On a high shelf lay the volume that HigherBrook had brought from the Rotunda as a peace offering. Beside that lay the stone box of Destiny Farm meat that TripStone had purchased from the trader to give to Gria as evidence. HigherBrook suppressed a groan as he realized the price she must have paid for it.

The meat was sealed shut and covered in layers of wax, preserving the corrupted filth inside while protecting those outside.

No, HigherBrook reminded himself. *Not filth*.

That flesh had been a life, an intelligence. Someone who, like Piri, might have had dreams.

He turned to Ghost's parents and choked, "I'll take you where you need to go."

CHAPTER 2

Promontory

“We must go to Skedge.”

DamBuster frowned across the table at Ghost and shook his large head, looking pained. “I’d take you there myself if I could. It’s not safe here, especially for Piri and TelZodo. But she needs to heal first, otherwise that trip would kill her.” He picked at his food. “Then DevilChaser would kill me.”

Travel would be difficult for them all right now. Ghost looked past his heavily-bandaged feet balanced on a chair and toward the birthing room, where DevilChaser and MudAdder tended his family. TelZodo’s birth had driven out all other considerations, and no one had noticed the swelling from Ghost’s long run until later. Adrenalin had kept him numb until DevilChaser sliced off his boots.

Then DamBuster had lifted Ghost up and rushed him from the room before the smells of putrescence sickened Piri further.

To hear the doctor tell it, he was lucky he’d kept his feet at all. Once again, Ghost was reduced to using a walking stick, this time a crutch, and sparingly at that.

DamBuster added, “Conditions are bad here. We’d leave if we could, but conditions are bad everywhere right now.”

Ghost fished a chunk of Yata from his many-pocketed burlap, noting soberly that most of the pockets were empty. “Piri told me several days ago that MudAdder is from Destiny Farm, and I’ve seen his branding since then. You’ve given clothing to us but not to him. Why?”

The large man grimaced. “Don’t ask me about MudAdder.”

Ghost chewed thoughtfully as he surveyed the dining room. Cabinets held DevilChaser’s medicinals, but the boxes the black marketers delivered sat in another room whose door remained closed. If the chameleons were transporting medicines, then why the secrecy?

Ghost had spotted the naked Yata slipping behind that door, with DamBuster following closely behind. The two men stayed inside, joined on and off by DevilChaser, for extended periods.

“A man comes here from time to time.” The apothecary took a swig of his tea and frowned. He hesitated, then drained the cup and advanced to the cabinets. He plucked a bottle of spirits from the shelves and brought it to the table. “Name of SandTail.”

He poured two fingers into the ceramic cup and downed the drink in a single gulp. “Don’t ask me to tell you what happens in the lab, but know this. When SandTail’s cart pulls up, you must keep your baby quiet. Absolutely silent; Piri, too. He would cart her back to Destiny Farm and kill TelZodo if he found them.” He poured another shot. “I wish to hell I could take you to Skedge.”

Ghost eased his feet off the chair and levered himself up. “Give me the bottle.”

DamBuster up-ended the cup and wiped his mouth. “Go ahead. I don’t blame you.”

“I’m putting it back.”

DamBuster quirked a sad smile. “Bastard. Sit, then. I’ll put it away. There are plenty of good reasons to be lame, but self-righteousness is not one of them. I won’t have you hurting yourself on my account.”

The large man had grown increasingly restive in the days since TelZodo’s birth. Circles darkened further under his eyes, correlating with the frequency of his visits to the lab, but Ghost had tempered any further theorizing. Any more extrapolation would entail a larger margin of error, and now nausea accomplished what caution could not.

There was scientific method, and there was gut instinct.

Ghost murmured, “I’m headed that way.” He grasped the bottle by its neck, shifted his weight to the crutch, and hobbled to the cabinets. “I had my own laboratory, once. Some day I’ll tell you about it.”

First he had to consult with Piri and see his son. He made the slow, difficult trip to the birthing room, pausing outside the repaired door to smile at her dulcet

humming before pushing his way inside.

DevilChaser scowled and motioned curtly for him to sit. “That’s your third walk today. Don’t make me take that crutch away from you.” He squeezed Piri’s shoulder, then rose from the blankets. “She’s healing remarkably well, but it will take time.”

“She’s healed remarkably well before.” Ghost beamed at Piri and at the nursing TelZodo. The child’s eyes opened, a match to hers. His hair and portions of his down began to darken, taking on a ruddy violet tinge.

Ghost reclined gingerly beside her and rested a hand on TelZodo’s back, letting his fingers brush Piri’s arm. Her face was drained, straw-colored hair slicked to a forehead of dulled bronze tones.

He waited for DevilChaser to switch his attention to unwrapping foot bandages, then drummed, *How do you feel?*

Piri held their son to her and waited for Ghost to slide his palm beneath her fingers.

I’m told I could be better. She nodded toward MudAdder, who gathered poultices under DevilChaser’s direction. *He can tap his name, and mine, but little else. He can’t read. He needs to hear a voice.*

“Ghost, your infection is not clearing as fast as I’d like.” DevilChaser accepted the herbs from MudAdder. He wrapped and repacked clean gauze around red, swollen skin, his thin face pinched with concern. “I know you’re conserving the Yata you brought with you from the Marsh, but you can’t afford to shortchange yourself now. We’re rationing our own supply, but we have enough to go around.”

A glance at MudAdder showed him unperturbed at the mention of meat. The man’s nonchalance was not surprising. Piri had given Ghost enough of an education in those matters.

Ghost’s fingers wandered over TelZodo’s curls until he realized the child was asleep. “I’d be in worse shape if we ran out too soon. I know why I ration Yata, but why do you?”

“Shortage.” The doctor cut and tied gauze before lifting Ghost’s other foot. “Both the Farm and the angels are overtaxed right now, thanks to the Chamber’s uncompromising stupidity.”

“I don’t know about angels.” Ghost sucked in a sharp breath as DevilChaser probed a tender spot.

“They collect the dead from Skedge. This foot’s worse.” He leaned over and snatched the crutch away. “Sorry, Ghost. I’m taking away your walking privileges.”

MudAdder caught the healer’s attention and made pushing motions.

DevilChaser shook his head. “If he’s this reckless with a crutch, he’ll be that much worse in a wheelchair.”

Ghost looked from one to the other. “What if I promise to behave?”

“You haven’t behaved from the moment you got here.” The doctor frowned at the trio on the floor and shook his head. “Or from long before then.” He heaved a sigh. “But I don’t behave, either, so I’ll do as MudAdder suggests. Do anything to jeopardize your feet and I will strap you down for good.”

MudAdder watched DevilChaser leave, then hurried to the blankets. He held out his palm and pointed to Ghost’s mouth and hand.

A quick thinker, that one, probably another breaker of rules. Ghost nodded and took a deep breath. “I’ll teach you in Masari. I know they don’t speak Yata at the Farm, or here. Each touch is a sound. I’ll show you the sounds and then we’ll put the words together. How long before he comes back?” He pursed his lips at MudAdder’s show of fingers. “Good. We can start. When you can communicate it, I want you to tell me about SandTail and the laboratory.”

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MudAdder did not know touch-speech, but he could pantomime. Before DevilChaser returned with the wheelchair, the Yata had pointed clearly toward the lab, then reached back and touched the tattoo on his neck. Then he had mimed the restraining chair. The straps around him, his inability to move.

“The bottles in the crates.” Ghost had fought to keep his bile from rising. Next to him Piri was propped half-upright, quietly attentive as she swaddled TelZodo in a blanket. “They’re for making Destiny.” He searched MudAdder’s face. “They’re for *trying* to make Destiny.”

The Yata answered with a slow nod.

“You’re not restrained now,” Ghost whispered. “Why do you stay?”

MudAdder tried one gesture and then another, before he took hold of Ghost’s hand and motioned to be taught more sounds. Not long afterwards, they heard the clack of wooden wheels on the pine plank floor and DevilChaser’s thin voice calling out to DamBuster.

The Yata gave Ghost’s arm a light touch and knelt by Piri. The look that passed between them made Ghost wonder if they knew each other’s thoughts. More than stoicism crossed their faces. The gods only knew what experiences they had already shared.

MudAdder stood, smiling generously at TelZodo as DevilChaser wheeled in the chair. Then he left the room to answer DamBuster’s mournful call.

Now, seated and with his feet raised, Ghost held TelZodo in his arms and massaged tiny shoulders. Were it not for the child, he would be gripping the armrests, white-knuckled. He watched helplessly as Piri inched toward the chamber pot, unable to keep the muscles around her eyes and lips from twitching. “You need more analgesic.”

She offered a shallow smile and squatted, wincing.

He’d medicate her if she would let him, but the painkillers were made for Masari. They traveled through her skin and tissues with a force that left her reeling, no matter how much Ghost reduced the dose. “At least let me treat you when you’re ready to sleep. DevilChaser is right. You need to relax or things could get worse.”

She knew. He saw her resolve, her stubbornness. All he could do now was coo lovingly at their son and study the equipment in the room. Now that he could wheel around, perhaps he could create a calmative better suited to her constitution.

Then there was TelZodo, about whose constitution Ghost could only guess. Given time, he could use the lenses here and see what he could learn from the contents of the child's diaper. More than anything, he wanted not to think about what was happening in the lab down the hall.

He caressed TelZodo's tiny form, marveling at the strength with which the infant grasped his finger and hung on. *I understand you completely now, NightShout. I know why you did what you did and how you must have felt and I forgive you.*

He would do the same, given half a chance. If the crutch were back in his hands, Ghost would hobble to the lab even if it killed him and smash everything in sight. Eliminate any chance of recreating Destiny. Shatter to splinters the many bottles he had assiduously, blindly packed.

"I thought I was a criminal before," he whispered sweetly to the child. "How little I knew."

The baby gripped the fur of his chops, yanking hard. The pain felt good.

## CHAPTER 3

### Outside Rudder

BrushBurn never saw so much mud that sat implacably still, swamping his wheels.

He had seen it rushing in torrents off the mountain slopes, drowning Promontory's streets and citizens. He had seen it fully alive and exacting vengeance, not existing for the sole purpose of gumming up a major thoroughfare, like a child's prank that wouldn't end.

Their first night on the road, his shoulders had ached from the weight of the yoke and his legs from the constant slogging. He and TripStone had done more lifting than pulling on their first day of travel.

He'd grumbled, "There are ways to pave this."

"Yes, and then to maintain it, but you've remarked yourself how shorthanded we are." If anything, the fanatic's exertions had made her glow with renewed vigor rather than with exhaustion. "The route is less mired up ahead. Until then, we lay wood boards down during the rainy season and move slowly over them for as long as we have to."

Even softened by lamp light, her smugness irked him. "You could have told me this."

"You could have asked."

TripStone's clothing remained the same, day and night, as when they had been at RootWing's farm. She left her muddied boots by the flap and her rain-drenched coat by the flames and let the rest wrinkle and ferment. Her vest pockets still bulged with aromatics, but those were losing potency. Behind the dirt and sweat, her other odors were asserting themselves.

BrushBurn smiled to himself. She was trying so hard to drive him away. And failing so miserably.

He had gone to his pallet without a word that first night, leaving her to sort it out. She wasn't as cramped or as wearied as he, and his recuperation had been more important. He could blame the hard labor in Crossroads for her endurance. Its surviving citizens exhibited a rugged health borne of desperation. In a village reduced from its own archaic ignorance to stark primitivism, the fittest prevailed.

On one level it was enjoyable to watch. On another it was disheartening.

She had burrowed, nostrils flared, into her blanket on the other side of the tent, leaving BrushBurn thankful that he was too tired for frustrated arousal.

The next morning she awoke first, preparing tea and mouthing a hard crust of Yata with the color and consistency of slate. If that was what the hunt offered, no wonder BrushBurn's sales had increased. She'd remained aloof as they breakfasted, but so had he.

The terrain might try his patience. Other delays proved more enticing.

She had a superb feel for the controls despite the deplorable road, reacting to his guidance as quickly as his own hands. At first he ascribed it solely to her hunting reflexes, but then BrushBurn remembered the massive books in the Rotunda, glimpsed on his way to meetings with the Crossroads Chamber. TripStone's memory and her processing of words had been trained into a highly-proficient machine that worked just as well in her flawless responses to his commands.

Somewhere, amidst all those words and memories, was the information she continued to hide from him.

The rain let up. He watched her from his end of the yoke, her unruly mass of fiery hair tied back with still-dripping cloth. "Has the road become solid, or am I just fooling myself?"

The lines around her gray eyes crinkled as she relished his discomfort. "If the weather keeps to a drizzle, we'll have one more day to Rudder. If we get another downpour, I suggest you chop down a tree."

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TripStone listened to bird song and squirrels chattering in woods shadowing the side of the road. She held onto their cacophony, but soon those distractions

would fade above the treeline, leaving her on her own against nature.

BrushBurn was everywhere. The humid air wrapped his scent around her. The yoke vibrated with every movement of his muscles. His voice commanded her fingers as she manipulated levers and chains, bypassing her brain and sinking into her nervous system.

Let him think her heavy breathing came from the steep incline, that the swivel in her hips came from combating the mud.

No. She knew better and so did he. The way to the Warehouse lay through both their groins. As with passage into the Rotunda, she would have to spiral her way in, leaving herself exposed in the open air.

I'll keep my stride to yours. TripStone had almost laughed at his arrogance, as though his longer legs could outperform her pace. He hadn't complained as she'd driven heedlessly through the muck. Perhaps he was winded. He should be thankful. Her speed had kept the wheels from choking on more than one occasion.

He had left her alone afterwards. She'd retired to the blanket, her clothes sticky and itching against her skin, the mass of pillows beside his pallet a constant reminder of their prior appointment. BrushBurn had set up the cushions, casually ignored them, and dismantled them in the morning without comment. TripStone had helped transport them back to the cart after breakfast, before she and the trader collapsed the tent.

Now they spun the lower gears, pulling their cargo over smooth cataracts of granite rising steeply to the pass. Low clouds eddied about them, feathering the way. Other wagons already dotted a wide clearing, preparing to spend the night before the easy descent into Rudder.

BrushBurn directed her to a secluded spot. Together they lifted the yoke from their shoulders. Hands at her buckles, she watched him slip his harness from his limbs.

She could spring upon him, grab the straps, and cinch them tight. Opposing instincts warred within her as to what to do next. TripStone looked away and then climbed into the cart's open compartment, toward the tent frame.

They lashed and secured poles, hung the roof and walls, spread rugs. After BrushBurn's constant direction on the road, the silence as he passed her made her muscles jump. One by one they lit the lanterns, transferring items of soft comfort and stark functionality from cart to tent.

Opulent pillows. Tin cups.

She stepped out into the first hints of dusk as he locked the cart down. Rudder sparkled below, a pleasing glow of newly-lit hearths and wicks touched to flame. West of the tightly-clustered settlements flowed the river's darkened waters. Beyond its far banks sat the Marsh.

Remote waterfowl honked, but thick clusters of forest hid the prison from the pass. Light from the setting sun illuminated bridges the escaped slaves from Alvav had described. TripStone scanned the clearing and the distant, upthrust Cliffs fading to purple, the same marbled expanse she had passed while tracking SandTail and the wretch who was now her traveling companion.

What if Crossroads' carts had come through here during Rudder's Meat Days? Everyone TripStone knew had assumed Rudder followed the Covenant's enforced ban on commerce during those times. You didn't come to trade while your neighbors either served the hunt or sought solace in prayer before communing with the dead. You certainly didn't travel to their private, sorrowful spaces.

The people of Rudder had seen fit not to challenge those beliefs. What would have happened if someone had chanced upon the Games and learned the truth?

She tried to look beyond the thick-leafed groves, worried and aching. Then she turned her back on it all and walked through increasing darkness, ducking back inside the tent.

Her tea waited, sending smoky tendrils up from a squat table. TripStone eased off her boots and coat and bypassed her pack, bereft of appetite.

On her way to a featureless chair she studied BrushBurn. He sat at a table twin to hers, preoccupied with sheets of parchment and easing a juicy chunk of Yata into his mouth.

She looked away. "You run a disgusting business."

His nib scratched with short, even strokes. “Most business is.”

She sat with her back to him and raised the tin cup to her lips, savoring the air of pungent leaves that, for a moment, masked everything else. Eyes closed, she sipped, relaxing into the heat of liquid and lamps. When the nib stopped scraping, when the pen was lifted and set aside, she was too enmeshed in meditation to notice.

She didn’t feel his hands on her shoulders until they began to knead, seeking out and loosening knots. Her voice rose, thick and deep. “You said you wouldn’t touch me.”

“Yes. If you did not want to be touched.” BrushBurn’s fingers came around her vest, dipping into a pocket and drawing out aromatics. They were brown now, and weak. Only the moist air kept them from crumbling in his palm. He dropped the dead leaves and flowers to the ground. “Push me away and I’ll go.”

The teacup’s warmth spread against her hands. She couldn’t move them.

He eased from one pocket to the next, teasing out the herbs and powdering the rug with decay. He inhaled deeply, and then more deeply, uncovering the air.

Her own lungs began to quiver. Only the chair back prevented her spine from arching, her head from settling against his stomach.

He extended his fingers into her breast pockets, pressing the cloth. He cupped her through it, continuing to knead until her pulse filled her throat. The fingers of one hand dipped lower, seeking and remembering, assuming. She felt his smile in the way he grasped an edge with a light touch, drawing out the sheath with exaggerated care. He took his time as he pulled its full length from her vest.

His hands left her suddenly and he stepped back; she inwardly cursed her flash of dismay at his absence. She heard cloth open, ministrations, the friction of membrane. Her own hands dropped away from the tin cup, palms up and open.

Her prayers fled from her but she could plead. *Stay with me, Erta. Don’t leave me.*

Her brows knitted in concentration, then relaxed as BrushBurn lifted her gently out of the chair. He turned her to face him, leaning in.

“No.” TripStone spun from him. “Not like that.”

Her hands fluttered. Fumbling, she peeled off her vest and unwrapped her shirt, flinging them aside. She pulled apart the laces on her breeches, slid them off, and tossed them against the rest. Foot wrappings uncoiled and she kicked them away.

Without looking back at BrushBurn, she strode to the mass of cushions and leaned her full length against them, pillowing her cheek. Then she waited.

“I agree,” BrushBurn murmured. “Better not to be intimate too soon.” His hands caressed her waist. They positioned her, gliding between her legs. They confirmed readiness. “You let me in deeper, this way.”

He pressed his palms against her buttocks, massaging her, unhurried. She felt the warmth of his pelt against her back, tried to remember the sounds of his own undressing and couldn't. He reached between her and the pillows and explored her pectoral fur, abdominal fur, following the red swatch downward until she could barely keep herself still.

Finally, he moved. TripStone suppressed a wild grin as he filled her.

Drizzle pattered against the tent intermittently; lamp light flickered with shifting air currents. He rested swollen inside her, pulsing, keeping to small movements before he drew back and plumbed her with long, slow strokes. Then he withdrew again, almost completely, hesitantly. TripStone quaked around rhythmic, almost imperceptible thrusts, the merest kiss of his tip.

The pillows filled her fists; she could not keep the moan from her voice. “You're a seducer,” she rasped. “This is a game to you.”

His legs pressed more firmly against hers. BrushBurn eased his hands up her sides and along her arms, enclosing her wrists. His breath warmed her ear. “It is a discipline, like hunting.” His hips began their maddeningly slow push until she could hold no more; he ground in a circle against her until she tasted blood. “And, yes, it is a game.”

Her muscles abandoned her reason as the demons took hold. The sound arising from her was that of a beast. The trader answered and grasped her more tightly, groaning sweet encouragement. Pulling, plunging.

Let him think TripStone called wordlessly to him. She was splayed on a Soala of fattened cushions, her place of need, entreating the demons. She petitioned, begged for their strength, surrendered. They bayed back along her spine, guiding her. Filling her with bright red furious light.

Her hips answered BrushBurn's, thrusting back. Her fists opened as he grasped them and their fingers interlaced, closing like traps. TripStone clenched, drawing out his gasps of praise; she would squeeze the life from him if she could. His teeth came down hard on her shoulder and held fast.

He no longer pushed her; now she was pushing him. Up the mountain, through the mud, roaring toward the summit. She freed her fingers and grasped his arms, clutching him against slipperiness. Higher and harder, breaking through the rutted road until she had secured the yoke about them both, screaming with delirious greed and explosive rage.

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She was the first one up, wrapped in the blanket and busying herself over the teapot. Watching coolly as he pushed up from his pallet to rub his eyes. "Good morning, BrushBurn."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "So. You have kept to your credo. You have not tried to kill me with your gun."

TripStone filled a tin cup and placed it before him. Her clothes, freshly scrubbed in the rain, dried beside the fire. The blanket about her was still warm, though her hair dropped to it in wet crimson rings.

"You've washed."

"You chose a private spot," she said. "The weather was generous."

He scanned the rugs. She must have buried the sheaths outside as well.

Her back to him, she lifted breeches, testing the fabric between her fingers. Her blanket dropped to the ground before she stepped into the pant legs, drawing their thickness up.

Her fur remained matted around his bites, the exposed skin scabbing over. "How

is your shoulder?”

She didn't turn around. “How are your balls?”

“As you might expect them to be,” he answered, mildly. The tea felt good going down.

TripStone tied her laces before reaching calmly for her shirt, taking a moment to attend the sounds outside. The rain had been falling lightly; now it let up again. She paused in her dressing to refill her cup. A nipple peeked at BrushBurn from between unsecured ends.

If her movements were not deliciously deliberate right now, they should be. He should dress as well or they might never get to Rudder. BrushBurn let his own blanket drop behind him as he moved carefully to his traveling clothes.

TripStone took one look between his legs. Her laughter was more amused than derisive, a good sign. She still hated him, but not entirely. He almost wished she were more severe. The sooner he deflated, the sooner he could relieve himself.

He secured his pants with loose knots, retrieved his cup, and joined her by the tea. “We'll be spending the day in Rudder while the cart is cleaned and serviced. The main road to Promontory will be less punishing.” His tired smile answered the lines crinkling around her eyes. “I will get us a room at the Milkweed for the night because I prefer a hot bath to a chilly rain.”

He poured, warming his hands around the cup. “You've purchased my silence. If you'd rather not be seen with me, I will rent a second bed.”

Her scrutiny lasted through several sips. “A single room is sufficient,” she finally said, “and I will sleep on the floor. Your courtesy toward me is misplaced.”

“You did not buy my courtesy.”

“As I said.” She drained the cup, adjusted and tied her shirt, and reached for her vest. “Why the Milkweed? It's out of the way.”

“It's quieter than the Blackbird. I thought we both might profit from a night's rest.”

He stood and stretched before making his way behind the dun curtain. He could hear her on the other side beginning to put provisions away. BrushBurn closed his eyes and listened to her efficiency, her forced detachment. He waited for his bladder to clear, and then his head, before he closed up his pants again and rejoined her, pulling on his shirt.

Keys in his hand to open the cart, he ambled past her. “Ineffective, perhaps,” he said, pointedly, before lifting the tent flap. “Not misplaced.”

Without looking back, he slipped out into the gray morning.

## CHAPTER 4

### Basc

“Like it or not, HigherBrook, we are stuck with each other.” Arms folded, Gria paced heatedly beside her parchment-filled table and its seated Masari. “You’ve got to save Crossroads. I’ve got to save Basc. This isn’t about the Covenant any more. This time, you and I share a common enemy.”

“And if you destroy Destiny Farm, then what? You were going to kill just our hunters. Instead you almost destroyed both our peoples.” He glanced at her narrowed lips and the residual pain in her face. “You started something you couldn’t control then. What makes you think you can control an attack now?”

“I don’t.”

His palms slammed against the table. “*Then by the gods, call it off!*”

“Don’t you think I want to?” she hissed. Her hands grasped the edge of the wood. She bent until her face was level with his. “I’m pulling people away from the work we fought so hard to accomplish. The thought of this mission makes me sick, but Destiny Farm makes me sicker. The thought of TripStone eating Erta devastates me, but that was Erta’s wish and I realize its strategic value.” She gazed on the velvety, turquoise-colored cloth on a pedestal by the door, the elder’s bones resting inside. “It’s not a question of choice any more. Or of ideology.”

HigherBrook watched the muscles in her back as she straightened. The StormCloud strapped to her was gigantic, hanging grotesquely off her Yata frame, and she was tall for her kind. But she bore her weapon’s weight and bulk almost as easily as he carried his.

He knew what that said about her. He didn’t want to know what it said about him.

“You’re dependent on Promontory now,” she added, softly. “I understand that. But even your own farmers, who live to keep Crossroads fed, see the importance of this undertaking, despite their misgivings about TripStone.” She shrugged.

“Do what you feel you must. I can’t stop you from sending a message to Promontory’s Chamber to warn them of her plans.”

He growled, “There is nothing to send. I know only your final objective, which I cannot substantiate.”

She turned to him, hands on hips. “Then you’re not trying hard enough. You’d better think about why that is.”

HigherBrook rested his head in his hands and sighed. The gods had grabbed them both by the neck, dragging them against their will into governance. TripStone’s single-minded arguments had been annoying, frightening at times, but Gria’s levels of reasoning were more dangerous still. She was as familiar as he with the webs of compromise, but she tweaked them harder, unafraid to break strands or engage the tangling in which he himself was trapped.

That tangling had tightened with Ghost’s and Piri’s disappearance. HigherBrook’s secrets were putting people in danger, whether he kept them or not.

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Wrapped in a plain cloak and hood and shielding his face against the rain, he had pulled the covered cart with Ghost’s parents into Rudder two days earlier. He’d continued toward the bridge spanning the river and connected with the northeast road leading to the Marsh. If nothing else, HigherBrook had to see the prison for himself and then decide how to deal with Rudder. Learn what he could while keeping his people alive.

The rest he would have to leave to the gods.

He had passed BrushBurn’s heavy load, its wheels sunk deep in the mud. Averting his gaze, he’d been unable to squelch a private smile at the sounds of lifting and hauling, grunts of concentration and sputtered curses. If Destiny Farm was to be destroyed, it wasn’t going to happen that day.

Ghost and Piri had survived one episode of the Games and then vanished during the next hunt. Piri had been largely unknown, even carrying a mix-child, but a Masari living in the Marsh attained fast notoriety. A Masari guard had confirmed the rumors.

Alerting authorities to look for Ghost would not have been a problem. Ghost's so-called "crimes" were now moot; he was to be returned from exile rather than extradited. Piri was the one in danger, more so if a live birth had resulted from their union.

HigherBrook had left the decision up to RootWing and DewLeaf, who understood the risks. He had not envied their time in the cart as he brought them home, as they weighed all the unpleasant alternatives. In the end they told him Ghost had been in danger all his life.

They would keep vigil for their son. In the meantime, HigherBrook would keep quiet.

Now he fingered the pages of narrative at Gria's table. The general standing before him had herself lived under a death sentence and returned from exile.

Was that the deciding factor, then? Is that what made her so willing to put both her people and his at risk, acting toward an outcome largely unknown?

She studied his face and said, mildly, "You think too much."

"Someone has to."

"No." Gria meditated on the bright pictograms, her gaze darting, connecting. "Not when the stakes are this high."

HigherBrook rose from the small chair, drawing his own conclusions from the symbols inscribed on the ceiling, walls, floor. He and Gria each discerned different patterns, listening to different, selective voices. "I cannot in good conscience support this mission," he said, finally, "but I won't try to stop it."

"At least you're consistent," she replied, raising an eyebrow. "As I recall, you bestowed that same judgment on BrushBurn's meat trade."

"I *will*, however, work to make Crossroads a sanctuary for children of mixed blood." He frowned at the sealed box. "TripStone is right on that account, and I would join her in asking that you do the same for Basc."

Gria gave him a sideways glance. "Given what's happened in the Marsh, you're going to have varying results. If you thought the Covenant created a caste

system, you're in for quite an awakening."

"As you have pointed out to me, it is no longer a question of choice." HigherBrook rolled stiffness from his shoulders and adjusted a strap. "Any more than my having to carry this damned rifle."

She nodded. "I can see you're getting used to it. You wear it well."

"I wear it *reluctantly*."

"As do I, though you may find that hard to believe." She pursed her lips. "HigherBrook, I know that CatBird has begun taking you into the hunting grounds. I cannot prevent my citizens from attacking you, but if I come up against you I will stay my fire." Gria looked again at Erta's bones and sighed. "Our people need each other right now, and despite our differences you and I must work together."

"Agreed."

She scrutinized him. "I can tell you haven't killed yet. When you do-and you will-I'll be here if you want to talk. I've already killed my share of Masari. I won't be offended."

Her words rattled him. HigherBrook shook his head. "How can you live this way?"

Gria shrugged. "It lets me live." She offered a wan smile. "TripStone understands this, but she's not here. She and I spoke about more than just the mission." The smile broadened. "I miss her already."

HigherBrook remembered a sharp voice scolding from half-beneath BrushBurn's cart as he'd hurried past. For a pleasing moment the hunter's exasperation had made up for his own.

He scowled at the relics on the wall. "So do I."

CHAPTER 5

Rudder

Riotous awnings fluttered in a main square fueled on friendly chaos and deflected short bursts of rain. Merchants shouted out the qualities of their wares as clutches of Masari hurried from cart to cart, proffering coin and livestock, merchandise and services.

TripStone listened wistfully to voices raised in laughter and song as froth spilled from over-filled mugs onto the ground. The last time she was here had been just before dawn, smuggled out of Promontory and buried in chains on the day that Crossroads had been laid waste.

She wished the marketplace were as empty now as it had been then, quiet and gray. Now she looked on raucous merriment and saw only death.

The doors to the Blackbird swung open and shut with a never-ending flurry of patrons, flanked by unattended wagons parked layers deep. TripStone cast a glance at BrushBurn, wondering if he'd chosen the Milkweed to spare her further heartbreak.

Why would he? He'd already caused heartbreak far greater than this. The massacre had taken lives, but he and Promontory were taking her village apart without an iota of remorse. On the contrary; he was taking pride in a job well done.

He called out hearty greetings to a throng of merchants, engaging them in spirited, good-humored exchange until her legs felt like lead and she wanted to beat her breast and wail. They were in town now; she didn't need the sight-lines they'd sought on the mountain road. Without a word she drew her hood about her head, blocking out as much as she could.

She was still thin from the winter; no one seemed to recognize her. But two seasons earlier she hadn't known about the Games. Rudder's citizens looked the same as before, but she didn't recognize them, either.

The trader's voice pitched her way; her hands moved over the levers and their

cart advanced, pulling onto the main road and then turning onto a narrower one, away from the town center. BrushBurn's directions blotted out the festive yells dropping behind them. For that, at least, she was grateful.

They settled on a straightaway and he fell silent for a bit. Then he said, "I'm sorry."

Hands clenched into fists, she whispered, "No, you're not."

Mercifully, the hood blocked her view of his face.

"Crossroads can be like that again," he added, gently. "In time."

"You understand nothing."

He didn't answer. Gears whirred, laboring now; the cart had turned rickety from its hard journey. TripStone listened to warblers as moisture collected on the light wool about her face, outside and inside.

She waited for her tears to dry, then sighed and eased her hood back. The river fell behind them; open space lay ahead. Only a few settlements dotted the landscape. TripStone had heard the Milkweed mentioned in passing, but hadn't realized how remote it was.

"The merchants seem to know you," she said, fighting hoarseness. "You must make a tidy profit with your meat here, too."

"Hardly." BrushBurn gazed ahead as well, keeping to a calm, easy gait. "Rudder has a fondness for textiles. Despite all that's happened, I've discovered your people still have a talent for weaving that the buyers here appreciate."

"You diversify," she said, flatly. "How convenient."

"For your people, yes. Rudder pays handsomely, which means I can pay the sellers in Crossroads well."

She grimaced. "So they can buy your meat."

Annoyance crept into his voice. "Yes, TripStone. Unlike you, I would rather not see your citizens starve. Or be mangled and killed by wild Yata." He snorted

explosively. “You could learn a few things from this place.”

From this place? The “wild Yata” of Basc and the refugees from Alvav had already educated TripStone about Rudder. She bit her lip. Let BrushBurn think Crossroads and Basc were enemies. Let him think she was ignorant of the Games and the tyranny that sustained them.

The Milkweed rose out of luscious fields in a heavy mist, two stories of gaily-painted wood surrounded by a large circle of wagons. The plantings of hops and barley were no surprise; neither were the wineberry bushes. TripStone also spotted well-apportioned herb gardens as they turned down a narrow dirt road, and vegetable seedlings. A small red barn lay tucked behind the inn.

Networked farms dotted Rudder’s side of the central valley. The Milkweed obviously ran its own small enterprise.

She raised her eyebrows at BrushBurn, who said, “I take it you have not been here before.” His steely eyes twinkled. “I’ll get us my regular room, if it’s available. It’s in a quiet corner. The tavern can get rather spirited.”

They pulled up to the wheelwright house and slipped from their harnesses. BrushBurn gave a joyful shout and strode to the door. In minutes a gaunt man emerged, grinning. He clinched the trader in a short, tight embrace, then gave him a hearty slap on the back.

“FernToad! Let me look at you.” BrushBurn held the wheelwright at arm’s length. “Tell me you’re not at level four yet and I’ll eat one of my pillows.”

The wheelwright practically trembled with excitement. “Save your feathers. I reached it two Games ago!” FernToad patted his stomach. “I had to break before I lost a tooth. And I’ll need to fill out a bit before I go under again.”

“I know, but still.” BrushBurn’s eyes gleamed with admiration. “You’ve been chasing level four for *years*.” His grin was infectious. “Well done! Come to the cart. It needs everything you’ve got, both wood and metal. We had a devil of a time climbing out of Crossroads.”

FernToad took one look and said, “Use wood boards next time.”

“So I’ve heard.” He brought the wheelwright to the front. “This is TripStone.

She's accompanying me to Promontory. Excellent tandem runner."

TripStone tried not to gawk at FernToad's skeletal face. She shook a mangy hand with thin fur the color of faded brick. Her voice became small. "Level four what?"

FernToad laughed. "Level four *yatanii*. Isn't it obvious?"

Her eyes widened. "Yes, but I was afraid to say."

FernToad rubbed her arm affectionately and winked at BrushBurn. "Let me guess. She's from Crossroads." He turned back to TripStone. "Being a *yatanii* is nothing to be ashamed of." His face turned serious. "How are things over there?"

TripStone shook her head. "Not good." She took a deep breath. "I'm going to Promontory to try to represent Crossroads' interests."

"Good luck. They're tough buzzards." FernToad jerked his chin at BrushBurn, looking sly. "Him, too." He bent to examine the cart further. "This will keep me up all night. Go settle in and I'll get to work." The wheelwright pulled a pad and charcoal from his apron, scribbling notes.

BrushBurn motioned to TripStone as he unlocked a compartment. "I have some unloading to do. Give my name at the bar and they'll get a room ready."

TripStone tried to drive numbness away as she leaned into the cart to retrieve her pack and StormCloud. She spent a moment watching FernToad, pondering his sinewy emaciation as he reached spindly arms toward an axle.

After a confused glance at BrushBurn, she turned from the cart and stepped up to broad double doors. Someone had painted them to look like a boardwalk dwindling to its vanishing point above a kaleidoscope of water plants.

More murals inside depicted birds in flight and clusters of tree frogs. The walls seemed lined with painted sedge. TripStone marveled at them until someone walked across her field of vision and she spotted the outlines of ribs under a thin shirt. She stared after the woman, then hurried to the bar.

A large chalkboard hung above the long wooden counter, filled with names and numbers. She found FernToad's listing and scanned the others. There were

dozens of *yatanii*, all of them in various stages of starvation, but none seemed particularly debilitated. No one around her walked with a cane. No one exhibited physical distress.

At least the bartender looked robust. TripStone caught his attention and stammered, “Room for BrushBurn.”

“Yep. Knew you were coming.” He set down a newly-wiped glass and reached into his apron for a piece of folded parchment. “You must be TripStone. A messenger came by with a note for you, said you and BrushBurn were traveling together. He’ll be happy to know his room’s already set.”

“Thank you.” She accepted the note uncertainly, then leaned forward and blurted, “Is everyone here *yatanii*?”

“Not everyone, but most.” He laughed. Young cheeks dimpled around thick claret chops. “BrushBurn certainly isn’t. I don’t imagine anyone could be with his job; this is probably his idea of a vacation.” He slipped the glass into a rack overhead. “I’m a novice, myself. I’m still level one, but I’ve already been under for sixteen days.”

“No Yata for sixteen days?” TripStone leaned her elbows on the counter and tried to remember. “I felt a little tired after sixteen days, but I was still pretty euphoric. After half a year I was almost dead.”

“Really! What level were you?”

“We didn’t have levels.” She looked again up at the board. Small, neat lettering indicated only a partial list. “I’m from Crossroads.”

The bartender offered a sage nod before taking TripStone’s hands in his. “First, I am very sorry for what happened to you all. Second-” He smiled. “Come down to the bar later, when things get lively. We’ll show you how it’s done.”

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TripStone looked upon thick, pink clusters of swamp milkweed and azalea, sticky sundews and enormous water lilies, delicate jewelweed. Other murals adorned the room as well. She had walked down a hallway painted with sedge-ringed pools set before mountains streaming with runoff, her footsteps following

the graceful flight of long-necked herons. The inn's artist had created the illusion on the floor of wide, weathered boards chained together, floating on water thick with vegetation.

Weavings of actual sedge grass lined the room's single pallet. Small bottles sat on a plain wood bureau; TripStone uncapped them one at a time and smelled herbal tonics that confounded her senses. A window overlooked the yard by the barn, roomy enclosures of chickens and rabbits.

BrushBurn's bath had already been drawn and steamed in a large, gray tub. More water heated in the hearth. TripStone heard the trader greeting other guests down the hallway and quickly folded the note, slipping it into her vest.

He entered, his pack and a large wooden box over one shoulder, collapsed tent pallet over the other. He set them on the floor, unbent and straightened the kinks from his back, and pointed to the sedge-lined bed. "That's yours."

TripStone watched, perplexed, as he closed the door to their room and stripped off his clothes. "I would not have pictured you here."

"I'll take that as a compliment." BrushBurn tested the water and eased in a grimy leg whose rusty pelt had darkened to brown. "I've never seen the Marsh, but many here have. I'm told the depictions are accurate." His other foot crossed the lip of the tub and he sank into the water with a happy sigh.

TripStone opened her mouth and shut it quickly, relieved the trader's eyes were closed. The Marsh was a *prison*, not these bucolic scenes. It's where the Cliff sent its underclass to die.

She looked down at the tent pallet. "I said I'd sleep on the floor."

"It's that damned courtesy." BrushBurn opened eyes bright with suppressed laughter. He lifted a dripping hand and pointed to the water. "*This* is better than cold rain."

"I'm not joining you," she said, stiffly.

BrushBurn's smile bowed within the steam as he sank lower. "I'm not inviting you."



TripStone left him to his luxury and padded back down the hallway. Cheery voices called to each other as she descended the stairs. Wiry patrons joined those who were as solidly-built as the bartender, all of them filling rough-hewn tables and dining on small game. Bowls of broth floated root vegetables and early peas.

A meal slid before her as soon as she sat at the bar. Soup, starch, rabbit. Ambient conversation buzzed in her ear as she sat still, bathed in wonder. A prison that looked like a paradise. A meat trader at an inn filled with *yatanii*. *Yatanii* who didn't seem to suffer, physically or otherwise.

She thought of the parchment in her vest and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Down the counter a young man rubbed scanty chops, frowning. Another man patted him on the back and whispered something in his ear. They both laughed.

The bartender stepped up to TripStone. "Watch that one," he said, pointing. "SnailBud, the one with the itchy face. He's going to break, probably soon." He leaned over the counter and turned to check the board. "Almost at level two. Won't make it this time, but I think he'll cross the Threshold."

SnailBud shoveled rabbit half-listlessly into his mouth with a rubbery-looking arm. He put down the spoon and shook out his hand.

TripStone asked, "What's the Threshold?"

"It's why we do this." The bartender's hands wove the air as he spoke. "When he breaks we're going to give him as much Yata as he wants, until he can't eat any more. If it ends up being less than he would have consumed without the fast, he's crossed the Threshold. The higher your level, the more weaned you are." He called down the counter. "SnailBud! How long have you gone without?"

"Since midwinter!" His shout rang with triumph and frustration. "Level two next time!"

"Threshold this time!"

"Don't jinx me!"

TripStone felt wetness on her face.

The bartender handed her a cloth. “The trick is to break before you do your body too much damage. You need your strength to build up resistance.”

She dabbed at her eyes. “I have a friend.” TripStone smiled broadly through tears. “He should see this.”

Customers rose from their chairs and started pressing in toward the bar, drawn by the yells. They elbowed each other good-naturedly. Scandalous whispers inspired uproarious laughter.

“It’s a good show.” The bartender’s grin turned wicked. “When two people break at once, it’s a *great* show.”

A tall, broad-shouldered woman hurried up to the bar. “Mint tonic, sweetheart. Did I miss anything?”

“You’re just in time, Bubbles. He’s getting ready.”

She took a glass from him and drained it, wiping green flecks from her lips. She turned to TripStone. “I should go over there, but the crowd’s too thick. I haven’t seen you here before.” She proffered her hand and a firm grip. “I’m BubbleCreek.”

“TripStone.”

Amber eyes blinked in amazement. She asked, softly, “From Crossroads?”

“Yes. But how did you-”

“Oh, sweetie, there’s somebody *very* worried about you!” BubbleCreek hugged her across the back. “We have to talk. But after the show, when the noise dies down.” She turned and called out. “Snail! Open your pants now! Don’t come in them like last time!” She giggled as whoops rose from the throng.

“You’re so good at it, you help me!”

“Not a chance!” shouted another. “She swallows her Yata in the Marsh!”

BubbleCreek crowed with mirth. She moved dishes to the side and hoisted herself onto the counter. She patted the wood. “Come up here. It’s a better view.”

TripStone followed suit. SnailBud pushed his plate of rabbit away and leaned over the counter, grimacing either in pain or irritation. The crowd urged him on. He scratched at his cheeks and shook his hand out again.

The bartender said, mildly, "Some are more stubborn than others."

BubbleCreek nodded. "He knows how to take care of himself. Any minute, now." She turned to TripStone. "I understand the Covenant was a bit-" She licked her lips. "Different." She looked at SnailBud's fists and leaned across the counter. "Open the barrel, sweetheart. He's there."

The bartender bent down as the shouting built.

BubbleCreek cupped her hands around her mouth. "He knows! I told him. It's coming!"

SnailBud screamed obscenities and the bar erupted into cheers, BubbleCreek yelling with the rest of them. The bartender lifted a large plate stacked with chunks of Yata still dripping brine. He weighed it on a scale above the barrel, then rushed it down the counter as the crowd began to chant.

*"EAT! EAT! EAT! EAT! EAT! EAT!"*

TripStone's nausea built as SnailBud reached out with both hands, cramming the meat into his mouth. She held her stomach, forcing herself to watch.

BubbleCreek squeezed her shoulder. "Disgusting, isn't it?" She laughed. "Wait. It gets better." She leaned toward the crowd, chanting with the rest.

A long, low moan rose from the center of the throng and TripStone looked away.

"Oh, good," BubbleCreek said, after a moment. "He's got someone. *Two* helpers." She yelled, "Take turns, will you? He's only got one!" She raised her eyebrows. "*Three* helpers."

The bartender murmured, "It's not just the cock, you know."

TripStone tried to close her ears against the sounds of gluttony and sex, thankful for the loudness of the crowd.

“Sweetie, it’s better if you look.” BubbleCreek eased her back around.  
“Everybody goes through this. Me, too.”

TripStone burped and swallowed bile. “What level are you?”

“Six.”

“You’re not thin.”

“There are plateaus. Wait until I start to try for seven.”

TripStone tried not to sway as she watched the kneeling helpers, the perpetual motion of SnailBud’s hands and mouth. He swallowed chunks whole. The bartender ladled more Yata onto a second plate and dropped it on the scale.

Despite herself, TripStone began to laugh. “No,” she tittered. “The Covenant was not like this.” She shook her head, swallowing hard and giggling as she held her hand lightly across her mouth.

BubbleCreek asked, “Do you need to throw up?”

TripStone waited for a moment, then shook her head again.

The bartender said, “He’s starting to slow down. Both ends.”

The din eased up as patrons gave SnailBud congratulatory claps on the back. He slouched over his plate, his breathing relaxed, and eased one more morsel between his lips. He swallowed, leaned back on his stool, and raised brine-glistened hands toward the ceiling.

The room hushed as the bartender strode over to snatch two plates. He dropped the empty plate into a tub of water and placed the other one, quarter-full, on the scale. Mingled breaths joined metallic quivering as everyone waited for the scale’s arm to still.

The bartender leaned back with a broad grin. He shouted at the top of his lungs, “*THRESHOLD!*”

BubbleCreek threw her arms around TripStone as the room erupted into cheers. The larger woman exulted, tears streaming down her cheeks. Other patrons

hugged each other, weeping with jubilation. They clustered around SnailBud and crushed him in embraces, smearing their clothes with brine.

“This is the most important step.” BubbleCreek released TripStone and wiped her eyes. “Too many people look only at the levels, but Threshold begins the change. He’s really part of the family now.” She patted TripStone’s arm and hopped off the counter, hurrying toward the celebration.

TripStone looked back toward the bartender, but he was gone, crammed with the others in a tight circle around the young man who fell half-collapsed into admirers’ arms. She eased her body down to the floor, holding onto the counter’s edge until she found her balance.

Then she took a deep breath and wobbled, hesitantly, toward the joy.

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BubbleCreek laid the parchment back down on the table. “It’s good they’re free, wherever they are now.” She tipped mint tonic into her mouth and wiped her lips in a tavern grown quiet. “I hope you find them. When I told Ghost about the attack on Crossroads, he feared you’d been killed with the other hunters.”

Soft conversation mingled across tables as serene *yatanii* glided before the painted landscape. BrushBurn stood by his open box near the back of the room, displaying silky cloth to potential customers.

TripStone squinted in his direction before turning her attention back to BubbleCreek. “Ghost was a *yatanii*, too. He’d fast, on and off, eating as little as he could. The thought of gorging on Yata would have been horrible to him.”

“You told me he didn’t have much stocked away. For the weaning to work, he would have needed enough to fill him when he had to break.” She patted TripStone’s hand. “It’s good he and Piri found each other. Most everyone in Rudder who pairs with a Yata is a *yatanii*. I imagine the others would find it too hard.” She shrugged. “Or they wouldn’t care. We’re still a minority, but we’re making a difference.”

BubbleCreek’s description of the Marsh differed radically from testimonies given by the Cliff’s escaped slaves. They had seen only combat in the clearing during the Games. They’d watched wagons fill with corpses. They’d seen gas

canisters arcing in the air, falling within the prison and laying down a veil of smoke. Products of trade had come to the Cliff, but not detailed descriptions of life inside the prison.

TripStone gazed at the murals, smiling at the thought of an able-bodied Ghost carrying Yucof on his shoulders before BubbleCreek had lifted the Yata into her arms. She sipped a tonic of feverwort and felt her stomach begin to calm. “You love Yucof. Why do you hunt?”

“Probably for many of the same reasons you do.” BubbleCreek rested her chin on her hands. “I’m good at it. Strange as it sounds, we need enough Yata on hand to wean ourselves from it, and I haven’t heard of any Masari who was completely free of dependence. You could say I hunt to help keep this place going.”

TripStone studied large amber eyes whose gaiety faded to stoicism. Except for the difference in color, she could be looking into a mirror. “You think BrokenThread was still dependent, then.”

“You said she had done without for a year. That’s not unheard-of among *yatanii* here, but they weren’t sick the way she was.” BubbleCreek sighed. “I also hunt in the Games because I can find out afterwards if Yucof survived the safe room. I bribe one of the guards to deliver a message that I’m alive, too. It isn’t much, but it’s better than seeing him just once a season.” She frowned. “I know Yucof wants to escape. I don’t know which prospect worries me more.”

The box traveled. The women watched BrushBurn set his textiles down by *yatanii* gathered in the center of the room. He nodded in TripStone’s direction before unfolding a kerchief to extol its weave.

“I also hunt,” BubbleCreek added, “because I won’t touch *his* meat.” She shook her head. “I don’t envy Crossroads. I hear you’re traveling with him.”

“I don’t know if I can have any influence in Promontory, but I’m going to try.” The pretext felt increasingly hollow on TripStone’s tongue. She wanted to scream that she went to Promontory to destroy Destiny Farm, and that BrushBurn himself had helped smuggle the instruments of Crossroads’ destruction to Gria’s camp.

Slipping the cloth through his fingers and joking with patrons, he seemed almost

benign. TripStone squinted at a strangeness in the weave.

Then he held it against the light and the pattern became apparent. TripStone looked quickly back to BubbleCreek and sipped more tonic to hide a smile. “We’re rebuilding, slowly. But it’s been awful. I’m almost as thin now as when I was a *yatanii*.”

At least her fellow advisors were trading objects other than relics for BrushBurn’s meat. At least they were giving him items he thought Crossroads’ weavers had produced, that were too mundane to fetch Destiny in Skedge.

TripStone wondered what his reaction would be if he knew he was selling the handiwork of the “wild Yata” of Basc, whom he thought lived only to battle Masari.

She said, “Tell me how you prepare the Yata meat here, what goes into the brine. If there’s anything you grow or that comes from the Marsh that helps sustain the fast. Tell me how many steps it takes to reach the Threshold.”

“It’s different for different people.” BubbleCreek steepled her fingers. “But I can give you the range and tell you what I know.” She rose from her chair. “I’ll be back. This will require a lot of parchment.”

She ducked behind the bar and returned with ample sheets. Shadows deepened around the room as she answered more questions, explaining as she wrote. More lamps were lit and then selectively extinguished as tables emptied. BrushBurn locked his wooden box and balanced it on his shoulder.

He squeezed TripStone’s arm as he passed her and glimpsed the scribbles. “I told you you’d learn something here. I’m going to bed.” He yawned and added, softly, “I need the sleep.”

TripStone watched him head toward the stairs and then looked back at BubbleCreek, whose face remained politely neutral. The sheets filled with columns of numbers, equations, recipes. Crossroads was close enough to Rudder so that its soil might support some of the strange herbs. Some would still have to come from the Marsh unless substitutions worked.

She’d catch up on her own sleep later. Seeking liberation was more important.

BubbleCreek brought her a tonic of sweetflag root. “This will help you stay alert.” She glanced back toward the stairs. “I think BrushBurn would make a good *yatanii*. I keep telling him he should quit the Farm. I’m glad he’s finding other things to sell.”

CHAPTER 6

BrushBurn moved quietly about the room, gathering his half-empty box, folded tent pallet, and pack. He glanced down at TripStone and listened to her pleasingly light snore. It would be a shame to wake her, but they'd already been delayed and Promontory's Chamber was waiting.

At least she slept on a bed. He'd almost expected her to huddle on the floor, just to spite him. She possessed some sense after all.

Dawn had already begun to creep between the window curtains when he'd awakened to the sound of her hushed movements, a quiet shuffling as she stuffed the parchments into her pack. She had stood by the window afterwards, blocking thin slivers of light from his face. He could see her clearly even with his eyes closed.

He had smiled to himself when she stretched out on the Milkweed's thick, soft pallet, her fingers brushing against the sedge, her sigh rising from beneath the blanket. Her snores had eased him back into a brief sleep.

She was awake by the time he loaded his cart and began his breakfast of rabbit and vegetable stew. BrushBurn sat in the quiet tavern sipping fennel tea, watching as she descended the stairs, her pack over her shoulder and StormCloud strapped across her back. He raised an eyebrow as she handed a folded message to the bartender, giving instructions for delivery.

What intelligence could she possibly be sending back to HigherBrook? That Promontory was exploiting Crossroads' textiles now? Unless she was telling him about the *yatanii* contests here, but certainly they didn't merit a message.

The thought of that stuffy fellow engaged in one of those activities was enough to make BrushBurn splutter in amusement. He grabbed a cloth. TripStone arrived at his table as he mopped spilled tea.

She dropped the pack and set her stew down with exaggerated care. "I see you're up."

He waved the comment off, still smiling. "You could have stayed in bed longer."

Dark circles shadowed her eyes after two near-sleepless nights. BrushBurn noted the tonic in her hand. “Even someone of your hardy stock needs rest.”

She breakfasted meditatively, still seeming half-asleep, but BrushBurn knew better. He left her to her mental inventory as they returned their dishes to the counter and stepped outside. He could almost spy the gears spinning inside her head.

FernToad had executed dazzling repairs. Even TripStone seemed impressed as she examined joinings and reinforcements and the smoothness of the grease. She was obviously taken with more than just workmanship as she gave the wheelwright a long hug goodbye before strapping back into her harness.

FernToad grabbed BrushBurn in a tight hold and clapped him on the back. “You rogue. You didn’t tell me she was a *yatanii*.”

“I didn’t know until we got here.” He glanced back at her. “She was starving like everybody else in Crossroads.”

The wheelwright clasped his hand. “Come back soon.”

“Don’t make it harder for me to leave than it already is.”

BrushBurn stepped up to the cart and buckled himself in. TripStone nodded to him as they lifted and positioned the yoke.

He sighed. “Prepare to let out the chains.”

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Softer foothills sharpened into a craggy gray that matched the sky. The cart responded easily as they shifted down, and down again, turning onto a steeper grade.

BrushBurn looked up at layers of clouds scudding at different speeds above the treeline. Rain must just now be coming to Promontory. For a while the dust would settle, making the air easier to breathe, and the water in the cisterns would be fresh.

Then it would all be too fresh, too long, too fast. And the mud would make the

mire in Crossroads seem like an afterthought.

TripStone studiously observed their route, scanning the forested slope. Her nostrils flared as she took deep breaths. Worn down by more time, the mountains around Crossroads and Rudder proved gentle compared to these. Even at their steepest, those green hills were friendlier.

Here, along the main trade route, wide roads and generous switchbacks barely blunted the reality of hard, upthrust rock. The water collectors along the way served to discourage death rather than increase comfort. Conditions would be brutal come summer.

They were brutal in winter, too, and during the rains. BrushBurn watched TripStone's quiet fascination. Hunters were rugged, but so were the traders who came this way. You didn't get into or out of Promontory unless you wanted to.

He said, "You've never been here before."

"I've never seen this before." She turned sleepless eyes toward him. "Why do you do it?"

She was more sad than angry. As though that made any difference.

"You hunt," he said, plainly. "I trade."

"But why Yata? I saw how you were at the Milkweed. You were a different person."

He offered a wan smile. "You understand nothing." He nodded at the grade ahead. "Draw in the chains more. Downshift." Their fingers flew over quick-responding controls. "I happen to enjoy the company of *yatanii*. I don't meet many in my line of work. I hadn't realized you were one, yourself." His steel-blue eyes brightened. "It makes sense in retrospect."

Her voice turned flat. "You hate your work."

"Not really."

"You should."

They crested a rise and turned. The gears shifted up, chains easing as they leveled out into a brief plateau. BrushBurn stretched his arms above his head, massaging his wrists and fingers. “Enjoy the easy road while you can.”

She reached beneath the yoke to knead the back of her neck. She rubbed her eyes with her other hand. Even her efficiency in small things was pleasant to watch.

They both fed people; why was that so hard for her to understand? Not everyone was built to risk their lives in the hunting grounds. Crossroads should be thankful it *had* hunting grounds.

“Promontory doesn’t have the luxury of being in a fertile environment,” BrushBurn said, gentling his voice. “We make due with the lot given us. You used the Covenant, but that caused its own suffering.” He adjusted the straps across his chest, limbering his fingers by the levers. “Rudder has its struggles. Despite its dangers, I’d live in the Marsh if I could.”

TripStone’s eyes blazed at him. “You wouldn’t last there a day,” she spat, with unbridled venom. Her fury seemed to come from nowhere. “Living among Yata? You’d cut them up and package them.” Her breathing hardened; tears nestled in her eyes. “Is that why you go to the Milkweed? Make a *yatanii* friend, then tag along with someone during a Thanksgiving Day with a knife in your hand and profit in your sights?”

BrushBurn gaped at her. She didn’t look away, her expression half-wild from more than just sleeplessness. “I know you hate me, TripStone,” he said, softly. “I hadn’t realized quite how much.”

Bitterness rose in her throat. “Don’t talk to me about the Marsh.”

“You hardly know anything about it.”

“I know enough.” She looked away. “Believe me, you have no place there.”

He forced himself to watch the road, glancing at her when he could. Her chin was set in a firm line, her gait stiff. He reduced his stride further, confused.

Maybe it was just the hardness of these mountains. Nothing cushioned either the view or the terrain above the treeline. One’s soul could become like the landscape, and for all its hardships Crossroads had been soft.

They moved together in silence. “There’s a rise up ahead,” BrushBurn offered.

“I see it.”

He tried to read TripStone’s face and couldn’t. “Something’s wrong.”

She whispered, “We should shorten the chains again.”

They downshifted and began to climb.

“This isn’t like you, TripStone.”

“You don’t know me.” She huffed beneath the straps. “You think you can package me, too. You can’t.”

He wanted to reach across the yoke that separated them and extend his arm to her. But the wood between them was too wide, the harnesses around them too tight. The scent coming from her was acrid with fear.

No, not fear. Worry.

BrushBurn took a deep, slow breath. His voice would have to touch for him, but he had to settle himself before he could try to calm her. “Is that all you think I do? Package and sell?” He shook his head, fighting leaden legs. “I know my business. If that makes me a monster to you, then I’m sorry.” He barked a short laugh. “You give me too much credit, TripStone. Beneath these trading clothes I’m just a farm boy.”

Her hands flew off the levers, turning into claws. The look in her eyes was terrifying, her voice deeper than he’d ever heard it before. “*You bastard.*”

The cart jerked and began to slide.

BrushBurn shouted, “Hit the reverse brakes! *Now!*”

He felt the tilt of the wheels, the swing of the load. His feet left the ground as the weight of bones pulled him back and metal screeched between the gears. His skin turned to ice as they gained backward momentum. “*TripStone!*”

The brakes on her side engaged, but they were still sliding. BrushBurn listened

to FernToad's handiwork being quickly scraped away. If they couldn't stop before the switchback, the cart would careen over the edge. Their harnesses had too many buckles to undo in time. He and TripStone would plummet right along with the rest.

She screamed at him, but he couldn't hear her through the agony of chains derailing, of derailleurs yawning outward. The ridiculous thought hit BrushBurn that even she must be saddened by the state of the cart. They might as well feel sorry for something before they died.

Steel seized up with a sickening thud as a tangle of metal finally stopped the wheels. His feet were back on the ground, the heels of his boots only a couple of layers thinner. Promontory's smog was still far off, but BrushBurn's lungs were already burning.

He looked toward TripStone, gulping air, but she'd already shucked her harness and vanished. He freed himself, doubling over until his heart stopped pounding, before he limped around to the side of the cart.

Silver flashed through the air before he saw her. At first he didn't realize that he was the one bellowing in pain, his side a wall of flame.

*"You miserable bastard!"* The emotions playing across her contorted face were excruciating. *"You don't know what a farm boy is! You disgusting vulture, you don't know what a farm is!"*

TripStone drew the chain back for another strike. BrushBurn lunged for it as she let fly; the sting in his hands was inconsequential compared to the rest. He tugged her to him, flung his arms around her chest, and snatched his revolver from its holster. He shoved the barrel hard under her chin and eased the hammer back a click.

"Stop now," he gasped, "before I have to blow your head off."

She was reduced to gut-wrenching howls, hanging limply against him, pressing his back into the ravaged gears. Idly BrushBurn registered the implications of his aim. If he squeezed the trigger now, his bullet would splatter both their brains.

He pushed the hammer upright, maintaining a tight hold on her as he felt his flesh purpling under his coat. He had to steel himself against her wails to start

untangling the strands of her misery.

Perhaps her daily walks past his cart and all her visits to RootWing had meant more than just civic, communal duty.

When she quieted to tortured moans, BrushBurn asked, softly, “Who is he?”

She shook her head, refusing to answer.

“Someone I’ve met at the Crossroads farm? One of RootWing’s kin?”

She groaned, “Go to hell.”

He sighed and leaned back, letting a sprocket dig its cogs into his skull. “Drop the chain, TripStone.” He closed his eyes and listened to clattering against the rock. “You didn’t tell me you were leaving someone behind.”

“He’s not left behind,” she whimpered. “He’s missing.”

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TripStone moved the last of the lanterns into the tent. She was cried out; no water remained in her to shed.

She had run her fingers wistfully over the wreck as BrushBurn staggered down the road to look for a clearing large and flat enough for the night. Then she’d watched him work, short of breath and wincing as he unloaded and transported their provisions, refusing her offer to carry his share. Afterwards, he locked up the cart and left it stranded on the road, carrying his pack in one hand and a bottle of spirits in the other.

“We’ll have to wait for a ride,” he’d said, dully. “Then I’ll send someone back to get the cargo.”

Now she lit wicks in the gathering dark. BrushBurn sat at his small table, hunched painfully over the sweat-stained note she’d carried in her pocket.

Finally, he straightened. Dismay still rounded his shoulders. He murmured, “I didn’t know,” handing her the parchment as she passed him. “This says Ghost has a family with him. That they’re welcome back into Crossroads, all charges

dropped.” He tried to smile. “He’s not just your lover, then. He’s also a friend.”

“He’s always been my friend.” TripStone sat at the opposite end of the tent and rested her head in her arms. “We’ve always looked out for each other.” She turned her gaze toward him. “I wrote back to RootWing this morning because Ghost should know about the Milkweed.”

Realization dawned on BrushBurn’s face. He rested his arms on the table top, knotting his fingers together. He said nothing for a long time.

TripStone said, softly, “I’m sorry about the cart.”

“Wood and metal.” He shrugged. “We’re still alive.” He padded toward the empty teapot and retrieved the tin cups. He dropped one on her table, hobbled to his pack, and lifted the bottle of spirits.

“Medicinal,” he offered. “It’s quite strong.”

TripStone shook her head. BrushBurn returned to his chair and set the cup down for a slow pour. For a while he stared at it.

Then he took a deep draught and let out a long sigh, leaning back.

TripStone watched his closed eyes and the even rise and fall of his chest, his forced calm. The air carried him to her. “You hurt, too.”

He barked a laugh, took another drink.

“Tell me.”

“You don’t want to know.”

She took cautious steps toward him and rested her hands lightly on his shoulders. “You’ve done things I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Things that sicken me. Help me to understand why.” She gave his vest a gentle squeeze. “I promise I won’t hit you.”

“That’s too bad.” He opened his eyes and lifted the cup to his lips. He set it down, filled more from the bottle, and closed his eyes again. “I didn’t lie to you, TripStone. I was born on Destiny Farm. Grew up there. Until I came of age, it

was the only place I'd ever known. I hadn't even heard of Promontory."

He took another long sip. His other hand reached up and covered hers. "It's actually quite beautiful. It's still a desert, but the weather is more temperate than in Promontory. Milder. Many happy memories there." He looked up at her. "Not what you might expect."

She tried to still the trembling in her legs. "Whatever I expect, I want to know what is."

"I'm better at telling what was." He looked over at her empty chair. "I can see you need to sit down, and we've already had a hard day."

TripStone patted his hand and stepped away. She set down her empty cup first when she returned, then slid her chair opposite his. Weariness overtook her as she sat. Her hand covered the tin when he lifted his bottle again. "Not yet."

He nodded. His hands encircled his cup and stayed there. "Your Ghost," he said. "When he was growing up, did he play in the barns? Were there lambs there? Kids?"

"I think he liked the insects more." She looked into eyes of dulled steel, looked away. "His brothers and sisters probably did most of the playing."

"With the young animals."

"I imagine."

BrushBurn took another drink and sighed. "Yata don't respond to Destiny until they're sexually mature, though they become sexually mature in a hurry. Until then, the children pretty much run free throughout the Farm. The entire property is fenced in, but other than that they aren't penned. They don't have to be." He poured more from the bottle. "I have another one of these in my pack in case this runs out. I may need you to get it for me." More spirits tipped into his mouth. He wiped his lips and pointed to the cup. "This is very effective for blunt trauma. I'm breathing better already."

TripStone reached across the table and placed her hand on his.

"Your hand is cold."

She whispered, "So is yours."

He frowned. "It should have warmed up by now. That was going to be my excuse for you to join me in a drink. I'll have to think of something else."

She tightened her grip. "You were telling me about Yata children."

"Beautiful creatures." He turned her hand palm up, eyes cast down as though examining a flower. "I didn't know until I was older that they couldn't speak because their tongues had been surgically deformed. That was a standard practice to help control the herd. They were livestock; we pretty much took it for granted. It's what you did on a farm."

He covered her palm with his. "They couldn't speak, but they could communicate. Especially the children, because their minds were still unclouded. Graceful pantomimes; they could tell stories just by dancing. Their laughter was like bells."

His eyes were tight-shut. "I knew from an early age that they were intelligent. I also knew that they were meat." He squeezed her hand. "One of us has just gotten very cold, but I don't know who it is."

TripStone whispered, "It's me." She reached for the bottle and poured.

BrushBurn's eyes remained closed. "Top off my cup, please."

"Couldn't you do anything?"

"I was a child." He blinked and looked at her, his gaze an abyss. "I'd make friends. Eventually they were taken off to the breeding pens. I wasn't allowed to look for them again until I was big enough not to be trampled in the midst of their copulations." He drained his cup, refilled it, drank again. "I once told you, during an incident I'd rather forget, that the Farm Yata were much more responsive to me than you were. There was a reason for that. It was a reunion between us."

TripStone's body quaked. She took a long drink. "How could you tolerate this?"

"They were happy."

“They were *slaughtered*.”

“Every Yata killed for food is slaughtered, TripStone. You had the Covenant. Rudder has the Games. Promontory has Destiny Farm.” He sipped. “Like everything else, it was standard operating procedure.”

She took BrushBurn’s hand in both of hers, white-knuckled. “If that’s the case, then why are we drinking like this?”

He reached for the bottle. “Because it’s not easy to love Yata. I learned that when I came of age.” He gave her a sad smile. “Was Ghost your first?”

TripStone nodded, raising the cup to her lips.

“I remember my first.” He tossed back more liquid, poured a few drops, and painstakingly examined the bottle. “We’ve got an empty teat.”

He started to rise and listed hard to the left. TripStone sprang up to catch him.

“Blunt trauma,” he murmured as she eased him back down. “I was wrong. It still hurts.”

She whispered, “I’ll get the other bottle.”

“Get two.”

TripStone stared back at him. He sat at the table with his hands folded, his eyes closed. He breathed slowly and evenly, looking deceptively calm, but his scent told her otherwise.

She reached into a pack filled with spirits. “Were these in here all along?”

“Part of my cargo.” His voice sounded far away. “I put them in my pack before we set up camp for the night.”

She brought two bottles to the table. “You wanted to tell me, then.”

“We’re stranded here until we can get a ride.” He blinked rheumy eyes at her. “You weren’t in the best of moods, either. I didn’t want to take any chances.” He drained his cup and opened the spirits. “She didn’t have a name. None of them

do, and I wasn't going to call them by their numbers. I gave them the names of what was around me. Cactus. Wren. Basalt." He grinned. "When I was very young I'd get fixed on a word because I liked the sound, and then I'd have a dozen Tourmalines." More spirits flooded the cup. "It didn't matter. They all knew which one I meant. Before they went to the pens." The cup tipped, drained. "We weren't supposed to name any of them; it made things that much harder. You don't get attached to livestock you're going to outlive. I called her Sunrise."

TripStone's shoulders began to shake. She closed her eyes and felt BrushBurn's hands enclose her own. "I want to tell you to stop."

"I know you do." He brushed the fur on her fingers. Tender movements. "I can't stop now." An odd lightness touched his voice. "You've got a gun. That will stop me."

She looked into twinkling. "You'd like that."

He shrugged. "Maybe not." He released her hands and embraced the cup. "The Farm has tremendous awnings, very sturdy cloth. Even in summer we were protected from the sun. We'd get the most wonderful breezes, very sweet air. I thought the whole world was like that before I got my first look at Promontory." He drank deeply. "Of course, by the time I finally got to Promontory I was too impressed with its expansiveness and its industry to notice the breeze wasn't there any more."

She waited, her limbs drained of strength. She couldn't lift the bottle if she wanted to.

BrushBurn refilled her cup. "You should have gotten more sleep."

She wished she had tears left. She choked, "Sunrise."

"Sunrise." He leaned back in his chair and sighed. "We all used to run naked around the Farm. Yata children, Masari children. Did I mention the breezes?" BrushBurn swallowed more spirits and lifted the bottle again. "It didn't take long to learn about sex. The Yata were medically checked to be certain, but their readiness for the pens became obvious during everyday play. At first play was all it was; that could happen at any time. It was all very innocent." He emptied the cup. "It was always innocent."

He rubbed his eyes and laid his head down on the table, muffled. "I learned from the best lovers, TripStone. It's helped me tremendously in the course of business." He looked up at her. "You know, I never cared much where I left my seed when it came to my dealings with Masari. It didn't matter. But I think I was the only one at the Farm to use a sheath in the pens. Everyone should, when you think about it, for safety and efficiency's sake if nothing else. But we had our leniencies." He pushed back up. "Mix-children have no value there. They'd be another mouth to feed, for no guaranteed return." He reached for the bottle. "They were considered waste."

A great groan rose through TripStone's lips. "Did it ever occur to anyone there that a hybrid child could be less dependent on Yata?"

"Of course it did." BrushBurn raised the bottle to his lips and gulped, then gave it a look of surprise and refilled his cup. "Try changing an entire economy, based on a practice that yields uneven results with no reliable way to predict long-term performance." He drained the cup. "I didn't know that language when I was coming of age. If I had, I would have used a sheath outside the pens as well."

Tears welled up in TripStone's eyes. Her stomach was a boulder. "Sunrise."

"Sunrise. That's when I learned about hybrid children." He fixed TripStone with a steady gaze. "She and I had known each other since we could barely walk. Most Yata children go to the breeding pens first, but she went directly to the nursery. Sometimes you can tell parentage early, but not always. It wasn't until the child was born that we knew a Masari and not a Yata had impregnated her."

His breaths turned slow and deep. "It could have been one of my brothers, or a cousin, but for some reason she favored me. I never saw her again." He rested his hand on TripStone's, a sheen of sweat on his palm. "My family spared me a lot of grief by killing her. They knew that profit isn't everything."

He lifted the bottle and hesitated, then put it down.

TripStone picked it up before noticing that her cup was still full.

"You can drink from the mouth," BrushBurn offered. "I did."

TripStone put the bottle down and grasped his hands, choking. Her forehead touched the table. She almost gave up trying to form her lips around the words;

her tongue felt cut out. "I'm so sorry."

He eased a hand from her grip and smoothed down her hair, his touch heartbreakingly gentle. "My family had performed a kindness. I had to learn."

He spoke to her from another existence. TripStone sat back in her chair, letting her head loll. She gulped air as dizziness swept her. She bent forward again, toward the table, propping her chin on her hands. "I was consecrated as a hunter when I came of age," she rasped. "I was terrified, BrushBurn. Crossroads looked to me to kill for them. I almost couldn't do it."

"But you did. That's why I'm a trader."

She squinted at him, confused.

"I come from a farming family," BrushBurn said. "Everyone does what they can to sustain the operation. When I was old enough, my parents told me to perform my first culling." He cupped her cheek. "It was my last. They learned my limitations."

He gathered fresh tears from her chops. "They saw I had a good head for business, so they taught me what they knew and then sent me to Promontory to learn more. I jumped at the chance. I could travel, see what the rest of the world looked like. I could help support my family without killing anyone." He reached for the bottle. "For a while I was very happy, but then I realized something was missing."

Her breath caught in her throat. "Yata."

"Yata." He poured. "There's a Yata community called Skedge, but they're not the same."

TripStone bit her lip. Despite their shared agony, she could not tell him what she knew.

He emptied the cup and added, almost inaudibly, "That's why I said I wanted to live in the Marsh. From what the *yatanii* at the Milkweed tell me, I think I might like it there." Sad blue eyes gazed into hers. "Does it sound awful to you that I envy Ghost his stay there?"

TripStone swallowed hard. She whispered, “No.”

“That’s good.” He nodded toward the table. “Your cup is still full.”

She pushed it toward him. He drained it.

Her head threatened to split. She tried to focus on BrushBurn’s face as it began to swim. “Do you ever get back to Destiny Farm?”

“I did once, after I left.” He emptied the second bottle into his mouth.

“Afterwards, we agreed it was best I maintain a home in Promontory. My family brings up the meat. Sometimes I distribute it in town, sometimes I take it on the road. Crossroads was a special case.”

Which your actions helped bring about. TripStone fought a new wave of dizziness. She tried to shake it from her head and stopped when it worsened. “BrushBurn.” She took his hand in hers, trying to resolve the blur of his pelt. “Don’t you ever regret any of this?”

“Of course I do, TripStone. I regret all of it.” He squinted across the table, blinking. “Haven’t touched that third bottle.” A crooked smile bowed his lips. “We’ve done well.” He rubbed her arm. “Can you walk?”

TripStone took several deep breaths and waited for the tent to right itself. “I think so.”

“I can’t. I’d be obliged if you would help me up.” He leaned back. “Watch the bruise.”

She rose and approached him with slow, weaving steps. Even with her help, he tried to stand on his own before they staggered to his pallet. BrushBurn gritted his teeth as TripStone gripped and lowered him, squatting.

“You’re good with a chain,” he murmured. “I’ll undress in the morning.”

“I’m removing your boots.” She crawled to the foot of his bed and started to tug. “You’ll sleep better with them off.”

“Damned courtesy.”

She smiled. His eyes were closed; she set his boots aside. Numbness floated through her. She breathed it in, letting it spread until it became a thick white cloud, a blur into which she could sink her fingers, hanging suspended above the mountains. “Good night, BrushBurn.”

“Good night, TripStone.”

She struggled around the tent, extinguishing the lamps. She slipped off her own boots and foot wraps, her breeches, her vest and shirt. Her body swayed uncertainly in the dark, arms wrapped around her waist against the chill.

She turned around, shivering. Her feet moved on their own. She edged wearily toward the pallet, listening to BrushBurn’s deep, even breaths. If TripStone held still enough, she could hear the pulse in her throat, the slowing rhythm of her lungs. Strangely weightless, she sank to her knees, crawled onto the pallet, and pulled his blanket up around her shoulders.

A tentative arm rounded her back and pulled her closer. She pillowed her head on his chest, resting her palm against his chops.

His faint moan of gratitude silently shattered her.

CHAPTER 7

Promontory

The sky spat rain: short, quick bursts that stopped as quickly as they began. It wasn't too different from a baby, that way. Between spurts the clouds continued to hang, swollen, hoarding their loads.

Ghost slumped against the wall and gazed out the window, watching DevilChaser and DamBuster arrange burlap bags filled with tailings, gravel, and sand. The men piled layers around the house for that time when the clouds opened completely.

You must sit. MudAdder stood behind him in the kitchen, tapping his arm.
They'll see you.

"They probably know I'm watching," Ghost said, "but you're right." He eased down onto cushioned wood as MudAdder held the wheelchair steady. "They don't seem in any particular hurry to finish what they're doing. If they suspect anything, they're letting it go." He looked up into eyes bright enough to be onyx. "That should give me some work time."

MudAdder nodded and wheeled Ghost out of the kitchen, toward the beakers.

The Yata had been a quick study in touch-speech. They'd practiced by the light of a single lantern after their hosts had gone to bed. After repeated prodding, MudAdder had finally snuck Ghost into the lab.

Swallowing his revulsion, Ghost undertook a more thorough study of his ingredients. He retrieved the gas canister he'd smuggled out of the Marsh and hid it, but finding an antidote to Rudder's smoke bombs would have to wait. Before anything else, he had to safely alleviate Piri's pain and tend to his own infected feet.

He left DamBuster's experiments untouched and tended to his own. The Marsh's rich pharmacy yielded more than just the ingredients for Destiny. When combined with preparations native to Promontory, they produced powerful curatives.

MudAdder pushed Ghost to a counter. *DamBuster knows you're stealing from him.*

“I’d be surprised if he didn’t. He keeps very careful records.” Ghost plucked bottles from a low shelf and pointed, waiting for MudAdder to retrieve a container from higher up. The Yata had to stand on one of the crates to reach it. “I think it secretly gladdens him.”

He measured out powder and jelly and started mixing a paste. “You want him to succeed. Why?”

Because without enough Destiny, they must kill more of my people.

“And with Destiny, they kill you anyway.” Ghost put the mixture aside. He grabbed an orange oil and shook a few drops into the dish. “To feed people like me. At least without it, you can think clearly.”

For a moment the fingers receded. When they returned, their touch was light. *Sometimes thinking clearly is hard.*

Ghost’s hand paused by the dish. He turned toward MudAdder and tried to keep the menace from his voice. “That’s too damn bad, isn’t it?”

He should send MudAdder to Piri. She would show less mercy.

He sniffed the dish. Satisfied, he balanced it on his lap. Without waiting for MudAdder, he wheeled himself to a stack of boxes and propped up his feet.

The Yata held the dish as Ghost leaned forward to unwrap bandages.

“I’ve read DamBuster’s notes.” Ghost took the dish and started spreading the paste on skin that had crusted over, its redness gone. Blanched flakes broke off and drifted to the floor. The fur on his feet and ankles had almost completely fallen away. “I see where he’s going, and I think he’s getting closer. If I’m right, the Marsh provides only part of the answer. The rest must come from around here.” He re-wrapped one foot and bent to the other. “Materials that occur in abundance, given the quantities of Destiny used at the Farm. Probably something that serves as an accelerant, and that substitutes for whatever the Yata use where I come from.” He glowered at MudAdder. “I have no intention of sharing my theories with DamBuster. He’ll discover the formula soon enough on his own.”

SandTail spoke of holding another culling soon.

Ghost lowered his forehead to his knees and took several deep breaths. “MudAdder, I cannot and will not be an accessory to your enslavement. I’ve done enough damage already. Try telling DamBuster yourself, if you feel you must.”

He re-wrapped and leaned back in his chair. After all he had told this Yata about the Cliff and the Marsh, even about Basc, the man still preferred the only life he’d known. No pretense, no rituals. Nothing complicated to mask the obvious. Only the simplicity of knowing that one was comfortable and well cared for, until such time as one was chosen. And then the knowing stopped.

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SandTail’s visit three days earlier had been chilling.

Piri could finally sit comfortably upright. She had taken small walks around the birthing room, cradling TelZodo in her arms. She looked over Ghost’s shoulder as he sat in his wheelchair, carrying out his own experiments at the nursery’s modestly-equipped counter.

TelZodo was fussing loudly when DevilChaser had opened the door, looking pale. Ghost quickly prepared a mash, praying for guidance. If the gods existed, they would not let him poison his son. Breathing hard, he dipped his finger in the mixture and held it beneath TelZodo’s tiny nose, and he and Piri hummed quietly until the child’s complaints diminished and sleepy eyes closed.

He couldn’t hear words through the walls, but he could hear their tones. SandTail had been praising and damning at once, urgent with tightly-controlled fear. DevilChaser had been belligerent, DamBuster dull and resigned. Barely breathing, Ghost held TelZodo swaddled against him while Piri stood behind the chair, her hands on his chest, her fingers motionless and warm.

They waited through a visit that had seemed interminable, until they finally heard footsteps passing their room, a door opening and closing. They didn’t move until DevilChaser peeked in and nodded, looking more sour than ever.

Ghost had more to fear than just the discovery of his family. But SandTail’s visit proved the man did not inspect DamBuster’s inventory, instead trusting the

apothecary to keep track. And DamBuster wasn't saying a word about how quickly his supplies were disappearing.

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Ghost's feet and lower legs tingled. The paste sent its agents through layers of his skin, including the tiny, living creatures he'd spied through DamBuster's lenses. He'd been so used to drawing animalcules out of himself that he hadn't thought to put them in until now. "How much time do we have?"

MudAdder left the room. He returned, smiling, and drummed on Ghost's arm, *We have time. They are being tender with each other.*

At least they lived in a house of love on the outskirts of this toxic morass. "Let's go to my other project, then. We'll clean this later." Ghost eased his feet down and let MudAdder wheel him to the canister.

"Did you know," he murmured, careful to keep the residue in place, "that most of what goes into the smoke comes from the Marsh? I wasn't only providing the ingredients for Destiny. I was collecting the means for my own gassing." Ghost reached beneath the counter and retrieved a mask and soft, spongy cake from his cache. He sniffed the cake and scraped off a sliver to examine beneath the lenses. "This has had enough time to cure."

He folded the cake into the mask and tied the cloth around his head. Bent toward the residue, hands cupped around the canister, he took a sharp, deep breath.

He rose almost immediately, cursing and wiping tears from his eyes. He scribbled a note, then bent to the canister again to hazard a cautious sniff.

Ghost's pen scratched through repeated samplings. His lips curled into grimaces as he teased out strands of scent. This cake was an improvement over its predecessors. So, too, the charcoal in the mask, but he still had more work to do.

And this was just the residue. The canister's contents were either dregs left over from burning or raw powder whose potency would be reduced if Ghost ignited it into smoke. He had no way to tell without setting a flame to it.

DamBuster might be looking the other way, but befouling the lab was too risky. Even with the door closed, the gas could spread beyond the room.

Ghost looked over his shoulder and saw MudAdder sitting placidly in his restraining chair, his legs draped over an armrest. The man reclined in the instrument of his torture, observing the manipulation of chemicals with only moderate interest.

Then his expression turned pensive. MudAdder slipped from the chair and padded over to Ghost, his fingers flexing.

If you find an antidote, the Yata in the Marsh might not come into the clearing, he tapped. The Masari would have to go in after them. Obtaining food would be harder.

“That’s right.”

That’s self-destructive for you.

“I suppose.” Ghost turned from him to uncork a bottle and lift a lab spoon. “You’ve got your peculiarities. I’ve got mine.”

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“Stay there.” Grinning hopefully, Ghost waved Piri against the far wall. “Wait for me.”

She leaned back, balancing TelZodo in her arms and easing the end of her short braid out of the baby’s mouth. Spittle decorated her tunic. Eyebrows raised, she nodded at her husband.

He parked his wheelchair against the opposite wall, pushed himself upright, and began shuffling across the room. “No more pain,” he murmured, “but I think I’ve borrowed someone else’s legs. TelZodo!” he called, cheeks glowing. “This is how it’s done. Watch closely.”

His feet *looked* like someone else’s, pale and wrinkled and bald. Fur was just starting to grow back, now that the bandages were off. Gauging his stride sight unseen would come later; for now, Ghost watched where he stepped. Their pallet came up on his left.

In minutes it fell behind. Not long ago, Ghost had run across a mountain. Now, covering the distance of a single room unassisted left his legs trembling. He had

to build muscle again. He'd walk clear across the Promontory smog if he had to. "Just wait until I start to toddle, Piri. You won't be able to stop me."

The door opened when he was at arm's length from the far wall. He stepped once more, turned gingerly, planted his feet wide, and fell back against the wood with a huff.

DevilChaser glanced at the wheelchair before fixing Ghost with a bemused look. "DamBuster asked that I tell you he's made some rearrangements in the lab. His separatory funnel now goes behind and to the *left* of his vacuum adapter. And dinner is ready." He studied Ghost's naked feet. "You didn't have to sneak behind our backs. I smelled trouble on you. He counted it."

"I know." Ghost laughed; even TelZodo's gaze seemed accusatory. "Your silence means a lot to us."

"Thank us by sharing your notes. We can always use better medicinals." DevilChaser held the door open. "We're not expecting visitors. If someone pulls up outside, we'll rush you back in here." He waited while Ghost slipped a cloth hammock around Piri, tucking TelZodo into its folds. "You can also tell us what you're doing with one of Rudder's smoke bombs."

The dining table seemed almost as far away as Rudder, but Ghost's muscles began to remember their jobs. He could almost anticipate where he would step next. "You must have found the mask, then. If we are ever back in the Marsh, I want us to be protected."

DevilChaser took his seat next to DamBuster, who hurried between dining table and kitchen. MudAdder sat at the other end, his chair raised on wood boards beside a step stool. Next to him, Piri climbed into her elevated, cushioned chair. She settled TelZodo in her lap and gave MudAdder a soft smile.

At least the Yata enjoyed a better broth now. Piri had let Ghost know that the gruel, based on the slop in Destiny Farm's troughs and lacking only the drug itself, was not acceptable. She had punctuated her words carefully, leaving small welts on his skin.

Ghost sat opposite DevilChaser, swaying a little as his weight left his feet. For a moment he wondered if he'd magically float to the ceiling. The stew before him looked richer than before. "You've stopped rationing."

DamBuster poured tea, his voice low. “Only for this meal. We’ve begun to feel some deprivation effects, and the shortage has eased a bit. Temporarily.”

Ghost frowned. “Another culling.” He glanced at MudAdder, who looked away. “Is this meat from the Farm?”

“I’m afraid so. Their salesman is back in town.” DamBuster waited until he had everyone’s attention. “It wasn’t another culling, this time. BrushBurn convinced SandTail to free up more of the emergency supply.”

Ghost pushed his plate away. “Thank you, but I’ll do without.”

DevilChaser snapped, “You’re barely healed, Ghost. We’ve run out of Yata from the angels. You’re going to have to compromise.” He nodded at Piri and MudAdder. “They understand.”

“I know they do. That’s not the point.”

“It *is* the point if you want to reach Skedge.” DevilChaser speared a chunk of meat and raised it before his face. “I know Rudder relies on the Games, but sometimes even their people depend on Destiny meat.”

Ghost gulped tea. “I’m not from Rudder.”

“You said you had stayed in the Marsh. Where else could you be from?”

DamBuster leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips. “Same place as that other one. What was her name?”

“Look who he’s paired with, DamBuster. He can’t possibly be from Crossroads.” DevilChaser tapped his chops, thinking for a moment. “Her name was TripStone.”

Blood drained from Ghost’s face. The ceramic mug slipped and fell from his hand.

## CHAPTER 8

He walked. Through sunup. Through sundown. Through the night with a lantern in his hand.

From room to room at first, then around the outside of the house, then venturing down the small dirt road leading from the yard. Past the herb garden, circumventing the chickens who squawked against the rain. Fat drops splattered on Ghost's head and ceased abruptly, as though his thoughts burned them off.

Skedje rose in the distant mist like a mirage. He would walk across the salt pan if he had to. *She* had.

No, that wasn't quite true. The angels had carried her to safety, to these men who had saved her life. TripStone had departed Promontory on the morning of the attack. She would have missed the worst of it, but she would have had to survive the winter.

DevilChaser had patted DamBuster on the back as the larger man mopped up the table. "At the rate things are going, maybe we should move to Crossroads." TelZodo had tried to play with the spilled tea after his initial, startled cry.

Ghost wanted to hurl his plate against the wall when he learned how the Yata militia had obtained their arms. He should have; his son probably would have found that amusing. The child's temperament already seemed to take after Piri's.

Far from bringing its meat to Crossroads on an errand of mercy, Promontory had helped engineer the massacre. Slaughtering Yata had not been enough. They'd had to aid the slaughter of Masari as well. Even MudAdder had looked dismayed at the telling, and Ghost didn't think anything could shock Farm Yata. Piri had merely narrowed her eyes, deep in her own murderous contemplation.

Then DamBuster described the Little Masari and her grip on Ghost's hand turned hard enough to shoot pain through his fingers. She'd scratched into his palm, *Take me there.*

He was already a ghost. He could be an angel, too. Angels were well-respected in Skedje, and he'd have a better chance of never having to taste Destiny's meat.



But first he needed his legs back.

“I’ve been a *yatanii*,” Ghost had told his hosts. “I may still be able to last a while longer without. Don’t put that crutch away yet.”

Now, he ventured farther out on the dirt road until the tremors in his thighs told him to turn back. They were familiar now. They told him he experienced more than just muscle fatigue. Whatever it cost, he had to find an angel soon and hope there’d been a death in Skedge.

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TripStone squinted hard against the morning and covered her eyes with her hand. Her head throbbed. When it finally no longer hurt to look, she saw the same blank walls and the same sparse room that had haunted her for days. Beside her, the rest of BrushBurn’s stark pallet was still warm.

“Gods,” she moaned. “What I’ve become.”

“I know that prayer.” BrushBurn laced up a well-made but otherwise featureless shirt. At least the tea he brought her no longer came in a tin cup, though his earthenware was simple and unadorned. His home in Promontory served as a shelter and no more. Any color seemed to reside solely in his tent.

She sipped, tasting oil. “This is awful.”

“Drink it; you’ll feel better. We’re having goldberry brandy later.”

“You can’t be serious.”

They had consumed most of the spirits in BrushBurn’s pack by the time their passage to Promontory arrived. Try as she might, TripStone couldn’t remember entering the city.

Her first audience with Promontory’s Chamber had stunned her. She’d expected to find the governing body in the marble-domed Warehouse with its potential armory, but the officials met in a squat stone building in the center of town instead.

Spirits had been in abundance there, too, which TripStone declined at first.

When her arguments continued to meet with polite indifference, she began to worry less about her attempts at eloquence and more about the true purpose of her visit. That alone moved her hand to fill and then refill a glass embossed with sturdy barracks and tall smokestacks, the images of smelters.

She stayed her reach before the pictures began to blur, but BrushBurn's home had been equally well-apportioned afterwards, with no one for her to try to impress.

As she sipped the bitter liquid, he asked, "Who is Erta?"

She squinted at him.

"You were calling out her name in your sleep."

TripStone nodded, dully. "The last Yata I killed." She pointed to her slowly-diminishing pack. "That."

"The meat that looks like slate."

She sipped and nodded again. A few more sips and she would edge out of bed and crawl to retrieve her breakfast. "That's a good shirt," she observed.

"SandTail insisted on meeting with us privately." He reached for equally fine, equally plain breeches. "He's coming here." His hands paused at the laces. "He seemed as taken as I with the fact he is known as far away as Crossroads. But then, HigherBrook is a student of history. Did he tell you anything other than SandTail's name?"

TripStone held the tea against her lips and slowly shook her head, relieved for the numbness of hangover. Just whom had she followed? SandTail and BrushBurn had seemed simple smugglers without the good sense to keep from crashing through the woods.

"Let me refill that." BrushBurn knelt by the pallet and eased the cup from her hand. He peered at her, smiling a little, then retreated to his utilitarian kitchen. In a minute he returned with more of the oily liquid. He plucked her pack from the corner of the room and set it down beside her. "You need food, and more than just this. We still have some stew." He added, "Meatless."

She coughed as she fished a small chunk from the pack. His kindness made her want to dive back toward the bottle. “Thank you.”

He pointed and said, firmly, “Tea.”

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“So this is your tandem runner.” SandTail beamed at TripStone over a half-drained snifter. “Let me say that I am as impressed with your destructiveness as I am with your loyalty to Crossroads.”

BrushBurn sipped and said, “Bad road.”

“The road was fine.” TripStone folded her hands before her, trying to ignore the brandy. “It was my error.”

“And honest.” SandTail nodded to himself and added, congenially, “We value your input here. We’ll forgive the damage.”

“If you want my honest opinion, my input to your Chamber seems inconsequential.”

“Yes. I know.” SandTail patted a short stack of leatherbound books. “That’s why I’m here.”

TripStone had watched curiously as his cart pulled up to the house and he emerged looking like a lump, carrying the volumes inside his coat against the intermittent rain. Even misshapen, SandTail was considerably less scruffy than when she had first spotted him from a rocky perch near Ghost’s cabin.

“BrushBurn suggested we meet here today, rather than in my study. He thought my décor might upset you.” SandTail’s diminutive hand caressed the top book, whose bronze skin and delicate grain revealed the leather’s origin. “Though considering your many religious uses of Yata, I find it odd that you would object to our more functional approach. They’re body parts however you consider them. One fetish is just as good as another.” His palm left the aged tome and rested firmly atop TripStone’s hand. “But my purpose here is to teach you, not to shock you.”

TripStone rewarded SandTail with a shallow smile. Like BrushBurn, he wore

rugged finery, but his ochre pelt bore a curious trim that revealed rather than hid old scar tissue. He was teaching her already.

“Did you know,” he mused, “that you are the first person from Crossroads who has spoken of establishing a partnership with Promontory? In the interest of your people, of course, now that we’re all you’ve got left. We know you’re here to learn about our operations. It’s what any good adversary would do.” He lifted the top book from the stack, found its narrow bookmark as he turned it to face her, and laid it open. “When you next write to HigherBrook, tell him we’re going to give you what you came for.”

The parchment was exceedingly old and smelled of preservative. TripStone bent to labored handwriting. Ancient flourishes trailed from the pen in painstaking detail.

*Our party had traveled perhaps a day, when I saw a plume of black smoke on the horizon. My father was speaking with the men who had asked for our help when the Yata opened fire on us, shooting my father, my uncle, and my father’s runner. The runner was killed outright; my uncle was shot in the abdomen and lived until that night. My father was shot through the lungs and lived until morning of the second day. Of the settlers from Promontory who had requested our assistance, five were killed, including a boy just come of age. We who remained drove the Yata back after a prolonged exchange, during which time a bullet grazed my neck and others sustained injuries as well. Only then could we burn our dead, as the soil was too sparse and the risk too great for us to dig even a rude grave.*

TripStone raised her head. “You’re telling me,” she said, softly, “that what happened in Crossroads is not the first time Yata have obtained guns from the Masari.”

“I tell you nothing of the sort.” Brandy caught the light as it swirled in the glass. “That letter was written long after Masari had begun capturing guns from the Yata, who invented firearms.” SandTail appraised her, his manner sober. “Skedge had already begun arming Alvav. Were it not for Promontory and the help given us by Rudder, Crossroads would have seen those guns much sooner, though not in Masari hands.” He took a thoughtful sip. “Stopping that trade took many generations and many lives. Securing the flatland’s mines and metalworks, also established by the Yata, took longer.”

TripStone looked at BrushBurn, who wordlessly opened another book. He turned the pages with a gentle hand.

SandTail steepled his fingers. “Ask your leader whatever became of our repeated pleas to Crossroads for help during that time. Ask him which of all your Rotunda’s books holds that correspondence.”

She shook her head. “I’ve never heard of any of this.”

“No, I imagine you haven’t.”

SandTail set the first book aside. BrushBurn stopped turning the second volume’s pages and slid it before her. She gazed upon a letter of politely-worded but uncompromising refusal.

“Your people had no interest in our fight for survival, or the potential consequences if we failed.” SandTail’s tapered, scarred fingers grazed the leather, following lines of coppery grain. “Crossroads refused to send forces into Promontory for the express purpose of killing Yata because it was too busy *worshipping* them.”

~ ~ ~

SandTail let more brandy slide down his throat as he watched the woman from Crossroads. She did not read quickly. Instead, her fingers hovered over the ink, almost touching the letters as though trying to bypass sight.

She was a hunter, and there were few of those left in that accursed place. Perhaps she knew, now, what it was like to lose family. To be completely vulnerable. She might, from the look in her eyes. They were more than just tired.

She had taken one polite sip before moving her snifter carefully aside, a sign of respect for the books. Perhaps for herself as well. SandTail had not known what to expect when he had stopped here before, after receiving word of the wreck, to find his colleague half-carrying the Crossroads representative into the house. She had not been injured in the mishap as SandTail had first surmised. On the contrary; she’d been falling-down drunk.

TripStone turned the page and SandTail noted the thinness of her fingers. Her shirt and vest were concealing, but hunched over the table her shoulders looked

bony even through layers of clothing. She blinked and closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again.

SandTail leaned back in his chair. “I am a student of history, like your HigherBrook. If you have questions, I may be able to answer them. Some of my kin’s words are on those pages.”

Her gaze was rooted to the parchment. “No one in Crossroads is taught this.”

“Does that surprise you? Crossroads has a longstanding practice of preserving the stories of Yata, not of Masari.”

TripStone whispered into the book, “Is this why?”

“In part, perhaps. But your obsession with Yata long predates the settling of Promontory, as the ancestors of my ancestors might attest.” SandTail nodded to his colleague. “You were right to bring her, BrushBurn. This may yet be worth a demolished cart.”

The trader nodded back, uncharacteristically silent. That, along with his concern for TripStone’s sensibilities, was itself informative. He didn’t house a mere envoy. He had feelings for her.

SandTail hid his smile behind the snifter. If her receptiveness to BrushBurn made her more open to Promontory, so much the better.

Certainly they were both obsessed with Yata. Perhaps that had brought them together.

SandTail watched the hunter struggle with the chronicles, observing tiny cracks in an otherwise stoic demeanor. Most likely that stoicism was a strength the settlers took with them as they left the Covenant behind, and then the Games behind, leaving the pressures of population growth to track rumors of food waiting in the arid lands.

Certainly it took strength to endure the tortures of Skedge, whose native inhabitants soon found a new use for Destiny in their battles against the Masari. SandTail had deliberately left those chronicles behind. They would come later, when she was ready for them. One must employ the right sequence of steps or one’s product fell apart in its manufacture, leaving only slag.

It would not do to make slag of this woman. That had happened to enough people during the raids, when small Yata abducted smaller Masari and consumed copious quantities of Destiny so as to better enjoy the spoils. Destiny had first come to Masari consciousness neither as a gift of the gods nor as a regulated substance. It had come as a weapon that had often proved deadlier than bullets.

Turning that weapon to Promontory's advantage had taken longer than securing the rest. Until the Masari could manufacture the drug for themselves, that battle continued.

SandTail floated a drop of brandy on his tongue. Time, soon, to pay another visit to DamBuster.

The envoy from Crossroads leaned back from the volume and took a shaky breath. Her voice rose from a deep cavern. "I spent years learning and repeating the words of Yata. I resented their freedom to tell their stories when we were not allowed to tell our own. Now that I'm reading yours, there's nothing I want more than to look away." She shook her head. "I can't."

"I will leave these here, then." SandTail patted her hand and tried to catch her gaze, without success. "Take as much time as you need, TripStone. This partnership has been a long time coming. There's no sense rushing it." He pushed back his chair. "Take good care of her, BrushBurn. When you are ready to return the histories, I would be pleased to have you both come for dinner. TripStone, you may bring your own meat if you like."

She nodded, still without looking at him. She remained seated while BrushBurn walked SandTail to the door.

"This is hard on you as well." The smaller man looked up at the trader, whose gaze was direct and entirely transparent. "Be careful."

"It's odd, you know," BrushBurn said, under his breath. "Spend enough time in Crossroads and their senselessness becomes almost admirable."

SandTail squeezed his arm. From behind he heard the delicate scrape of glass being lifted from wood. The snifter was not lowered back down for a long time.

## CHAPTER 9

### Basc

Gria ran her fingers through close-cropped hair slicked down by the rain. If she squinted, she could find new, still-small scars on the mountainside. *Forgive me, old friend.*

The scars would grow much larger and much more quickly if Promontory's forces came here. Smokestacks would line the horizon, belching out fumes more noxious than the controlled fires her smithies managed to maintain even in this downpour.

She should take consolation in that fact, but she could not. She could only stand confidently before her troops, imparting strategies and outlining options, before leaving them to find their own comforts.

She thanked the gods her student Watu was dead. This destruction of the slopes would break his heart. The Covenant had pressed herbalists into the service of making Destiny for others, but in doing so had made the land itself into a lover. All the forest's teeming life, its seasons and its cycles, had been branded into Gria's skin as she waited and watched and harvested. Even the rocks had whispered their stories into her palms.

They had done no less for her student as he existed between the worlds, running the Meethouse in Basc and serving the militia in the far woods.

Gria had been exiled from her village, but she'd still had these gently rolling foothills. Without the dictum to produce either children or the drug that enslaved their parents, she had been able to worship the forest nakedly, finally, on its terms.

For all its destructiveness the Covenant had at last come to rest at a tenuous equilibrium, keeping Yata and Masari in check, enough to preserve the distant wilderness. Now the Covenant was gone, no longer able to protect the purity that had nourished Gria through half a lifetime. Her very battle to preserve her people now turned her against the one thing that had saved her.



She listened to training exercises at the other end of the clearing, bodies slipping in mud. She arched her back and craned her head toward the sky, exposing her neck and letting the rain sluice down her face. If the gods existed, then Watu was with them now, looking down upon this latest desecration. Gria wished he would talk to her, the way Ulik talked to Zai, from wherever the dead resided. “At least I can still speak to you,” she sighed, “whether you choose to hear me or not.”

A small, strong arm tightened its grip around her trouser leg. “Who’re you talking to?”

“She’s talking to the gods, Evit.” Abri stood off to the side. Gria caught him shooting the younger boy an impatient scowl. “Like mommy.”

“Why?”

Gria ruffled the hair on Evit’s head, smiling down at the crooked braid fashioned by his brother’s hands. “Because the gods are perverse, my dear. You can ask your mother what that means.”

Soon she would move them back indoors to be with the other children, though they never seemed to tire of watching Zai, even when she was only a speck in their vision. The rain didn’t bother them at all. It was probably good for Zai, too, for the times when she cast her glance this way while barking commands, sending her company through its paces. And Ila, sprinting across the muck with a mocked-up, weighted StormCloud in his hands, now knew where his sister was.

The gods were perverse, but they also had their moments of mercy.

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Mercifully, too, there was little talk of Woolies.

Gria walked among the barracks, taking tea and breaking bread with one cluster of soldiers and then another, dining on a variety of flesh. Her speeches waited for other occasions. Around the campfires, she took plate and mug in hand and listened.

They knew the focus of this attack. They worked closely with Masari now, and hunted them down as well, trading one equilibrium for another. Gria’s forces

trained to liberate Destiny Farm by any means necessary, but this time they limited their hatred. They had to. The success of their mission depended on a Masari.

More than one. RootWing had placed one of his messengers at Gria's disposal. The Masari runner had passed a sealed note to her own messenger stationed in Basc, who had rushed it out here to the training grounds. Gria herded Zai's boys back inside when she saw him coming and strode forward to take the parchment. She motioned for him to follow her and ducked out of the rain.

TripStone had proved more adept than her mother ShadowGrass at learning the ancient pictograms. The border of the parchment bore a fanciful design that would seem mere decoration to most.

Unable to get into the Warehouse, it said. Chamber meets elsewhere. Keep training, and wait.

Inside the border Gria read, in Yata, *Pray as hard as you can.* The ink was smudged and diluted in places. The handwriting was deliberate, more so than usual, and the words were larger than TripStone's accustomed style. A tiny spatter indicated a broken nib.

Gria nodded at the note and whispered, "Stay with us, TripStone." The hunter had not seen much of Promontory before, but her initial description made the dangers of that place apparent. Traveling with the trader could not have helped matters.

TripStone had switched to Masari at the bottom, writing in small, tense strokes, *Ask HigherBrook if any writings from Promontory unrelated to trade exist in the Rotunda. He must look for them.*

Gria pursed her lips. She would have to destroy the rest of the note; HigherBrook could read the pictograms as well as she. But she could honor TripStone's request.

Gria lifted a small knife from her belt and sliced the Masari text free, then handed it to the messenger. "If you can't find HigherBrook, give this to one of his advisors. It will get where it needs to go."

She watched the man lope away, his boots splashing in puddles, then turned her

attention back to the mountains. For the first time that she could recall, the rivulets draining into the valley looked brown.

CHAPTER 10

Promontory

Ghost closed his hands into fists and opened them again. No matter what he tried, no matter what pastes or tinctures, draughts or powders he put onto or into his body, he could not make the tingling in his extremities go away. DevilChaser was ready to kill him.

The doctor was ready to kill DamBuster, too, who refused to assist with any sedation or force-feeding. Withholding the crutch had proved useless. When Ghost didn't hold onto Piri, he held onto the walls, the chairs and tables, the counters, collecting bruises when the furnishings tricked him and jerked away on their own.

He had quipped about the vagaries of inanimate objects back in his cabin, too, but at least he'd had his stick. He hadn't suffered quite so many falls. Eventually DevilChaser placed the crutch back into Ghost's hands, spluttering choice epithets that had impressed even Piri.

They have contacted the angels. She leaned across the pallet and pressed hard on Ghost's bare chest, finding places where he still had feeling. *As soon as there is a body it will come here.*

The look in her face went beyond concern; she watched him with a chilling detachment. Ghost knew what it meant. He met her gaze and said, voice low, "Don't even think it."

Piri ignored him, holding TelZodo to her breast. Her milk proved as tasteless as everything else Ghost tried to ingest. That experiment had at least been pleasurable, until he realized her nipples were better off in their child's mouth. Now her nakedness lured him in other ways.

DevilChaser entered the birthing room and dropped into a chair. He glowered down at them. "I've got one man feeding poison to a Yata strapped down in one room, another man suffering Yata deficiency in another, and two Yata who don't have the good sense to run as fast and as far away as their little legs will carry them. And I'm too stupid to throw my hands up in disgust and hop the first

transport into Rudder.” He rubbed sleepless eyes. “Somebody shoot me.”

“I would,” Ghost said, sympathetically, “but right now my aim is very, very bad.”

“Since you’re hell-bent on this madness, at least tell me what to expect. I haven’t seen this before.”

Ghost nodded. He lay back on the pallet, easing numb arms behind his head. “My muscle coordination will get worse. If I use the crutch at all, you’ll have to tie it to me because my fingers won’t work.” His stomach roiled when he swallowed. “Abdominal cramps will probably start tonight. Cold sweats.” Piri’s touch fell hard on his sternum, reminding him. “Blurred vision.”

“This will kill you eventually.”

Ghost closed his eyes. “It will take time to kill me.”

Maybe the angels would arrive with food before then. Piri’s scent became increasingly pervasive, but she refused to keep her distance. Instead, she snuggled closer to him, almost recklessly, tempting him.

He knew what she wanted.

“DevilChaser.” Ghost shifted uncomfortably on the bed and listened to the sounds of contented suckling beside him. He kept his eyes closed against the sight of soft, yielding flesh. “I want you to remove all the knives from this room. Take away anything you see that can cut.”

He heard the chair scrape and tracked footfalls as DevilChaser advanced around the room, up and down the counter. He sighed with relief at the soft clacks of metal being gathered together.

The footfalls paused. The doctor said, “From the look on your wife’s face, I think she’s going to kill you before your deficiency does.”

“I know.” Ghost took a deep breath. “She was going to wait until I grew too weak to be able to stop her. Then she was planning to use those knives to cut pieces out of herself.”

DevilChaser fell silent. Only TelZodo's nursing filled the room; Ghost smiled at the sound. He could almost ignore the dull pain beginning to settle around his torso, a prelude to his own guts being sucked hard.

The footfalls resumed, with more clacking. The doctor's voice grew closer. "You're right to tell me to remove these, Ghost. A ragged wound heals more quickly than one created by a sharp edge."

Ghost's eyes sprang open. He blinked against the harshness of the light until he saw the seriousness, even severity, in DevilChaser's face. "You're as crazy as she is."

"Maybe so, but if she's willing to sustain a few flesh wounds, we have the agents to treat them, including your contributions. And anesthetic to dull whatever pain your bites might inflict on her." He nodded toward the pallet. "Look at her."

Ghost turned his head. Piri smiled up at the doctor with tears in her eyes. She lifted her thigh and pointed to it with a questioning look.

DevilChaser nodded. "That's as good a place as any. I've watched you two, Ghost. I know you're not going to kill her, at least not this way. Carrying that baby almost finished her, and I worked too hard delivering TelZodo to allow Piri to sustain any permanent damage now." He turned to the counter and busied himself with preparing a mask.

Ghost let loose a great groan, knowing his protest was only half-hearted. "Piri," he said, "you have no idea what you taste like raw." He shook his head. "I tried it once and it terrified me. You are one potent people."

She didn't need to move her fingers. He saw the look of pride and challenge in her face, as though he had just stated the obvious.

"Good," DevilChaser said, resolutely. "You get fed, she gets to relax, and I get to stop feeling utterly useless. This could actually be a good day."

They waited until TelZodo was sated and sleeping before DevilChaser tied the mask around Piri's nose and mouth. She breathed deeply, trailing her hand down Ghost's arm and over his chest. The mask crinkled below bright eyes that began a lazy, half-lidded blinking.

Then she gave Ghost's stomach an affectionate pat and winked before turning away to lie on her side.

Ghost grumbled, "I give you *one* baby to feed and look what happens."

Her shoulders shook with hilarity; she would peal with laughter were it not for the sleeping child. Ghost swam through tingling until he lay on his side and edged down the pallet into position behind her.

DevilChaser held up his hand. "Try a pinch first. I want to see if she can feel it."

Ghost gave him an impish grin and complied. His fingers were too numb to tell him anything, but the fold of skin between them paled appreciably.

"On her thigh would have been more accurate," the doctor said, evenly, "but that will do. Did you feel that, Piri?" After a moment, he nodded. "She's ready."

Ghost allowed himself a heavy sigh of final resistance. At least now she was as numb as he. Even so, he glided his palm along her waist and then her abdomen, studiously avoiding the site of her incision.

Caressing her thigh, his other hand trembled with an anticipation he couldn't hope to quell. He looked back at DevilChaser. The doctor's presence would temper the fever building inside.

"I love you more than you'll ever know, Piri." His voice deepened, thickening with need. "Don't ever let me forget this."

Moaning with ancient ecstasy, unable to hold back any longer, he sank his teeth into her.

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DevilChaser had his medicinals ready. He would observe them every step of the way. He expected a controlled feeding, performed with all the proper safeguards in place. The procedure should be somewhat more than a simple bloodletting and considerably less than an amputation.

Ghost's hands tightened around his wife as he sheared off the first lozenge of flesh. It was a quick act, and oddly tender, until his eyes suddenly glistened with

wildness.

He jerked convulsively against Piri, grabbing and pulling her leg hard, pinning her. Straightening, rocking for a moment with forced restraint, then bending to her again. Ghost growled low in his throat as he raked his teeth along her thigh, clutching her to him as he gulped bits of her down.

DevilChaser froze, stunned by the savagery. He recovered quickly, repositioning himself in case he had to use force. Something would have to be left of his patient. He'd collected knives in his pockets. He might have to use them.

He hastened to Piri's side when a guttural cry issued from beneath the mask. Her breathing had quickened; he prepared to uncap more anesthetic. "Hold on," he gasped. "I'll get him off you."

Instead she tore the mask off, howling and waking the baby. Her face revealed much more than pain. DevilChaser took one look at her and reeled.

Ghost answered her summons, nipping, digging deeper, pulling. Piri levered herself up, triumphant. Her nails ripped the length of his back until his head came up and the two were face to face. The look that passed between them evolved with blurring speed.

Amazement. Rapture.

Hunger.

There was no telling what DevilChaser harbored in the birthing room except for his own panic. He turned quickly to TelZodo, but saw no signs of upset. Instead, the infant lay quietly, staring wide-eyed and attentive, tiny nostrils quivering.

The doctor swung around blood already beginning to pool. He prepared to grab and move the baby to safety when Piri rose against him and drove him back, exulting when Ghost grabbed her from behind.

She turned as jaws locked around her arm; crimson sluiced between her fingers. Piri hurled herself against Ghost, knocking them both off the ruined pallet, his skin under her nails, his fur in her mouth, her teeth gripping his side. The air turned gamy as they scrambled after each other, yowling across a floor turned increasingly smudged and sticky.



He tore another chunk from her. She clawed another piece from him.

DevilChaser was ready to prepare syringes to knock them both out when he saw that the frenzy around him only appeared unchecked. The bloodstains on the floor ended at a safe distance from TelZodo. All the treatments carefully arranged on DevilChaser's counter remained intact. The smears blossoming on his walls stopped long before they reached him.

As horrific as the pair seemed, they were not completely out of control. They only looked as though they were killing each other. The gore drenching Piri almost but did not quite conceal the superficiality of her injuries or the nature of their tangling. DevilChaser thanked the gods she was still nursing. It would keep her from conceiving.

He heard banging. He hurried to the door, being careful not to slip, and flattened himself against it.

“Stay where you are!” he called, breathlessly. “Don't come in here!”

“What the hell is going on?”

DevilChaser shook his head and leaned his cheek against the door. “Ghost's back to full mobility, dear.” He waited for the din to ease. “Parents and child seem fine. Doctor could be better.”

After another moment he wheezed, “Sweetheart?”

DamBuster's deep baritone vibrated through the wood. “I'm still here.”

“If SandTail stops by, shoot him.”

No one seemed in any danger, but DevilChaser had to be sure. He'd be there if they needed him. Idly he started counting Ghost's mounting lacerations, mentally connecting the points where they intersected, until his own loins tingled. He quickly switched his attention back to Piri.

Finally, panting and dazed, the Yata lifted both hands and placed her palms squarely on Ghost's stomach. Ghost nodded and slid to the floor by her side. They lay quietly together, spent.

She began to giggle.

TelZodo realized the excitement was over and started to fuss. Ghost lightly touched the top of Piri's head and crawled to his son, then started rummaging around for a clean diaper cloth.

DevilChaser hurried to Piri, grimacing at numerous shallow gouges across her body until he saw the bliss in her face. He motioned for her to open her mouth. The welts her own teeth had left on her tongue were not severe. They would heal.

She had suffered no deep trauma. None of her muscles had been irreparably damaged. Instead, Piri had bled freely, cleansing her system until her lesions began to clot and heal.

“Did you know it was going to be like this?” he asked.

Piri shook her head with an innocent smile. DevilChaser stared, mesmerized, at flesh already knitting anew. If anything, Ghost would be the one more susceptible to infection.

The doctor wasn't quite sure what he had witnessed, but he knew it was not sustainable. All the more reason to get the angels here as fast as possible.

~~~

DevilChaser stood in the kitchen doorway, looking out toward the salt pan. The black silhouette of a cart glided in the distance, above a white expanse glowing beneath gathering storm clouds.

“Thank the gods,” he breathed. “DamBuster!” he called, “I can see the angels from here. Get Ghost.”

The cart grew steadily larger; it couldn't come too soon. Ghost was sated for now. Piri rested comfortably and TelZodo acted as though nothing of any consequence had happened.

DevilChaser tightened his hold on the doorpost. *He* needed time to recover.

Ghost's wife had provided enough meat to keep him healthy for a couple of

days, until the angels came. It had been an extraordinary exercise in deliverance and control. DevilChaser never wanted to see anything like it ever again.

He hung onto the doorpost, listening to distant chains and whirring carried in on the humid air. The jaunty footsteps approaching from behind drowned them out. Ghost's walk had a new levity to it that DevilChaser couldn't ignore. It almost made up for the days spent scrubbing down the birthing room.

"MudAdder's with Piri." Ghost stepped up to the door. His shirt and breeches hid a broad slathering of salves, but small bandages still dotted his face. "I think he's as surprised as we were by what happened."

"Feeding on her like that is only a temporary solution."

"I know." Ghost looked up into the gathering storm. Lanky as he was, he seemed to have grown even taller. "I was terrified of killing her, and she was terrified of starving me. A temporary solution's as good as any." He squeezed DevilChaser's shoulder. "I'm in your debt."

The doctor waved at a stack of boxes set beneath DamBuster's ample pantry. "You've paid your debt. Those are your medicinals we're trading for meat." He jerked his thumb back toward the lab. "You made SandTail's purchases into curatives when they could have gone into making Destiny. Using the Farm's own supplies to avoid buying from them suits me fine."

Ghost met his gaze. "SandTail's still expecting results. We can't trick him for much longer."

DevilChaser nodded. "DamBuster's been pursuing his least likely hypotheses first. He looks busy enough."

"Another temporary solution."

The cart passed from salt pan to scrub brush. DevilChaser spotted a tangle of dulled limbs. "Normally the angels sell in town, but I put in a special order for you. They'll be setting up in the shed and cutting here."

Ghost leaned against the doorpost, arms folded across his chest. "Ask if they need help. I know Yata anatomy. I can offer labor for more meat." He smiled in the direction of the runner. "And maybe passage to Skedge."

~~~

The pair of angels took one look at Ghost and joked that someone had already sliced *him* into choice cuts. Then they watched him work with a blade.

“TripStone used to do this all the time,” he murmured. He separated flesh from bone, following arterial tributaries and checking the fluids draining into a bucket. “But with prayers and meditations and a lot of sorrow. I never knew how she could stand it.” Gloved fingers slipped beneath cartilage. “Then I lived in the Marsh.”

“Not many hunters come to Promontory.” The angel leaned over a plain wood table, her hands inside a chest cavity, removing a heart. “Some of us used to work for the Farm.” She smiled. “Some just like the adventure.”

They dissected in a dry room that smelled pleasingly of hay. Ghost listened to distant thunder and adjusted his apron before continuing. The bodies told him their stories, sickness and injuries dictating to him as clearly as words.

Lantern light revealed their secrets. Tumor, embolism, the ravages of old age. A child with a malformed liver. A bad slip on the rocks. A murder victim with multiple stab wounds.

“There’s been more violence on the mesa,” the angel said, noting his surprise, “especially with the pressure to produce more Destiny. The Little Masari can take only so much before they start turning on each other.”

“And turning on the Farm. I heard about the sabotage.” Ghost reached for preservative and sniffed a familiar scent. He’d handled these tinctures before, probably collected the herbs, himself. “This smells like WoodFoam’s materials. He preserves the dead in Rudder.”

“Used to.” The other angel lifted his blade and set a spleen aside. “He works with us now.”

Ghost stopped cutting as a wave of sadness washed over him. If he closed his eyes he could still see the little girl hidden away in the forest, her fine ruby fur against bronze-toned skin, her chubby arms hugging Piri’s belly. He could hear the high-pitched, smoky Masari voice. *Brav.*

Only the death of WoodFoam's daughter would have sent him here. She'd been his only reason to visit the Marsh. "I'd like to meet with him. How long has he been in Promontory?"

"Just a few days."

Ghost bent back to his work, half-listening to a chorus of rips and tears, the cracks of separating joints echoing in the cracks of thunder.

The woman added, "Every time we go to Skedge there's been more unrest. I'm afraid the death toll is going to rise there, and rise soon. It's more work for us, but it's terrible for them."

Ghost nodded. "Seems no place is safe."

"We could use you."

He offered a grim smile. "You've got me."

He navigated intestines, would check later to see if the Yata's last meal had been a good one. He'd warn Piri, but he already knew what she would drum, even if she had to drum it on the soles of his feet. He knew they would still go to Skedge.

Neither of them had shied away from risk, but now she was bent toward revelation. The Little Masari had to learn that they were Yata.

# CHAPTER 11

## Crossroads

HigherBrook had read them all before. He had hunched over the scriptures, both Masari and Yata, blinking against the added light of a raised wick. He had pored over the births and deaths and deeds, marriages and inductions into Crossroads' varied guilds. He had both read and written of the Chamber's deliberations and decisions.

He had penned, from the day he came of age, the stories shelved within the Rotunda's great dome. His fingers bore calluses from his toiling in the Grange fields and now the fields in Basc. His hands had toughened further under the recoil of his StormCloud. But the hard growths on the sides of HigherBrook's fingers and on the pad of his thumb were what defined him then and would continue to define him, no matter how primitive he was forced to become.

He lived by the pen. He knew these books.

"Sir." CatBird called up to him from the level below, one walkway among many belting the dome. "Why are we looking for writings from Promontory inside the Yata narratives?"

"Because I've looked everywhere else, and so has the rest of the Chamber." HigherBrook rolled his shoulders, balancing a hefty volume in his arms. He turned the page. "A sheet may have slipped in somewhere."

TripStone had not deigned to give him any information he could actually *use*. What kind of writings was he looking for? Writings from when? If she thought she distracted him from observing Gria's activities, she needn't have worried. He knew about them and he was letting them be. "Give me a little credit," he growled.

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

"Sir." CatBird sounded hopeful. "I believe I understand about the inks now. The

way they're different among the different books."

"I know," he said, fighting dejection. "You've been here enough times. I know you can smell the difference. Have you actually *read* any of the books?"

A small voice wafted up to him. "I'm looking through them now."

Even if she did take an interest in the narratives, it would be from a different perspective. CatBird's tradition was no longer the Covenant, and HigherBrook could do nothing about that. Perhaps, in some ways, they now had a better tradition. He'd gotten to know the Yata as people.

In the beginning, CatBird had been simply confused, pouting at the parchment. "But we talk about this all the time," she'd said. "It's nothing special."

"I know you have friends in Basc now," HigherBrook had patiently explained, "but what if they died? Wouldn't you want something of their lives to be written down?"

She'd stared at him, screwed up her roseate chops, and asked, "Why?"

HigherBrook couldn't help smiling. He exasperated her enough times in the hunting grounds and she certainly exasperated him here. Then again, no one shot arrows or bullets at them here. No one set traps to catch them, except perhaps TripStone.

Fine. He'd rather be snared here than in the far woods.

Lamps burned as rain hammered against the dark, windowed oculus. He and CatBird had worked their way from the top shelves, the smallest circles, down to the broad middle of the dome. HigherBrook had thrown his arm around her on the highest walkway when he saw her sudden sway, her face the color of the Rotunda's off-white granite walls. She'd whimpered against his chest, clinging to his linen shirt as he guided her to a lower level.

Battling Yata and sweeping the woods of pitfalls and spring nets did not perturb her. CatBird laughed off her wounds as she carried corpses back to Crossroads, then showed off her scars along with the other hunters. She had taught HigherBrook to scent danger and then told him, inconceivably, not to worry about it.

Despite all that, she was still terrified of heights. Even here, at the steady midpoint before they reached the ground and then the subterranean dormitories, she flattened herself against the shelves and studiously avoided the railing.

Her voice floated around curves. “Maybe it’s hidden in the walls.”

HigherBrook laughed. “There’s a lot that’s hidden in the walls, CatBird. It’s got nothing to do with Promontory.” He paused. “Or with the Covenant.”

She’d find *those* smells interesting. Even a building as bloated with tradition and sanctity as the Rotunda had its places of profanity and outright irreverence. If this hunt for writings from Promontory were a practical joke, it wouldn’t be the first one.

CatBird’s footfalls echoed on the steps curving to the next level below. HigherBrook turned back to his book. As much as he wanted to read these pages, poring over their details for new insights, he had to be as expedient as the young woman who was both his teacher and his pupil.

And more, perhaps. Like so many of the Hunt Guild children, she had been orphaned during the massacre. Behind her extraordinary competence with a gun lay a shy lostness that HigherBrook saw every time she fell quiet. Somewhere in the course of their mutual lessons, he’d begun feeling responsible for her.

Paper shuffled. Boots whispered on wood. Even their breaths were reflected back to them by the dome’s sensitive acoustics. HigherBrook looked up when he heard the sound of pages turning one way, then being flipped back, then being turned again. He peered over the railing.

“Sir?” CatBird’s voice ended in a quizzical curl. “I’ve found something strange.”

HigherBrook noted his place, then quickly shelved his book and hurried down the stairs.

CatBird’s volume lay open to stories of an ancient lineage. HigherBrook almost wanted to make examples of them, pointing out the flourish in the letters of this particular scribe, the formalized use of language in both Yata and Masari. He played the old game of remembering individual style and penmanship, ways for him to decode who had written the words before he checked the signature.



These pages held stories of Basc, just like the other tomes. HigherBrook's brow was just as pinched as CatBird's. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Look behind the ink."

He stared at her, then peered more closely at the words.

"All the stories are written on fresh parchment," she continued. "But this one isn't."

It was true. Something had existed on this page before. Someone had taken a knife to the parchment all those years ago and painstakingly scratched text away. None of the older ink remained, and even most of the indentations were gone. Only the harshest examination indicated that something else had once been there.

HigherBrook scrutinized CatBird's expectant, heart-shaped face. "How in the world did you know what to look for?"

"It's like tracking." She smiled broadly up at him. "Prey learn very well how to hide, so we have to learn very well how to find them. It's the same as I was telling you before our last trip to the woods. And it's also the smells." She held the book out to him. "Go behind the ink."

HigherBrook looked from her to the page and back. She gave him an encouraging nod.

He bent to the parchment for a sharp, indrawn breath, held it, then let it go. He breathed in again, more slowly, more deeply, his lips curled back.

The smell was old and musty. This book had been inside the Rotunda for a long time. Its leather had been tanned using a quaint process, and its ink formulation came from a tradition long discontinued. Behind that lay a very faint shadow of odor that slipped out of reach.

He bent again and closed his eyes, tightening his focus.

There was little he could relate to anything, but one thing was certain. The parchment just beneath HigherBrook's nose had not been manufactured in Crossroads.

HigherBrook held the air in his nostrils and brought it down to his lungs. He tasted flourishes in the scent and read styles, patterns.

He sighed it out and said, “Wait here.”

He sprinted up one flight of stairs, two. Quickly around the curve to the left, past the elaborate archway into the Rotunda’s outer dome. Down the hallway, past the offices where he had once sat with the other scribes. Past the census room and onward toward the trade documents.

For a moment he swayed before the records, breathless and glad for the late hour. At least he wasn’t startling the secretary. The papers weren’t hard to find, especially since Promontory was now Crossroads’ main trading partner.

HigherBrook grabbed the latest receipt from BrushBurn and held it to his nose after waiting for his heartbeat to slow. He breathed much stronger smells, with subtle differences, but much remained the same. The flourishes curled in the same directions. The patterns locked.

He descended again to CatBird and found her paging through the volume. She looked up at his approach and asked, quietly, “Promontory?”

He nodded. “You’ve found more.”

“Several more, but I don’t know what they said. It’s all scratched away and ironed out except for very small traces.” She shrugged. “Whatever Promontory was saying, someone here erased it.”

“And erased their history.”

He rubbed his brick-colored chops and tugged on his goatee. It hadn’t been enough to silence the Masari voices here in favor of Basc. The Masari of Promontory had been silenced as well, their words forcefully obliterated for reasons TripStone had not seen fit to tell him.

Her sheared note had passed to him from one of Gria’s men, who said it had come from RootWing’s messenger. That made sense; TripStone and RootWing would keep each other informed of any news related to Ghost.

He murmured, “Good work, CatBird.” He shook his head. “Not a snare, after

all.”

“Sir?”

“Nothing.” He patted her shoulder and gave her a peck on the forehead.

It’s time he wrote TripStone a letter.

# CHAPTER 12

## Mid-Spring

### Promontory

DevilChaser hurriedly opened the birthing room door, but Ghost didn't need to be warned. He had already heard SandTail's wagon pull up. Piri was healing well and no longer in bandages. She shifted into a more comfortable position on the blankets that served as their bed in the wake of their destroyed pallet.

TelZodo breathed easily in her arms. Ghost hastened to prepare a calmativ in case the child was startled awake.

They heard the door open and close, followed by several extra sets of footsteps. Already that did not bode well. Something had changed, requiring the presence of bodyguards. Ghost and Piri craned their heads toward the hallway.

"I'm rather surprised at our friend." SandTail's voice oozed cordiality. "DamBuster's taken quite a liking to what my suppliers have brought from abroad, but it took one of our lesser chemists to discover what *this* land has to offer. Why do you think that is?"

"Ask him, yourself," DevilChaser grumbled. "I'm not your apothecary."

Promontory possessed mineral riches. Some of its plants and animals, including the serpent MudAdder was named after, yielded powerful toxins already used in medicinals. The local chemicals alone did not yield Destiny, but when combined with elements from the Marsh they seemed promising.

DamBuster had studiously avoided that option. The others pressed into service had not, and SandTail was extolling the notes in his hand to prove it.

Ghost tried to ignore the sour taste in his mouth. DamBuster's options had been diminishing. He could have gone on a bit longer, perhaps, keeping impeccable notes on his deliberate excursions down blind alleys. But the longer the apothecary delayed, the greater the risk that SandTail would discover Ghost's theft of materials.

Then there was MudAdder. After the latest culling, Ghost couldn't look at the man without cringing. Even Piri's stern drumming on the Yata's arm had made no difference. MudAdder and SandTail wanted the same thing now, and both of them seemed equally determined to get it. The test subject had taken to strapping himself into the chair as soon as he heard the cart's approach.

Ghost tapped on Piri's arm, *What makes you and MudAdder so different from each other?*

Her incredulous stare flashed with ill-concealed anger. *MudAdder has not lost his children.*

*But he has.* Ghost caressed her cheek, noting the slight heaving of her chest. *He just doesn't know how much he's lost.*

At least the cullings would stop for a while, now that the machinery in Skedge was working again. DevilChaser had returned from the market with rumor that cart after cart of Destiny had been seen tracking across the salt pan and down into the canyon. The Little Masari had returned to work with renewed enthusiasm.

SandTail's glee trailed off as he and his bodyguards passed the birthing room and continued toward the lab; they would be unintelligible from there. Ghost set a dish of sedative paste on the floor and sat beside Piri, cradling her in his arms.

They waited. If they listened closely they could hear only a smattering of words. SandTail followed his threatening good humor with strict, clipped commands. DevilChaser's explosive rants all but drowned out DamBuster's depressed baritone.

As always, Ghost tightened his hold on Piri during the moments of interminable silence that followed.

This time a moan broke through the hush. A low moan at first, then climbing and cresting.

TelZodo stirred in Piri's arms but did not wake. Piri took long, even breaths, looking sadly pensive. Ghost coated his finger with paste, his heart hammering.

Another moan echoed down the hall, accompanied by loud rocking, the straining

of Yata limbs against leather straps, the chair shifting on the floor. Whoops erupted from SandTail's bodyguards and Ghost shoved his finger quickly beneath TelZodo's nose, thankful that the noise in the lab drowned out the child's surprise.

Piri blinked. Twin tears coursed down her cheeks.

The noise died down almost as quickly as it had risen. SandTail's voice was encouraging but not congratulatory, his tone still a bit menacing. Ghost kissed Piri's tears away and whispered, "He's not there yet."

She shook her head. *He might be. The body needs time to adjust.*

"How much time?"

Her hand grazed his cheek. *A few days of the feed when you first enter the breeding pen, but you are surrounded there. You're influenced by everyone around you. Her dark eyes gazed hard into his. I don't know what will happen to MudAdder. He had been breeding for years before they weaned him. His body would remember.*

Ghost's mouth went dry. If MudAdder broke from his restraints during a session, he would head directly for the birthing room and for Piri. If all he needed were repeated exposures to the current formulation, he might dose himself when he wasn't restrained. If the formulation were correct, SandTail would press DamBuster into production. The house would soon fill with Destiny, placing Piri at a different but no less alarming risk.

Ghost's lips brushed her ear. "I'm meeting with WoodFoam tomorrow. I'm going to get you and TelZodo to Skedge as quickly as I can."

## CHAPTER 13

**“Put anything that fine woman orders on my tab.”**

SandTail pointed to where TripStone sat. His easy command sailed from the bar to BrushBurn’s table, above the hubbub of gossip and the occasional explosion of raucous laughter, even above the pounding rain and thunderclaps outside.

Flashes of lightning blanched everything in the tavern. Ambient smoke sparkled before it deadened into haze as color returned to the room.

BrushBurn placed his hand on TripStone’s. “I don’t much care for your leader, but I’m relieved he knew nothing of Crossroads’ refusals.”

“Frankly, so am I.” TripStone took a careful, measured sip of ale. “From HigherBrook’s note, it seems the erasures took place almost as soon as the letters arrived. They were found under the writings of a very ancient scribe.” She shook her head. “There’s too much to tell him by messenger; I’ll suggest he speak with Rudder’s historians. He wants desperately to know what was scraped away.”

BrushBurn said, voice low, “The sooner Crossroads can deal with its own history, the better.” He looked toward the bar. “SandTail was impressed at the quick response to your inquiry, and at its candor.”

SandTail’s eyes had fairly gleamed at the news. By admitting the erasures, Crossroads had shown its culpability. In addition to showing complete apathy toward Promontory in a time of great need, it had covered up that apathy in the most heinous way possible. As Masari died brutally at the hands of Yata in the arid lands, their calls for help had died underneath the words of Yata inscribed in Crossroads.

SandTail had been livid at the disclosure, then triumphant.

BrushBurn had seen that same satisfied gleam as he trekked with SandTail across the wilderness, toting guns in one direction and Destiny in the other. To the trader’s great surprise, SandTail had felt no compunction about rearming Yata.

“We’re giving them inferior weapons,” the smaller man had explained. “As soon as the hunters are eliminated, we’ll get Crossroads fed. We’ll disarm the Yata and bring them to Destiny. You get more livestock, Crossroads gets more meat, and they’ll pay us for the meat with their land.” He had clapped BrushBurn on the back. “Then, my friend, Crossroads will have paid its debt to Promontory.”

The ensuing destruction had surprised them both, but no less than Crossroads’ insistence on combating the wild, armed Yata on its own. Once Rudder had helped defend the border and left an arsenal of StormClouds behind, Crossroads had not seen fit to call for additional help.

And, by the sight of the pensive woman sitting beside him, not all of the hunters had died. One was here, representing Crossroads itself.

She had survived the massacre. BrushBurn worried she might not survive Promontory.

TripStone barely touched her ale, but BrushBurn knew better. The tavern didn’t concern him. Neither did their meetings with SandTail, or even their sessions with the Chamber. It was at home, just the two of them, where the bottles came out.

Preparing for the rains had only delayed her drinking, revealing instead a feverish sobriety. BrushBurn had tried to ignore TripStone’s obsessive fervor as she helped him shore up his house, hauling one bag after another with a strength and momentum that seemed extreme even for her. By the time they were done she was barely winded, but when BrushBurn looked into her eyes her gaze was elsewhere.

Elsewhere, too, when she shared his pallet. She took him into her arms and brushed her chops against his, but her lips moved to his shoulder when he turned to meet her mouth. Her limbs tightened around him to soften the rejection, her embrace one of apologetic passion before they finished with each other and sank into deep, dreamless sleep.

Lightning sizzled above the canyon; walls rattled at the boom. SandTail turned from the bar with more ale in his hands.

TripStone took another sip. She spotted the concern in BrushBurn’s face and patted his hand. “I’m all right.”



He laced his fingers with hers. “I know you are.”

They were reduced to giving each other false reassurances. Those had begun after their visit to SandTail’s study.

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TripStone had shown no open dismay at SandTail’s upholstery, but had spent an inordinate amount of time studying the cluttered walls before sitting finally on the bronze couch. BrushBurn didn’t much care for the leather, either, but he could admire its workmanship. There was no telling where one skin ended and the next began.

Still standing, TripStone had examined the Yata markings on the musket before she replaced it gingerly on its hooks and took an outdated, single-shot rifle in her hands. For a moment BrushBurn thought her face might crumple. But she had mustered her strength and said, simply, “Our training rifles were like this. A bit small, no adornments.”

“I know,” SandTail answered. “Promontory kept making them for Crossroads.”

“Yes.” She blinked at him. “Was it a shock to you when some of them fell into Yata hands?”

“Not particularly.” Leather squeaked as SandTail shifted in his chair. “They were struggling under the Covenant, just as you were. There was bound to be some form of rebellion.”

“A natural course of events, then.”

BrushBurn had looked closely at TripStone’s face, which remained as blank as it had been the first time she had stepped into his tent. If she knew anything at all, she hid it well. BrushBurn sipped brandy, thankful that any direct questioning of her would be useless.

He’d watched for reaction as TripStone set down the rifle and SandTail rose from his chair to take her around the room, explaining the framed certificates and proclamations lining the wood walls. He hadn’t gotten past the first few when TripStone said, suddenly, “Tell me about the factory gloves.”

The interruption had impressed SandTail, who observed, “You have a keen eye.”

“I’m a hunter.” She looked down at him. “Those are placed out of the way, but they’re hung at your level, and your scars look like old burns. You were a factory worker once.”

“They were my father’s,” SandTail said. “But yes.”

“Tell me about him.”

She was an extraordinary listener. For a moment BrushBurn thought he’d seen a glimpse, finally, into the inventory he’d started to pursue when TripStone first stood out as more than just another Crossroads fanatic. She was Covenant-trained; she hungered for story as much as for Yata. He wondered how many she could possibly hold in her head.

He had heard this kind of personal history before, not just from SandTail but from others of his ilk. Factory children had played among the waste piles the way BrushBurn had played among juvenile Yata.

Dead material, one way or another. If not at that moment, then soon enough.

Sometimes he envied the man, though not for the position SandTail had built up for himself. It must be easier, ultimately, to derive one’s enjoyment from something that had never been alive. To wear the scars outside, giving them a chance thereby to fade.

It allowed SandTail to treat Destiny Farm as he treated the other industries. Workers were living beings who needed attention. Product was product.

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The tavern rocked with another blast of thunder. SandTail set the ales down, though not at BrushBurn’s table. Instead, he pulled up a chair among men and women newly off-shift, whose coats still dripped puddles onto the floor.

TripStone leaned forward, her chin in her fist, listening as he inquired about family and work conditions. SandTail had already brought her around to the different tables, introducing her only as BrushBurn’s guest. She had sat eagerly among the laborers, her quaffing carefully choreographed, inquiring about

minutiae to which she gave her full attention.

“He remembers everyone’s name,” she murmured. “And the names of their children. Have you noticed that?”

BrushBurn rubbed her arm. “He’s very good at what he does.”

“They’re upset about a Destiny shortfall. What’s causing it?”

BrushBurn lifted her hand, nestling his lips and letting them linger between the fur of her knuckles. He could tell her, but he didn’t have to. She’d hear the rumors eventually.

Direct questioning did not work with him, either. He wished it did.

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TripStone smiled at the tenderness and the stubbornness of BrushBurn’s kiss. For all the devastating honesty that had passed between them, they could still keep secrets from each other.

“My guess would be that there’s trouble in Skedge.” She let a finger slide across his lips. “You don’t seem to be getting Destiny from anywhere else.” *Any more.*

BrushBurn nodded, releasing her hand.

“And you’re selling to Crossroads now.” Her voice dropped. “What made you think you could create a market you couldn’t sustain?”

BrushBurn sighed and lifted a mug of ale. “Would it make any difference to you if I said I objected to Promontory’s plans to expand into Crossroads?”

She took a long look at him and saw only resignation. “Perhaps you could have made your objections more clear.”

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She’d seen the same resignation in his face as they’d sat on SandTail’s couch four nights earlier. BrushBurn had accepted a plate of delicate Yata strips and young vegetables hauled in from Rudder, while she’d gnawed on Erta’s remains.

TripStone's own meatless plate reminded her of the Milkweed. She wished she had an herb tonic at hand, rather than SandTail's ubiquitous goldberry brandy. BrushBurn seemed to be thinking the same thing. This place was hurting him as much as it was hurting her.

SandTail had talked easily of his family. The deaths of his parents and siblings and his own poverty became lore on a par with the chronicles he'd shown TripStone after dinner. He spoke to her as a man with a clear conscience.

She had forced her hand away from the snifter as she learned of the births and deaths of mix-children in Skedge, the products of abductions carried out during generations of skirmishes and raids between the Yata on the mesa and the Masari pouring into the flatlands. Not all the young mothers and the other abducted Masari children had been slaughtered and dumped unceremoniously over the sides of the mesa. Some had been allowed to live, satisfying one Destiny-hardened Yata after another until they leaped from the cliffs, themselves.

"We were at an impasse," SandTail had explained, refilling BrushBurn's glass along with his own. "At a crossroads, you might say. Until someone thought to explore the canyon. In those days such a trip was considered desertion. We needed every able-bodied fighter we could get."

Gripping BrushBurn's hand, TripStone had read the deserter's meticulous journal. In it, the rains were coming to an end, the channel through the canyon swollen with swift-running currents that slowly began to ease. The heat climbed, creating a steamy mist as the long-ago traveler paddled his way past rock outcroppings.

The water drained into a seasonal lake. Trails beyond climbed the canyon wall until they reached a broad, protected shelf with enough vegetation to store water through the drought. That oasis of flora and fauna, tucked inside a great bowl of harsh sedimentary rock, had formed a balanced, self-sustaining pocket in the midst of desolation.

The traveler had climbed over a shallow rim and been dumbstruck.

*To my amazement I beheld a large grouping of Yata, arranged in what seemed familial clusters, living off the land and unconcerned by my presence. They spoke to one another in a language foreign to me, neither Yata nor Masari, and I was able to walk among their dwellings, being no more than a curiosity to them.*

*They evidenced no need or desire for clothing and examined my own shirt and breeches with great wonder and no small trace of levity.*

*Of any sort of manufacture they seemed completely ignorant. Rather, they hunted with primitive weapons or gathered sustenance from the plants around them. I found neither Destiny nor any other stimulant in their possession.*

*Their numbers appear to be in the hundreds, but exploration beyond the shelf may yield yet more settlements of what appears to be a peaceful, docile people.*

TripStone had heard deep, measured breaths beside her. BrushBurn held her hand as tightly as she held his. No one needed to say that this paradise would become Destiny Farm. The pressure on her fingers told her all she needed to know.

She lifted her snifter and took a deep but careful drink. She kept her face blank as SandTail replenished the glass.

Once more, TripStone went over the traveler's journal, and again, keeping her movements deliberately slow. Her gaze wandered to the explorer's maps, one glance at a time, in-between close examinations of the text. To the bend of the canyon, the pattern of outcroppings. The locations of the trails. The broad shelf, the oasis.

She had leaned back repeatedly to close her eyes, feeling the sympathetic pressure of BrushBurn's fingers. She pressed them back. She took her time, drank more brandy.

"They had forgotten Masari had ever existed," SandTail told her. "I can see your pain, TripStone. It was a shame to spoil their innocence. Skedge left us no choice."

TripStone nodded, her eyes still closed. In time the pictures in her head became clearer, as she overlaid grids through a slight haze of inebriation.

The days she'd spent learning the ancient pictograms in Gria's hut had provided more than just a way to communicate in code back to Basc. They'd given her visual mnemonics. The visual mnemonics gave her the maps. When TripStone was sure she could redraw them later, without looking, she opened her eyes, took a last, small sip of brandy, and turned the page.

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If RootWing's messenger was not delayed, her copied maps should be in Gria's hands by now, along with the rest of what she'd learned. The maps were ready when the messenger had come with HigherBrook's letter.

TripStone looked across the tavern, to where SandTail leaned over another table filled with workers. He was too far away for her to hear him, but she could read the concern in his face. She turned to BrushBurn as renewed sheets of rain pounded the walls outside. "What does the Farm do when there's a Destiny shortfall?"

BrushBurn sipped his ale. "More culling. Then we preserve and set aside the meat for when it's needed." He frowned. "It's a damned waste of Yata lives."

"From a reproductive point of view."

He snapped, "You know my point of view. But yes."

She took his hand in hers. "I'm sorry," she said, softly. "For everything."

BrushBurn peered at her. "Is there something you want to tell me, TripStone?"

She shook her head and took another sip. "No."

Now that she knew how Destiny Farm began, it almost didn't matter how it would end.

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"We confiscated what Destiny we could," SandTail had explained, as though he himself had been among the early settlers. Several books lay open on the table in his study that night. The level of amber in his brandy decanter had dropped steadily. "When our own raiding and rescue parties found the condition of our children who were still alive in Skedge, we were tempted to destroy it all. But to do so effectively, we would have had to eliminate Destiny everywhere. That would have been an enormous, dangerous task, and we were barely able to sustain ourselves as it was." He leaned back in his chair. "When word reached Promontory of the Yata living within the canyon, we saw an opportunity to both colonize Skedge and maintain our food supply. We just had to take the proper

measures at the proper time.”

BrushBurn had reached to the table’s far end and lifted another book. He placed it before TripStone and eased his arm around her shoulders. “You asked me before why we didn’t consider sparing mix-children at the farm.” Defeat ringed his voice. “Breeding hybrids did not decrease our need for Yata. As I told you, the results were too unpredictable. We learned that from Skedge.”

The book opened to stories like none TripStone had ever seen. They were fanciful tales, filled with strange beasts and ethereal kingdoms. Nursery rhymes employed rhythms of speech and repetition, paving the way for learning and retaining other stories. In many ways they resembled the verbal mnemonics TripStone had learned as a child.

Stories of Masari and Little Masari. Of mix-children bridging the two. Of a wondrous heaven high above the desert and magical angels who came to carry off the dead.

SandTail drained and refilled his snifter. “We were fighting both Yata and floods, but the floods helped us confine the Yata to the mesa. By combining forces from Promontory and Rudder, there came a point where we outnumbered them. That and the weather finally let us occupy most of the metalworks and get the arms trade sufficiently under control.” He leaned toward TripStone, cupping his snifter in his hands. “Those accomplishments would mean *nothing* without a steady supply of Yata meat. We were hungry, both sides were exhausted, and there was a plentiful food source inside the canyon with neither the temperament nor the technology to offer any resistance. The Yata in Skedge had fallen into a delicate position, and as much as we wanted to destroy them we knew we had to preserve them. We knew we could control and farm the Yata inside the canyon, but we needed Destiny to do it.”

For the first time, TripStone spied cracks in SandTail’s composure. He tipped the brandy into his mouth, looking haggard. “We learned it was easier to change culture than biology, though it almost destroyed us instead.”

TripStone rested her elbows on her knees and lightly turned the pages. The drawings brought tears to her eyes. “These were made by children.”

“Yes, they were.” SandTail refilled her glass. “They capture the rhymes quite nicely, don’t you think? It doesn’t take much to indoctrinate children. After a

while, they add their own embellishments.” He reached over and turned another page. “For generations our children knew they could be abducted in a raid at any time. We taught them to *live*, TripStone, no matter where they were or how they were treated. We told them to care for their half-Yata babies and to teach them stories, and to teach stories to all the full-blood Yata children they encountered. They ate the dead in Skedge and told whoever they could that angels had taken the bodies away.”

His small hand eased under a corner and turned another page. TripStone looked upon columns of statistics, a detailed calculus and census. Past performance. Projected yields. The minimum amount of Yata needed to sustain Promontory. When the numbers became clear, she reached quickly for her snifter as SandTail drained his.

“Sometimes,” he said, “we simply had to let them get taken away.”

“There *were* mix-children who were free of the need for Yata,” BrushBurn added, sounding sick. “They were the first true Little Masari.”

“Many were sterile,” SandTail added, pointedly, “but not all. Those who weren’t often mated back to Yata. The Masari traits disappeared quickly, but the culture had already started to change. They started *speaking* Masari, giving themselves Masari names.” The gleam in his eyes made her want to turn away. “It took *generations*, TripStone. Many in Promontory chose to starve rather than jeopardize our food source inside the canyon. We had to look at the long term. We had to establish trade relations with Skedge in a way that would convince them to give us Destiny, by telling them *we* couldn’t conceive children without it. In a way, that was already true. Until we had the Farm, we couldn’t *afford* to conceive any more children than we needed to complete the change.”

SandTail rose to pluck another bottle from a low cabinet. “We would have liked to have gotten the formula for making Destiny ourselves, but they weren’t about to give us the secret to their only valued commodity, now that we possessed their other factories.”

TripStone drew BrushBurn’s arm more tightly around her as he emptied his snifter. “And once you had the Destiny, you started the Farm.”

SandTail nodded. He uncorked, poured. “We sent our friendliest people through the canyon. No one carried guns or weapons of any sort, only the Destiny. We



gave it to the Yata as a gift, and then we waited. Soon all we had to do was simply build the pens around them.”

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More people crowded into the tavern. Some of the roads had to be impassable. TripStone watched SandTail make his rounds, welcoming new, drenched arrivals. Her gaze settled on one seamed face after another, wondering if there was anyone in the room whose ancestors had been spared trauma.

She wondered how many here had taken seriously the “tavern joke” about the Yata militia. Who would believe, given Promontory’s history, that any Yata would be allowed to touch a gun ever again? It had been a good joke, considering how the town must have felt about Crossroads. Something to lighten up an otherwise dreary, hardworking day.

Access to Promontory’s armory would undo that history. The weapons in Yata hands would be StormClouds this time, not outdated, single-shot training rifles.

TripStone took a deep draught of ale. And another. She waited for the buzz to spread, feeling the worry in BrushBurn’s touch as he slid his arm across her back.

The gods existed in Promontory. They were its dead children, sacrificed on the altar of Destiny.

She hoped they would guide her. Or forgive her. She was not sure which.

CHAPTER 14

Basc

Gria waited as HigherBrook stared at pictograms and bones, leaning his fist hard against the wall. His breaths were ragged, his eyes dark. His tea had long grown cold.

Her gaze trailed over the StormCloud on his back, which he had burnished to a high sheen, and over his clothing. HigherBrook wore fine linens, as though he had just emerged from a Chamber meeting. He had scrubbed his face to the point of abrasion.

He didn't need to tell Gria what he had done. She knew. He had washed off every bit of blood that he could find, but he could reach only the stains on the outside.

"You're alive," she said, softly, settling her elbows on the table. "Start with that."

"You don't understand." Sharp shadows cut across HigherBrook's cheeks, cast by lanterns lit against the dark. His voice seemed to have deepened. "I didn't enter the hunting grounds to train or to hunt. I entered them to kill."

Gria's eyebrows rose. "Explain to me the difference."

HigherBrook walked stiffly about the room, reading the painted images, looking at everything but her. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "I went in there to kill Masari, not Yata. But the Masari I wanted to kill are not in the hunting grounds. The Yata had to suffice." When he finally turned toward Gria, his face was a mask of deep-seated rage. "They wanted to see if we still had a tavern operating. When they learned that we did, they walked up to the bar and asked where the *piss buckets* were."

Gria nodded. "How many invaders from Promontory?"

"Dozens." He bent and lifted his tea from the low table, tossing it back as though it were spirits. He set it back down and continued to pace. "RootWing and DewLeaf greeted them at the Grange with guns; I had to order the guns put

down. That was two days ago.” He closed his eyes. “By yesterday my skin was crawling. I couldn’t clear my head even in the Rotunda because Promontory’s damned ‘advisors’ were in and out of our Chamber sessions. I have never seen such greed as the way they looked at those books. Not to read, not to try to understand. Just to trade for Destiny.”

Gria poured more tea, watching steam rise. “So you went into the hunting grounds.”

“After our final session let out.” HigherBrook stared again at the walls. “I didn’t think I’d be ready to go in there alone, especially at dusk. I didn’t care.”

She softened her voice. “You had your instinctual drive. That protected you.”

“I had *nothing!*” he roared. “I had a farm and a library swarming with fresh-faced conquerors. I had whatever was left of me and I had a gun. So help me, Gria, I did not want to kill a Yata.”

“But you did,” she said, mildly. She handed the tea up to him and watched him cradle its warmth in his hands, his eyes still cold. “And Crossroads is not conquered, yet.”

“Don’t tell me it isn’t conquered.” He sipped almost convulsively. Gria couldn’t tell how much of the pain in HigherBrook’s face was emotion and how much came from a scalded tongue. “Using the Grange as our base of operations for Basc-Crossroads cooperation is out of the question now. With your permission, I will move some of our people permanently into Basc—that is, until you no longer need them.”

She nodded. “Granted.”

“Our hunters are reduced to training in the old Hunt Guild fields, but those are not designed for warfare.”

So he admitted, now, that their mutual hunt was war. Gria tipped tea past her lips and studied the seething Masari. He’d come a long way from the day when he kneeled and touched his forehead to the ground before the Honorable One. His spine was straight, his rifle perpendicular to the floor. “HigherBrook.”

He looked at her, his lips set in a tight line.

“The Yata you killed will help you kill Destiny Farm. Use his strength.”

Sadness welled in his throat. “Her strength.”

“Her strength.” Gria frowned. “The gods have a purpose in all this, HigherBrook. You still believe in them, yes?”

He barked a laugh. “Which ones?”

“Point well taken.” She sighed, rubbing her eyes.

He no longer flinched at the thought of destroying Destiny Farm. The gods moved slowly, sometimes, but they moved. Decision-making in the hands of mortals often proved the most troublesome.

Perhaps TripStone had used extra parchment for a reason, separating her pictograms from her maps; but she had left no further instructions. She had drawn with a shaky hand, but that could have come from any number of causes, none of which Gria wished to contemplate.

Words would have been clearer, but they would have been far too cumbersome for a messenger to carry. The images needed a second eye, perhaps a Masari eye, to interpret them. Gria no longer trusted her own.

How many times had HigherBrook studied these walls and bones? How many patterns could he see? Pictograms had surrounded Gria ever since Erta’s abdication, but nothing in this hut matched what the sheets sent from Promontory seemed to tell.

She drew them out of her pocket, unfolded and turned them around. “Sit down.” Gria had trouble believing their contents when the Masari before her dwarfed the table, crouched on a too-small stool. “You put me in a difficult position,” she said, “but I see no reason not to show you this.”

She raised her eyebrows as HigherBrook lifted one sheet to his nostrils, reading its scent.

His brow furrowed as he lowered it back to the table, regarding the drawings. “These are from TripStone,” he said, quietly, adding, “She’s not well.”

“No, she’s not. That’s another reason I’m sharing these with you.”

Gria replenished his tea and stood. She paced, studying interplays of color and form on the ceiling. Perhaps the monochrome of a single ink skewed the meanings of TripStone’s message, causing misinterpretations.

But no; HigherBrook was laying the sheets out on the table, side by side and top to bottom, fitting the patterns just as Gria had. His gaze traced the same routes. Gria refilled her cup and sipped, facing the wall. The images tricked her eyes, beginning to swim like living things.

“So,” he said, barely audible. “Basc could have destroyed Crossroads long ago, given the chance.”

She turned and stared at him. “You don’t seem surprised.”

“That the Yata could have eradicated us?” He shook his head. “No. Not after what CatBird found in the Rotunda, now that I suspect what was written there.” Incredulity swept his face. “Crossroads owes its existence to Promontory because we couldn’t reconcile the Covenant with what they were doing. It’s obvious now that they’ve come to collect on a very old debt.”

He offered a wry smile. “TripStone’s command to look for those writings was part of her message to *you*; obviously she did not see fit to ask me directly. She barely communicates to me at all. Her reports on Chamber meetings have been dreadful. They hold barely enough detail to justify her presence in Promontory as a Crossroads representative. And obviously she hasn’t been able to stop the invasion here.” He leaned over the drawings and sighed. “We were not on good terms when she left Crossroads.”

“I imagine not,” Gria said, drily. “You tried to jail her.”

“When you next communicate with TripStone, tell her that I am not opposing your actions, or hers.” He frowned at the sheets. “Unless she has had a change of heart after learning this.”

Gria studied the worry lines in his face. “Based on the rest of her message, our mission is still going forward.”

HigherBrook nodded, looking spent. He huddled on his short stool. “If the Yata

re-take Promontory, I might just prefer your style of governance to SandTail's. You were taking your revenge on the Covenant, not on Masari."

The words jolted Gria. She sat down and laughed bitterly into her tea, her voice thick. "You, of all people." She took a deep drink. How did it happen that one of the Covenant's fiercest proponents understood her better than most of her own followers? How was it that the destruction her army had perpetrated paled in comparison with atrocities committed by the ancient Yata of Skedge?

She met his grimness with her own. "If my troops had thought as you do, our winter would have been much less brutal." She set down her cup as the tiny hairs on the back of her neck began to stand. "If you want my governance, HigherBrook, you need to help me preserve Basc. Promontory's forces are in the Grange, now, and on my border. It won't take them long to cross over when they decide to move."

The sealed stone box with its desiccated remains fairly glowed in the lamp light. Gria looked from it around the rest of the room, stopping to consider Erta's bones. "Promontory would feed you, you know. We'd make a sterling addition to their herd, and these hunting grounds would be safe for you." She fought to control the tremor in her voice. "You know what you would get from SandTail. If Yata regain dominance, I can't guarantee my leadership would prevail. Consider that when you make your choice, because you cannot remain neutral any longer."

She held the cup to her lips and breathed in steam, her eyes closed. At the first sign of Promontory's forces she would have to take her people into Alvav, whether or not she received word from TripStone to advance. They'd be on their own.

The escaped slaves would prefer that she invade the Cliff, then free those prisoners in the Marsh. But that would pit them against Rudder, which would call to Promontory for help. Gria's forces would be fighting both Yata and Masari, outnumbered and outgunned. They'd be back where they started, or worse.

She swallowed tea and opened her eyes. HigherBrook continued to study the parchment, his face betraying nothing.

Finally he heaved a massive sigh. "If I am to support you, then TripStone needs

to know that, and she needs to believe me. It's been a while since I've practiced drawing the pictograms, but I assume she's learned your style and my own is somewhat different. The message must come from both of us. She'd know there were two voices on one page."

Tension drained from Gria's limbs. She managed a nod and bent toward a pile of loose sheets. She chose a less-tattered parchment and set it before him, then watched as he held it up to the lamp.

He peered uneasily at indentations. "What used to be here?"

"Part of a manifesto I kept at the camp." She tracked his gaze; there were still enough hints of words left behind. "I've learned to appreciate some of the old ways, myself. I didn't realize until recently just how much the Covenant had preserved."

"That's no reason to destroy what you've written." He pushed the skin back to her. "Restore this, and the rest. Basc knows how to make its own parchment now. We'll use a clean sheet."

Gria looked into his eyes and saw a slow burn there, and wondered whether he felt the pulse of the Yata he'd killed. Whether the stain began to transmute into a further communion. Whether the dead Masari coursing through her own blood were the ones who blessed her with this moment.

She poured more tea. "We have a long night of planning ahead of us." Her bronze hand raised the cup. "To the mission."

"To preservation." His great furred hand dwarfed the earthenware touching hers.

They nodded gravely to each other and drained the cups. Gria bent down again and plucked a pristine sheet of parchment from her small, carefully-guarded cache.

CHAPTER 15

Promontory

“It’s a bit more rustic than you might expect.” WoodFoam guided Ghost around a gaping hole in a buckling road. Repair crews dotted the streets on a gray morning, shoveling patches of gravel in the wake of the storm. “We’ll get a table. The bar stinks of piss.”

Ghost laughed. “It’s probably better than breathing the air out here.” He squeezed WoodFoam’s arm. “Thank you for agreeing to see me.” He lowered his voice. “I’m sorry about Brav.”

Ruby chops twitched. “She lived longer than I expected.” Sober green eyes looked into Ghost’s. “I kept her hidden in the Marsh, and I kept her a secret in Rudder. After she died I couldn’t stand to be in either place. When I heard you were also living in Promontory, I had assumed the worst had happened for you as well.”

Ghost shook his head and whispered, “We’re all fine. Piri and TelZodo are in hiding until I can get them to Skedge. And I need to get them there *soon*.”

“That’s why you want to become an angel.” WoodFoam’s lips curled into a smile. “That’s as good a reason as any.” He stopped walking. “The tavern is still emptying out. The floods must have stranded people there overnight.”

A crowd milled outside sturdy stone walls, boots calf-deep in puddles. Occasionally a cart and runner pulled up, but most of the customers walked slowly away, wrapped in cloaks dried by the tavern’s hearth. The few open coats revealed work clothes underneath.

Ghost watched a steady stream of patrons exiting. “Looks like many went in for shelter rather than for a drink.”

Another cart arrived, barely visible through the throng. A voice called out in the midst of the crowd, sharply but jovially, joking about the weather. Telling people to make way.

Ghost's fur bristled. "I've never met SandTail," he muttered under his breath, "but I'd know his voice anywhere. Have you had any dealings with him?"

"Not directly. He has nothing against the angels, but he's a Farm man." WoodFoam gave Ghost a quizzical look. "How do you know him?"

"I'd rather not say just yet."

SandTail bustled about the cart, opening the passenger compartment door himself as his runner waited, harnessed to chains. Two figures buried in hooded cloaks separated from the rest of the crowd. The shorter one stumbled against the larger; the larger one extended a protective arm. Neither was particularly steady.

WoodFoam murmured, "Long night."

"If I were a guest of SandTail's I'd be soused, too." Ghost looked away as the pair struggled into the compartment. He glanced back toward the tavern. "That place must have been almost as crammed as a safe room. Are you sure it's wise to go inside?"

The angel grinned. "No." They wove through the thinning mass as gears began to whirr.

A few customers remained, dotted about the dim room. One worker rinsed the floor with collected rainwater. Another followed, strewing from a bag of sawdust. From the bar came the sound of liquid streaming into a bucket.

"As I said." WoodFoam scanned the tables, pointing to an empty one in a dark corner. "Rustic." He shrugged. "I didn't know anyone in Promontory before I got here, so I came to the bar first. You learn a lot from strangers." They sat on stained, rough-hewn chairs. "I'll buy; you can return the favor when you're working. They make a good ale."

Ghost nodded. He watched WoodFoam stride to the bar.

Clearly, SandTail's jollity had not yet dissipated from his visit to the lab. Ghost looked with disdain around the tavern. If he wasn't careful he could lose his footing, too. *One ale, two at most. Then stop.*

WoodFoam set a pair of mugs on the sticky table. "We can talk here, but quietly.

I will ask to pair up with you for the next run, when a message comes from Skedge saying they need us. I don't know how the others would react to transporting someone who's escaped from the Farm, let alone a mix-child."

Ghost sipped. "I can't wait for a message. Can we get there before then?"

WoodFoam rested his arms on the tabletop, careful of spills. "Only in a training session, and that would require another angel. I'm a novice and you have no experience at all."

Ghost rubbed his eyes and tried to think. His nostrils quivered at the ambient stench. After a few moments, he leaned over his ale and lowered his voice. "If you hadn't introduced me to the chameleons, I could have lost Piri the way you lost your wife. I don't know what would have happened to TelZodo, and I don't know what would have happened to me. We almost died coming here. She almost died giving birth when we arrived. I'm not going to lose them now." His hands gripped the mug. "If I have to steal a cart and take them to Skedge, myself, I will do that."

"The salt pan is treacherous, Ghost."

He bristled. "I know it is. I almost lost someone to it."

WoodFoam nodded. "Then you know the angels are the rescuers out there." He drank deeply and wiped his chops. "I'll tell you what I know. The salt forms an uneven crust over the mud. The thinner the crust, the greater the danger from mud adders, and they can be very active during the rains until the lake is too deep for them to breach. You need to wear protection against them."

Ghost nursed his ale as WoodFoam's fingers punctuated the table top. The angel repeated lessons from rote memory, a checklist rather than personal experience.

He could probably learn more from DevilChaser. The doctor had never traveled to Skedge, but he'd spent years treating patients the angels brought to his door. He knew what was out there because he'd seen it through the salt pan's survivors and victims alike. And he didn't want to lose Piri and TelZodo, either.

Behind WoodFoam's drone ran an undercurrent of grief, his green eyes dulled, his gaze downcast. Ghost laid his palm on the angel's wrist to halt the recitation. For a moment the air was overwhelmed with spurts of laughter from the bar,

clinking glasses, and thumping tankards. Shadows gestured through a haze of smoke.

Ghost watched the crowd, weighing the options of trust.

“All right,” he muttered to himself. He took a swig of his ale, his face sour. “Gods help me if I’m wrong.” He turned back to WoodFoam. “You’ve bought me a drink, so I’m going to buy you dinner. And we’re not going to discuss Skedge or the salt pan right now.” Their eyes already smarted, but it was time for them to get worse. “Have you been able to talk to anyone about Brav since her death, or about her mother?”

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DamBuster was gathering eggs from the chickens when he heard two pairs of footfalls outside the coop. He ducked back into the yard, setting his basket aside to watch the men walking a straight line, side by side, talking. Ghost gestured; the stranger’s hands were in his pockets. DamBuster read their faces as they neared the house. Their eyes were red-rimmed, but not from alcohol.

“Stay outside a moment.” The apothecary rushed past them and into the kitchen, but MudAdder had already backed away from the window. DamBuster took him aside. “I don’t know who’s with Ghost, but it’s best you get back in the lab.”

He almost wanted to strap the Yata down, given how hungrily the man looked at the preparations. They had all spent a sleepless night, only partially because of the storm.

DamBuster had kept a close watch on MudAdder for any delayed reaction after SandTail’s departure, while DevilChaser remained in the birthing room. “At least you have patients,” DamBuster had growled at his companion. “I don’t know what I have any more.”

MudAdder’s erection disturbed him less than the man’s face contorting with overwhelming need. Instead of sex, the Yata craved more gruel after he’d emptied his bowl. Fortunately, he couldn’t put that desire in words. DamBuster had refrained from making another drugged batch, waiting instead for the effect of the first one to wear off.

He had kept MudAdder busy in the kitchen. They worked in silence,

pantomiming to each other. If the Yata wanted to handle bottles, DamBuster made sure they were going to be filled with ordinary herbs.

Now he called toward the birthing room, “Ghost’s brought a guest! You’d better go see what it’s about. Bring in the eggs.”

MudAdder quickened his pace toward the lab. DamBuster grabbed the small bronze arm; he’d have to strap the Yata down after all. “I wish I could trust you,” he growled. He shook his head with dismay as MudAdder gave his hand a sympathetic pat. “I know you want an end to the cullings and I know you want to go home, but I’m not letting you near my work table.”

The naked man sat placidly in the chair, waiting, showing no resistance. DamBuster moved a waste pail beneath the seat’s opening and bent toward the ankles, drawing leather through a buckle.

For a while the days had been pleasantly numb. Chemical patterns had invaded DamBuster’s dreams, but he’d been able to keep them at bay or twist them in new directions. As long as he didn’t poison his test subject, he was content to wander from one formulation to another, distilling and extracting, diluting and condensing, filling page after page with some semblance of research. He had played, almost joyfully, with the many ways in which he could be wrong.

Then SandTail had come in with another set of notes that changed everything. Now DamBuster tried to control MudAdder, DevilChaser tried to protect their fugitives, and the house became claustrophobically small.

MudAdder affixed his own thigh and waist straps. DamBuster tightened them and handed over a clean lap towel. He’d been ready for the consequences when he had first freed this man, expecting shattered beakers, an escaped Yata, and maybe a bullet through the head from one of SandTail’s men. Secretly, he’d cherished the idea of broken glass and scorched powders. If the house burned down they’d be forced elsewhere, maybe even out of Promontory.

DamBuster never expected a man so eagerly restraining himself, begging for a drug that took away everything but the thrill of the rut until he was ready for his own processing. The chest strap tightened. Tapered fingers warmed the apothecary’s hand.

Before he could think, DamBuster held MudAdder’s arm to the wood and

cinched the leather. “I can’t let you touch me.” He hurried around the chair and secured the other arm. “You’ve already touched me too damned much.”

He eased MudAdder’s forehead back and strapped it in place. Then he unstrapped it. “If you bang your head, I will be right back in here. Do you understand me?”

The man nodded, his eyes black pools of understanding. DamBuster kissed him on the forehead and rushed out the door.

“We’ll be wearing overboots coated with a repellent,” DevilChaser was saying, sitting at the head of the dining table. “And gaiters. Morning will be the best time to travel.”

The stranger sat to his left, gesturing. “But there’s more action in the mud, then.”

“There’s less action in the *clouds*, then.”

Water heated in the hearth for tea. DamBuster headed to a cabinet for cups.

“I don’t know what the rains do in Rudder,” the doctor continued, “but around here they *wait*, and then they try to drown you. The angels’ wagons are amphibious; mine is not. The salt pan isn’t completely saturated yet, but it must be forming pools by now, and those will corrode any metal that comes into contact with them. We’ll need to move slowly as it is.” He turned to Ghost and Piri, seated to his right. “That means we leave at first daylight.”

DamBuster set out the cups and gave DevilChaser a long, hard look. “You and I need to talk.” He glanced across the table. “After.”

DevilChaser nodded. He tilted his head. “This is WoodFoam. He and Ghost met in the Marsh and WoodFoam’s a new angel who hasn’t been to Skedge yet. He’s about to go on his first practice run.”

DamBuster took a seat next to the stranger. WoodFoam’s gaze was rooted to Piri and to the infant nursing at her breast. The man’s eyes were still red and tender with longing.

“I should tell you,” the apothecary warned, “that Skedge might be a more dangerous place than the Marsh.”

WoodFoam said, “I know about the factory unrest.”

“Factory unrest is the least of it.” DamBuster looked from Piri to Ghost, then jumped up as he heard the sound of boiling. “I’ve got a Yata in my laboratory who wants nothing better than for me to find the formula for Destiny,” he called from the kitchen, “and like it or not, that will happen soon. Then I’m going to be forced to make enough of it to maintain the Farm, and so will the other people SandTail’s put on this project.” He poured water into a teapot, watching the leaves swirl. “Eventually we will no longer need Skedge.”

He gathered quilted cloth around the teapot and brought it to the table. “And then, my angels, you will be out of work. Because Promontory would like nothing better than to do away with everyone there.”

Ghost squinted at DamBuster, shaking his head. “I don’t understand. You told me they believe they’re Little Masari, and until recently they’ve had good relations with Promontory. If you can make Destiny here, that takes the pressure off Skedge and leaves a backup factory. The Farm would repopulate. Skedge should become less dangerous, not more.”

“Should be,” DevilChaser said, “except for all the bad blood. Including bad mixed blood.” He glanced around the table. “WoodFoam knows what I’m talking about.”

WoodFoam nodded. “That was a long time ago. Rudder’s made peace with it, but then we don’t have to rely on Skedge.”

DamBuster waited for the tea to steep. He poured, glaring at DevilChaser. “You’d better explain some things to the man from Crossroads before you take these people over.”

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“I’m keeping you restrained for just the one night.” DamBuster took hold of MudAdder’s pail and soiled urine towel. “Then I’ll move you into the birthing room and away from temptation instead of trussing you up. I can’t tell you how much I hate doing this.”

He stepped out of the lab, carrying waste through the kitchen and outside, where the clouds darkened to purple. DevilChaser was loading up their cart with

medicinals for the trip, explaining the different curatives and their uses to WoodFoam. He'd probably explain everything again to Ghost come morning.

They'd have to carry extra food. Those returning would overnight in Skedge. The apothecary smiled wryly to himself as he watched his companion. "Shouldn't have done all that cooking. I might have been able to get you to stay."

DamBuster emptied the pail into a pit for night soil and threw in hay to cut the nitrogen. He rinsed the bucket and towel repeatedly in collected rainwater and added the rinsate to the pile. Promontory didn't have Rudder's soil, but it had Rudder's imports. That and a little extra work was enough for a half-decent kitchen garden.

Thunder boomed in the distance, but the rain held off; it was probably safe to hang the towel outside to dry. Skedge lit up across the salt pan like a black beacon.

Ghost had listened intently as DevilChaser and WoodFoam recalled the lessons they'd all learned as children-that is, the children of Promontory and Rudder. To his credit, Ghost had not seemed particularly disturbed, perhaps because he'd performed his own shocking acts in Crossroads. Given a little thought, he told them, it all made sense.

This time Piri had blanched. DamBuster wished he knew what had upset her, whether it was learning about the free Yata colony discovered within the canyon or the brutality of the Yata in Skedge. Maybe it was everything. When DevilChaser spoke of the price paid by Promontory's children, she had stood quietly and taken TelZodo back to the birthing room, Ghost hurrying after.

Their dinners were long cold by the time they emerged. Both of them picked at the remains as Ghost reiterated, glassy-eyed, that they still intended to make the journey.

DamBuster and DevilChaser had moved table and chairs while Ghost and Piri made a makeshift bed for WoodFoam in the dining room. WoodFoam stood by them, holding TelZodo as though he'd been born to do so. The angel seemed unperturbed by the fading bite marks on Piri's skin. He had even smiled at them a little.

Now DamBuster strode over to the cart and clapped DevilChaser on the shoulder. "I still want to talk to you, after I clean MudAdder up and get him set for the night." He peered at the doctor's face. "Don't forget. I'll drag you inside if I have to."

DevilChaser gave him a quick kiss on the lips and a grave nod. "I won't forget."

WoodFoam's education continued as DamBuster turned away, grasped the bucket, and went off in search of clean towels. MudAdder was waiting, patient and quiet, when he returned to the lab.

He knelt and dipped a towel into a basin. "I've cleaned up many men, MudAdder, but you're the first one I feel as though I'm mistreating, no matter how many times you reassure me that I'm not." He dried the Yata off. "You know you're going to go home soon. You know how close we are, and I can't fool SandTail any longer." He arranged a clean lap towel and stood. "When you do, I want you to be as happy as you think you're going to be. I don't know what else to do any more."

DamBuster retrieved a small piece of parchment and pen, stepped around to the back of the chair, and eased MudAdder's head forward. He copied down the number from the Yata's neck and returned to stand before him, holding out the slip. "This is what you are to the Farm. Have you ever seen this number before?" MudAdder shook his head. "I know Ghost's been teaching you to read because you've been helping him with his experiments. Do you know what this says?"

The Yata nodded. DamBuster pocketed the slip. "I want to protect you, MudAdder, and I know I can't because you don't want to be protected. The only thing more that I can do for you is to remember you after you're dead. If I can get SandTail to grant me this one favor for the work I've done, I would ask to be able to buy your remains. I would be honored to be nourished by you."

He raised a towel quickly, wiping wetness from MudAdder's face.

"Gods help me, I never understood Crossroads." DamBuster held captive shoulders, then smoothed back the shorn black hair. "Tender-hearted religious nuts who didn't know enough to help themselves, let alone anyone else. Did Ghost tell you how they used to worship Yata?" He saw the nod and wiped away more tears. "Just once, I'd like to be able to do that. I want to see what it's like, instead of just eating you without a second thought. Try to remember that when

your brain and your body give you half a chance. Will you do that?" He cradled the small head in his hands. "Good."

He leaned forward, hesitated for a moment, then kissed MudAdder tenderly on the lips.

DevilChaser waited for him outside the laboratory door. WoodFoam stretched out on the floor behind them, blanket over his shoulders. The door to the birthing room was closed. DamBuster sighed as he and his beloved slipped their arms around each other and repaired to the bedroom.

He closed their door, listening to a soft click as DevilChaser pulled off his shirt. "You don't know how much I want to ask you to stay." He frowned. "You also know I won't."

DevilChaser loosened the ties on the apothecary's tunic and tugged it upward. "I've seen you with MudAdder. You don't need a chaperone." He grinned as he trapped DamBuster's arms in the cloth. "Whatever you decide to do, dear, you won't need my help."

"That's not what worries me."

DevilChaser kissed him. "Liar."

"That's not what worries me most." He pulled the slimmer man to him, basking in the warmth of their mingled pelts. "None of you has gone across the salt pan before. If you're not back here after two days, I'm calling for rescue."

DevilChaser nodded. "I would expect nothing less." He scowled. "I'm still not happy letting those three go in their condition. Piri's still injured, Ghost is still getting his strength back, and TelZodo is still too young."

"Forget about those three for a minute. *You* be careful."

DevilChaser tugged on DamBuster's breech ties. "I'm always careful."

"Liar." His own hands reached out, untying. He spluttered, "Damn it, I can't stop you."

It was the price of sharing a life. DamBuster's mouth closed on DevilChaser's.

Pressure built between his legs as his beloved throbbed in his hand. They stopped to remove their boots and let their breeches slide to the floor, grasping each other again. They dipped toward the pallet.

“Don’t you dare die out there.” DamBuster’s lips moved lower, exploring the skin around DevilChaser’s pectoral fur. “It took too long for me to find you. I don’t want to go looking again.”

“You worry too much.”

It was an old accusation for which no reply was ever sufficient. DamBuster moved his lips lower and dispensed with words, then shifted his body around under DevilChaser’s guiding hands. The room filled with the scent of aloe. DevilChaser’s fingers spread a moist warmth, cupping him, massaging. They reached further back, easing him open.

His lover slipped from his mouth and repositioned; a hand closed around him. Heat flushed into him front and back.

DamBuster gasped, “You’ve got an awful trip tomorrow. I should be doing this.”

“You will.” Fur and skin entwined about him. “Don’t worry about me.”

Words vanished beneath the pressure of thumb and palm, the singing of nerves running back to front. This was not Destiny. This was love; this was awareness. The lie about the Masari’s need for bed snuff had always seemed droll to DamBuster. Now it struck him as being horrifically perverse. Wasn’t being enslaved to the pain of simply caring for one another enough?

They moved together until only motion remained. DamBuster filled to overflowing, his fears swept up in swift fountains. An echoing cry rang against his spine as he shouted into a blanket so as not to wake the others.

CHAPTER 16

Crossroads

HigherBrook paced at dawn, carrying his lantern up and down the muddy road, past rows of empty Hunt Guild houses and fields. Almost no adults remained in this part of Crossroads. Mostly the children of hunters lived here, alone, visiting with each other but otherwise remaining solitary creatures, taking care of themselves.

Sometimes he wondered if he was becoming one of them. This empty stretch was the only place left where he could clear his head, the only place in Crossroads not polluted by Promontory.

A good thing, too. No one asked him questions about where the inhabitants had gone. At least he'd found them a better place to train.

He would laugh if he weren't so frightened. He laughed anyway. Unselfconsciously, with only birds and straw Yata to hear him. Every yard here still had one, guarding the obsolete training fields. The dummies still meant something, standing inert, each with its heart spot clearly marked on the back. A sacred death dispatched with a single, unerring bullet. Those days were long gone, but they were remembered.

Gria had been surprised when HigherBrook told her about the dummies, kept up through the changing weather conditions, their straw regularly renewed and repacked in burlap. She'd been no less surprised when he'd stood at the entrance to Basc with his own small army, careful not to cross the border until she had come to personally give them all clearance to enter, armed and outfitted for battle. Her own new recruits flanked her, refugees from the latest, squelched uprising on the Cliff.

"Promontory's occupied the Grange and our hunters need better facilities," he'd said, flatly. "Request permission to train with your militia."

He'd smiled a little at the fear in her eyes; he wasn't the only one guiding his emotions along a thin line just short of panic. Feeling lightheaded, HigherBrook had called CatBird and another young hunter to haul a heavy wooden box to the

front of the crowd and lay it before the general's feet. He couldn't spare much, but he could spare this.

He'd bent down and lifted the latch and cover, exposing a neat cluster of StormClouds. "For your forces," he'd said, his mouth dry. "If you can trust us to use your training facilities, we can trust you not to use these against us. Except," he added, "in the sanctioned hunting grounds."

Gria had knelt to examine one of the black rifles and HigherBrook knew her heart raced as fast as his own. Finally he began to understand what it meant to risk everything, and he wasn't through yet. There was still the matter of the Chamber.

Finally, Gria had asked, "Do they know about the mission and about our secrecy requirements?"

"Yes." He watched as the Yata slowly re-latched the lid. At least he wasn't risking everything alone. "I screened each of them personally. They'll be training to secure Crossroads."

She nodded. She stood, dusted off her pants, and met his gaze. "It's a long walk to camp. Follow me."

HigherBrook had felt far more fear as he caved in to the Chamber's demands and then exceeded them. Trusting in Gria's leadership was one thing; trusting in the mission's success was another. He'd had to risk much more than guns.

Almost from the beginning, when most of the town was starving, a faction of the Chamber had clamored for public approval of Destiny Farm's meat. HigherBrook had been able to hold them off, neither approving nor prohibiting sales.

Then the hunting grounds had opened. Many Masari avoided BrushBurn's cart, expecting to catch their own food. Instead, they ended up buried beneath the Grange's fallow fields. More Chamber officials pressured HigherBrook to sanction the meat in light of what they saw as the senseless deaths of people who had never hunted before. He had resisted that pressure for as long as he could.

Now Crossroads needed that meat. Either TripStone would send word for Gria's army to advance into Alvav or Promontory would invade Basc, sending its

people fleeing. Either alternative meant an exodus of Yata, with nothing left to sustain an independent Crossroads.

Approve the sales, he'd told the Chamber. Encourage our citizens to buy, as much as they want. Stock up.

BrushBurn's assistants had already collected promissory notes, tallying up accounts. Now the village began to pay, painfully stripped one asset at a time.

Failure of the mission would utterly bankrupt Crossroads, but the town was close to that now. HigherBrook had stood, seething with RootWing and his kin, as carts laden with the Grange's early harvest rolled toward the mountain pass on their journey to Promontory.

The Grange was only the first target. Once Promontory had that under control, it would turn to the Rotunda and to its library, slowly confiscating Crossroads' history. Once the Rotunda emptied out, nothing but servitude would remain.

Tally up to the hilt, HigherBrook had wanted to say. We have no intention of paying the rest.

Low clouds hid the rising sun, hoarding rain. HigherBrook reached the end of the Hunt Guild road and turned around, passing his own tracks multiplied in the mud. He had neophyte hunters training with Yata militia and Crossroads up for sale as his people flocked to Promontory's cart. Only a thin sliver of soul kept him from losing his mind. The rest was up to the gods.

If Destiny Farm sent more meat, so much the better. There was no telling how long the mission would last; he might need backstock. The cart should be easy to capture when the time came.

TripStone's empty house sharpened into view. Her straw Yata stood sentinel like the others; HigherBrook smiled in its direction. As he had done so often before, he turned onto the flagstone path and made a circuit around modest contours, checking to make sure that everything remained in place and untouched.

NightShout's gun still rested inside, and the boy's training rifle. HigherBrook lifted his lamp and gazed at them through the window. He and TripStone's father had both killed a Yata woman in a fit of desperation. One act had been treated as an abomination, the other as an unfortunate consequence of war.

If NightShout's spirit heard HigherBrook's prayers, the old man knew how sorry he was.

Soon it would be time to repair to the Rotunda and to its great stone caverns beneath the ground. Time to put to good use TripStone's assessments of the building's vulnerabilities and her advice on security improvements. HigherBrook had thought that she was only helping him safeguard the Rotunda's contents when she submitted her reports. Now he knew that she had studied the Rotunda as a proxy for the Warehouse.

No matter. Her information was useful either way. Soon HigherBrook would have strong walls in place and locks on doors that couldn't be kicked in. Enough to house all their guests from Promontory. The Rotunda was built to be a sterling library and the august seat of bureaucratic endeavor. Before long, it would be a superb jail as well.

Now he regularly strolled through the tavern, counting heads rather than ales. More invaders had arrived, but HigherBrook's forces still outnumbered them. And the would-be conquerors had not been trained to hunt.

CHAPTER 17

Promontory

A gentle hand squeezed Ghost's shoulder. The birthing room lay in shadow when he rolled awake and opened his eyes to a lantern's steady glow. He blinked, looking up into forest green eyes.

WoodFoam said, "It's time." He straightened and padded from the room, leaving the lamp behind.

Piri had snuggled up against Ghost, TelZodo nestled between them. The baby stretched into a tiny, mighty yawn; Ghost offered a pinky for grasping. He smiled at delicate coppery knuckles brushed with translucent violet down and whispered, "You're ticklish."

Piri's fingers meandered down his side. *So are you.* She rolled onto her back and yawned.

Despite Ghost's initial protests, she had let him sleep through their son's nocturnal feedings. Now he freed himself from the blankets as TelZodo sought a nipple. A neat pile of traveling clothes sat on a chair. Ghost dressed quickly to the sound of nursing before he brought the rest over to Piri.

He examined a padded strapping board made for carrying the child up the mesa. "I'm going to see if they need help. You'll be all right?"

She motioned him impatiently toward the door. He wondered why he even bothered to ask.

WoodFoam's bed had been put away and the table and chairs repositioned. Two breakfasts were laid out along with another lamp; soiled dishes sat to the side. More lights moved outside the kitchen window, voices carrying.

Ghost considered joining them but returned to the table. DevilChaser would send him right back inside if he didn't eat first.

He was swallowing his last mouthful when Piri climbed the small step and sat

beside him. He pushed the plate away and held out his arms. “I can take TelZodo.”

You want to help them load.

“Yes, I do. After I help you.” Ghost reached for a sleepy bundle. “See? I’m learning to be as fussy as our doctor.”

She eased the child into his arms and drummed, *Then it will be a long trip.* She gave him a broad smile and bent to her broth.

Ghost cradled TelZodo to him. He walked about the room, casting a wistful glance at the closed lab door. No sounds of movement came from behind it; MudAdder was still asleep. Ghost continued into the kitchen and watched preparations from behind the window.

A wave of homesickness swept over him with such stunning speed that he swayed on his feet, clutching the baby. TelZodo answered with a squirmed complaint before dropping back into slumber.

Crossroads lay fixed within a moment of desolation, even though more than a season had passed since the massacre. Ghost knew how and why the attack happened. He’d learned the historical context and the extent of initial destruction. He’d heard about the current dearth of trade.

He knew nothing about a single life he’d left behind.

He would go home again in an instant. He would admit to all his crimes even if it meant death, if only he could look upon the faces of everyone he loved. They flashed by Ghost in a blur. He could barely hold their images in his head.

He wanted to burst into the lab, wake MudAdder, and tell him, *I understand you now. I know why you want so badly to go back to the Farm.* Even for a brief, mindless grasp of flesh before life ended. Even drugged.

Ghost understood. He wondered who would be alive to prosecute him.

He took a deep breath before turning from the window. Piri rose, leaving her empty bowl and mug behind, a look of concern on her face. He couldn’t hide anything from her.

Ghost eased TelZodo back into her arms before gathering up the strapping board and diaper cloths. He jerked his head impatiently toward the door outside, copying her gesture.

They walked toward the cart as the sky began to lighten. DevilChaser and DamBuster had bolted down a raised cover and created a passenger compartment lined with blankets.

DamBuster finished loading food. He straightened at their approach and enfolded Piri and TelZodo in a gentle hug. "Take good care of each other," he whispered.

She nodded and raised herself on tiptoes. DamBuster bent down to receive a peck on the cheek.

Then he took Ghost aside. "There is a small package at the bottom of the last box," he said, voice low. "That's for you to take up into Skedge." He glanced toward the passenger compartment. "It has well-marked meat from the Farm, with the same branding you see on the back of Piri's neck and on MudAdder's. That's the only way I can think of to tell the Little Masari who they really are."

Ghost nodded and whispered, "Thank you."

DamBuster grasped him in a tight embrace. "Listen to me, Ghost. Promontory will try to take Skedge once we start making Destiny on our own. I don't know how long before that happens, but it will happen. You and your family might need to return to the Marsh." His large hands enfolded Ghost's shoulders. "You have a gas canister and a mask in my lab, and no place is better equipped for you to work toward something that will protect them. Skedge is not safe for Masari right now, but as an angel you'd be able to travel back and forth."

Ghost looked longingly toward the cart. WoodFoam held TelZodo as Piri climbed inside, then handed the baby back to her. Ghost didn't need to see the angel's face to know he remembered his own wife and child. "I've already left one family behind, DamBuster. I won't do it again."

"Find them sanctuary," DamBuster said, evenly, "and then get back here."

Ghost looked into the larger man's face, breathing hard. "WoodFoam lost his wife in childbirth and his daughter just died. He couldn't be with her in the

Marsh when it happened. He could see her only once, at midseason. The only way he could live out the rest of his time in Rudder was to forget he *had* a daughter.” His eyes blazed. “I will not do that with Piri or my son. We’ve worked too hard to keep each other alive.”

DamBuster gazed back, unmoved. “And you must keep working.” He gave Ghost’s shoulders a last squeeze and turned away.

Ghost stood motionless, still clutching the strapping board and diaper cloths. In a daze he walked to the cart to set them inside. He glanced back at Piri, who sat comfortably with TelZodo.

Save for a few hours at a time, they had not been apart since the day WindTamer had brought her to his cabin. Along with BrokenThread, Ghost and Piri had been confined in that cramped structure as surely as they had been prisoners in the Marsh. Ghost had gone outside only when necessary, furtively gathering wood and water or emptying a chamber pot.

Piri had learned to read there, first by studying the words on his *yatanii* list. Ghost could still see her standing on the box by his lenses, head to head with him. Even before she could puzzle out the words, she had read the fear in his handwriting. She had taken hold of his palm, then, and drummed.

I am afraid that I will wake up, and you will all be gone.

Then his laboratory was destroyed and only the bones of BrokenThread left behind. He and Piri had crossed into Alvav with nothing left but each other, drawing each other down into meadow grass and into a bond he’d dared not imagine. After that, she had told him to live, if he were ever without her.

Ghost crawled inside the cart. He took Piri into his arms and warmed his lips against hers. Their mouths opened to each other; he cupped her face in his hands. A small part of him wondered whether his heart beat too slowly, if the blood flowing through his veins became as sluggish and saturated as the salt pools they were about to cross.

Chains rattled outside. Leather slid through buckles amidst murmurs of concern. DevilChaser strapped into the harness and they took the dirt road through scrub brush and nettles to the edge of whiteness.

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DevilChaser smeared overboots and gaiters. Ghost wrinkled his nose at the smell of repellent before he slipped his own protective coverings on.

Behind them lay a wasteland of earth tones to which the rains already began adding color. Dormant desert flowers awakened. Soon they would explode into bloom.

The house they left had dwindled to a speck on the horizon. Ghost turned away from it. Beyond the toes of his boots, salt scalloped into low, petrified waves looked almost yellow in the hazy dawn. Skedge caught the light, straining toward low clouds.

DevilChaser pointed to darkened lines in the near distance, calling WoodFoam over to join them. “That’s mud. A cart’s already come through from the look of it, likely traders bringing more Destiny in.” The doctor sighed. “That means we’re dealing with a thin layer of salt. Don’t stint on the repellent, including on the soles. We’ll have to renew that periodically.”

Ghost dipped into a bowl of waxy salve as DevilChaser leaned into the cart and called, “Piri, dear, we’re going to stink. Can’t be helped.” She answered with an assenting, amused hum.

The doctor gazed back toward the house and muttered, “Honestly, I don’t know why he’s so upset. DamBuster’s afraid I’ll kill myself out here.” He chortled. “SandTail and BrushBurn walked this route and they’re none the worse for wear. Of course, that was during the dry season, when the salt was thicker and most of the adders were dormant.” The doctor patted Ghost’s arm. “Your friend was out here completely unprotected.”

Ghost blinked, turning away from his boots. “What was that?”

DevilChaser enunciated carefully. “I *said* that if you don’t pay sufficient attention, you’re going to get bit.”

Ghost answered with an absent nod and started slathering a gaiter.

WoodFoam finished coating his legs and rubbed the residue over his arms. He reached into the cart and withdrew a long stick ending in a metal hook. “Are we

capturing?”

“Moving, yes. Capturing, no.” DevilChaser patted the shoulder beneath him. “Listen up, Ghost.”

Ghost tried to focus on the stick and on the doctor’s slender hands guiding the wood through practice maneuvers. WoodFoam had rehearsed the movements more, but neither had dealt directly with a mud adder.

“You’re looking for brown and white coloration,” DevilChaser was saying. “That’s their camouflage against the mud and the salt. Problem is that everything can move during the rains, and it’s hard to tell which is the adder and which the elements. If they perceive food or a threat, they’ll spring up.” He raised the pole. “You don’t kill them unless you have to; used the right way their venom can heal. They’ll go back down below if you hook them and move them away from you.”

WoodFoam asked, “And if they bite?”

“Our coverings should keep their fangs from reaching skin and the repellent should make them let go.” DevilChaser smiled. “Or so I’ve heard. If I’m wrong or if a snake is particularly spirited, that’s what our medicinals are for.”

Ghost heard him as though through deep water. He looked out across the salt pan and wondered how much writhed underneath. He dipped into the bowl again, trailing paste across soles and up ankles, working it into leather. Two pairs of eyes were focused on him when he looked up.

He blinked in confusion and asked, “What’s wrong?”

WoodFoam said, softly, “You’ve been moving at half speed.”

“Sorry,” Ghost mumbled. “Preoccupied.”

“Well, stop it,” DevilChaser said, sharply. His attention darted from one to the other. “The angels generally move in pairs. One pulls the cart, one moves the adders. WoodFoam, you’re best among us with the stick; we’ll start you on that. Ghost, you need to clear your head; you’ll pull. I’ll sit behind and direct. We’ll rotate at first break.”

Ghost rubbed excess repellent on his arms and started strapping in, adjusting the harness from DevilChaser's height to his. The last time he pulled a cart he'd been naked except for his boots, covered in grease, and rubbed raw from burlap. And Piri had been...

Stronger light slipped into creases in the mesa. Salt brightened to the color of bone.

DevilChaser's hand clapped him hard on the shoulder. "Ghost," he said, through gritted teeth, "whatever you're in, snap out of it now."

Ghost swallowed. He gave the doctor a helpless nod and whispered, "I can't thank you enough for all you've done."

"Thank me by staying alert and not getting yourself killed."

Ghost tried to smile. "That's a start."

WoodFoam stood, hooked pole in hand, ready to walk by his side. DevilChaser climbed onto the cart and took a seat behind him. Ghost heard another shift from behind and TelZodo's gurgle, followed by the doctor's terse, "Not too close to the edge."

He turned as much as the harness would let him and grinned back at Piri. She nodded at him, her eyes bright, and jerked her head toward Skedge.

Ghost took a deep breath. "Letting out the chains."

His fingers worked the levers as salt crunched beneath his boots.

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Black clouds massed overhead; snow-colored crystals gleamed beneath narrow shafts of sunlight. DevilChaser's cart and its crew formed the tallest objects on the salt pan, a lightning rod crawling across milky flatness. They edged around water left from the rains, taking care not to splash chains and sprockets with corrosive.

WoodFoam scanned for movement from below, aiming his hook toward adders breaching the surface. They shot like ribbons from the mud, adding their hiss to

the tinkle of crystals breaking underfoot. Most slipped free of the metal once pulled away, retreating into muck as quickly as they had emerged.

The angel and Ghost had frozen in place their first encounter, as the serpent darted toward one boot and then another, before WoodFoam grasped his pole with both arms and wrestled the adder across the salt. Soon he could guide them away one-handed while Ghost maintained a steady stride, more concerned with the threat of becoming mired where too much water had percolated through.

Against a backdrop of gears whirring, Ghost learned to hear the warning pop, a quick suck in the mud before the infuriated hiss. He glanced quickly at WoodFoam, who was ready with the hook. They nodded to each other, stepping onto the thin crust, leaving brown tracks where their boots lifted.

An occasional long-necked bird flapped down, white plumage beating still, heavy air several feet above the salt. It scanned the surface, gliding until it found a place to strike, and dove. A soiled head rose from the mud with a writhing prize in its beak. Ghost heard the wind of its mighty wings and followed its trajectory across the stony column ahead.

They stopped to rest, eat and drink, reapply repellent. Feet lifted out of strike range, they crowded into the cart. The chemical tang of Promontory's air was gone, replaced by a mixture of salinity and the paste's sharp astringency.

"I've been taking my directions from Piri," DevilChaser confided, between mouthfuls. "She's got a good feel for the surface. All I have to do is watch where she points." He caught Ghost's attention and jerked a thumb toward the front of the wagon. "You get to sit, this time. I'll take some stick lessons from WoodFoam."

The sky heaved with a gentle rumble. Ghost followed DevilChaser's worried gaze toward clouds that moved more quickly. The doctor spluttered a soft curse.

"I'll give you your lessons in transit," WoodFoam offered.

"Make sure I keep looking down."

Ghost shifted into position as the other men disembarked. He looked at Piri, who nodded and pointed to where the crust seemed thickest. Ghost relayed the information as WoodFoam harnessed up, then smiled down at his placid,

napping son.

Piri's hand slid beneath his shirt. *The angels come to Skedge more than once a season. We will be fine.*

He stared at her. *How did you know?*

It's in your face. More than worry. Her touch sent shivers beneath his pectoral fur. *You are memorizing us before you have to leave.*

Ghost slipped his arm around her and laid his head on her shoulder. He breathed in the faint musk at Piri's neck as her fingers meandered wordlessly across this chest. Her own fearfulness translated into hesitancies, a nervous petting of the same thatch of pelt.

Even if he were to sleep as he so wanted to do, her nails would wake him as soon as the cogs started to move. Ghost bestowed a wistful gaze at the bundle in her lap, envying TelZodo his serenity.

He straightened with a sigh as he heard WoodFoam's soft command and the clicks of chains lengthening, setting gears in motion before the wheels began to turn.

CHAPTER 18

Skedge filled the horizon by the time of their next rotation, rich in layers and fissures. The land rose a bit, the salt crust thickening. Ghost kept his attention on the ground, working the hook.

He caught a glorious specimen, its markings shimmering like quicksilver in the stormy light. They beheld each other, one spitting and the other entranced, until DevilChaser snapped beside him, “Lifting one adder away does not stop the others from coming up!” Ghost gave the man in the harness a sheepish grin and eased the snake aside.

Half the time he didn’t know whether the gurgling and coos behind him came from TelZodo or from WoodFoam. He memorized those details, too. They would remind him that he was not alone, that someone else in Promontory experienced the pain of separation. He and WoodFoam could work together as angels. If they had to keep their secrets in Promontory, they could at least be open with each other.

Now the man from Rudder called, “Those must be the gondola lines. If we can see them from here, we’re getting close.”

Ghost took a moment to examine the crevassed wall. Enormous chains and pulleys spanned the height of the mesa, guided by metal pins and hooks driven into the rock.

DevilChaser asked, “Any chance of getting a gondola for Piri and TelZodo?”

“None,” WoodFoam said. “They’re for lowering the dead, not raising the living. Not even living Yata.”

“I figured as much.” DevilChaser sighed. “Thought I’d ask, anyway.” His voice sailed above Ghost’s bent head. “The death boats came during the transformation, when the Skedge Yata were becoming Little Masari.”

The cart creaked as WoodFoam leaned forward. “There should be an overhang near the chains. It’s a protected area, with places to anchor the wagon in case of flooding.”

DevilChaser nodded. “I see it.” He flipped levers and started heading up a small rise. “Skedge and Promontory had established a peace, but you still had occasional Masari raiders trying to climb the lines. The angels are the only Masari allowed to touch the gondolas, and those are heavily guarded.”

WoodFoam said, drily, “The living get to climb.”

An amused hum rose from Piri’s throat.

“We climbed into and out of the Cliff,” Ghost murmured, scanning the salt. “I can’t imagine this would be much different.”

“The Cliff has steps.” WoodFoam pointed to the left of the chains. “Skedge has a crevasse.” He added, “The handholds and footholds are sized for Yata, not Masari. The mesa had to be defensible.”

DevilChaser shook his head. “At least the rain held up.”

Salt yielded to gravel and then to stone. Ghost replaced the hooked pole in the cart and raised his arms above his head, stretching the kinks from his spine after being stooped for hours. Promontory was a dark blot across the salt pan, choked in murky, late afternoon haze.

DevilChaser unbuckled from his harness and tethered the cart to hooks driven into the wall. Ghost crawled inside and found Piri affixing a swaddled TelZodo firmly to the strapping board. WoodFoam crept on hands and knees, gathering provisions for the night. He handed Ghost a leather vest with large pockets spanning the back and sides, then continued to fill and button up his own.

Ghost uncovered the box he wanted and lifted its lid, reaching in and rummaging. The meat he pulled out was well-wrapped and well-preserved, its branding hidden beneath several layers. He slipped it into a pocket that would span his shoulder blades. Meat from the angels went into a side pocket to fuel him for the climb, followed by a water bladder and his share of medicinals.

He shrugged on the vest and buttoned it closed as DevilChaser called to them from outside. Impatience rode the air. They didn’t have much daylight left.

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Piri wiped her hands on her tunic. Softened cheese and juice formed a leaden pool in her stomach. Her fingers turned numb as they worked the buckles of the strapping board Ghost held up to her back, and she listened to the silly sounds he made at the baby. She tightened the straps, looking back across the salt pan.

Soon she would not hear those sounds. She would not feel his pelt against the softness of her back or his broad lips covering her own. There would be no playful nip at her neck, their covenant of trust with each other.

She would have to trust others, and she and TelZodo would have to trust them alone.

Her hand reached back convulsively; Ghost took it in his own and moved before her. She blinked back tears, trying to smile, and drummed on his palm, *I must memorize you, too*. She choked down fear as he held her against his chest. She unbuttoned his vest partway down, buried her face in his tunic, and tried to lose herself in his fragrance. Her hands clutched his waist.

The Yata living high above them seemed almost unimportant. It was the single Masari she cared about now, and the child they'd produced. If they were driven back to the Marsh, they would at least be together. But how long could TelZodo survive there?

"Piri." Ghost cradled her to him. His lips brushed her hair. "I will do whatever you want me to do."

She reached up to his cheek. *I know*. She traced the line of his chops, the scant hairs at his chin.

They had nowhere else to go. They had to climb. She had to see the Little Masari for herself and tell them who they were. They had to know, before Promontory took them.

Warm breath traveled past Piri's ear, toward her mouth. Ghost's tongue caressed her own. She would have to teach Skedge her language; once he left, she would be without a translator. She had to find a way to get the thoughts out.

Ghost's lips moved to her ear. "I'll come back soon. I promise."

She opened her eyes and gave him a brave smile. He returned it.

“We’ll spend the night in Skedge,” Ghost added, softly. “I’ll do as much as I can before tomorrow.”

She nodded and looked to the side, where DevilChaser and WoodFoam waited patiently by a walkway carved into the rock, above the salt. It led from the overhang past the chains, ending at a dark rift.

“WoodFoam, you’re an angel on a training run.” DevilChaser pointed. “Tell them that when you get to the top. Piri, you’re behind him, then Ghost. I’ll follow.” He waved them past. “Don’t anybody fall.”

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The Masari moved slowly toward the top of the mesa, negotiating handholds and footholds too small for them and pressing close against the rock. Piri hummed encouragement as they called back and forth to each other, cursing at unplanned scrapes and dodging boot-loosened pebbles.

“TelZodo is doing fine,” Ghost called up to her. “I believe he’s just passed gas.”

Oh, how she wanted to look down. How she wanted to thank him. Her throat vibrated gratitude. She would have to devise a new vocabulary, one that needed no hands.

She eased her boot into the next indentation and pulled up. The spacing of anchors became intuitive; Piri could almost climb with her eyes closed. When the sun dipped behind Skedge and threw them into shadow, she wondered whether the raiding Yata had climbed and descended in the dark, crossing the pan at high water or high salt.

Yata used Destiny against Masari. To rape captured children. The thought drove her on. She had to do more than tell these people what they were; she had to tell them about their ancestors. One powder had done so much damage to so many, Yata and Masari alike. If she could, she would destroy the factory in Skedge altogether, but that would not end production.

Piri reached up, breathing hard. She stopped short when her fingers touched WoodFoam’s heel. *Climb faster.* Even if he could understand her touch, she had no way to tell him.

The angel called down, “We’re nearing the top.”

Distant shouts reached Piri’s ears. Arguments. WoodFoam hesitated above her; he heard them, too. TelZodo fidgeted on the strapping board and complained.

“Hey!” A Yata scolded them from above. Piri could barely make out a face pinched with rage. “We sent your damned ambassadors home two days ago! They cleaned us out of bed snuff. We don’t have any more!”

“We’re not ambassadors!” WoodFoam shouted. “We’re escorting a Little Masari woman and child. I’m an angel in training and so is the man behind me; we also have a doctor with us. We’re not here to take anything.”

“Good,” the man yelled, “because we can’t *give* anything. Promontory is not popular here right now. You picked a *hell* of a time for a training run!”

Ghost asked, “Ambassadors?”

DevilChaser said, “Their word for traders.” He lowered his voice. “Those mud tracks we saw this morning were left by a Destiny cart.”

The man called down, “Wait at the top but don’t go past the stairs. We’ll get you to safety.” He turned around. “They’re on a *training run* two days after delivery. *Idiots!*”

Piri tried to discern what the man said, but all she could hear were TelZodo’s full-throated wails and Ghost’s futile attempts to calm the child. Resolutely she followed WoodFoam until his boots reached steps carved into the stone and his hands grasped metal rails. He moved to the side, making room as she climbed up beside him.

They were high enough to see jewel-inlaid roads and houses gleaming in the low sun. Piri grasped a railing and looked down at Ghost as their son continued to howl. They tried to reassure each other with a glance.

A harsh, smoky voice snapped from above, “This is completely unacceptable. The angels should know better than to send someone at a time like this.” A hand alighted on Piri’s shoulder. “And where did *you* come from?”

Piri turned to face a portly, copper-faced woman sporting a thick black pelt. Her

eyes widened.

WoodFoam said, “She can’t speak.”

“How convenient for her.” The mixed-blood woman waved them forward. “Come with me, quickly. Visitors from Promontory are not well-liked these days, especially so soon after we’ve broken our backs to meet your deadline.” Her short legs pumped as she began to jog. “We have near-riot conditions here and your presence might just set one off if I don’t get you inside soon.” She called behind with an irritated bark, “Bend down! Especially the tall one.”

The woman trotted down ornate walks inlaid with semiprecious stones. Her very dress seemed patterned with silver and gold. Piri spied graceful columns leading up to homes covered in brilliantly-colored stone facades. Ghost bent almost double behind her and tried to calm TelZodo through all the jostling, making their discomfort into a game.

They slowed their pace away from the crowd as they neared a small cluster of houses. The Masari bent to avoid hitting their heads on the lintel as their host opened a marble-veined door of stone shaved thin and led them through. She collapsed onto cushions and pointed to pillows across the room, struggling to catch her breath. “I’m AgatePool, and like it or not you’re my guests. This is where angels and ambassadors stay when they’re *welcome*. You men may spend the night, but then you’ve got to go, or there will be workers out here in droves screaming for your removal. Sit.”

Pearlescent stone surrounded them; the walls almost gleamed with an inner light. Windows glowed from the setting sun. Large, multi-hued pillows softened a marble floor inlaid with a simple, angular mosaic of delicate colors.

Piri remained standing long enough for Ghost to unbind a hiccupping TelZodo from the strapping board. She unbuckled and lowered the board to the floor before dropping onto the cushions. Ghost sat beside her; she frantically opened her tunic before reaching out to take TelZodo from his arms. The warmth of his chest soothed her as she leaned back against it, humming with relief as the child latched onto a nipple.

AgatePool observed the group dispassionately. Then she snorted. “Training run.” She looked from TelZodo to Ghost. “Promontory is off-limits to Little Masari. You should have left her here when you impregnated her.”

Ghost shook his head. “She’s not from Skedge.”

“I’m sure she can speak for herself.”

“No,” Ghost said, softly. “She can’t.”

WoodFoam leaned forward. “Ghost and I *are* angels. I assure you of that.” He smiled at Piri. “And this *was* a training run, however unconventional. That’s why DevilChaser is with us. He’s her doctor.”

Piri eased an arm out from under TelZodo. She held up a finger to get AgatePool’s attention, then formed a phantom pen with her hand and waved it over invisible parchment.

AgatePool heaved herself up from the cushions. “You want to write something.”

Piri nodded. AgatePool huffed toward a large hardwood desk at the far end of the room. Gleaming white paperweights sat in a line at the back, each irregularly shaped. Vivid pictures stippled onto smooth surfaces appeared almost to move.

“Ghost.” DevilChaser’s voice was hushed. “Didn’t the Covenant use Yata bones as relics?”

Ghost started. He rolled up from the cushions and stepped forward, partially hunched over, to get a better look. When AgatePool turned to face him, he pointed to the desk. “How did you get those?”

“In trade for bed snuff. They’re made by Little Masari from abroad.” She shrugged. “It’s amazing what they can do with simple bones. Wonderfully detailed, even if primitive.” She fished pen and parchment from a drawer. “You look surprised.”

Ghost coughed. “I am.”

Piri read deep sadness in his face as he sat back down. Ghost had railed against the bones. They had been forbidden in his cabin. Reminders of Yata divinity hung everywhere else in Crossroads, then, the stranglehold of the Covenant blotting out Masari identity. They’d been anathema to him until his stay on the Cliff.

Piri had listened curiously in Shabra's dining room as Ghost began to describe them as revered icons of respect. Day by day, story after story, his feelings about the bones had changed, as each meal brought him the remains of a Yata executed rather than sacrificed.

Piri frowned at the relics now. Here they were no more than exotic paperweights traded to Promontory for the flesh of her people before being sold to Skedge for Destiny. To produce more people, more flesh for sale.

She handed TelZodo to Ghost before accepting AgatePool's writing materials. No one would be around to speak the sounds for her after the others left. She had to write them down.

The other woman sat opposite her. Piri nodded her thanks, leaned back on her heels, and closed her eyes. She was back on the Cliff, facing Bodasa in the middle of the night. Sheets of parchment lay on the floor between them, as they moved from Masari text to Yata text to fingerpress and back again. Piri dug into memory. She had to remember the Masari letters again, the ways in which they spoke.

Finally, nodding to herself, she bent low over the sheets from AgatePool and began to write, first one element of sound and then another. Ghost leaned forward to look over her shoulder. She smiled, her gaze still cast down at the parchment, as his hand caressed the back of her neck and moved her straw-colored braid to the side.

AgatePool leaned forward as well. "An odd tattoo."

Piri turned her head. She looked long at DevilChaser and WoodFoam, blinking back tears as they both nodded. They had to know what was about to happen, but neither objected.

Perhaps it made no difference. A generous supply of Destiny had been delivered to the Farm and DamBuster was on the verge of finding a way to make it. When he did, the Yata on the mesa would have little time left before they were killed or taken as livestock. In the meantime, Skedge still needed Promontory's manufactured goods and Destiny was all it had to trade for them. Any disclosures about the Farm would reveal the truth, but would likely accomplish little else.

Ghost handed a sleeping TelZodo to WoodFoam and unbuttoned his vest. He shrugged it off and opened the pocket across the back. “AgatePool,” he said, his voice hoarse, “have you ever heard of Yata?”

“No,” she mused, “I’m not familiar with the term.”

Ghost pointed. “Those are Yata bones, not Little Masari. The Yata came from a village called Basc. Their bones were polished and inscribed by Masari from Crossroads. That’s where I’m from.” He pulled his bundle from the pocket and set it on the stone floor. “Those are the bones of willing sacrifices. They were killed because Masari must eat Yata to survive.”

He nodded toward WoodFoam and began to unwrap. “The angels don’t take your dead to heaven or to any kind of burial ground. We cut them apart for food.”

DevilChaser reached into a side pocket, removed a small chunk of meat, and laid it beside the bundle. “This is what we get from them.”

AgatePool looked from chunk to slab, eyebrows raised. “That’s ridiculous. We’re Little Masari. I don’t know what the Yata are.”

“You’re mixed blood,” Ghost answered. “Our son TelZodo is mixed blood; his name means ‘twin soul’ in Yata. My wife’s name is Piri; that’s the Yata word for ‘hope.’” Ghost’s voice fell flat, his eyes dull. “She wasn’t named at birth. She was raised to be just the number on her neck, at a place called Destiny Farm.”

Piri leaned further over the sheets, forming her letters with care. She did not want to look up. Once all the sounds were in place, she could begin to teach them. She tried to concentrate on that, not on what unfolded above her head.

After she had learned to read Ghost’s *yatanii* list, she had turned to numbers and measurements, practicing in the back room of his cabin. She had learned to count animalcules and to draw their shapes, watching their mesmerizing movements through the lenses. More words had come later.

Touch had come first.

She glanced at Ghost, whose hands unwrapped layers of preservative-treated cloth. She stopped her writing, unable to turn back to the page.

She had seen babies taken away and seen the throats of mix-children cut. She had heard confused yells during cullings in the middle of the night and suddenly-lucid screams from the slaughterhouse. She had seen the dead cooked in pits and heard the farm hands swapping jokes around the fire, when she was aware enough to gaze at them through the steel of the pens.

She had never seen the final, packaged product. All feeling left her fingers. She couldn't write even if she wanted to.

Ghost looked up at AgatePool and asked, "Do you eat meat?"

Their host shook her head, looking puzzled. "Generally, no. Some snake on occasion."

He nodded. "That's good. That makes me more hopeful for my son." Beside Ghost, WoodFoam huddled over TelZodo, his full attention captured by the sleeping child. Ghost bent back down. More cloth fell to the stone floor. "Are many mix-children born here? Do some of them just wither away? Rapid weight loss, softened bones?"

AgatePool leaned over the meat. "Mix-children are rare. Many die of a wasting disease."

"It's not a disease. It's Yata deprivation." He set the last layer aside and turned the slab over. "You're fortunate you don't have the dependence."

Piri scooted beside him and stared at neatly-trimmed flesh, almost uncomprehending. She followed the tracery of its marbling, studying the patterns in blue ink. This writing was what the back of her neck looked like. She wondered which body might have pressed against hers, perhaps mated with her, produced a child with her, that might have become this.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She looked up at AgatePool's incredulous stare and bent her head forward, pulling her braid further away to expose her neck.

"This makes no sense." AgatePool's gaze darted among them, anger building in her dark eyes. "We're all Masari here. We're related to you. I'm living proof of that and so is your baby." She pointed to the slab. "If that is what you say it is, it's cannibalism."

DevilChaser said, drily, “You’d better show her your scars, dear.”

Piri pulled her tunic further up, exposing the bites on her thigh.

“I was being careful,” Ghost whispered. “It was that or starvation.”

“No,” the doctor said, pointedly. “We had meat from Destiny Farm. You chose not to eat it.”

AgatePool hissed, “What is this place that farms *people*?”

Piri grabbed the parchment and hurried to AgatePool’s side. She painstakingly moved the pen from one written sound to another.

The other woman glared at her and said, “No.”

Piri pointed out the sounds again, to make certain she was understood.

“You’re telling me that Little Masari are Yata and that bed snuff is Destiny. That’s preposterous.” AgatePool stood and began lighting lanterns against the encroaching dark. “You’re telling me my workers manufacture a drug that’s used to breed people as though they were animals.”

“Yes,” Ghost said, sounding weary. “The Destiny you sell to Promontory goes directly to the Farm.”

She turned from the wick and folded her arms across an ample chest. “You’re lying. The birth rate in Promontory has been dropping steadily from factory pollution. That’s why we’re being pushed to our limits to manufacture bed snuff. I have enough trouble keeping my workers from staging a revolt without having to deal with vicious rumors.” She pointed to Ghost. “You got this woman with a mix-child. I can sympathize with them but not with you. I will provide shelter for them until Piri is ready to work. You will go back home and take your tall tales of cannibalism with you.”

WoodFoam looked up from TelZodo. He asked, quietly, “Who tells you what happens in Promontory?”

She scowled at him. “That’s none of your concern.”

Ghost began wrapping the meat. “Then I ask a favor.” He held up the slab. “Do not let your informant see either Piri or TelZodo, but show this.” He set it back down and resumed folding the treated cloth. He grumbled, “Likely you’ll get another story. You’ll have to decide what to believe.”

Piri turned away from the meat to write down the few remaining sounds. She heard AgatePool’s footsteps retreat.

They returned minutes later, and a coppery hand set a plate of vegetables before her. Piri lifted hard, crunchy pieces and waited patiently for enough saliva to collect.

“She can’t eat that,” DevilChaser snapped, taking his own plate. “It needs to be mashed, made into something soft or liquid.”

AgatePool turned to Piri. “I thought you were mute.”

Piri regarded AgatePool, then tilted her head back and swallowed her spit. Her head came forward. She opened her mouth.

Ghost edged closer. He lifted her dangling tongue, carefully, as though for the first time.

AgatePool retrieved a lamp. Its warmth bathed Piri’s face, as close to her as the lamp WindTamer had held in Ghost’s cabin after their journey from Promontory to Crossroads. Ghost had been apologetic to Piri then, almost afraid to touch her. She hadn’t known about the Covenant, much less about what she already meant to him.

Ghost’s skin moistened, slipping a bit as he held her and pointed. “The Farm mutilated her at birth. Here.” Fingerpads caressed her tongue. “Here.” Piri found Ghost’s arm and drummed. He added, “She didn’t know then that she was Yata, either.”

His hand withdrew, wet with saliva. Piri held it against her cheek and looked beseechingly up at AgatePool.

The black-tufted woman gazed back at her before bending to retrieve the plate. Piri held it up, then watched AgatePool’s broad, retreating back. She listened with the others to slow, rhythmic sounds of pounding coming from the kitchen.

CHAPTER 19

Promontory

Mud Adder stood twitching behind DamBuster, eager and impatient for results. SandTail couldn't have done any better if he'd sent his henchmen to look over the apothecary's shoulder.

DamBuster almost wanted SandTail to visit, now that Piri and TelZodo were out of the house. He wanted someone to yell at, someone who could yell back. Instead, he worked in cloying silence. He tried to ignore the harsh scrutiny from a Yata still grieving over the cullings performed, before the factory in Skedge had roared back into full production.

Sick with dread over the arduous trip to the mesa, DamBuster focused his energies on the contents of his own dishes and beakers, guiding pipettes with a steady hand. MudAdder sampled one formulation after another, laced into gruel or dissolved into water. He pointed, asking for second helpings, then third helpings.

"Much more of this and I won't be able to fit the straps around you," DamBuster growled. The Yata smiled complacently, but his black eyes flashed anger as he reached and lifted between his legs, showing that he still remained flaccid between brief, futile bouts of arousal.

"I thought we were cooped up and isolated in this dungeon before, MudAdder." The apothecary tapped powder into a vial, wrinkling his nose at the stench. "I had no idea."

The experimental subject snatched a sheet of half-formulated notes from the counter. He dropped them before DamBuster and folded his arms, waiting.

They hadn't truly been alone with each other until now. Muffled footfalls had sounded on the other side of the door. Dishes and cups clinked; low murmurs of conversation followed DamBuster as he worked. The house breathed. Even TelZodo's complaints had made him smile.

DevilChaser had visited the lab sporadically, talking to MudAdder or giving

DamBuster's shoulders an encouraging squeeze. The household had taken its meals together, always alert for the sounds of SandTail's cart, but maintaining a tight grasp of civility in the midst of these unforgiving sessions.

All that stopped once DevilChaser's cart departed. Only the experiments remained.

DamBuster had strapped his lover into the harness of their cart that morning. He'd felt the press of buckles and leather through shirt and pants as he wrapped the doctor in his arms and kissed him goodbye. He had watched the cart carry its passengers as far as the lip of the salt pan, before he turned back toward the house.

He had tackled the birthing room first, emptying its shelves, moving equipment and curatives into crates and locking the crates away. DamBuster was going to shut the laboratory at night and give MudAdder a clean room free of drugs. Plenty of blankets, a decent chamber pot, a basin for washing, and no torture devices.

Back in the lab, he'd unstrapped MudAdder, diving into his work while the other man cleaned himself up. The claustrophobia of recent days vanished in an instant, leaving a gaping, agonizing void in its place.

MudAdder's hands began to flutter. The Yata scowled at the notes DamBuster forced himself to pen, until the apothecary wished Ghost had never taught the man how to read. Now that man paced behind him, jumpy and seething and demonstrating how much he wanted the torture devices by hurling himself into the retraining chair. Wood creaked under the onslaught.

DamBuster hurled a bowl across the lab, splattering the door. "I don't know what to do with you!" he bellowed. He grabbed MudAdder's chin, tilting the delicate face upward. "Sometimes I just want to take you into my arms and show you what it's like to love without that poison, but it would mean *nothing!*"

He snatched a basin and towel and bent to the mess. MudAdder stood, curious and pensive, looking from DamBuster to the work table and back.

The apothecary gathered up broken pieces of crockery as he wiped. He sat back on his heels, shaking his head at the Yata's supple skin, the smooth musculature articulating under bronze. Even then, the small, lithe man gazed hungrily at the

formulations.

“When Piri escaped from the Farm she wanted to stay the hell away from Destiny. She had a *child* without it.” DamBuster called to a head turned elsewhere. “Do you even *know* the people you’ve bred with? I can’t stop thinking about DevilChaser right now, but I’m forcing myself to do SandTail’s bidding instead. Do you remember even *one* person you’ve touched in that pen?”

MudAdder turned back to him. Looking sad, the Yata defined a broad rectangle with his hands, then placed his hands over his heart.

DamBuster said, softly, “They’re all one person to you.” The other man nodded.

If MudAdder had bred with Piri, would he have even realized it? Heaving a sigh, DamBuster finished wiping splatter and set the soiled basin aside.

He continued to work until the bottles began to blur. He took MudAdder by the hand and brought him to the birthing room with its cleared counters and featureless shelves. Clean blankets layered the floor by his lantern’s smooth yellow glow. DamBuster made sure the Yata was resting comfortably, then walked away and locked the door to the lab.

The bedroom was empty. The apothecary peeled off his clothes, letting his gaze travel across indentations left next to his own on the pallet.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, his partner had simply been an oasis of body heat, a blanket of skin and pelt. DevilChaser’s breath had warmed DamBuster’s furred neck. In moments of simple, animal need, he could have been anyone. Once, during a lifetime of anonymous comforts, DamBuster had believed that was all there was.

He could simply lock the door, but it might not be enough. He looked away from the indentations, scanning the room before he decided on a low, heavy bureau. The floor would be ruined; it didn’t matter. DamBuster cleared off the top, then set his back against the side and pushed the bureau against the door, wincing at deep gouges left in the wood underfoot. Then he snuggled beneath the blankets, curling toward the remnants of DevilChaser’s scent.

The door rattled softly during the night, once. Lamp light peeked through cracks and lingered, then slowly faded away. DamBuster buried his head in his arms,

miserable with longing and apprehension, waiting for his own throbbing to cease.

CHAPTER 20

TripStone jerked under her blanket to pounding on the door. Her head threatened to split open. She huddled tighter under the weave.

Next to her BrushBurn's pallet was cold, and had been for some time. She had opened her eyes briefly to watch him dress, when clouded light peeked in from the other side of the room. He'd left a cup of the oily tea on the floor for her, but she'd had no desire to pick it up. Now it was also cold.

That must have been morning. Now he was home again; it must be evening. And someone was rapping very loudly, very rudely on the door. TripStone smiled at the sound of BrushBurn's heavy step. At least he would make that pounding stop. Her head was another matter.

At least she wouldn't have to struggle out of bed and answer the door naked.

On another day, BrushBurn would have checked in with the meat vendors. Then TripStone would have gone with him to the Chamber for another session of bureaucratic futility. Voice slurred from more than just alcohol, she had asked him instead to tell the Chamber that she was ill and to convey her regrets.

BrushBurn had knelt by her. He'd taken her limp, unwashed body into his arms. She'd looked at him and said, simply, "Your problem is, you care too much."

Worried steel blue gazed back. "So do you."

He'd handed her the tea. She'd put it back down on the floor and curled up tighter as he left the house.

She had failed at her pretense and her mission alike, and the communiqué stuffed into her pack only made things worse. Her arguments at the Chamber changed nothing. Now forces from Promontory were in Crossroads, securing the Grange and placing Basc at risk. Carts had already come laden with Crossroads' early vegetables and continued on to Skedge. Her village's produce as well as its bones joined other commodities streaming to the mesa in return for ever-greater quantities of Destiny.

The factory ran smoothly now, yielding an extraordinary haul of the powder. Resistance seemed to have eased with the new shipments. BrushBurn and SandTail, fretting over the exhaustion of Destiny backstock at the Farm, had been ecstatic. Despite the rationing in Promontory, they had dispatched another cart of meat to Crossroads, the better to secure their eventual prize.

As usual, the messenger had found TripStone at the tavern, where she sat at the bar overhearing story after story of the men and women of Promontory, as though that would make any difference. Seeing HigherBrook's stiff, stylized pictograms supplementing Gria's more natural hand should have been a comfort, but it wasn't. HigherBrook had once tried to jail her in the Rotunda, but now he placed his faith in a mission that became harder and harder to realize.

TripStone had gotten access to history instead of buildings. She couldn't look around her without seeing pain, and given half a chance she would cause yet more suffering.

That alone had been enough to drive her under the blanket. Now, even knowing that history, HigherBrook had given her his support and she had absolutely nothing to show for it.

Worst of all had been their message of personal concern for her well-being. TripStone had waited until BrushBurn left the house and then sobbed into the mattress, thankful that she lacked the strength to drag herself to the brandy.

Now she heard the further pounding of the rain as BrushBurn opened the door to SandTail's urgent voice. She shrank further under the blanket. *Please, gods, no more books.* RootWing and DewLeaf had been right; this place was finishing her. Just as surely as it was finishing them.

BrushBurn's gravelly voice answered, alarmed. TripStone held still beneath the covers, trying to listen past the anvil ringing in her head. His alarm turned into grief. She listened more closely.

"How many?" BrushBurn asked.

"They're still counting." SandTail sounded sick. "The Farm tested the bodies. They're still fit for consumption, but we need to preserve them immediately."

Hard footfalls hammered TripStone's anvil as BrushBurn rushed for his cloak.

“I promise you, we will move on Skedge as soon as we can make enough Destiny ourselves.” SandTail’s voice was firm but clearly upset. “For now, all we can do is find and execute those behind the poisoning and bring the other factory workers into line.”

BrushBurn’s voice held tightly-controlled rage. “You’re questioning everyone.”

“We’re sending people to Skedge now. My men intercepted a cart on its way back from there earlier today. Angels on a training run. They knew nothing.”

TripStone tried to slow her heartbeat. Her head rushed with blood.

SandTail lowered his voice. “We’re bringing the bodies up tonight, while it’s still dark. We don’t want to upset the town. We’ll preserve them at the Warehouse, have them ready for distribution as soon as possible.”

TripStone bit her lip as the anvil in her head resounded with a deafening clang. Her pulse roared. The Warehouse would be open and she had to get there. She stilled the hand that wanted to reach for the cold tea, ready to grab an entire pot of the oily brew. But there was no time. She would make do with what she had.

Hinges creaked. BrushBurn asked, mournfully, “What could possibly have possessed them?”

SandTail spluttered as he headed out the door. “Nothing possessed them to poison Destiny, BrushBurn. For the thousandth time, murder is in their blood. They thought they were killing *Masari*.”

The door slammed, muffling the rain. TripStone counted seconds, then tossed off her blanket and grabbed the tea. She gagged on cold oil. One cup barely affected her aches; she would fling it away if her muscles didn’t hurt so much. Lantern light shot needles into her eyes as she crawled on hands and knees toward her pack. She pulled it open, reaching toward the bottom for scant remains of Erta.

“I’m with you,” she whispered, panting. “Stay with me.”

She’d been rationing, but now she needed her wits about her. The meat threatened to break her teeth. She held it in her mouth, softening its stiffness with saliva as she painfully pulled on her clothes. She stood and fell hard against the wall. The room spun.

For once, she was thankful for BrushBurn's monastic accommodations; she had less around her to break. TripStone stumbled from one side of the house to the other, taking deep breaths until her head began to clear. "If you're going to help me, Erta, you'd better do it now."

She gritted her teeth against the agony lacing her skull as she pulled on her boots. TripStone threw her hooded cloak about her shoulders and then her StormCloud, plucked her lantern from the floor, and staggered out into the rain.

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Even cleaned by the sizzle of lightning, Promontory's air still stung TripStone's lungs. Bright lights shone from the tavern and peeked from shuttered houses. Most everyone stayed indoors against the weather, though a few hardy souls wove noisily down patched roads, slipping on gravel.

TripStone quirked a wry smile. She fit right in.

She tried to think. The Rotunda was on the outskirts of Crossroads. From what DamBuster had told her, the Warehouse would be on the outskirts of Promontory. It wasn't near the salt pan, and proximity to the mountains would make it too susceptible to mudslides.

TripStone pictured the ancient map and headed toward the canyon, peering between houses in search of a dome. She would walk all night if she had to. Each minute of wandering cleared her head a little more. She drew her hood more closely about her face, hunched against wind-driven downpour. Easier to let herself be buffeted as she zigzagged down the street.

She saw the smoke first, a column barely lit from the lights below, rising against the rain. The oculus was open. For a wild moment TripStone wondered if they were burning books, before her nostrils registered the faint aromas of herbs and preservative, the tang of flesh.

She stood dumbly, swaying on her feet, staring at the distant dome.

Fire started to burn through her chest. She forced her legs to move. The smell of Destiny meat filled her lungs, but that couldn't be helped. As though from eons away, she detected the swivel of her hip joints, the slight undulating of her spine. Her muscles twitched, fighting through the haze of liquor. She tightened her rifle

strap about her before she realized what she was doing.

No spiraled walk led toward the Warehouse. Instead, TripStone advanced across a flat expanse of scrub. She lowered the wick in her lantern, just enough to see where she stepped. The lights ahead directed her. Flames; they were smoking the meat. A flash of lightning illuminated granite against the dark.

Covered carts pulled up to the dome; bodies were spirited through the outer perimeter doors at ground level. One wagon barely finished unloading before the next pulled up, and the next. TripStone quickened her pace. How many bodies were already in there? How long had they been unloading?

A hooded man darted from one cart to another, consulting the runners and penning notes. TripStone extinguished her wick and kept walking; she didn't need to see the man's face to know who it was. If BrushBurn looked in her direction, he would see only a silhouette.

He probably wouldn't recognize her. She wasn't weaving any more.

She crouched, watching. Rainwater seeped through her cloak. Too much activity bustled about the perimeter doors, and they were too small for her to sneak inside.

Guards attended the great bronze doors far above ground level opening into the heart of the dome, their vigilance sporadic. All available hands were occupied with preserving what meat they could.

*The main doors, then.* Massive steps lay in a long flight ahead of her. TripStone had nowhere to hide; she had to climb them as though she belonged there. Best to pretend that this was the Rotunda, that she knew exactly where she was going.

Nerves fluid, lantern held loosely at her side, she took the tall steps. Someone in a bloody apron passed her on the way down and they exchanged wordless greetings. TripStone lowered her hood as she approached the doors, letting the rain fall on her face.

She nodded to the guard. He took one look at her StormCloud and waved her through. TripStone stepped onto the great central walkway and caught her breath.

Rain spilled through the oculus and steamed on heated rocks below. Fires burned beneath her, smoking dressed carcasses lashed to poles. Farm workers wielding knives grabbed corpses passing continuously through the small doors. TripStone looked upon disemboweling tables, her eyes smarting in the thick air.

She glanced about and saw hooks holding prepared carcasses to either side of the great doors. Around and around, one level to the next, almost up to the oculus, headless bronze bodies from past cullings and the more recent deaths hung like rigid banners, smoked and shriveled and ready for distribution to the butcheries.

TripStone closed her eyes momentarily against nausea. She rushed to the spiral staircase, overlaying in her mind the patterns of offices and libraries, inner and outer passageways, dormitories and caverns. She remembered the elements in her own crude drawing, Gria's finger pointing to one place and then another.

She hopped off the stairs, ducked beneath an archway, and re-lit her lantern. She turned and sprinted down an alabaster hallway, the dome's outer wall curving around her. Another stairwell led down to the dormitories, or what had been the dormitories in the Rotunda. TripStone passed doorless, empty rooms in the Warehouse's lower levels.

A collapsed burlap bag lay against granite; she stepped up to it and knelt. Her fingers touched brown dregs; she rubbed the substance beneath her nose and sniffed. Not gunpowder.

TripStone stood, brushed herself off, and continued down a hallway of empty holds. She descended to another level, another hallway. Lightning blazed through window slits, striping the floor.

Her clothes reeked; the smell of smoking meat still penetrated this far. She moved farther in, stopping at the first scent of gunpowder. She lowered her wick and took cautious steps, overlaying positions on her internal map.

Voices echoed. They were still bringing in bodies on the other side.

Oblong wooden boxes filled the next room. TripStone levered one open as quietly as she could and looked upon a cache of repeaters. She lifted one and cocked the barrel, examining the magazine. It didn't have the power of a StormCloud, but it would do if necessary. She scanned the room until she found stacked boxes of bullets.

There were still the caverns. She had to go deeper.

TripStone saw no locks anywhere; whoever got inside the Warehouse and knew where to go would gain access to the arsenal. How many protected the outer perimeter doors, how many the great bronze doors? She couldn't tell. The guards were helping to carry dead Yata; for all she knew, they also helped with the butchering. However many were stationed here, she and Gria's army would have to overpower them without suffering great loss of life.

But the Warehouse held the armory, just as Gria had surmised. TripStone now knew where the guns were.

She left the last traces of alabaster behind. Smoothness yielded to rough granite blocks glistening with a moist sheen in the humid, underground air. Buttressed archways cast long shadows before TripStone's lantern. Her nostrils quivered at mustiness. Her clothes still stank in air finally free of cooking flesh.

High time it was. She had reached the bottom.

She turned down a crudely constructed hallway wider than the others, large enough for five Masari to walk abreast. It ended far ahead, opening into a black expanse that lightened to gray as she approached. TripStone raised her lantern higher, hastening her advance.

Her footsteps echoed into the cavern ahead. Lamp light illuminated one thick column after another. Rows of them, separated by vaulted ceilings. TripStone stepped inside the vast room, shining her lantern on stacked crates extending to the edge of her vision. Paths mazed among the stacks, dwindling to vanishing points.

TripStone set down her lantern, opened a crate, and smiled. She lifted the StormCloud in her arms. She checked the rotary magazine, the cocking lever, the smoothness of the action. Her palm caressed the barrel.

Not long ago, a lifetime ago, she had held this gun to her chest, crammed into a transport with shooters from Rudder as they descended toward Crossroads. It hadn't seemed real, this massive machine with terrifying capabilities, this black metal without spirit. It didn't matter. Spirit had fled beneath the massacre.

Now, somehow, it had returned. TripStone sank to her knees on the dusty floor

beside boxes of bullets and gave thanks, though she did not know to what or to whom.

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BrushBurn still directed and recorded deliveries as TripStone left the Warehouse. She took a moment to watch him bustle about the carts like a man possessed. His sense of smell was at least as keen as her own, possibly better. When he got home he would know instantly where she had been. Her clothing, pelt, and hair still stank of desiccated flesh.

Rolling in the scrub yielded only nettles in her cloak. She tried undressing by the canyon, her lantern dark, beseeching the rain to wash her clean. Destiny Farm's dead still encircled her in a cloud of scent.

Drawing a bath at home would do no good, either. She would have to wash her clothes and cloak as well, unusual actions for someone supposedly confined to a bed.

The tavern was still open. She still had time. Maybe she couldn't entirely eliminate the smells of the Warehouse from her body, but she could cover them up with the odors BrushBurn most expected from her these days. SandTail was funding her inebriation. He might as well fund her deception.

TripStone walked up to the bar, next to a patron in mid-piss, and said, "Give me a bottle of your strongest."

The bartender handed it over without a moment's hesitation or surprise. Sighing, TripStone took the spirits out back and ducked into shadow. She carefully anointed herself, took a sober walk home, and sucked down a few mouthfuls. Stinking in earnest, she piled her clothes by her pack and slipped back under her blanket.

Dawn light crept through the window when the door to the house opened. TripStone listened to BrushBurn's heavy tread as he struggled about the kitchen, heating water for oily tea and preparing his treatment for hangover in advance of pulling off a cork.

She wanted to ask him how bad the damage was. She wanted to go to him and provide solace beyond what he got from the bottle, be as kind to him as he had

been to her. But he would hear the clarity in her voice and discern the steadiness in her walk.

Her fists clenched atop the pallet. He wasn't grieving over livestock now; he grieved over much more. If not friends, then the children and grandchildren of friends. Sighing, TripStone waited. She counted the cups being filled and gauged the dulling of his senses. She whispered into the feather cushion, "Forgive me."

Then she pushed up from the bed and padded naked toward the hearth. BrushBurn sat at a small table, both hands around his mug. He blinked at her with red-rimmed eyes. Without a word, she moved behind him, kissed his rusty, smoke-scented curls, and started to massage the knots from his shoulders.

CHAPTER 21

The rain began in mid-morning, a light drizzle strengthening into a steady downpour. DamBuster broke from his formulations repeatedly, long enough to hurry to the kitchen window to look for the black speck that was DevilChaser's cart.

He spotted it in late afternoon, moving unsteadily, probably dodging the growing pools. More and more of the salt pan turned gray, reflecting the sky. Another speck, barely visible in the far distance, seemed headed toward Skedge.

DamBuster rushed back into the lab. He took MudAdder by the hand and pulled him away from a work table covered in small, powdery fingerprints. "I can't leave you alone for a minute. Come help me."

Whatever shape these men were in, they needed something hot. DamBuster stoked the hearth, directing MudAdder to set out ingredients for soup. The Yata complied reluctantly, his steps edgy. More than once he tried to dart back to the lab.

"You can do as I say out here," DamBuster barked, pulling him back, "or be strapped to the chair in there. Which will it be?"

MudAdder remained in the kitchen, brooding. DamBuster bustled from pantry to counter to flames to window, watching as the cart passed from salt pan to scrub. Daylight dwindled. He was still too far away to tell who was in the harness, who was putting away the hook. Chairs from the dining room now formed a half-circle around the hearth. DamBuster locked the laboratory door as the cart drew closer and then tossed on a cloak, ready to dash out into the rain. Soup simmered.

He burst from the house when he heard voices. DevilChaser was bringing up the cart, his gaiters badly stained, the rest of him disheveled. DamBuster couldn't see the others. The only sign of them was their yelling from inside the passenger compartment.

"They'll come when they're ready," DevilChaser gasped. "Get me inside."

DamBuster rushed to unbuckle his companion and drew off the harness, arms ready when the doctor stumbled forward. “Hang onto me.”

“Gladly.” DevilChaser grabbed him around the waist and clung. He flashed DamBuster an exhausted grin. “I told you I’d stay alive.”

DamBuster looked down at the gaiters. “You were lucky.”

“Someone has to be. We were in a hurry to get home, didn’t always look where we were stepping.” The doctor’s eyes caught MudAdder standing at the window. “Put him in the lab and strap him down. I have news he doesn’t want to hear.”

“I’m taking care of you first.”

The doctor didn’t argue. DamBuster half-lifted him up the stairs and lowered him into a chair by the hearth. He removed the gaiters and boots, setting them down in a far corner of the room. He snapped at MudAdder, “Get blankets,” then started stripping DevilChaser of his soaked clothes.

The door slammed open. Ghost steamed into the kitchen, pouring rainwater as he strode toward the birthing room. In a moment he was back, viciously rattling the locked laboratory door and yelling for supplies.

WoodFoam rushed up behind him and grabbed him around his chest. “You can’t work like this, Ghost! Dry off and eat something. Piri and TelZodo are *safe_!_*” He cinched his hold tighter against bucking. “AgatePool is management. She probably didn’t know what was happening. She wasn’t at the vats. They won’t go after her!”

Ghost roared, “You don’t know that!”

Their gaiters and boots were stained as well; water pooled beneath them. MudAdder entered, half-hidden by the woolens in his arms. What showed of his face was confused. DamBuster grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around DevilChaser before handing him his soup.

The doctor said, softly, “Put MudAdder in the lab.”

“No,” Ghost shot back. “He should hear this.” He broke WoodFoam’s hold and took the blankets from MudAdder, holding them away from his sopping clothes.

He set them down by the hearth, handed one to WoodFoam, and began to strip. “Several carts crossed the salt pan three days ago, filled with Destiny. It was all poisoned.” He tossed his shirt aside and pointed back toward Skedge. “They thought it was *bed snuff*. They didn’t know they were killing their own people.”

The Yata fell back against the wall as though his heart had been lanced. Then he rushed the laboratory door and threw himself against it, screaming. DamBuster whipped out his key. This time fists pummeled him as he unlocked. MudAdder’s cries wrenched his own heart into pieces.

DevilChaser yelled at Ghost, “Was that necessary?”

The lab door swung open. DamBuster choked back his own tears as he wrapped his arms around MudAdder. “All right,” he whispered between the other’s wails. “All right. I know what I have to do now and I know I need to do it quickly. Let me put you in the chair.” He swallowed a sob as the Yata went limp against him. “No more delays.”

Minutes later a light knock sounded on the door. DamBuster grumbled, without turning from his work, “If you’re here to do further damage, Ghost, we don’t want it.”

A hinge creaked behind him.

“I’m sorry.” Ghost’s voice filled with pain. “I tried to turn us back toward Skedge after we were questioned; we knew nothing until then. I could have gotten us killed. They should have thrown me to the snakes.” A blanket rustled; DamBuster heard the soft tread of bare feet. “If both of you will let me, I’ll wipe MudAdder’s face.”

“He’ll nod if he wants you to.” DamBuster tapped more powder into a dish. “Otherwise, let him cry. He deserves to be able to do that much.”

The blanket shushed beside him. He looked up into haunted eyes. “Take what you need and set up your lab in the birthing room. I’ll give you the key to what I’ve locked away.” DamBuster rubbed his chops and leaned heavily on his elbows. “We’re racing against each other now. I can’t wait for you.”

“I know.” Ghost knelt, reaching under the table for his mask and canister. “I know you’re doing everything you can for me. I’m thanking you now because I

don't know what I'll feel like later." He straightened, studying the shelves. "The meat didn't work."

DamBuster plucked a bottle and handed it over. "It took a long time to convince the Yata they were Little Masari. It'll take time to turn them back." He frowned. "Especially after what they've just done."

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DamBuster ladled breakfast onto a plate, brought it into the birthing room, and set it down on empty counter space by Ghost's makeshift lab. "You'll work better if you eat."

Ghost hunched over lenses by his lantern, scribbling notes. "Get away from me."

His voice was low and menacing; his downcast eyes smoldered. The dark circles beneath them were almost black. Dishes and beakers lined the counter, holding progressions of experiments next to a pile of pouched masks.

"You don't believe me right now, but I'm trying to help you," DamBuster said. "I'm doing what I have to do because this house will fill with SandTail's men if I don't, and you will be out on the street without a place to work. I'm buying you time, Ghost, not taking it away."

Silence. DamBuster couldn't blame him. They both hurt.

The gas canister was empty, its residue exhausted. Next to it a mortar held powder made only partly with supplies from the Marsh.

Ghost had rushed outside repeatedly throughout the night with tiny amounts of different formulations, setting one pinch and then another aflame, trying to recreate Rudder's gas as closely as possible. Then he'd bent to the work of finding filtering agents that gave protection against the effects.

The apothecary left the birthing room and plodded to his own work table. Scant light entered the house. DevilChaser lay in an exhausted sleep in the bedroom. WoodFoam was collapsed on blankets covering the dining room floor. The lamps in the house's two laboratories had been on all night.

MudAdder sat strapped into the restraining chair. DamBuster no longer worried

that the Yata would rush to his work table unattended; that was now beside the point. He worried because the lab had knives.

“I’m not giving up.” DamBuster spooned gruel into MudAdder’s mouth. “Don’t you give up, either.”

The Yata tilted his head back and swallowed. He stared into space, listless.

DamBuster laid a light touch on his arm, wondering if the urge to rut could overcome melancholy. Without the drug, how long before the survivors at Destiny Farm became similarly depressed?

No one else stirred in the house except for Ghost. His breakfast was probably cold by now, but that couldn’t be helped. When the man was ready to drop, perhaps then he’d eat. Eventually he’d have to sleep, too, even though it meant sleeping alone.

“I’ll have to get my own breakfast, soon.” DamBuster slipped another spoonful into MudAdder’s mouth. “Is this even beginning to have an effect?” He frowned at the head’s slow shake. “All right. I’ll try something else. But I’m going to have soup first.”

The Yata barely nodded. He seemed not to care any more, one way or the other. DamBuster squeezed his arm and headed toward the kitchen.

WoodFoam sat at the dining table, leaning over a rewarmed bowl. He blinked at DamBuster and yawned. “I should get back to the others for when we get word. We’ll probably have deaths in Skedge soon.”

DamBuster walked past him, squatted by the hearth, and picked up a ladle. “I think you’ll have your hands full.”

“Thank DevilChaser for me when he wakes up.” The angel looked toward the birthing room and sighed. “I probably shouldn’t bother Ghost.”

“I’ll tell him you were thinking of him.” DamBuster added, under his breath, “When I can.”

He finished filling his bowl as WoodFoam slipped behind him and quietly opened the door, easing out into the brightening morning.

## CHAPTER 22

### Skedge

“We have two workers in custody, but they were both in quality control.” AgatePool traced routes along a map and turned to face several grim-faced Masari. “They’ve confessed to letting our delivery go to Promontory unchecked, but they couldn’t have acted alone. They wouldn’t have been at the vats.” She sat opposite the large people and clenched her hands beneath her chin. “I am *appalled*, ambassadors. This happened beneath my nose. I guarantee you I will find everyone who was involved and will punish them severely.”

“Yes, you will,” a tight-lipped Masari woman answered. “You will execute them.”

AgatePool’s black neck fur bristled. Given the recent spate of unreasonable demands from Promontory, this one should not be surprising. The ambassadors before her sat stiffly, exuding more than just dismay. AgatePool smelled an undercurrent of hate.

Could the bed snuff have become addictive in Promontory after all this time? The occasional factory workers who suffered overexposure to the snuff became dizzy with sexual arousal, leaving their posts and grabbing coworkers in an attempt to mate. They’d been removed from the premises until their symptoms disappeared.

They’d been aggressive, almost pathetically comical, but they had not been particularly violent. AgatePool did not see in their faces what she saw in the ambassadors, who looked anything but stimulated. Several inspected the production schedules and employee reports tacked to wood boards, flipping through them for incriminating information. They stood half-bent with fists behind their backs in an attitude of murderous calm.

She pitched her voice to soothing. “Surely you can understand what it means to be understaffed; you have your own factories to run. Killing whoever perpetrated this crime could lead Skedge into a full-scale revolt.” She looked from one unforgiving glare to another. “I’ve been dealing with personnel and equipment problems ever since you pushed us into accelerated production. I’ve had a police

force at the plant since the sabotage began, but they can't control everything. The more workers I place under disciplinary action, the fewer I have available for manufacturing."

The man opposite her stabbed the map with his finger. His seamed face creased with rage. "You could have given us the formula for bed snuff, but you chose to withhold it. Now Promontory is dying as a result. Killing those involved in the poisoning is scant retribution for what you've done to us." He leaned across the table, towering over her. "We will stay here until we get that formula, if it means tearing this factory apart."

"*Sit down.*" AgatePool pushed up from her chair. She paced, studying the glowering Masari at the table and the others taking notes from her records. Fanciful designs meandered beneath the ceiling in graceful, raised patterns. Her gaze played across an amethyst façade as she thought.

Outside her window, the salt pan glistened with new pools. Smog swathed Promontory within a half-bowl of mountain crags and hovered over the canyon.

They could search all they wanted. The technique for making bed snuff was taught orally, within a tightly-knit network of mentors and students. AgatePool had thought the tradition quaint at first and more than a little foolhardy. But snuff was the only treasure Skedge could offer in return for everything that Promontory provided. It had always been proprietary to Skedge and fiercely protected, preserved in brains rather than on parchment.

AgatePool began to understand that wisdom as she studied the ambassadors. She had not known how quickly business partners could turn into thugs.

"Please help me to understand," she said, spacing her words. "Your ambassadors came for the snuff four days ago. They would have had a day's travel back across the pan. How many in Promontory have died in the two days before you made your journey here?" She rubbed the back of her neck, her fur still puffed. "I'd think you'd have impounded whatever wasn't used at the first sign of trouble, but you haven't brought anything back."

"That's an internal affair." The Masari woman's voice was clipped, almost dismissive.

"It would help my investigation," AgatePool snapped. "I've got my people

searching houses. We should know what to look for. If you're set on killing the perpetrators, I think you would want to find them."

No one answered.

What caused this rift in relations? AgatePool listened to the sounds of her own heavy breathing. Parchment flipped; nibs scratched. The Masari filling her office were her larger cousins. She'd taken as much pride in her pelt as she had in the color of her skin. She embodied the best of both worlds, and until recently the peltless Little Masari had looked up to her as their intermediary.

Then Promontory started driving them all like slaves and her workers kept the deepest secrets of their rebellion from her. Now the ambassadors wanted those workers dead, but they offered nothing to aid her search for them. What was wrong with these people?

Their behavior showed all the signs of addiction. AgatePool's large, angry visitors were being singularly unreasonable. Perhaps all of Promontory was unreasonable now. What could be happening in *its* factories? How much snuff could the Masari have used in so short a time? Were they all striving for fertility at once? When did they *work*?

She sat back down. "Tell SandTail to come here. I must meet with him."

"He is attending to the crisis in Promontory," said the seam-faced man. "He'll come here as soon as he is able." He began rolling up the map. "In the meantime, you will grant us full access to these facilities and arrange for accommodations on site."

"In other words," AgatePool said, tightly, "you are taking over this factory."

"We are aiding your investigation." He stood and slipped the map under his arm. "You can tell your police force that we will supervise production from now on."

"In that case, I will tell my police force to supervise *you*." AgatePool observed the Masari in an attitude of forced calm. "I would also remind you that as shortstaffed as we are, my workers outnumber you considerably. Keep that in mind if you find yourself wishing to take punitive action." She folded her arms. "For any reason."



The Masari gave curt bows before leaving her office, hunching over as they passed through its low doorway. AgatePool sat with her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes and then her dark chops. Her pelt was still fuzzed.

She heaved herself up with an explosive sigh. She would have to speak with her head of security. Perhaps one of the ambassadors would agree to be tested for addiction. If that was the problem, she would consult with her medical personnel. They had experience dealing with overexposure. Relations might improve if they could help Promontory, returning their communities to some form of normality.

She rubbed the back of her neck again, stretching, trying to ease her tension. Her wall's amethyst façade beckoned to her from behind the wood boards. Its soothing shade promised revival. She gazed into violet, playing mental games with age-old designs, carvings made in the stone with a graceful hand.

One pattern kept drawing her back. It repeated around the rim of the ceiling. She'd looked at it countless times. Beautiful ancient artistry, so like the primitive markings on the carved, stippled bones from abroad.

Her palms began to sweat. She wiped them on her dress absent-mindedly as she stood by the wall, squinting at the pictograms. For the first time, the symbol that repeated the most looked oddly familiar.

AgatePool rushed to her supply closet and plucked differently-colored chinks from the shelves. She locked her door, shoved her meeting table to the wall, and climbed.

She tried first one chalk and then another. Copying the design wasn't good enough. She had to transfer its pure, engraved image directly from the stone.

Arms aching, AgatePool held one sheet of parchment after another above her head. Dust sprinkled her hair and chops. Pieces shattered in her hand. Workers knocked on her door and she sent them away. She would see them later. If what she suspected were true, she would *show* them later.

*It can't be. It's impossible.*

If it were impossible, then why was her grip so tight that even the hardest chalk crumbled, sticking like paint to her drenched palms? She relaxed her hold and

burnished another sheet. Eventually the image stayed, bleeding onto the parchment and burning into her brain as she slid off the table.

AgatePool brushed herself off as best she could. She fetched a basin and cleaned away the colored streaks, then put the chinks away. She moved the table back.

She separated the rubbings from each other using clean sheets and wrapped her cloak around them as many times as it would go, thankful for her stoutness. The extra wool would protect them. Then AgatePool unlocked her door and fled the factory as quickly as she could.

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Rain danced inside cisterns, impacting deep pools and sending up tiny beads that fell back and merged in the dark. AgatePool hurried past one of them, a gracefully-carved receptacle also left from the old times. Also engraved with ancient symbols, pretty designs.

Ancient Masari designs, made when all the Masari were little, before some of them grew too big for their houses and resettled in the flatlands. Every child knew that.

Every child on Skedge. What did other children know?

Her black curls stuck to her head. Her dress wrinkled in wetness. She could have worn her cloak and held the rubbings inside, but what would have protected them from her perspiration? Better to hold the parchments layered inside folded wool. AgatePool had towels at home. She would dry.

Rain streamed into her pelt and dissolved stray dust particles. Tiny streaks bloomed across her dress. Even the mosaics in the roads and on her floors were suspect now. What hidden meanings did they possess?

Let me be wrong. She held her folded cloak tighter against her chest. *Let me be imagining things.*

If it were true, then how could she possibly exist? How could her parents have found each other? How could they have produced her? Her father had been of Skedge. Her mother had been an ambassador from Promontory who had braved the pan and the climb when her time came near. She had given birth on the mesa

and departed as soon as she could travel. *What did she eat?*

In AgatePool's home sat a mutilated woman caring for her son the way AgatePool's father had cared for her. He'd sought nursemaids and proxies for a Masari mother who had been largely absent, who had visited only in the course of trade.

She would have known exactly what she was trading for. AgatePool's father had never known. Yet they'd loved each other.

AgatePool rushed past fluted columns and pushed her way inside. She dropped her cloak on the floor and hurried to her bedroom, stripping off her clothes and grabbing a towel off a hook. She rubbed dissolved chalk and rainwater from her hair and face to keep from dripping onto the rubbings, then wrapped her bulk in ample cloth.

Received in exchange for bed snuff. Something so simple as a towel.

Not bed snuff. AgatePool secured the cloth around her with a jeweled pin and padded back to wet wool. Forcing calm, she knelt by her cloak and began to unfold.

Piri sat crumpled on the cushions, bent over TelZodo and humming in brief, listless snatches. She'd been without her mate for almost two full days, receiving scant comfort from her host. The woman probably hadn't slept.

These visitors could not have come at a worse time, just as AgatePool and everyone around her had tried to catch a breath before the next stretch of incessant labor. Production had finally resumed in earnest, with employees working double and sometimes triple shifts to fill Promontory's outrageous order. How could life for her people improve when more and more of the goods Skedje received were going to Alvav in return for factory supplies?

Then her guests had placed all that back-breaking labor in the preposterous context of farmed people. Vicious lies, spouted at a time when AgatePool had been utterly exhausted. She had shunted them all into a guest house before tossing fitfully in her own bed. She'd awakened them loudly and impatiently at dawn. She'd stood by dispassionately during long, stoic goodbyes at the crevasse.

Piri had tried to communicate back at the house, pointing to the word sounds she'd written and trying to touch her. AgatePool would have none of it. She had work to do and tired, angry people to mollify. She wanted to hear no more of the unthinkable Destiny Farm. She would mash the woman's food and see that Piri and her baby had a roof over their heads, but they could not expect her to do any more than that.

Then word had come of the poisoning and she had looked into unabashed Masari hatred.

Rivulets of water spilled onto the floor; AgatePool patted them with her towel. But only the outer layers of her cloak were soaked through, and soon she handled dry wool. The rubbings remained undamaged.

She looked back at Piri and met a blank, empty stare.

AgatePool lifted a sheet and crossed the room. She sat on the cushions next to her guest. "May I?" She lifted the thick braid as Piri hunched low over her son.

The symbol was the same. On the neck. On the meat. Around and around the walls, underneath the ceiling, engraved throughout the factory.

Destiny. Destiny. Destiny.

Palms sweating, AgatePool held the rubbing next to the tattoo, took a shaky breath, and whispered, "You poor creature."

A muffled sob rose in Piri's throat. The mutilated, bitten woman leaned back against AgatePool's chest, tears leaking from her tight-shut eyes as her hand stroked the fur along TelZodo's back.

AgatePool held Piri securely, smoothing back the woman's pale hair. "As soon as you feel ready, I want you to go get your pages of sounds." Her own voice sounded faraway. She barely felt the rest of her body. "Teach me the touch language." The parchment in her hand fluttered, as though her trembling came from somewhere else. The symbol blurred. "Tell me everything."

CHAPTER 23

Promontory

We are back to the frontier wars. SandTail drove the thought from his mind again and tallied the numbers of dead, checking the latest census of Promontory's citizens. His makeshift desk of empty crates and wood boards sat in a dry, empty room beneath the carcasses swelling the Warehouse. Fat burlap bags once rose high against these walls, filled to bursting with Destiny. Backstock, enough to carry his people through a crisis.

Through *one* crisis, perhaps two. Not the scorching of a forest, followed by machine breakdowns and now this. Little Masari or not, contained rebellion or not, one act of treachery had stripped this city of its protective armor, drained it of its life blood. Generations of well-crafted trust washed away like so much silt.

Scant traces of the powder dribbled from the mouths of empty bags. SandTail lived here now, for as long as it would take him and BrushBurn to plot out the expected lifespan of their food supply. He looked into those burlap mouths whenever his mind began to wander. Fitting, to share a room that was once packed with his nemesis, with this drug that preserved in one hand and destroyed in the other. The mouths spoke to him, reminding him of what he had to do.

“Not a word of this to anyone, BrushBurn.” He didn't look up as the larger man entered, holding a new set of figures. “They'll find out soon enough. We had enough loose-lipped people here last night and the angels already know. Let the news unfold on its own. Don't push it.”

“They're bound to suspect something.” BrushBurn's face was expressionless as he spread the sheets across another crude desk and sat. “The herd needs time to repopulate. We should tell the Chamber to return to rationing immediately.” He leaned on his elbows, rubbing his temples. “The question is how deep to make the cuts.”

SandTail smirked. “I'm sure our agent from Crossroads would be happy to offer advice. You told me she's a *yatanii*, didn't you? She'd be pleased with our dilemma.”

BrushBurn said, flatly, “She’s been sleeping.”

“Sleeping or imbibing. I’m practically paying her a salary in what she guzzles.” He examined parchment, frowning. “Though given our current situation, it’s probably better for her to be blind drunk. Keeps her blind.”

The trader returned to his numbers, copying from disparate columns and re-figuring, his penmanship excruciatingly neat. The odors of smoke were still everywhere.

“I didn’t mean for it to be this way,” SandTail said, gently, to the bent head.

“No one did.”

SandTail bent to his own columns. Like it or not, he’d made slag of the woman; he didn’t want to do the same to his protégé. He had sent BrushBurn home after seeing the trader stumbling about at the end of a furious night’s work. *Other* people were supposed to carry in the bodies, he’d yelled. Anyone could do brute labor. He wanted BrushBurn’s grasp of statistics. For statistics you needed a clear head.

From the look of things, the man hadn’t slept much. Likely, BrushBurn had done his own imbibing, with a pot of curative tea at his elbow. Some day that duet of chemicals was going to catch up with him, the way Destiny had caught up with Promontory. If the trader were lucky, he would have fallen for a time against the skinny body stuck at home, keeping his bed warm. Hanging onto a pelt you cared about, even a matted one, was the best soporific.

AgatePool must be frantic. SandTail hoped his agents weren’t being too rough on her. Throw the saboteurs off the mesa, have the angels cut up the corpses, and round up the rest for the Farm. Put the mix-children of Skedge someplace safe and start over.

“I’m paying DamBuster a visit tomorrow,” he said. “You’re coming with me.”

BrushBurn looked up from his desk. “I’m sure I won’t make an impact.” His gravelly voice dropped. He turned back to the sheets. “I can serve you better sitting here than by watching a Yata strapped in a chair being forcefed until he either ejaculates or dies.”

“That’s precisely why I want you there. You’re in pain. Our apothecary needs to see that.”

The larger man said, flatly, “I can accommodate you, then.”

“He cares about that Yata as much as you do. He needs to feel he’s got an ally in this, coming from the other side.” SandTail wished the trader would look up. It didn’t matter; he knew what those steel blue eyes would reveal. It hadn’t been easy teaching detachment to a youth who’d known only sensitivity, but Promontory itself had helped that detachment take hold. In the end, his protégé had been blessed and cursed with both. “You’re Destiny Farm’s best representative, and right now DamBuster’s work is crucial to yours.”

“That may be, but my work has never been crucial to his.”

SandTail laid down his pen. “Don’t be so sure. You’ve handled that drug more than any of us. Maybe you know something the rest of us don’t.”

He pushed back his chair, curling a clean sheet in his hand, and made his way to one of the empty sacks. He scooped the dregs and placed the sheet before BrushBurn. “Spend time with the Destiny. We already know what the numbers are saying. You’re not a chemist, but your instincts are good. Have DamBuster explain his notes to you tomorrow.”

He watched as BrushBurn rubbed a pinch between his fingers, seeing the wince. “You know I despise that stuff as much as you do.” SandTail squeezed the large bicep beneath the same wrinkled shirt he’d seen the night before. “Let’s just make sure we can make plenty more of it to hate.”

~~~

TripStone stood by the tavern door, watching the messenger depart. No sooner did one return to Crossroads than another rushed to Promontory, keeping vigil at the bar. Sometimes she wondered if they were running for pay. She dared not ask.

This time she had stood upright rather than slouched as she handed over the folded parchment. Her direct gaze had met the messenger’s for the first time since her arrival here. The man would convey her mood as well as her notes.

She had appeared to doodle in the tavern, sitting at a table and scratching her nib almost absently, embellishing pictures of mountains, of fanciful birds and tree-shaded watercourses. She'd smiled down at the markings. She had to restrain herself or Gria and HigherBrook might miss her actual message.

*Made entry into Warehouse. Found armory of StormClouds.*

*Advance.*

She almost didn't draw the excess, but then realized her doodling was a message as well. It was crisp rather than smudged, with steady, unbroken lines. She had luxuriated in the ink, and that indicated pleasure. She should grasp of it what she could before she deepened the turmoil of this town, shattering herself further.

She needed a way to breach the armory before Skedge came under attack. Gria could be marching into an all-out assault. TripStone had inserted symbols of caution, explaining the poisoning and illustrating the risk. BrushBurn's mood would tell her when Promontory secured the formula for Destiny. Once that happened, Skedge would be as imperiled as Basc.

TripStone had taken his hands in hers that morning, sitting with him at his kitchen table, wanting to ask everything and saying nothing. She'd let him shakily pour tea for both of them. Instead of sleeping, he had spent his time heating water for a bath and scrubbing the stink from her. Then he'd washed her clothes and set them by the fire to dry.

If her mission were successful, he, too, would be in danger. *Get away from here*, TripStone wanted to tell him. *Escape to Rudder. Stay at the Milkweed. Try to get into the Marsh.*

She'd held her tongue. She could read him now. She could get from him the information she needed to know.

She had clung to BrushBurn after he dried her off. She'd brushed her chops tenderly against his before she retreated to their pallet and watched him depart for the Warehouse. When her clothes had dried, she dressed and headed to the tavern.

The messenger passed out of sight. TripStone turned and pushed her way inside, past heavy oak doors. Her stomach wrenched, partly from the room's stale air,



but mostly from hunger. She vaguely remembered wondering if alcohol could serve as a substitute for Yata, but that was before her mind had unclouded. Not long ago her pack, sitting next to the pallet, had seemed too far away.

If she could, she would take the spirits she acquired so easily on SandTail's tab and bring them to the small cluster of angels sitting at the end of the bar, see what she could offer in trade for meat. But they were empty-handed. She leaned over the counter instead, eavesdropping on their conversation.

They were expecting a message from SandTail's agents, a call to retrieve dead factory workers and perhaps more. The one the others called WoodFoam knocked back an ale and spoke of riot conditions.

TripStone sighed. She should listen in on the angels more often. Gria might still have to deal with Promontory's forces, whether or not Destiny was decoded by the time her army got to Skedge.

The bartender started lighting lamps; it was time to ask for another bottle. Time to drink a little, spill a little more, go home, undress, slip into bed while still reeking of alcohol. Perpetuate yet another lie in this place of lies.

The usual spirits thudded on the counter before her. TripStone's fingers closed around the neck. She counted off swigs and steeled herself to stop, taking the liquor in hand. She walked slowly back to the doors and out into the dusk.

When she remembered the warmth of BrushBurn's cheek, her grip almost broke the glass. She struggled home, forcing her arm to stay down.

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BrushBurn eased open the door to the house and stepped through. He removed his boots, looking down at the slowly-breathing mass beneath the blanket, at the bottle beside the bed.

The blanket moved. TripStone sat, blinking up at him. He wondered if she was thinking or just dazed; the shadows thrown by his lamp made it hard to tell. Hard to tell, too, whether the drawn lines in her face came from drink or from starvation.

This was not Rudder's controlled deprivation. She was damaging herself.

He knelt by the pallet and took her into his arms. He kissed her forehead and whispered, “Don’t lose that inventory.”

TripStone’s brow furrowed. “What inventory?”

His lips moved to her hairline. “The vast collection you keep up here. The items not for sale.” He looked from pensive gray eyes to the bottle. “Are you finished with that?”

She nodded. He raised it to his lips and drank until a buzz began to spread. Not too much. He had to stand, cook dinner, try to get her to eat. Once rationing resumed, he might not be able to get her enough food.

He eased his hand across her abdomen, gauging the sharpness of her ribs. “This is not good.”

“I can do without for a while longer.”

BrushBurn pulled her to him; feeling as though he held air. He buried his face in her neck fur. Her lips still turned away from his, but she had let him touch her everywhere else. “You must have meat from the Farm, TripStone. Later may be too late.”

She hugged him back. “I still have a little in my pack.”

“You have almost nothing in your pack and you can barely chew it.”

She eased him away; her hands caressed his chops. Not for the first time, she looked as though she wanted to say something.

His fingers combed through her hair; she retained some inventory after all. He whispered, “Tell me.”

Minutes passed. BrushBurn looked upon tiredness, closed eyes. He’d grown up learning how difficult it was to love Yata, but had not for a moment considered how hard it was to love a Masari. He hadn’t thought it possible, this affliction that drove him to rescue the skeleton in his arms.

Finally she looked at him and said, “I overheard you and SandTail last night. I know about the poisoning.” Her hands found his; she drew them down to her lap.

“I’m sorry. This must be awful for you.”

“It’s awful for Promontory.”

He worked a hand free and aimed for the bottle. TripStone reached out and grasped his wrist, holding him back. BrushBurn smiled a little at the restraint; she’d probably kick him if he tried the same with her. He’d be happy if she did. Despite her emaciation and the spirits on her breath, she seemed stronger.

He lifted her hand, letting his lips linger on her palm. “What you just did is the best thing that’s happened to me all day.” He lifted a tear from her cheek. “That is why you must eat. We’ll have to ration again. I don’t know how much Yata I’ll be able to get.”

She didn’t answer, only asked, “How many dead?”

“Hundreds.” BrushBurn removed his shirt and crawled into bed with her, holding her against his chest. He drew the blanket up around them both. “They’ll have to last until the Farm can be self-sustaining again.”

TripStone whispered, “And if they don’t?”

“Then more of us will look like you.”

Was this why her people liked bones so much? Could they see their own so clearly underneath skin and pelt, always one hunt away from malnutrition? BrushBurn hugged her more tightly. His voice dropped. “Skedge is another food source. Once we can make Destiny for ourselves, I doubt the Little Masari will be spared.”

She leaned against him. He ran his fingers lightly across her cheekbones and down to her clavicle, her sternum. He asked, “What happens to Masari bones in Crossroads?”

“They go in the soil with the rest of us,” TripStone answered, her voice dulled. “In fallow fields. The Grange is also our burial ground.” She looked up at him. “That is what Promontory is exacting from us.”

For a moment BrushBurn didn’t know whether to kiss her upturned face or look away. Instead he said, “I’m sorry.”

She nodded and snuggled further into his arms. “So am I.”

He ran his hands down her sides and frowned. “I will make sure you have enough to eat.”

TripStone’s body vibrated against his with calm, slow heartbeats. Her warmth was enough. The pallet’s softness was enough. Sleep was enough.

At least she would be spared the sight of the test subject. BrushBurn sank down into straw and nestled against her back, breathing in her battered scent. Dinner could wait.

He wondered idly if this was how it began, with one simple relinquishment, and then another. He wondered how deeply his own bones were buried inside him.

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TripStone was dressed and preparing tea when BrushBurn awakened to the sound of SandTail’s cart. He opened the door, still clad only in breeches. He heard her setting a third cup on the kitchen table and breathed in the aroma of fennel. It returned him to the Milkweed, to the sight of her descending the stairs carrying pack and rifle. To FernToad’s exquisite, short-lived handiwork on their doomed wagon.

SandTail stepped out of the rain and looked up at him. “It’s about time you got some sleep.” He raised his eyebrows at the sight in the kitchen. “Our Crossroads representative seems a bit steadier today.”

“She overheard us the other night. She knows.” BrushBurn reached for his shirt. “Excuse me.”

From the chamber pot behind the curtain he heard SandTail’s amiable greeting followed by TripStone’s deadpan. The smaller man mused, “I see you’ve changed your beverage.”

No reply. BrushBurn wondered if she answered SandTail with a blink. He smiled to himself as he closed his breeches and ambled toward the table.

TripStone’s shirt and vest hung loosely from her and dark circles swam beneath her eyes, but she poured with a steady hand. She sat with an air of exhausted

serenity.

“BrushBurn tells me you know about the poisoning.” SandTail leaned back in his chair and sipped. “Perhaps you’d like to join us on our visit. Our apothecary should see what starvation looks like. It might get him to recreate Destiny faster.”

BrushBurn said, stiffly, “She doesn’t need to see the lab. DamBuster will have enough to motivate him.”

TripStone’s cup halted halfway to her lips. Her eyes flashed with recognition and a touch of sadness, but then it was over. BrushBurn watched her face soften into a mask as she drank.

She pondered for a moment, then said, “Perhaps another time.”

SandTail answered, curtly, “We’re out of time, my dear. This is for your well-being as much as ours.”

BrushBurn edged past the tightness in his throat. “I strongly doubt that overwhelming DamBuster would produce a satisfactory product, and two days ago TripStone was barely able to stand. I should think my pain is sufficient.”

He watched the two of them, SandTail squinting into his cup, TripStone’s hands curled meditatively around hers. With a start, BrushBurn realized that both of them consulted different storehouses of information, weighing different options. He knew SandTail’s well enough. He didn’t know hers.

TripStone lifted the pot. A renewed blast of fennel filled the room.

“Very well,” SandTail murmured as she poured. “Stay home, TripStone. Have more tea. Get your rest. Eat if you feel so inclined. BrushBurn, you will let me know when she is strong enough to join us.”

TripStone stepped around the table, her movements quiet and efficient. BrushBurn spotted traces of relief behind her expression of neutrality. Her shoulders were more relaxed, her pupils less constricted. The less polluted her scent, the more it told him. When he touched her wrist after she refilled his cup, she gave him a little smile.

Later she leaned against the doorpost, looking out into the rain as BrushBurn pulled on his boots. SandTail had already splashed down the gravel and was waiting in the passenger compartment.

She whispered, "Tell me about the lab when you get back."

BrushBurn kissed TripStone's forehead. He enfolded her in his arms as he touched his chops to hers. "If you eat, I will tell you about the lab. I want to be able to hug you without breaking something."

"I won't break for a long time."

He squeezed her as hard as he dared before plodding toward the cart.

BrushBurn's trips to the house by the salt pan had been rare. He'd visited for medicinals to take on the road, knowing to pay in cash rather than in the Farm's meat. DamBuster and DevilChaser had been cordial if a bit aloof, but likely they were friendlier to other people, those who didn't work for the Farm.

DamBuster's voice had been among the most boisterous in the tavern before SandTail's orders had effectively imprisoned the apothecary in his own home.

Now that pressure would worsen. BrushBurn listened half-heartedly to SandTail's increasingly strident monologue, melding it with the wet echoes of spinning wheels, the slickness of chains and gears.

Gravel yielded to scrub. The runner slowed and turned a corner.

The cramped streets in town afforded only a slight breeze, but wind blew freely across the open land. BrushBurn raised his hood as he stepped outside and turned from the force of the rain. A partly-emptied chamber pot stood by the night soil pit. Tendrils of smoke rose from the shed, too thin to be a heat source, blowing away. Then they vanished altogether.

SandTail huddled in his cloak, hurrying past him. "Let's go."

DevilChaser admitted them, slamming the door loudly after they entered. The doctor had never looked so worn. He called toward the lab, "SandTail is here and he's got his trader with him." He fumed at BrushBurn, "Your test subject is practically meat now. Perhaps you could take him off our hands and sell him somewhere."

“We’re not looking for meat yet,” SandTail said, mildly. “Only for the correct response.”

“He has no spirit left. He can barely lift his pinky, let alone his cock.”

BrushBurn shrugged off his cloak and followed them down the hallway. Hunger gnawed at his stomach, or perhaps that was dread; his appetite had gone missing. One look through the laboratory’s open door and he turned away. He girded himself against the sight and turned back.

His mentor prodded him with a gentle hand. “I know this is hard for you, but you know as well as I do how necessary it is.”

SandTail walked past the seething doctor and called across the room, “DamBuster! I’ve brought you an assistant. My trader worked at the Farm before he came to Promontory. It’s time you saw another set of skills.”

The apothecary remained hunched over his work table amidst scattered notes, his body rigid. One hand scribbled as the other tightened into a fist. Viscous-looking bottles of numbered formulations lined counters and shelves. Dishes held more in different stages of production.

SandTail folded his cloak coolly over his arm. “You’d better get used to him, my friend. You’re going to be working together. I have no more patience to spare.”

BrushBurn knelt by the restraining chair and tried to remember how long it had been since he touched a Farm Yata who could touch back. He fingered the padding on the restraints. The body lacked sores. This man had been freed from time to time.

DevilChaser and DamBuster had cared for him. BrushBurn studied one and then the other, trying to gauge their sympathy as he looked past their disgust. A wave of gratitude coursed through him. The conditions were bad, but they were much better than he had feared.

Only straps stopped the limp Yata from slouching toward the floor. He exhibited no trace of Destiny. BrushBurn stroked dry skin and looked into unclouded eyes dulled by grief. This man showed more than just the pain of separation from the herd. Yata, even those drugged and copulating, looked this way after a culling. How much worse the agony must be for one whose mind was clear.

The trader unstrapped a forearm and took the small hand in his. “Do you want to go home?” He looked into listlessness, discerning the tiniest nod. “Then you will. I promise.” He bent down to release more buckles and heard high-pitched spluttering behind him. “Calm down, SandTail. I know what I’m doing.” BrushBurn felt the Yata’s fingers in his curls and smiled through tears, sweet joy in the midst of sorrow. “You’re welcome, little one.”

DevilChaser asked, “Just what did you do at the Farm?”

“I grew up there.” The hand on his head was a blessing. Such a simple touch, bringing back so many of its counterparts. “I left long before this one was born.”

Calm descended. BrushBurn’s heartbeat slowed, his body infused with warmth. The laboratory seemed to glow. If the gods existed, surely they had brought him here. After so many years, after all the corpses he’d carried and all the slabs he’d sold, BrushBurn looked into living eyes again, feeling again the magic of a pulse when he touched the ankle released from its restraint.

DamBuster stirred, exuding a strong scent of confusion. His face twisted into a mixture of hope and fear as he left his work table to kneel by the trader. “I’m not sure releasing him is safe. He’s desperate for Destiny now. I’m afraid he could harm himself if left unbound, either with my tools or by dosing himself uncontrollably.”

BrushBurn could be gazing into a mirror, to see the apothecary’s concern. “He has more sense than that. He’ll be safe.” He looked upon DamBuster’s uncertainty and saw guilt as well. The Yata was more than just a simple test subject to these people.

BrushBurn offered SandTail a shallow smile. “You’re right. He cares about the Yata as much as I do.” His voice dropped as he turned back to DamBuster. “You may never know how much that means to me. I give you my word, I won’t let any harm come to him.”

He smiled at the other man’s relief and watched hands dip to the buckles, drawing out the straps. Small bronze fingers grazed the top of DamBuster’s head. The apothecary winced.

“It’s all right,” BrushBurn said. He’s thanking you.”



“I know.” DamBuster gritted his teeth. “I don’t deserve it.”

“Yes, you do.”

He might have stayed on the Farm, given such a man for company. They would have understood each other. Growing up among Masari would have been no less painful, but perhaps it would have been less lonely.

BrushBurn moved to the other side of the chair, glancing up at a puzzled doctor and a suspicious mentor. “It would be best if you two left the room.”

DevilChaser locked gazes with DamBuster, who nodded. SandTail warned, “Don’t forget why we’re here.”

“I won’t forget.” BrushBurn freed a bicep as DamBuster released the chest. The Yata unbuckled his own thigh straps slowly, almost absently, showing no surprise. He must have been allowed to move throughout the house.

“The Farm is smaller now, little one. I know you know that. With your help, we’re going to make it whole again.” The door shut. BrushBurn pushed the forehead strap aside and lifted the limp man out of the chair.

Smooth bronze skin quivered beneath his palms; the Yata’s head rested heavily against his shirt. BrushBurn hugged the man close to him, sighing as graceful fingers gripped him in return. His gravelly voice purred. “It’s been a very long time since I’ve held one of you like this. I’d almost forgotten what it felt like.”

He found pressure points to either side of the short spine and worked upward from the small of the back, listening to make sure the Yata breathed more easily. He was a boy again, giving and receiving comfort beneath the awnings. Such simple, meaningful touch.

Sometimes BrushBurn wished his tongue had been deformed along with theirs. Tongues lied. His certainly had in the course of business. Learning the ways of Promontory had transformed it, mutilated it away from innocence.

His touch had been changed as well. He’d almost forgotten what it meant to truly give comfort unattached to outcome. He had never given such comfort to a Masari, except to TripStone.

She had responded with a grimace, as though BrushBurn had caused her pain. He wondered if he had forgotten the ways completely, if he'd been doing something wrong.

“You’ve been massaging him,” he said dreamily to DamBuster. “His muscle tone is still good. Thank you for that.”

The apothecary rose from his crouch. BrushBurn gazed upon a mixture of confusion and relief, envy and reverence, more.

The Yata was pliable in his hands now, relaxed. “I’m sure you received instructions from the Farm.” BrushBurn listened to deepening breaths. “I’m glad you disobeyed them. I’m not sure he would still be alive if you didn’t love him as much as you do.”

DamBuster hesitated. “His name is MudAdder.”

“MudAdder.” BrushBurn squatted until he was head to head with the Yata. “Perfect.” He straightened. “You know what we have to do. We have no choice, now.” He eased his arm across MudAdder’s shoulders, stepping toward a sheaf of notes on the work table.

DamBuster followed, shaking his head. “I don’t understand. Why do you sell their meat when you feel this way about them?”

“Because I could never farm Yata with the rest of my family. As a trader I can support them.” BrushBurn floated on a sea of tiny caresses and sampled scent. As a child he might have run beneath the awnings with this man’s parents.

*Not parents. Grandparents.*

DamBuster whispered, “I told MudAdder that I would try to buy his remains when he was culled. I don’t know how else to show my respect.”

BrushBurn nodded. “I’ll arrange it. Though if all goes well, MudAdder will breed for a long time.” The small hand clutched his side; he held the Yata closer. “You’ve shown him more respect here than I thought possible.”

Light coursed through him, washing him clean. He smiled at the apothecary. He had not thought to find a man so like himself in Promontory. He had not

expected this room, filled with chemicals and that abominable chair, to be one of passion rather than heartless manipulations. BrushBurn stroked the smooth skin beneath his palm, barely suppressing a shudder of bliss at its delicacy.

His other arm spanned DamBuster's back. "I'm sorry we hadn't spoken like this earlier. I feel closer to you than I have to my own kin."

The apothecary began to lay out his notes. "Don't be so sure. I'm not doing this willingly."

"I know. But you're doing it with love."

"What about Skedge?" DamBuster reached for a bottle. "When we can make Destiny, will the killing of Little Masari be done with love?"

BrushBurn whispered, "No." He added, "If I could, I would stop it."

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DevilChaser glanced out the kitchen window before retrieving a fresh pot of tea. He had added wood to the hearth, lit lanterns, and managed not to kill SandTail and the little man's self-serving smirk. Now all he had to do was make sure Ghost remained hidden in the shed, lighting no lamps and suspending his testing of masks against the gas.

The fugitive had been stuck in there all day; he might have to stay in there all night. Either Ghost was finally getting some sleep, or this forced inactivity was driving him berserk. If he was crazed now, at least he wasn't screaming.

His presence still posed a risk, even with Piri and TelZodo gone. SandTail would not appreciate a guest being privy to these tortures, much less one who experimented with his own foul-smelling substances.

DevilChaser had lost count of the near-misses, of moans rising and falling in waves, MudAdder's pleasure transmuted into heartbreak. No one had left the lab for hours. They took neither food nor drink. DamBuster didn't even come to the kitchen to make gruel.

The doctor glowered at SandTail as another wave began to build. "I don't know how you can stand it."

The short man raised his eyebrows and sipped. “You’ve been standing it much longer than I.” He grinned. “Frankly, I hadn’t expected our trader to be quite so enthusiastic. He was not looking forward to this visit, but he knew what to do as soon as he saw your test subject. I’m delighted.”

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BrushBurn pinched the bridge of his nose as diagrammed sheets begin to blur. Two nights earlier he had carried cold bodies. Now he held one that was still warm, that still clung to him.

He had become the chair and knew the reason for it now. He had held MudAdder in his arms, pinning the Yata’s hands. He had whispered comfort as the other man trembled, straining in his grip. The restraints were necessary. Any pleasure had to come from the formulation alone.

The pace of excitement was off. It built too soon, ended too abruptly. DamBuster worked with the right components but the wrong balance. The lenses revealed dazzling crystalline structures that looked like Destiny, but the powder went deeper than that. The many chemical reactions percolating on the shelves could teach the apothecary only so much.

BrushBurn guided his own body down a narrow pathway, remembering. The old lessons returned, coursing through his veins. He was under the awnings again, running unimpeded, unclothed, unselfconscious, yet with a restraint that guided his muscles and sinews into motions of unspeakable grace. He closed his eyes in the lab, watching again the slow, dancing pantomimes. Heavenly breezes kissed his skin.

His hands no longer rested on MudAdder’s chest. They were on Cactus and Wren and Basalt. They were on one Tourmaline and another, and another.

They were on Sunrise. Sweet Sunrise, who had taught him how and when to move. Who taught him to skew time, to change himself from Masari into Yata. BrushBurn could not alter his size or his physique. He could not alter his appetite. But with practice and single-minded determination, he had altered everything else.

He had been a boy, but then he grew and his body had changed and forgotten. He became potent and had forgotten about that, too. Then he’d had to forget much

more.

BrushBurn picked up a cloth and wiped sweat from MudAdder's forehead. "I wish I could help you, little one. I wish I could release you to help yourself, but I must leave it up to the drug. Otherwise I would be naked with you."

The apothecary eyed him curiously. "I hadn't known."

"That I love Yata?" BrushBurn saw his own sadness mirrored in MudAdder's eyes. "There are no Yata in Promontory except for this one. You couldn't have known."

Still cradling MudAdder, he reached for a blank sheet and began to sketch. Sinuous curves filled the page. They spelled out rhythms of life beneath the awnings, playful touches that blossomed into slow burns and then more fervent blazes. He changed the stroke of the nib, reducing the flush and swell of the breeding pens into the abstract. BrushBurn drew with his eyes closed, trying to translate sensation into ink. His fingers pantomimed.

"This is what I remember." Great burlap bags of Destiny hissing into the feeding troughs. Yata scooping the gruel in their hands and leaning back, dribbling the mixture down their throats, just long enough to be sated before they fell again into each other's arms.

A ballet of writhing. So many matings.

It was no use. He had to change his body again and become as much as possible the warm bronze flesh collapsed against his side. "If only Destiny could take me the way it takes you, little one." BrushBurn restrained his own hands, keeping his touch above MudAdder's waist. "Then I would know what to do, what to say. We must get you home."

He closed his eyes again and the laboratory disappeared. He eased the Yata before him and crossed both pairs of arms across MudAdder's chest.

"DamBuster." BrushBurn's voice rose from a deep well. "I will tell you as best I can what their sensations are like. Let that guide your hand, and tell me when you are ready to test again."

He spoke, and floated. His body unlocked. MudAdder's pulse sang against BrushBurn, but the trader had to fly away or drown inside the song.

Long ago he had learned pleasure. Then he'd learned to strip it bare. He had to forget the form he had taken and change into another. He had honed it, shaped it with brute force into a tantalizing instrument. His task had become surprisingly simple after he had left the Farm behind.

BrushBurn heard DamBuster's nib on parchment, the clink of metal on glass. His words reshaped him, bringing him back. The Yata remembered, too. Their heartbeats and their breaths synchronized.

Perhaps he could synchronize their thoughts as well. *It must be only you, little one. Only you and the Destiny.*

The lab became a mirage that BrushBurn soared above, the height of a falcon's flight. Someone else stood by the work table. Someone else listened to the hiss of powder, to pure metallic tones of careful measurements. Someone else smelled the numbness in the apothecary's muscles, his last relinquishment of resistance.

BrushBurn relinquished his own resistance, dissolving as he instructed. Life beneath the awnings was a pleasant, faraway dream. No sorrow. He moved into the pens and was enfolded by oneness. He melded with the others and forgot.

Fertility filled the air except for him. He was locked behind a barrier, never to produce another mix-child. He shot his seed into Masari instead, then left. They would bear his progeny to obtain his meat. Except for the one Masari who contained him utterly, yet in whom his care had instilled nothing but agony.

The memories sprouted wings. They soared between canyon walls, vanishing into the updrafts. His bones rose to the surface, breaking through skin and pelt, inscribed with the lives of Yata.

An odd sensation. How long had he been starving?

The pestle ground. Tapping, the heat of a gentle flame. A waft of scent. MudAdder stirred in his arms.

*Patience.* BrushBurn tightened his hold and waited for the room to cool. With deep breaths he separated himself out, becoming his own restraint. He heard a rhythmical clink, powder dissolving in water.

DamBuster whispered, “Ready.”

BrushBurn nodded, his eyes still closed. “It will work.”

He felt the tilt of MudAdder’s head and heard lips part. A careful restraint of the tongue, the tender throat swallowing. He planted his feet more firmly, prepared to maintain his hold.

The breeding pens shimmered with glistening bronze. BrushBurn became bodiless, insensate, neuter as canyon rock. He breathed rarefied air until he was nothing but stillness.

He was a cliff. Layers of time compacted inside him, immovable while everything else twisted and the wind moaned. The awnings fluttered. They snapped and billowed in the breeze as the pens echoed with joy risen from thousands of speechless mouths.

Yes...

Yes.

*Just a little longer, MudAdder. Then I will let you go.*

Cries reverberated off the bottles. Rain carried on the updrafts, sluicing down the canyon walls and into the ancient stream. The Yata thrashed, arching his back. Completing the dance.

It was done. They’d captured the demon together. BrushBurn waited until vibrations ceased and the room quieted before he loosened his hold and opened his eyes. DamBuster leaned back in his chair, exhausted, his gaze upturned as though entreating the gods.

MudAdder’s fingers played against BrushBurn’s shirt, over his heart. Curious, repetitive movements. A pleasing touch.

But still too much. BrushBurn could not come back into his body, not yet. He leaned down to plant a quick kiss on the Yata’s forehead. He told DamBuster, “Test again without me. With him in the chair. To be sure.” Then he fled the room.

The dining table blurred. DevilChaser stood and shouted after him as he sprinted toward the door. SandTail said, "Let him go." The voices receded.

Rain hammered. BrushBurn's cloak was still inside, but it didn't matter. Only his own nature mattered as it took hold. He coalesced back into flesh, gasping as he scattered his seed to the wind. He collapsed against the wagon and waited for his strength to return.

Through the door came the muffled sounds of SandTail's rejoicing; it was better to stay out in the rain. Enough chatter would assail BrushBurn during the ride home. He looked up into a shrouded sky. In the absence of lightning, the salt pan and Skedge dropped into blackness.

Snores arose from the wagon's passenger compartment; the runner was asleep. BrushBurn reached for a lantern and stepped well away before lighting the wick, using his body to protect it from the weather.

By the night soil pit the chamber pot still stood, still partly emptied, now filling with rainwater. BrushBurn looked toward the shed. Someone, something must have caused those tendrils of smoke to rise. Someone without time to fully empty the pot.

He stepped up to the door and knocked. No answer. BrushBurn pushed his way inside and reeled from an odd, acrid clutch of odors. He raised his lamp and looked around, carefully.

The shed was empty.



## CHAPTER 24

### Late Spring

Basc

After interminable drills and barely-contained anticipation, the mood around HigherBrook became almost festive. Smoke rose into the dusk from smithies hidden in far foothills as wagons trundled into the training grounds. Campfires burned beneath a cloudy sky. Around dozens of flames, soldiers bolted down a last meal before the Yata began their long march and the Masari stayed behind to reclaim the valley.

The Yata and Masari were equally boisterous, sharing stories about the kills on which they dined, toasting to the cunning and strength of their victims. Gria moved from fire to fire, trading praises and profanities. Reverence and irreverence blurred until HigherBrook no longer knew where one ended and the other began. In the urgency of the evening, he didn't much care.

He unloaded one of the wagons, fingering steel medallions and buckles mated to leather. Cuirass and greave designed for smaller bodies passed from his hands, armor in miniature. HigherBrook wondered if he distributed the seeds of his own people's destruction, but there was no turning back now. Their fate was in the hands of the gods. That thought was not entirely comforting, given the gods' behavior of late.

Promontory had gotten its wish. Crossroads no longer worshipped the Yata. *You may rue the day you chose to bring that desire to fruition.*

The guns, the armor became ordinary. HigherBrook would once have been appalled at the tanned bronze straps the Yata cinched around their waists, belting themselves with the leathers of their own kind. "They will draw on their kinsmen's strength," Gria had explained, requesting the hides of the dead killed for food. HigherBrook had complied once the skins' medicinal properties had been extracted.

Even the paler leathers, the ones from flesh without healing properties, no longer elicited a shudder. Those still sported tufts, removed from Masari felled in the

hunting grounds. Two seasons earlier, the Yata who attacked Crossroads had painted their hair and skin with clay, approximating a pelt, but now they wore the fur themselves. Two seasons earlier, they had marked themselves out of hatred for Masari. Now they did so out of respect for the fallen.

His own forces wore narrow strips of both skins as pendants around their necks, beneath their clothes. Tiny braids, Yata and Masari intermingled, rested against pectoral fur as constant reminders that the entire valley now fought for its life.

Gria had pressed one such talisman eagerly into HigherBrook's hand and he had slipped it over his head, feeling debased and ennobled at once. Now it pressed against him, constrained by the fine linen he had worn in front of the Chamber. He'd had no time to change.

Earlier that day a messenger had run from Basc through the burned forest and across the meadow, passing the cart of Destiny Farm meat and continuing to the Rotunda to deliver Gria's summons. Preparations to mobilize were well underway by the time HigherBrook reached the training grounds.

The general had shown him TripStone's communiqué. The hunter's message was clear. Lavish embellishments showed her joy and relief on discovering the armory, but even they included cautions. *Advance the militia toward Skedge immediately, he read. Destiny Farm Yata have been poisoned and the staging area is in jeopardy. Move now, before Promontory can mount an assault.*

Promontory's agents attending the Chamber's deliberations had seemed a bit less cocky than usual. They must have received their own message about the poisoning. Sitting in Gria's tent, HigherBrook had studied TripStone's note and mused, "They're divided on two fronts now."

"I doubt they'll be sending more people here," the general replied, with more than a little relief. "But keep track of whoever arrives in Crossroads, just in case."

Yata outfitted in armor clinked past him now, bustling among provisions and securing large packs to comrades. Masari hauled sacks of food brought from the fields. That part of Basc's harvest would go with the troops, as much as they could carry on the long march. No roads connected the Yata communities. They had only the old smuggling trail that wove through Alvav and zigzagged up into Skedge.

Gria's army prepared to traverse the same illicit path that had brought them their guns in the first place. By creating that path, Destiny Farm had shown them the way in.

HigherBrook shook his head, smiling as more armor slid from his grasp. Not long ago he had wanted the old militia camp taken apart piece by piece and rehabilitated entirely into farmland. He had not considered how valuable having both would be. Only so much of Basc's harvest could travel, and only a small fraction of Yata would remain behind to consume it.

With a proud gleam in her eye, Gria had decreed that in light of Promontory's conquest of the Grange and its crops, Basc's excess produce would go as food aid to Crossroads. As for meat, the cart from Destiny Farm still sat in the open, an unassuming target.

Over by the barracks, parents hugged their children goodbye before releasing them into Masari hands. The very idea of such guardianship seemed preposterous, but there it was, a tableau of the impossible. HigherBrook turned from the empty wagon to gaze upon tiny hands petting fuzzy faces and arms. Giggles rose amidst the campfires.

These children already knew the Masari chosen to watch over them. HigherBrook had screened the guardians most carefully of all. His ancestors would have tracked these Yata first, the young and the weak, killing them quickly and efficiently while dragging them from their kin groups.

Now both peoples evolved into a new nature, one that even Gria was willing to accept. The larders in the barracks were full. HigherBrook made sure that no one went hungry even for a moment. Parents and guardians embraced, reassuring each other. If nothing else, perhaps the respect engendered by the Covenant had ultimately led to this atmosphere of mortal trust.

CatBird stood outside a supply depot, her mouth pressed hard against that of a robust Yata male standing on a munitions box. They soothed each other underneath his armor and her hunting clothes. His cheek rubbed against hers. CatBird's chops were still downy, but the boy hadn't even begun to develop what the Yata called a beard.

HigherBrook wanted to interrogate her, but this was not the time. How long had she known this young man? Did she love him? How much did he care for her?

What if they encountered each other in the hunting grounds? Was he responsible enough to father a mix-child?

Later. First the boy had to come back home alive. Then he'd have to survive HigherBrook's scrutiny.

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Gria secured maps inside her pack and stepped outside her empty command tent. Lanterns swung along dark pathways. Her troops began to assemble, moving swiftly in and out of shadow, grasping the forearms of Masari comrades in spirited but somber goodbyes.

The supply depot was nearly empty of rifles, knives, shortswords, bandoleers. The soldiers remained upright and proud, but time and distance would tell how many could bear the rigors of the journey.

Their provisions would have dwindled by the time they reached the far border of Alvav. Their loads would lighten and then they would carry the logs. Gria prayed to the gods for forgiveness. The scars on Basc's mountains were bad enough, but Alvav's forest would also have to fall, enough to provide rafts for when the salt pan became a lake.

Zai stepped beside her and reached up to help collapse the tent, looking pensive. Gria studied two black braids stitched onto Masari leather at the other woman's shoulders, melding with a ruddy pelt. "Your boys' hair?"

Zai nodded. "I gave them my braid when I left to come to you. They remembered." Her wince was barely noticeable. "I did not think I would leave them again so soon."

Heavy cloth drifted to the ground. "You've served your time away from them, Zai. You don't have to come on this mission."

"Yes, I do." Zai clutched a partly-dismantled frame and looked back toward the barracks. "They know what we're doing and they want me to go. Almost all the other children have parents going to Promontory. Everyone knows what's happening."

"Some of us might not come back."

Zai's fingers jerked as she wrapped poles together, tying off knots. Her eyes smoldered. "Is that supposed to dissuade me? I could have died on a Day of Reckoning before we did away with the Covenant." Her glare was more defiant than angry. "I wanted to save my boys from becoming prey. I want even more to save them from becoming livestock. You know how well I command. You arrested me for it." She bent to retrieve more rope. A bitter laugh escaped her lips. "You certainly know how well I chop wood. I won't challenge your leadership, Gria, but you need me."

Gria nodded. "Agreed." Cloth rolled beneath her hands as she and Zai bound separate ends.

They worked in silence, both stopping briefly to observe the other, gauging stance and scent. Neither looked away when their gazes met. The wiry woman who had once sobbed in Gria's arms quietly appraised her commander's fitness, flirting with insubordination. It was a refreshing challenge, this dance to a line that remained uncrossed. Their mutual restraint, Gria mused, was a tribute to them both.

Zai pulled a last knot tight and straightened from her crouch. "Is there anything else?"

"I did not summon you, Zai. You came to me of your own initiative." The corner of Gria's lip ticced up. At least the tension between them would keep them both sharp. *Message received.* "Nothing else."

Zai dispensed a curt nod. "To victory, then."

"To victory."

Zai pivoted smartly on her heel and strode back to her troops.

Gria shouldered her own pack, buckling herself in. She draped bronze skin over her shoulders in memory of Watu, beseeching her dead student to guide her as once she had guided him. She prayed that he would help her contain their acts of destruction, harvesting only what they had to, so that both plants and people could recover.

Above her greaves, a gentle breeze ruffled light crimson fur on cream-colored leather. The skin and pelt were the closest Gria could find to TripStone's

description of her dead brother FeatherFly. Dry-eyed, over tea, the hunter had once repeated her father's words with weary flatness, telling how Gria's own soldiers had flayed the boy alive.

Gria had touched the hand of one who had moved beyond reproach and into quiet sorrow, disclosing the depths of grief to an enemy who had, against all odds, become a friend.

The quiet whisper at Gria's knees now reminded her of that atrocity as surely as she honored and invoked the child. TripStone's recent pictograms had shown the ways ancient Masari children suffered similarly at the hands of Yata. Despite that history, the Masari of Crossroads were sworn to protect Basc's young, whose parents were marching once again into battle.

They would march first to Skedge, whose Little Masari, the descendants of those ancient Yata, had unknowingly poisoned their own kind. No matter where Gria went, no matter how far, she kept seeing the same, immortally bloody handprints, the myth made real of the man who slaughtered his people.

Ata's sickness was everywhere. There was no escaping it.

Lead me safely to your sister, FeatherFly, she prayed. If you can forgive us at all.

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Yata and Masari glided as shadows through the burned forest, keeping their wicks low. Darkness obscured the new shoots rising from ash all around them. After sunset the tendrils were as black as the rest of the old hunting ground and the countless vessels worth of ink spilled into its soil.

Windows across the meadow filled with dim yellow glows, but much of Crossroads was already asleep. HigherBrook looked upon the silhouette of a sedate, unsuspecting town. In the morning, whoever ventured into the hunting grounds, old or new, would find no one waiting for them.

He wondered if anyone would notice the difference. Fewer citizens chose to risk their lives now, ever since the Chamber's endorsement of Destiny Farm meat. Instead, they flooded BrushBurn's associates with promissory notes. In a few days, when Promontory was distracted by Gria, HigherBrook's own, small militia would render those notes useless.

Most of his forces remained in Basc, ready to defend the Yata who stayed behind. The small complement marching to the valley's edge would escort Gria's warriors to the Alvav border and then turn back. HigherBrook scanned the landscape for any signs of interference, but the night remained pleasingly quiet. Distant lights already dwindled as the ground turned rockier. The army began its switchbacked climb toward the ridge.

The invaders from Promontory were probably asleep, too. He'd watched them drinking off their worries about the unrest in Skedge, choosing to celebrate Crossroads' burgeoning debt instead.

HigherBrook hoped they were having sweet dreams while they still could. His own were much less merciful, making him bolt awake in a cold sweat.

The air carried soft metallic *pings* from hushed armor. He marched with the others in a broken rhythm, passing to a steeper grade. Hooting owls fell silent. No one spoke, but faint drumming passed up and down the lines. Fingerpads skittered across arms.

HigherBrook practiced what he'd learned, tapping on the palm of his hand. A Yata had taught him the touch-language, but CatBird said it derived from the mnemonics hunters once learned as aids for remembering Yata stories gathered during Atonement.

Gria and her people had been taught by escaped slaves from the Cliff, whose leader had learned from Piri. Piri had taught TripStone, not the other way around. Ghost would not have known the technique. WindTamer had abandoned hunting for carpentry early on. Chances are he would have forgotten the mnemonics long ago.

That left RiverRun, the dead *yatanii* who had called herself BrokenThread. HigherBrook surveyed the area as far as his lantern permitted. Ghost's narrative had placed the girl's bones in a covered pit somewhere on the ridge, not far from what remained of his cabin. Not far from the trail they took now.

Sighs reverberated around HigherBrook, along with smatterings of conversation and occasional soft laughter. Boots resounded against granite. They left Crossroads behind, climbing out of the valley. He picked up his pace, edging toward the front. Several Yata refugees from the Cliff moved into position to serve as guides once the militia crossed the border.

Gria stood with her helmet under her arm, consulting with a man whose speech bore the Cliff's blunt inflections. They bent over a map. The guide pointed to different areas where they might pitch camp in the Alvav woods. But the man knew only his escape route; everything else was guesswork. When HigherBrook saw Gria's face, he wondered whether her dreams kept her awake as well.

A long train of warriors snaked behind him, shining with dim, reflected lamp light. HigherBrook couldn't tell in the dark which were Yata and which Masari. He would know when one moved ahead and the other dropped away.

He faced forward again as the ground leveled out, as the message to halt wound from the front down to the switchbacks. "Gria."

She turned to him. They clasped forearms and squeezed.

HigherBrook looked behind the mask of command and saw a mirror of himself. "Stay alive."

"And you." She swallowed. Her helmet glinted as she lowered it over her face. "Take good care of my people, HigherBrook."

He nodded and whispered, "Take care with mine." His arm pulled back until he grasped her hand. "May our covenant preserve us."

The bottom of her face was still visible. She smirked. "If nothing else, may we at least keep the gods entertained."

Her false levity didn't fool him for a moment. Gria's grip was hard enough to cause pain. Her fingers tapped *Thank you* before they withdrew.

She turned back toward the column of soldiers curving down the mountain. "We move on." Commander and guide faced forward again, crossed the ridge, and led the descent into Alvav.

HigherBrook watched them dwindle until they vanished in the dark. He stepped to the side, joined on the ridge by more and more Masari as the line advanced. They called out encouragements to the Yata, who answered back with weapons upraised.

HigherBrook wondered if it was a force outside himself that made him unstrap



his StormCloud and hold it aloft in silent salute to the passing troops. The Masari behind him followed suit. He didn't need to see them; he heard the shush of leather and the light click of nails on metal. He smelled their solidarity. His sweat-stained linens dampened further.

His arm had lost all feeling by the time the last Yata brought up the rear. Then the warriors of Basc were gone. Beside him, CatBird said, "I'll miss them, Sir."

"And one in particular, I've noticed," HigherBrook answered softly. He secured his rifle, gave her a tender smile, and didn't need to see her skin tone to know she was blushing. "Start the way back down, CatBird. I must spend some time here. I will rejoin you later."

"Sir?"

"It's all right." He gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Go."

She hesitated; HigherBrook spotted a flash of worry. He lifted his lantern in reply and raised the wick. He had enough light and enough oil. He wouldn't fall. He could find his way.

CatBird pursed her lips for a moment, then turned from him and called to the others. HigherBrook stood calmly, arms folded, watching them go. He commanded these troops, he was charged with preserving the valley, and now he was fretted over by the same young woman who repeatedly, blithely led him into the hunting grounds with hardly a second thought.

"I fret about you, too, my dear," he murmured into the dark.

Ghost's narrative came back into focus. HigherBrook remembered the feel of the parchment beneath his hands, could picture Bodasa's efficient Yata script. He had no cairns to guide him, only other people's memories.

He walked along the ridge until it widened into a high bluff. A blanket of moss hid the mound, but the moss was new, a luscious spread across soft soil. It would be a shame to disturb that gentle cover. RiverRun had no remaining kin. Perhaps her bones should be left undisturbed.

No. HigherBrook knelt, soaking his pants with dew. *We are all her kin.* It might be time to treasure Masari bones now. It was certainly time to treasure hers.

He unslung his StormCloud and removed his jacket, then breached the soil with the buttstock. He slipped his hands into the hole and began to dig, taking care as he peeled the moss back.

Everything had decomposed except for the cairn stones and the skeleton. HigherBrook's nostrils filled with the smells of fresh humus as he lifted one bone and then another, and another.

He pulled them reverently from the ground and laid them inside his jacket, folding the cloth over and tying the sleeves. He pulled off his shirt to hold the rest, shivering beneath thick clouds and mist, the night's rawness.

*How much could you have taught us if we'd let you? HigherBrook eased the small skull into linen. I spent my life writing down the details of other people's lives, and still I knew nothing.*

He had one more place to find. HigherBrook carried BrokenThread's bones back to the trail and tucked them behind bushes off to the side before continuing on.

TripStone had told him she'd spotted the smugglers from a rocky summit near Ghost's cabin. HigherBrook climbed and spotted an overhang as the sky began to lighten. He peered over the edge, could see the pale cloth of his shirt down below. He turned and made his way in the predawn, probing forest growth for the feel of logs beneath vegetation.

The cabin almost escaped him. So much had been eaten away. The door was almost completely gone. Without its occupants, the structure was dissolving back into the woods. HigherBrook parted a tangle of vines and passed into rooms left strangely intact. Only faint chemical odors remained, but whatever had spilled from the smashed glass around his feet had managed to preserve at least part of the interior. Not many creatures had braved the unnatural stench.

He held his lamp higher; the dried spills might still be volatile. A half-gnawed walking stick lay on the floor near a badly stained, frayed tapestry of a harvest dance. Old blood stains had darkened to brown.

The next room was much worse. HigherBrook stepped around more broken glass and Yata body parts in different stages of decomposition. The work table was similarly littered. A pair of shattered lenses stared blindly at a sagging roof.

Barechested and cold and reeling from the stink, careful not to touch any surfaces, he gazed on a shrunken, discolored pallet and pondered the other side of the Covenant. Not long ago, HigherBrook would have destroyed this place himself. Now the abominable crimes seemed inconsequential, except that the man behind those crimes was gone as well.

Now that HigherBrook had found this place, he could tell RootWing and DewLeaf. He could bring them here, preferably with masks and gloves, to see what they might want to salvage from their son's former home. The roof bowed in. It would collapse soon.

First he had to return to the valley and to a young Masari hunter who worried about him. He had to check on the children of Basc, now that their parents had gone away. Back in Crossroads, his forces moved into position slowly and unobtrusively around dozens of would-be conquerors.

"We've changed since you left, Ghost," HigherBrook mused to the walls. He stepped back outside into brightening morning and snuffed out the lamp.

## CHAPTER 25

### Promontory

Ghost paced up and down the angels' workshop, blind and dark-adapted at once. Raised metal tables cut corners into the air, pristine beneath his palms.

Nothing to do now but wait for the others.

Hours earlier he'd been cursing inside DamBuster's shed as he tested different counteragents to the gas. It didn't matter any more. How could he protect Piri and TelZodo inside the Marsh when he'd used up the smoke's chemical residue? Ghost had tried recreating the compound, but his closest approximation came from using local ingredients. His sickening concoction had *resembled* the smoke, but that wasn't good enough. He had no benchmark left.

Any protection was better than none. Every day the chance seemed greater that they'd have to flee back into Alvav. His wife and child had to have *something*.

He'd strapped another mask about his nose and mouth and incinerated another sample. His eyes smarted fiercely and his skin began to burn, but at least he could breathe without agony. Ghost had enjoyed that small, grimly satisfying success. He'd rather his skin peel off than the insides of his lungs.

He grabbed his chamber pot after snuffing the flame, taking a deep breath of relatively fresh, rain-spattered air as he stepped outside.

He'd been tipping the pot into the night soil pit when he heard the telltale *whirr* of SandTail's wagon approaching. For a wild moment, Ghost relished the thought of gassing the little man to death, but the wind direction was wrong. He dropped the pot to the ground and bolted back inside, grateful he hadn't removed his mask altogether. Fumes still clouded the shed.

He couldn't chance lighting another flame. He waited, listening for chains to lengthen and gears to mesh and heard only deluge pounding the walls. SandTail's visits were normally brief and threatening, but not this one. The bastard was staying all day.

Ghost checked his supplies on hand when dozing fitfully no longer worked. He made as many masks as he could, small and smaller, for Piri and TelZodo. He wrapped them securely in cloth, belted the cloth around his waist, and continued to wait.

He paced. Eventually that no longer worked, either. As long as SandTail was in the house, using a lantern in the shed was out of the question, and the shadows around Ghost had lengthened. His chemicals lost their color, turning gray in the fading light.

If he could sneak outside and away, he could deliver the masks to WoodFoam, then get back to work to see if he could produce something better. If nothing else, his family would have those.

He threw on his cloak, eased the shed door open, and peered outside. The wagon's runner had enough sense to get out of the rain; the man was probably napping in the passenger compartment. Ghost checked windows to make sure that no one saw him, then hastened to the far side of the house.

He stopped beneath the window to DamBuster's lab and flattened himself against sandbags, listening. Something had been keeping SandTail there from morning until dusk, but Ghost didn't hear him in the lab. The voice from above was lower-pitched. Gravelly.

Rain hammered against the walls, making it impossible to hear the words, but the man's tone bore no threat. On the contrary, it was highly intimate. DamBuster's replies, though no longer mournful, remained troubled. Ghost stood on a bag, straining to hear.

He did not have to strain when MudAdder cried out. Ghost knew what those sounds meant. They did not build and die back this time, but continued on to their ecstatic conclusion.

Ghost almost groaned aloud. DamBuster was no longer enslaved to the task of decoding Destiny. Now he would be enslaved to the task of making it, filling the house with it, setting bags of it into carts headed for the canyon. The formula would spread; factories would spring up. MudAdder would blissfully rut his life away, helping to grow a herd seen as nothing but food.

The masks at Ghost's waist seemed to burn as the rest of him froze. How long

before the Farm had enough drug to sustain it and Promontory massacred the people of Skedge? How long before he and his family had to flee, only to risk death somewhere else?

Ghost had slouched in the rain, clutching a support beam for strength. His grief lasted only a moment. Furious, he pushed away from the wall, jumped off the sandbag, and ran. He stumbled in the night, cursing himself for leaving his lantern behind. By the time he reached the angels' workshop, he preferred the dark.

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TripStone hurried to BrushBurn's door at the sound of his knock. She squinted at the trader, his cloak neatly folded and dry in his hands, his rumpled clothes shedding rain. He looked right through her when she greeted him. For a moment, TripStone wondered if BrushBurn knew who she was.

She'd been prepared to see torment after a day spent with the Yata kept as a lab specimen. Instead, the drenched man before her looked fully rested despite the late hour.

BrushBurn radiated a peaceful emptiness. His scent seemed to collapse in on itself. He made no move to undress, pushing her gently away when she reached out to untie his wet shirt.

"This isn't like you," she said. "Tell me what happened."

He busied himself making fennel tea, taking time with each step, handling objects delicately. "I said I would tell you if you ate." He spoke matter-of-factly, as though discussing the weather. He pointed to the table, his finger floating in air.

TripStone sat. "At least change into something dry."

BrushBurn removed a fleshy package from his pantry. "You bought meat from me once. Our transaction may have been disagreeable, but you need this as much now as you did then." He set it before her. "I am not selling it, TripStone. I am giving it to you."

TripStone kept silent. BrushBurn moved about the kitchen with a fluid grace she

hadn't seen in him before, yet he seemed born to it. Water dripped steadily from him, but he acted as though he neither noticed nor cared. She peered at his face as he passed her, looking for well-practiced concealment. Instead, his simple openness chilled her.

He was a wraith, but not the type NightShout had been. TripStone's father had floated about his house for years as one condemned, almost vegetative in a penance that Piri's attack on him had finally ended.

The man before her was neither repentant nor joyful. He had simply surrendered. She whispered as he came to the table, "What happened to you, BrushBurn?"

He sat and took her hands in his. His skin was still wrinkled from the rain, but his touch was warm. "That meat is yours," he said, gently. "I will not touch it until you eat."

"Then you'll get to be like me."

"I imagine so." BrushBurn released her and tended the tea, pouring into a pair of steaming mugs. His gaze seemed to turn inward as he sipped. "It's odd, you know. He will go back to the place he's always known, to the people he's always loved. So many have died, but the others are there for him, have been ever since he was born. That will be a constant in his life. Nothing more will change for him until he dies. He blessed me, and I envy him." He smiled at her a little. "That's what happened in the lab."

TripStone held onto her mug for warmth. "Destiny."

"Destiny." He sipped again, poured. Mild curiosity danced in his eyes. "Why are you here, TripStone?"

She looked sadly into her tea, until she could gather the strength to face him. "I'm representing Crossroads."

"Hardly." Water dribbled from rusty curls, soaking into his shirt. He shrugged. "It doesn't matter, really. I used to think it did."

TripStone had frozen on hearing DamBuster's name that morning. More than anything, she wanted to see the apothecary, but he and DevilChaser might have recognized her and she couldn't take that chance. BrushBurn had caught her

hesitation. She had expected him to question her afterwards, dreading the interrogation. Now his lack of interest alarmed her more.

TripStone pushed the meat away. She folded her arms on the table and laid her head down, waiting for her breathing to steady.

He didn't pry, didn't push her. He didn't touch her at all. Whatever her scent, he gave no indication he had read it. TripStone raised her head, watching helplessly as BrushBurn left the table to sit before the hearth.

For the first time he was as blank as his home, empty as its unadorned walls. She listened to silence, broken only by the soft crackling of burning wood.

She wanted to take him into her arms and tell him everything. She wanted to dive for the brandy and say nothing. Instead, TripStone watched as BrushBurn turned a passive gaze toward the flames. When she couldn't look at him any more, she stripped her clothes off and snuggled beneath their blanket.

She heard him put the meat back in the pantry and listened to sounds of washing. The fire sizzled out. Lantern light neared the pallet, diminished, and disappeared. BrushBurn's clothes were dry by the time he lay down, draping a chaste arm about her. He merely drifted further toward sleep when TripStone cradled his hand in hers and pressed it mournfully against her lips.

In the morning he dressed meditatively, gliding from room to room as though in a dream. His wandering about the house became a private communion that TripStone could witness only from the distance of being outside his skin. No matter what she asked, he answered only by offering meat, until she gave up questioning him.

With a shock she realized that BrushBurn more than loved the Farm Yata. He worshipped them. Whatever he had buried when he left the Farm, the test subject had uncovered it. Whenever TripStone looked at BrushBurn, she saw a man laid open as surely as if a blade had sliced him neck to groin.

"Come back to me," she whispered.

"Let me in," he whispered back.

"I wish I could."

He kissed her forehead. "I know you do."

She clutched him before he left to meet with SandTail, containing her despair as he rubbed his chops against hers and eased her away.

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Ghost awakened to WoodFoam calling his name and an urgent hand shaking his shoulder. His nose quivered at metallic stench. Soft slaps accompanied the buzz of conversation. Buckets clanged into place. Oiled leather squeaked, the sound of aprons being knotted into place.

"Sorry, Ghost," WoodFoam said. "Your bed's taken."

He slid off polished steel and scanned weary faces before he saw the corpses. "My gods," he groaned. "They must have killed half the mesa."

He rushed from one body to the next, turning them over, checking their features, double-checking until he was sure his family was still alive.

Then he grabbed an apron and a set of knives, listening to the conversation around him as he hauled dead Yata to the tables. Only then did he realize that almost all of them bore multiple puncture wounds. They had been stabbed, not shot. He raised his eyebrows. "This was not done by Masari."

"Factory rebellion." WoodFoam shook his head as he arranged bottles of preservative. "SandTail's people tried to commandeer the plant. They didn't realize there were Yata so sick of the overwork they were ready to just hand the place over. The loyalists felt otherwise." He grimaced. "This is all internal strife."

Ghost took the angel's arm. "Let me buy you a drink when we're done," he said quickly, under his breath. "I need to give you something for when you go back there."

Any traces of smoke remaining in Ghost's hair and clothes fell quickly to the powerful tang of preservatives as he and the others suited up. He passed the hours slicing and chopping, draining fluids into bottles or splattering them into pails. One body became indistinguishable from another, a collection of slippery parts to be sorted. Joints cracked and separated as the angels called to each other,

stains and gossip spreading equally across the room.

Late in the day he wiped dissection tables as others spread alcohol and then sawdust on the floor. He slipped his bloody apron off, tossing it and sticky gloves into a bucket of cold water before scrubbing down at a broad basin. The angels stripped, filling the buckets with gore and swapping jokes that were equally sanguine. Business would be good. They took bets on how soon they'd be recalled to Skedge. When they finished cleaning, they took provisions from a stockpile of meat and locked the rest away. They'd start selling after a few well-earned drinks and a night's rest.

They filed outside, already falling against each other during their jovial hike to the tavern. Ghost tucked a well-wrapped slab inside his shirt.

WoodFoam stepped beside him as he secured his cloak. "Still want to buy me a beer? First round's already covered."

"I need your help." Ghost eased them away from the others, biting down fear. "I have something that must get to Piri as soon as possible. I'd take it to her myself, but it needs more work." He looked back toward boisterous, tired butchers. "Name your price."

"A beer is sufficient." WoodFoam's hand rested against Ghost's back. "You know how I feel about your family. I'll check on them for you, let you know how they are. Give whatever you have to me in the alley. Then we'll join the others at the bar."

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TripStone leaned heavily on the counter in a room of smoke and laughter. The Crossroads messenger hadn't returned and she couldn't risk using another, even to deliver a coded note. Over and over she had drawn the symbol for Destiny, wondering if the numbness in her fingers came from Yata deficiency or from BrushBurn's news, or from the state of the man himself. Except for the clarity in his eyes, she'd have thought him drugged.

Her hunger receded into the same euphoria she remembered from before. Her cramps had diminished, but now a low, constant ache began to spread. Paradoxically, TripStone felt stronger, even happy. She knew what it meant.

It was a biological reaction, her body's attempt to marshal its energies and keep her functioning even as she used herself up. As a *yatanii* she had thrilled to the physical pleasure of deprivation. Her need to expiate guilt and to forsake all things Yata had infused her fasting with an overwhelming rightness. In her youthful ignorance, she was sure her sudden strength had let her leave the gods behind.

Then she had passed into the next stage and the demons had claimed her for themselves.

No amount of boiled water could soften the last few pieces of Erta enough for TripStone to chew them without risking her teeth. She had sat calmly at the kitchen table and watched fluid darken, following eddies of color in a slow dissolve. Enough nutrients had escaped into the weak tea to make a tiny difference, but they were far from enough to sustain her.

She knew what to expect now; she couldn't wait any longer. If the angels weren't back from Skedge, she would return home and try not to gag as she eased Farm meat past her lips. At least then BrushBurn might eat as well. Whatever else his visit to the lab had done, it was making him fast along with her.

She listened to the soothing buzz of crude tavern humor and petty argument, to half-hearted complaints and spirited wagers. Take away the piss buckets, clean the place up, and this could be Crossroads before the massacre. TripStone breathed in the passions of the everyday, reveling in the absence of emptiness.

She wondered how many of them would fall at the hands of Yata. Again.

The noise level rose; smoke thickened. Greetings rode from table to table. Uproarious laughter brought a smile to her lips. Crowds passed each other, entering and exiting as work shifts changed.

Gria's militia, their old tavern joke, should have mobilized by now. TripStone closed her eyes, but the tavern didn't vanish. She saw even more strongly the chops touched in greeting, the hearty slaps on the back, the tipsy nuzzling in dark corners. All enmeshed in the commonplace, all unsuspecting.

The bartender put her usual bottle on the counter; she opened her eyes at the thud. She was in a weakened state now. Even a few sips would be too dangerous.

TripStone trailed her finger down the side of the brandy. The more she listened, the more she wanted to raise the spirits to her mouth and drink until she either passed out or died. The euphoria of her fast could no longer help her.

Her hands were numb. She'd probably drop the bottle anyway.

Better to simply pretend that she was home. Not BrushBurn's home, but Crossroads. Not her empty house, but the Grange with its long dining table, where RootWing and DewLeaf treated her as a member of the family and she was surrounded by people who loved her.

But now the Grange was the property of Promontory. TripStone wanted to wail, to slam her fist repeatedly against the counter. Would the people here even care that her village was being dismantled piece by piece? Could they conceive of the loss?

Without the Farm, perhaps they could. TripStone looked through haze at a sea of faces, weatherbeaten and work-weary, and felt pulled apart at the seams. Patrons shifted dizzily before her, guilty to innocent to guilty again. She did not know who they were, much less who she was any more.

The bottle was smooth and seductive beneath her palm. Even drunk, especially drunk, she and BrushBurn had understood each other. Now she did not know who he was, either. She shuddered at the depth of her concern, pulling her hand slowly away from the spirits.

She breathed a loud sigh of relief when the tavern erupted in shouted greetings and the far end of the bar cleared to make room for a cluster of angels. The bartender glided over to them and opened a keg. Foam spilled liberally on the floor and then on the counter. Mugs rose and collided amidst shouted toasts. One shattered, spraying ale to roars of glee.

TripStone heard triumph overpowering exhaustion in the stories flying from beery mouths. Skedge had erupted. The angels have brought dozens of bodies across the pan and there was enough spilled blood to bathe the city. Their tales painted pictures of gondolas dropping down the side of the mesa, filled to near-overflowing with corpses. They'd lowered the death boats so many times that the man working the chains and pulleys had grown his biceps to twice their normal size in a single day.

And the puddles in the salt pan were joining. The angels told of wheels drawn up and floats set down, then of everything moved back again. Of adders shooting out of the water, breaching it like trout before diving back into mud.

Her purchasing would wait until they were sated with ale and revelry, but there was enough Yata to go around. TripStone closed her eyes again and relaxed. Thank the gods, the meat she ate would be clean.

The tavern's merriment rocked her like a lullaby. She held tightly to it, emptying her own mind to keep her hand from the bottle. For a few minutes she could forget why she was in Promontory. She could forget the ruin of Crossroads and the army traversing the mountains. She could forget that Destiny ever existed. It would all come back to her soon enough.

Voices merged, rising and falling like gentle breezes over wheat. The tavern breathed. TripStone thought of food, could almost smell undrugged flesh. Even before she took a bite, she felt herself knitting together as reverie took hold.

For a few minutes she was at the Grange again. RootWing and DewLeaf were again proud farmers, working the land side by side with hunters, artisans, and scribes. Beans twirled up corn stalks. The sun warmed TripStone's shoulders as she snapped off firm pods and peeled back ethereal silk. She weeded until her nails and the creases in her hands glistened black with dirt.

She gripped the dream until it blotted out the rest of the tavern. TripStone sat not at a bar but at a long table, passing plates of bountiful harvest. The Yata was sanctified. The vegetables were plump and the honey sweet, and no one owned the communal farm but the peaceful people of Crossroads.

The buzz around her became lilting conversation. A sweet tenor floated to her, Ghost reflected in the voices of his kin. The overtones were there; she could hear them. They edged around the dream, crossed over, and saturated the room. She rode them to consciousness, opening her eyes.

They didn't go away. TripStone looked quickly at the spirits. Her bottle was still full.

She stared ahead of her and barely breathed. She listened hard, hearing the voice again. She looked in its direction, toward the angels, past one body and then another. Hands gestured expressively above the counter. They raised mugs and

set them down, dropping coin onto the wood and chopping the air to make a point.

Suddenly, amidst all the others, there was only one. Long, delicate fingers. A flash of plum-colored pelt.

TripStone did not remember rising. There was only the voice, growing louder as she walked the length of the counter toward the far end. She couldn't stop the twitching in her limbs. Her legs barely held her up.

His back was to her. TripStone wanted to touch his hair, his shoulder, but she couldn't move. She wanted to whisper his name, but her throat was clogged.

A man with deep green eyes and ruby chops stared openly at her. He interrupted Ghost and pointed, and they were face to face. TripStone gazed upon confusion, watching as realization slowly dawned.

Ghost looked her up and down as he stood. He could hardly speak. "Stone?"

She nodded as tears coursed into her chops. A cry escaped her as she fell into his arms. She struggled to fill her lungs, he clutched her so tightly, but she was doing the same to him. They squeezed harder.

Ghost cradled her head in his hand, choking down a sob. "You're alive."

She whispered, "I thought I'd lost you, too."

The noise in the tavern dwindled to curious murmurs. TripStone buried her head in Ghost's cloak. She wasn't surprised people stared. They were used to seeing her weaving unsteadily toward the door, stumbling over chairs. This time there was a full bottle left on the counter, not a half-empty one in her hand.

"I'm getting us out of here." Ghost reached down. "WoodFoam."

"I know." WoodFoam grasped Ghost's hand. "I'll contact you when I get back from Skedge."

"I can't thank you enough. For everything." He reached down further. "Hold on, Stone." In a moment his arm was beneath her knees, her arms around his neck. He buoyed her up, holding her securely against his chest.

The last time she had seen him, he had hobbled with a staff and she could feel his ribs when she hugged him. Now TripStone clung to Ghost and felt muscle as he strode outside, hunching over her in the rain. His face had filled out; his cheekbones were less pronounced. “You’re not a skinny kid any more.”

“There’s almost nothing left of *you*. You’re about as light as Piri.” He ducked into the alley and beneath an overhang. A grin spread across his face. “I happen to have something for that. Can you stand?”

She nodded. Her legs threatened to buckle again as he eased her down. She leaned hard against the wall. “I was going to buy something from the angels.”

His grin broadened more. “You found one.”

CHAPTER 26

Ghost unwrapped his cloak and set it on the gravel, wishing the odor of sewage would go away. “It’s not DamBuster’s table, but it’ll do.” He helped TripStone down, nodding at her surprise. “I know you stayed there. Let’s get you well again before we talk.”

Light skittered off puddles and danced on barrels as the rain fell. The tavern reverberated with muffled jollity. Ghost reached into his shirt and drew out the slab, sliding a pocket knife from his breeches. Even through TripStone’s cloak, he could feel her scapulae. He shifted position and pulled her lightly to him. “Lean against me. I’m softer than the wall.”

Her head lolled against his breastbone. Her shoulder was a knob. Ghost steeled himself against caressing her hair and stroking her neck fur. Feeding her was more important. He didn’t need to probe beneath her clothing to know how thin she was. She’d been like this before.

His blade sliced through yielding flesh. “This isn’t cooked. It will be a little strong.”

TripStone’s hand came up and caressed his cheek. She answered by raising her chin and opening her mouth. Her nostrils already quivered as blood rose to her face. She took his hand in hers and guided it, sucking flavor from his fingers as they withdrew.

He held her more tightly. TripStone’s breath quickened as she chewed. Her chest heaved beneath his arms. Her hand nestled around his ear, into his hair. Ghost cut another piece as she prepared to swallow. She guided him again.

Her flush deepened. The heat pouring from TripStone’s body told Ghost how much she held back.

“I know what you’re going through.” He slipped another chunk past her lips and smiled. “You can let go. I’m sure this alley has seen a lot more.”

She giggled. The giggle became a moan that made Ghost’s spine tingle. TripStone swallowed and her voice turned husky. “You should see what happens

at the Milkweed.” She grabbed his hand again. “There is so much I want to tell you.” Her teeth pulled more Yata from his fingers.

Ghost cut another mouthful, and another. TripStone twitched pleasurably in his embrace and filled the air with happy sighs, laughing when she wasn’t swept up in release.

He kissed her cheek. “I haven’t heard you like this for a very long time. Take away the squalor and the rain and we could be back at the windbreak.”

“We had rain, once.” She grinned up at him. “You were sneezing so badly we had to rush back inside.” She reached again for his hand. “More.”

He wiped sweat from her brow as his own heat grew. The last time he held her like this they had both been bony, feeding each other bird song and the touch of flower petals. For a while that had worked, in the days when anything seemed possible.

Ghost fed her more meat, concentrating on assuaging her hunger. Water dripped steadily from the overhang and spread, beginning to soak into his cloak.

This time TripStone held his hand to her face. After swallowing, she kissed his fingertips, one by one, and gasped, “I think I can rest a while.” Her lips brushed his palm. “Thank you.”

“After all the times you’ve brought me meat, this is the least that I can do.”

“Do you have enough for yourself?”

“I can get more.” He waited for her to lick her lips, then bent down and covered them with his own. She was pleasingly warm against him now, her mouth no longer trembling. “Take the rest of what I have.”

She turned around and pressed harder against him, her lips by his cheek. “I lost track of you after the Marsh. By the time your parents looked there, you and Piri were gone.” Ghost saw myriad unasked questions in her eyes when she faced him again. Questions of his own began to stir.

He said, softly, “We have a son.”

TripStone grinned until Ghost feared her skin would split. Skeletal arms wrapped around him with renewed strength. “Ghost, listen to me.” She pulled back and grasped his hands in her own, blinking back tears. “You can go home. *All of you.* You have a full pardon, and both Crossroads and Basc are becoming sanctuaries for mix-children. You and Piri and...”

He stared at her, stunned. “TelZodo.”

“TelZodo.” She kissed his hands, beginning to laugh. “Your family wants you back, and Piri and TelZodo with you, but first we need to liberate the Grange. Basc would be safer for you right now.” She looked around them quickly and placed her finger to her lips, then turned his hand over and drummed, *We must get you to safety. An army is on its way here to destroy Destiny Farm.*

The words paralyzed him, pulling him in two directions whose boundaries blurred between intense joy and numbing fear. Ghost looked quizzically at TripStone and extended his palm. “Tell me again.”

She tapped slowly, clearly. There was no mistake. Ghost leaned against the tavern wall as his heart tangled and his questions multiplied. He wrapped and handed her the remains of the meat. “We need someplace private to discuss this, even silently.”

She nodded as they stood. “I’m staying with BrushBurn. We can go to the house. He won’t be back until tomorrow.” She frowned and drummed again, *No one else here knows about the mission. If BrushBurn found out, I don’t know what it would do to him.*

Ghost noticed the distractedness in her eyes, the tight pinch in her forehead. “You’re close with him.”

“Yes. I don’t want to be.”

“Still.” He gathered up his wet cloak. It was soaked through. His arm encircled TripStone’s waist as she unclasped her own and threw it over both of them. “You don’t let many people in, Stone. He must have done something to deserve that.”

She whispered, “He deserves more, but I can’t give it to him.” She hugged Ghost more firmly to her and gripped the meat beneath her other arm. They huddled together, darting through the overhang’s veil of water and splashing down the

main road.

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“Crossroads and Basc became allies after the massacre. We kept our pact a secret. Many of our own people still don’t know about it.”

They lay on dried cloaks before the kitchen hearth. The fire’s warmth kissed TripStone like a summer sun spreading its glow across Grange fields grown heavy with scent. She snuggled against Ghost, almost afraid to believe that he was neither a dream nor a drunk-induced mirage.

The worry lines in his face were real. She had to keep talking. “Promontory doesn’t know, either. Its agents think the Yata are still our enemy, especially since we hunt each other down. They don’t know that we are also rebuilding each other.”

“I wondered how Crossroads was functioning after the Covenant fell.” Ghost’s stroking conveyed as much nervousness as affection. TripStone felt tension where he touched her arm. “I didn’t know if it was functioning at all.”

“Most of it is functioning at the bidding of invaders from Promontory.”

Rain pounded against the windows. Shadows dripped down whitewashed walls. TripStone had seen Ghost’s mild surprise when she let him in. She wanted to explain to him that the color in BrushBurn’s life resided in his tent. Then she wondered why she wanted to explain anything at all.

Ghost lay on his back and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. “How did you manage to form an army, then? From what I’ve been hearing, I didn’t think enough people had survived for that.”

“Not enough Masari, no.”

He turned to her, his eyes widening in surprise. “A Yata army? You’re trusting the militia after what they did to you?”

“It’s not easy, but yes.” If only she could make his apprehension go away. It reminded her too much of her own. “Destiny Farm is a threat to both Crossroads and Basc. Basc knows that its independence depends on whether we can keep

our own.” She took a deep breath and added, “I trust them, even though they killed my family.”

He whispered, “*Stone.*” Pain spread across his face. “I’m sorry.”

TripStone rested her palm on his cheek. “Just before he died, my father told me what happened in the cabin. He was trying to protect me. He was very upset about what he’d done to all of you.” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have left you that day.”

“If you stayed, you might not be alive now.”

TripStone breathed in Ghost’s scent as he held her, listening to crackling in the hearth. “Where are Piri and TelZodo now?”

“Skedge,” he said, fiercely. “And they’re in as much danger there as in every other place we’ve been.” His eyes smoldered. “I know how NightShout must have felt, Stone. I wanted to destroy DamBuster’s lab when I realized he was being forced to recreate Destiny. We were staying at the house until just before he succeeded. I knew I had to get Piri and TelZodo out of there.”

TripStone looked beyond Ghost’s shoulder, watching spatters on the window. “You know that Promontory is planning to attack Skedge.”

“I know the whole blasted history,” he spat. He stood and began to pace. “I know about the wars here. I know why Promontory hates Skedge and why it hates Crossroads. I know about the arms for Destiny deal made with the militia you’re trusting to save us.” He shook his head. “If the militia’s the only choice left for Crossroads, I guess I’ll have to trust them, too.”

TripStone followed him out of the kitchen. She watched helplessly as he paused and stared at the half-empty bottle between her pack and the pallet.

“You’ve never taken to drink before.” Ghost squatted by the bottle and squinted in surprise. “This is goldberry brandy from the Marsh. It’s very strong. And very expensive here.” He looked up at her, his face working. “I think you’d better tell me about BrushBurn.”

TripStone nodded, faint with relief. “I’ve needed to talk about him ever since I got here. I can’t think of a better person to tell than you.” She reached out to

Ghost as he stood, pulling him toward the kitchen before she set a pot of water over the hearth. “I don’t think of BrushBurn when I drink the brandy,” she said, pensively, reaching for a bottle of slim seeds. “I think of him when I drink fennel tea.”

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A child.

A mix-child, born to a sensitive boy, another “farm boy.” A baby murdered with her mother to teach him a lesson, before his family sent him away.

Ghost’s heavy sigh rippled the tea. He looked at TripStone over the lip of his mug through sharp, sweet steam. “It’s a good thing you told me about Sunrise first,” he said, plainly. “Otherwise, I would have killed him.”

“I know. I almost killed BrushBurn, myself.” TripStone winced. “Then his kindness almost killed me. That, and learning the truth about this place.” She shook her head. “The only thing that saves me is knowing we’re fighting for our survival, but sometimes I don’t know what I’m doing any more. If we succeed in destroying Destiny Farm, are we adding to the suffering or taking away from it? I don’t know.”

The only obvious suffering was hers. Ghost carried his tea to a blank wall and leaned against it. They were all blank walls, except for the rain sheeting against glass. “Stone.” He sipped, watching the drops. “Do you remember when I first became a *yatanii*?”

Her voice was quiet behind him. “It was shortly before I came of age.”

Ghost nodded. “You told me how you cried when your aim was good. You hadn’t gone on a hunt yet. You were still shooting *straw*.” He turned back to her and returned the sad smile playing across her lips. “I became a *yatanii* because I was furious at our dependence on Yata and I hated what it was doing to you. You became one because you couldn’t bear to kill them. We both almost died, but for different reasons.”

“And yet you fell in love with a Yata.”

“I didn’t fall in love with Piri because she was Yata. I fell in love with her

because she was Piri.”

Ghost looked from one whitewashed wall to another. Stark nakedness, no distractions. Images began to bleed almost instantly through the paint: Piri and TelZodo, his kin at the Grange. At first they were the barest whisper of outlines. Then their phantom hands reached out, touching him.

He closed his eyes against dual aches that refused to go away. “BrushBurn’s a trader. He could clutter these rooms with anything. Why doesn’t he?”

TripStone pursed her lips. “His tent is much more festive.”

“He works from his tent.” Ghost drained his mug, opened his eyes, and returned to the table. The teapot he lifted was bland earthenware, as featureless as the rest of the house. But the heady liquid pouring from it was a luxury. A good sign. Not everything had been denied. “BrushBurn manipulated from his tent. He manipulated *you* there. He punishes himself here.”

Ghost set the pot back down. His fingers grazed TripStone’s hair. “BrushBurn didn’t expect to fall in love with you and you didn’t expect to open him up. You’ve been punishing yourself because right now he’s as vulnerable as the Yata who simply gave up and let you shoot them. He’s your prey and Destiny Farm is his heart spot.”

TripStone looked up. Her hands gripped the mug. “I’ve been using him to get information. I’ve been just as manipulative.”

“That’s not what’s driving you to the brandy.” Ghost sat opposite her and blanketed her hands with his. “Do you love him?”

Her face twinged. She whispered, “I don’t know.” She shot Ghost a nervous glance. “I care about BrushBurn too deeply already. I can’t let him get closer to me. I’m afraid of what I might tell him if I do.”

Her eyes pleaded for release. She looked the same as she had the day she’d been consecrated as a hunter.

Ghost rubbed warmth back into her fingers. “I wonder what kind of a man he’d be if he’d been allowed to keep that child. If Sunrise had been allowed to live.” He wiped a tear from her cheek. “BrushBurn might have learned to be a Masari

instead of trying to be a Yata, because that is what he's doing now. He wants to be MudAdder." He smiled at her confusion. "The test subject. DamBuster named him."

TripStone shivered. "It's love BrushBurn wants. If he wants to be a Yata, it's only because they've loved him back."

Ghost retrieved her cloak from the hearth. He draped it over her shoulders and tried to smooth her trembling beneath the wool. "Stone, if it's a choice between him or the brandy, pick him."

"I can't. It could jeopardize the mission--"

"The brandy will jeopardize it more." He lifted her to her feet and drew her into his arms. "You've already told me you don't know what you're doing. The nearer the army gets, the better that bottle's going to look unless you follow your instincts. Otherwise you'll tear yourself apart."

She hugged him tighter, barking a laugh. "It's easier in the hunting grounds now. The Yata fight back."

Ghost tried to smile through his own worry. "Tell me about the militia."

TripStone took a deep breath. "Skedge is their staging area. If Gria's troops can get there first and I can arm them, we have a chance of success." She sighed. "Otherwise, we're in trouble."

Ghost drew back and squinted at her. "I thought they were already armed."

"They are. With weapons vastly inferior to Promontory's." Her smile turned crooked. "It didn't take much to overpower Covenant-era, single-shot rifles."

She left the kitchen. Ghost raised his eyebrows at the gun in her hands when she returned. TripStone set it down on the table between the mugs. "This is a StormCloud. Not long ago, you couldn't convince me that a Yata could carry one of these and use it effectively. But that's just what the militia's been training to do." She opened a trapdoor in the buttplate and pulled out cartridges. "This fires more than thirty rounds between reloadings."

Ghost peered at the dark metal, then at the gleam in TripStone's eyes. Not all her

instincts were gone. Some had strengthened. “You would have hated this once.”

“It terrified me in the beginning, but Crossroads would be gone without it.”

His fingers grazed the barrel. “May I?”

TripStone raised her eyebrows at him. “You would have hated this once, too.” She slid the cartridges back in and closed the buttplate. “Rudder gave us these for defending our border against the raids. Once Gria’s troops arrive in Skedge, I must get them into the Warehouse and to those guns before Promontory assembles its invasion force.”

Ghost hefted the StormCloud, inspecting the action. He shouldered it.

“You’ve handled a gun before.”

He nodded at her surprise. “Only to put a sick animal out of its misery at the Grange.” Ghost looked uneasily at her. “The militia can do a lot of damage with these. What’s the likelihood they’ll stop after Destiny Farm?”

“I don’t know.” TripStone accepted the rifle from him and set it back in its corner. “They don’t hate Masari the way they did when they attacked us.” She shook her head. “I don’t know what we’d be setting in motion. I just know what will happen if we don’t act.” Her gaze burned into him. “It’s not just the original militia any more. All of Basc joined forces when they saw the meat BrushBurn sold me.”

Ghost growled, “‘Sold’ is not an accurate term for what he did to you.”

“Accurate or not, Crossroads and Basc wouldn’t have had this alliance otherwise.” TripStone caressed his chops. “You’d be surprised, Ghost. We’re following our instincts but we’re getting around them, too, just as you have. Basc is leaving its children in the care of Masari during this mission. We’re trusting each other with our future now.”

A chill shot through him. Ghost rubbed his arms. “All of Basc is in the militia?”

“All the able-bodied, yes. They knew it was that or become livestock eventually.”

He nodded. He gazed past TripStone, toward the whitewash. The faces were still there, no longer outlines now but flesh tones. Probing, expectant. Ghost tried to look away from them and couldn't.

Use the pain. He could feel Piri's command, her nails digging into his chest.

Her image moved. She jerked her head impatiently, telling him as usual to move on. He stared at blankness as the faces faded out and the lab faded in, followed by the shed.

TripStone's curiosity radiated against him. She murmured, "BrushBurn would say you were checking your inventory."

"I am." Ghost met her gray eyes, tallying. "Literally. I think I can help you breach the Warehouse." He dropped into his chair and stared down at the tea. Skedge rose through the ripples before he spotted his own eyes reflected, his pupils shrunken into pinpoints. "But before I say anything more, tell me again what you told me in the alley, because I need to be absolutely sure."

He looked at TripStone intently. She was not part of the wall. She touched him, she had scent, she brought him here. He had to start with what was real and hear the rest from her lips alone. "Tell me again that we will be given sanctuary in Basc. That I can settle there with Piri and TelZodo and that we can move into Crossroads when it's safe." Ghost tried to still the tremor in his voice. "Please tell me I was not imagining that."

"If I could I would take all of you there right now." She knelt beside him, taking hold of fists he did not remember making.

He forced them to open, then squeezed tightly as her fingers interlaced with his.

TripStone squeezed back. "Basc would welcome you, Ghost. Yata and Masari have been working together, side by side. Nobody worships anybody, and we don't try to harm each other except in the hunting grounds." Her eyes were as moist as his. "You don't have to run any more, except to get home."

He was at DamBuster's kitchen window again, as homesick as MudAdder, contemplating the impossible. "I'm used to hiding out in a cabin, you know. In a prison. In a room."

She said, softly, “I know.”

“I’ve forgotten what it’s like not to live under a death sentence. I still don’t know what it’s like. I didn’t care when it was just me.”

“You’re not a criminal any more.” She rubbed his hands, kissed his knuckles. The elation in her face was overwhelming. “I wish I could show you how much has changed. You’re the farthest thing from an outlaw. The stories you told to Shabra on the Cliff are being safeguarded in Gria’s hut before we can move them to the Rotunda.” Her eyes glistened with triumph. “You’re more than welcome back, Ghost. You’ve given Crossroads its voice.”

His muscles began to unclench as a laugh burbled up. “I try so hard to be a heretic and look what happens.”

His laughter became a sob as the walls shimmered like wheat. Gently rolling hills cupped and held him. A spider lazily webbed his fingers, touch-talking its stories as Piri drew him down within a fragrant apple grove. TelZodo took his first steps in a field of sunflowers, running freely in the open air toward a hundred waiting arms.

Ghost shook. The images were almost too much to bear. TripStone leaned forward to kiss the tears from his chops.

“You have no idea, Stone.” His voice cracked. “I can’t tell you how many times we could have died, just looking for a place to live.” He tried to smile, his face pinched with incredulity. “*Home.*”

She nodded vigorously, grinning. “Home.”

“And all we have to do is save it.”

TripStone helped him to his feet. The walls receded back into blankness. Ghost leaned into her cloak as her arm encircled his waist. He bent to kiss her chops, holding her across the back as they paced. “Even before we escaped from the Marsh, I tried to find a way to protect against the gas Rudder uses during the Games. I couldn’t. When the Games came around again, I smuggled a canister out along with Piri.” He shuddered. “She was in labor. DevilChaser delivered TelZodo, otherwise I would have lost both of them. We had already run from Crossroads to the Cliff to the Marsh and then to Promontory. And then to

Skedge. Skedge was already in danger, but they had no place left to go.”

TripStone’s hold tightened, as though Ghost were a *yatanii* again, struggling past the softness in his bones. As though he, not she, had been wasting away.

“We would return to the Marsh if Skedge came under attack, because it seemed the only place we could all be together. We just had to survive the gas during the Games.” Ghost rested his head against her shoulder, speaking as though in a dream. “While DamBuster worked on recreating Destiny, I worked on recreating the gas and finding a way to counteract it, but the residue ran out first. I improvised, but I had no way to tell if my substitutions would work back in the Marsh.”

His voice rasped. “I came as close as I could. You found me just after I gave filter masks to WoodFoam. He’s taking them to Piri.” Ghost sighed. “WoodFoam also fathered a mix-child. Brav’s mother died while giving birth, and Brav lived for only four seasons in the Marsh.” He frowned. “Isolating seasons.”

TripStone whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“He helped us a great deal. If it weren’t for him, I don’t know if any of us would still be alive.”

They rounded the kitchen table, stepping past cold tea to stand before the hearth. Ghost gazed into the flames. “I haven’t been back to DamBuster’s lab in two days, but I’ll find a way to work even if the house is filled with SandTail’s men. We can use the gas against the Warehouse guards and wear the masks to get inside. And we could use it against whoever tries to attack Skedge.”

TripStone nodded. “I’ll help you wherever you can set up. I’ll need to make another visit to the tavern. The messengers know to wait for me there.” She looked at Ghost with tears in her eyes. “I’ve used them to communicate with Gria and with HigherBrook, but they were hired by your family.”

She left Ghost’s side, knelt beside her pack, and retrieved a crumpled note. “I thought you might want to write a reply to this.”

Ghost took the sheet from her as she stepped back to the fire. Words glowed through the parchment’s translucence. DewLeaf’s pragmatic hand, RootWing’s slanted lettering.

He could see his parents standing at the gate to the Marsh, listening stoically to word of his disappearance. That news barely touched the page, written so lightly it seemed the ink had fled as well.

Beneath those words, scratched into the skin almost hard enough to tear it lest there be any misunderstanding, lay the urgent message that they wanted him and his family to come home if found. His exoneration was incidental. The law didn't matter any more.

Ghost stumbled blindly as TripStone led him to the table. He stared at the pen she placed in his hands. "I've disappeared from them often enough, haven't I?" He shook his head. "It's been years since we communicated."

"They know you were protecting them. RootWing told me that even if you were still a fugitive, he would know how to hide you."

Ghost's fingers caressed the words. Finally he forced himself to turn the parchment over. "I guess any place is good to start." He barked a nervous laugh as TripStone heated more water. "I can't feel my hands, but it's not Yata deficiency this time. I'll probably need extra nibs."

TripStone massaged his shoulders. "I've broken plenty, myself. Cried into the ink, too." Her lips brushed his hair. "Even if they see only a blot, they'll know it's from you."

She stood beside him, holding him. The pen touched down. Ghost watched, momentarily captivated by the ink's slow expansion on the page, like opaque flower petals unfolding. Or a seed ball opening, tiny spores poised along the edge. He grinned at TripStone's soft laughter, knowing he smudged his fur as he lifted the pen and wiped wetness from his cheeks.

It was a pretty blot, but there was room for more. Ghost pushed the nib slowly, thickly, watching the letters form almost before he knew what they spelled.

You have a grandson. His name is TelZodo...

CHAPTER 27

Alvav

“Gria.”

Bright morning light streamed into the command tent. Gria tried to open her eyes, but winced in pain instead. She whispered, hoarsely, “Are we still in Alvav?”

“Yes,” the man said. “Drink this.”

“No.” She turned her head. “I don’t know who you are.”

A hand took firm hold of her chin and turned it back, forcing her mouth open. She was too weak to struggle. She began to choke and felt fingers on her throat, guiding the liquid down. She swallowed a velvety potion, slightly sweet. A strange mix of odors filled the room.

“All of it, Gria.”

Perhaps it didn’t matter if he was trying to poison her. This valley had poisoned them all.

A woman chortled, her smoky Masari voice sardonic. “I don’t think they’re in any shape to mount an attack on Rudder.”

Rudder? And what was a Masari doing in her tent? Gria smiled and said, “This is a dream.”

“You’d better let her sleep, Yucof.” The woman’s voice became severe. “When she’s better she can tell us why they’re all here, after they murdered our brothers and sisters in Crossroads.”

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Oh, to lie again on the solid ground of Basc.

It faded in, the rolling green hills, the familiar flowers, the sweet bees. The

mountain sang in Gria's blood, whispering its secrets to her. She mixed tinctures with a steady hand. Her creams repelled the biting flies. Her infusions reduced fever. This was her land. She knew it. It loved her.

She walked there again, healthy and confident, naked. The breeze smelled of honeysuckle and rabbit. Her bare soles kissed the rocks, surefooted, climbing. Birds sang; she was wrapped in cloud. Switchbacks guided her up in a gentle rhythm, this way, then that way, floating her to the ridge.

She crossed over the top and plummeted.

Day became night. Grass became mud. Mud sucked her down by her boots and slithered inside her armor. Lanterns dropped disembodied in the dark. Her troops pulled each other out with poles and ropes, crawling on their bellies past the slurries. They slapped at insects in the rain, digging at the rashes blooming on their bodies until their flesh wept.

Everything trickled. Mountain runoff, streams overflowing, the river overrunning its banks. Drops pattered from the forest canopy on haphazardly scattered tents crowded into stands of birch and pine. Smoke from cookfires billowed into dense haze thick with flies. Parasites fed on her through repellent pastes that no longer worked.

Through it all her troops kept smiling, swaying from fever, struggling to keep straight-backed. One by one, they dropped.

Gria's eyes sprang open. She lurched up from her pallet, gasping for breath.

“Easy.”

The man was smiling. Yucof, the one who gave her liquid. His arm rounded her as she fell backward again; he eased her down. She blinked hard when she saw his carrot braid, the color and texture of a Masari's. Everything else about him was Yata. Gria stared more closely at him. She was not imagining things.

He called softly to the side, “She's awake, Bubbles.” He turned back to Gria. “You're in a safe place. The rest of your people are being cared for.”

Gria squinted in the bright light and raised an arm covered with salve. So were her breasts, her torso, her legs. The paste cooled her back as she struggled to a

sitting position.

“We had to strip you.” The man tilted his head. “That is, BubbleCreek stripped you and applied the ointment.”

Memory returned and Gria’s heart jolted. She twisted around in a panic before focusing again on Yucof. “Have we crossed the clearing?”

“With a little help, yes.”

“All of us?”

He nodded. “All of you.”

She whispered, “Are we in the Marsh?”

“No. You’re still free.” Yucof shrugged. “Trespassing, but free.”

Gria slouched with relief. She buried her head in her hands and tried not to cry.

She could still envision the distant lights of the Cliff casting tiny white circles of illumination. Everything else was charcoal as her troops had struggled silently through the mud of the clearing, their lanterns extinguished, the sick sedated to keep from coughing. They dragged the stretchers when they couldn’t carry them. Geese honked impatiently from inside the Marsh walls.

The army was too slow and too ill; the night advanced faster. They’d be caught in the arena of the Games before they could get across it. The guards of the Cliff would spot them at first light, call on the Masari for help, and round them up for the prison. A magnificent haul. The people of Basc would keep Rudder fed for years.

Ducks called in the distance now. Leaf shadows played across the top and sides of the tent. Whoever these people were, they must have erected it and set up the rest of the camp.

Gria looked up at Yucof. “We owe you our lives.”

He held up his hand. “You owe Masari your lives, not just Yata.”

“Yes,” BubbleCreek added, drily. “Though it’s a shame you destroyed Masari lives in Crossroads first. I helped defend their border. I saw what your people did.” She stepped up and knelt by the pallet. Her hunting shirt and breeches were stained with dirt and salve. “You present us with a dilemma, Gria. It’s not easy hiding an invasion force from the Cliff. We’re giving you a chance to provide an explanation before we turn you in.”

Gria whispered, “Who is ‘us’?”

“Yata and Masari who don’t follow the rules.” The woman’s amber eyes narrowed. “But you broke them in the extreme. You’re going to tell us why you’re here.”

Gria folded her legs under her. Her rash had faded; the lesions in her skin began to heal. She looked wistfully toward the closed tent flap. Wherever this safe place was, right now her troops were as naked and defenseless as she.

Any explanation would be useless. Rudder was allied with Promontory just as much as with the Cliff.

Bitterness welled in her throat. “Why help us at all only to condemn us to death? Or do you just want healthy combatants for the Games? Better entertainment for your Yata collaborators cheering from the terraces?”

Yucof folded his arms, “We’re giving you a chance to change our minds.” The look in his eyes was one of pity. “Even if you were healthy, you would have been no match for us.”

BubbleCreek sat back on her heels, her hands in her lap, her face hard. “We’ve confiscated your weapons, Gria. One series of rifle shots into the air will expose your army to both the Cliff and Rudder. We know some of your soldiers have escaped from the Cliff; they’ve traded with Yucof’s people. He’s helped some of them to freedom and others helped him escape from the Marsh. It would be a shame to have to bring them back into servitude.”

Gria gaped at Yucof. “You were a prisoner, yet you would send us all to the Games. You’d be just like the Yata on the Cliff, watching us get slaughtered for sport.”

“If that were true, you’d be in the Marsh now.” Yucof stood and stretched. His



black cloak fell open against a light tunic underneath. “The Marsh is not as bad as people from the Cliff would have you believe. All they’ve seen are the Games. Except for that and the walls, it’s a pretty independent life. Many prisoners would rather stay there.”

“You didn’t.”

He leaned against a simple table. “I’ve had many dealings with escapees. I wanted to join their trade network on the outside.”

Gria studied the cloak. “You’re a chameleon, then, a black marketer. My soldiers mentioned them.”

BubbleCreek murmured, “He also wanted us to be together after our child was born.” She glared at Gria. “It might surprise you to learn that there are Yata here who would *defend* Rudder against you. I’ve seen you stare at him. Yes, he is part Masari. Many people here are.”

Gria gazed down at BubbleCreek’s still-flat stomach. In spite of everything a laugh burbled up. “You think that shocks me. It doesn’t.” She sighed. “Not any more. But if you’re so concerned about Crossroads, know that it will fall and so will my people if our mission fails. We have no quarrel with Rudder and we’re cooperating with Masari this time. Some of them are guarding *our* children right now.” She smiled at BubbleCreek’s skepticism. “Help me up.”

Strong hands gripped her. The floor of her tent was like the mud again, shifting beneath her feet. “Yucof, there are plans in my pack. Please take them out. Unless you’ve already looked at them yourself.”

He turned toward the open satchel on the table. “They’re coded differently than ours.”

Gria smirked. “Your ancestors would have understood them perfectly.”

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When Gria could walk, she pulled on her tunic, pants, and boots, and made her way shakily to the tent flap. Her camp filled a narrow, rocky valley pocketed inside a crease of dark foothills. Her army’s rescuers, who could just as well become its jailers, moved smoothly beneath a thin ribbon of sky that had

thickened to gray. Some of Gria's soldiers were outside as well, unarmored and weaponless, taking tenuous steps on unsteady legs.

She nodded at them when they saw her, then stepped back inside. They might not know their fate, but at least they knew their commander could stand upright. The salve still coating Gria's body made her clothing stick to her skin as she knelt to examine bottles of curatives, reaching inside Yucof's bag of woven sedge.

The shadows of leaves no longer danced on her tent; its sides were opaque now. Parchment filled the table and spilled out onto the floor. A lamp wick flared to life. Gria edged around the wood, more steadily now, watching Yucof and BubbleCreek drumming into each other's hands, shielding their fingerpresses from her.

No matter. She'd find out whatever they needed to tell her soon enough. She had spent hours translating the pictograms until her throat was raw, sipping occasionally from Yucof's selection of medicinals.

Placed in the proper context, the maps became self-evident. Gria's rescuers were not happy with her, but they still protected her. No one filled the air with gunshot or gave the command to blow their cover.

"No change," Yucof told his colleagues whenever one peered past the tent flap. "Hold your fire." His hand was at his neck, worrying his odd-colored braid.

The future of Basc now lay in the hands of chameleons and *yatanii*. The chameleons had spotted Gria's army first, then notified the Masari.

"We're the only Yata who can sneak safely into Rudder," Yucof had explained. "Outside of private trade arrangements, the only Masari we can trust are the *yatanii*. We rescued you when we realized you were not a threat to us." He'd looked critically at Gria. "Piri and Ghost familiarized me with your valley, and BubbleCreek spoke with TripStone when she traveled through Rudder. That's why we're here."

BubbleCreek had gawked at the communiqués, at first unwilling to believe that TripStone was not a diplomat from Crossroads, but was instead a critical part of the mission to destroy Destiny Farm.

Gria almost wished she had taken the foetid box of meat along. “TripStone told me about the Farm. She wanted to destroy it long before I did.”

Now she gnawed on dried rabbit as she paced, fingering the talisman of braided skins hanging about her neck. “Believe me when I say that I regret what we did to Crossroads.” Gria’s boots clicked on flinty ground. “I wanted to destroy the Covenant, not obliterate the Masari. The degree of destruction far exceeded what anyone expected and my people almost starved as well. I had no idea we were supporting Destiny Farm. Promontory offered us guns for the drug and we took them.”

“Promontory *armed* you?” BubbleCreek stared at her in disbelief. Lamp light deepened the shadows on her face. “They’re the *last* people I would expect to give a gun to a Yata.”

“Not StormClouds, no. But Crossroads was using single-shot rifles. We modified training rifles to fire five rounds to their one.” Gria looked back at BubbleCreek. “Promontory wanted Crossroads. They used us to deliver it to them and now they’re on my border, ready to take Basc. That is why we’re going after the Farm.” The slice of rabbit curled in her hand. “If our mission fails, we are faced with the choice of being naked and bred there or ill-equipped to fight and slaughtered as spectacle here.”

“Promontory fostered your murder of Crossroads’ hunters.” BubbleCreek’s face twisted. “That’s unconscionable,” she whispered. “HigherBrook should have come to us as soon as he knew.”

“HigherBrook was fighting to keep Crossroads alive!” Gria leaned across the table, her head level with the Masari’s. “How could he go to Rudder after seeing all those StormClouds? As far as Crossroads and Basc were concerned, the Covenant was practiced *everywhere*, with the same primitive weapons. When he learned about the Games, he was as horrified as when he learned about the Farm.” She whirled on Yucof. “You’re having a child with BubbleCreek, but you didn’t learn about Destiny Farm from *her*; you learned about it from Ghost and Piri. Rudder kept the Marsh and Crossroads equally ignorant.”

BubbleCreek frowned. “We were respecting your traditions.”

“They were not *my* traditions.” Gria pulled a stool up opposite BubbleCreek and raised the lantern wick. “I suppose you thought the prisoners in the Marsh didn’t

need to know about the Farm; they're isolated behind stone walls. And the Cliff's citizens care only about their own freedom."

She slammed the rabbit onto the table, slid a clean sheet of parchment before her, and grabbed a pen and inkwell. "Yucof, you say you never heard of Destiny before you met Ghost and Piri. I was an herbalist before I became a soldier. I've known how to make Destiny ever since I came of age."

The pen scribbled. Gria cursed and blessed her memory. After so many years, the sacred, monstrous powder took form again. Its red eyes laughed at her. Its sharp teeth gnashed above a hundred thousand burgeoning bellies. Propagation without control. Food without mind.

As a young woman, that was how she had seen Basc, culminating in its thrashing within the Meethouse. Had she known about Destiny Farm then, she might have burned the woods down, herself.

Her nib grated. Drops beaded on the page. "You probably won't recognize the names we use, but I'm also listing physical descriptions and properties. The formulas won't match, but they should come close. From what I've learned about Skedge, I'm fairly convinced you've been trading them the ingredients, especially since you've been giving them much greater quantities since our attack on Crossroads. We lost valuable forest then and stopped being a supplier."

Yucof murmured, "We'd always thought they were medicinals. They never had any effect on us."

"You might have provided only part of what Skedge needed." Gria pushed the sheet to her left. "Likely their mix ratio is different from ours. The question you should ask yourself is, do *you* want to support the Farm? Skedge doesn't know it's Destiny. They think they're manufacturing bed snuff for Promontory." She turned to BubbleCreek. "That's another secret you kept from us. Rudder helped Promontory create the Little Masari. You know that history."

"I know that history, Gria." BubbleCreek lifted a map. She traced the meandering trail up one side of the mesa, the crevasse leading down to the salt pan on the other. Her voice dropped to a low growl. "My baby will not be the first mix-child in my family. An ancestor of mine gave birth to a Little Masari. Not by choice." The map dropped delicately onto the others. "I dealt with that history by becoming a *yatanii*. If we're lucky, our child will be more like Yucof."

She turned toward him and nodded toward the parchment. “Is that the same as your ingredients list, sweetie?”

Yucof looked up, his expression grave. “They’re very close.”

BubbleCreek sighed. “If there were no Destiny, my ancestor might have still had a mix-child, but it would have been at a time and with a person of her own choosing.”

Gria took another bite of rabbit. Opposite her, BubbleCreek gathered several sheets together, her face calm and studious as she viewed them. The Masari couldn’t be reading; she didn’t understand the pictograms. Without a word, Yucof rounded the table and started massaging the back of BubbleCreek’s neck, his fingers following her nap of fur.

Gria observed the weariness in their faces and knew it matched her own. “There’s something else you should know,” she said, softly. “I’ve never met either Ghost or Piri, but I know about them through his narratives and from what TripStone’s told me.” She leaned toward them. “Part of our truce is the full acceptance of mix-children in Basc and Crossroads, with or without pelts, with or without dependence on Yata.”

Gria looked from one incredulous face to the other. “We deal with that dependence through the use of sanctioned hunting grounds. It goes both ways. My people killed and ate Masari to keep from starving during the winter. But we maintain peace within our respective borders.” Her hands gestured above the parchment. “The Yata and Masari in my valley are much more in each other’s company now. I didn’t think couplings between them were possible, but those have occurred. I’ve already told you that Masari are guarding our children during this mission. That cooperation will be destroyed if Promontory isn’t stopped.”

She nodded at BubbleCreek. “You told me that Rudder doesn’t allow mix-children, and those with a pelt can’t live openly in the Marsh. The Cliff would throw hybrids right over the edge. Where does that leave you? Hiding in these wilds with Yucof? Sneaking back into the Milkweed to break your fasts?”

The Masari shook her head. “We’re slowly changing that system.”

“Our system is *already* changed. We’re not your backward cousins any more.”

Gria reached across the table and took BubbleCreek's hand in hers. "I hated the Covenant, but it taught our peoples to respect each other even as we chase each other down. There will come a day when Basc will be self-sufficient enough so that we no longer need to enter those hunting grounds. That will create other difficulties, but I am hoping we will deal with them as reasonably as we can when they happen. I would like nothing better than for Crossroads to establish a Milkweed of its own. The more your kind can wean themselves away from us, the better."

Her visitors drummed to each other again, Yucof's fingers on BubbleCreek's chest, hers on his arms.

Gria started gathering the parchments together. "HigherBrook will confirm what I've told you." She barked a laugh. "Of course, I have no guarantee you won't take all this information straight to Promontory. They know nothing about Basc's alliance with Crossroads, or they'd have come after us well before the rains began."

The tent flap shivered open. A thin Masari stepped into yellow glow and gave Gria a long, hard look before he turned to the others. "It's time to meet."

BubbleCreek nodded. "We'll be there soon, SnailBud. Have a watch posted here while we're gone." Amber eyes searched Gria's. Massive shoulders slouched. "And tell them to brew some very strong tea. It's going to be a long night."

CHAPTER 28

Promontory

BrushBurn gazed into black eyes moist with gratitude. He held MudAdder against him and quivered, savoring a last touch of grace before the naked man returned to the pens.

DamBuster had finished his final testing of the recreated Destiny, his movements wooden. Now he kissed the small, bronze forehead and managed to choke, “At least SandTail’s gone back to the Warehouse. We can say a proper goodbye.” MudAdder flushed as the men hugged him, a sign he was already acclimating to the drug.

The test subject would ride back not wrapped in burlap, but cushioned and happy on a thick bed of hay. The doctor and apothecary winced at the intense joy in MudAdder’s face, as though they followed the delirium of a condemned man. Worse, they were aiding it. BrushBurn wanted to comfort them as he grappled with his own, peculiar grief of separation.

The Farm cart waited outside the lab, its runner harnessed and ready to depart. DevilChaser scowled at the construction crew advancing on the house, marking off sections of brush to clear for barracks. Not far off, cords of wood imported from Rudder eclipsed distant foothills. “The Chamber doesn’t waste any time.”

BrushBurn tried to keep the dread from his voice. “No.”

MudAdder climbed inside the cart. Then sweet innocence vanished into mist as suddenly as it had appeared, when BrushBurn had first seen that extraordinary creature strapped brutally into a chair.

The only bodies remaining to be touched were preserved, packaged cuts from the headless carcasses smoked and hanging in the Warehouse. And TripStone.

She was sated, studying her tea, when he returned home. The scent of another person lingered in the room, but the trader could not take his eyes off the meat from Skedge. Relief washed over him as TripStone rose to rub her chops against his.

He caressed her cheek. “You’re not going to starve.”

“No.”

He held her tightly, almost afraid to let go.

Her quiet warmth brought every lost lover back into BrushBurn’s arms, all those who had disappeared one by one as he had bounded beneath the awnings to find them all gone. To the pens, to the slaughterhouse.

In time the shock of their removal dulled, and then became expected. MudAdder’s final embrace had been as ethereal as all the rest, a reminder of what was. Work on the barracks promised to make Skedge ethereal as well.

TripStone was as light as a Yata, but she wasn’t one. She was a Masari wasting away. Never had BrushBurn expected to see her disappearing from his grasp as well, not suddenly but in agonizing, slow increments.

He shivered against her. “You don’t know how much it means to me to see you eat.”

“An angel was here.” TripStone led BrushBurn to the kitchen, the tone of her voice strangely flat. “He helped me.”

Now that she had satisfied her hunger, BrushBurn could assuage his. He squeezed her hand, then stepped up to the pantry, unwrapped Farm Yata, and sliced it onto a plate. Rich striations of light and dark fell beneath the knife as he listened to his cup filling with tea. TripStone had again fixed an infusion of fennel. Its aroma again brought BrushBurn back to the Milkweed.

He looked back at the package the angel had given her, could see how much she had eaten. Sorrow welled up in his chest. If TripStone were to survive, he would have to convince her to leave.

He sank into his chair opposite hers. “You can’t stay here much longer.” Her hands were papery in his, almost translucent with a delicate trace of sinews. Never had a skeleton seemed so beautiful or so sad. BrushBurn wanted to ease TripStone into a cart and run her himself to the *yatanii* in Rudder. They would take care of her.

Her attentive gray eyes had grown almost too large for her thinned face. BrushBurn tried to look away from them and couldn't. "I want you to stay, but I can't bear to see you starving again. Not like this. Not so badly it could kill you."

She smiled at him. "I'll be fine."

"Not after Skedge falls."

He busied himself with his plate, feeling selfconscious as he raised the Yata to his lips. TripStone's inventory seemed to have stopped churning. She no longer looked tormented. She sipped her tea meditatively, waiting for him to finish breaking his own fast.

He would have kept saving his own meat for her, not touching it, letting it shrivel and desiccate like Erta's. But it would still have been Farm Yata and she would still have refused it. Only a few days of deprivation had left BrushBurn lightheaded, but he had eaten liberally beforehand. TripStone had reduced her consumption for weeks, extending the slate in her pack as thinly as she dared, before she'd stopped eating altogether. She had reached instead for the brandy.

She was not reaching for it now. BrushBurn looked thankfully down at her tea and then up at her. She regarded him with curious attention, as though seeing him for the first time.

He pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth. "If I knew how Promontory was going to affect you, I would never have agreed to bring you here."

She shook her head. "You were a different man then."

"I still cared about you." He frowned. "I admit I did not show it well." He shook his head. "And I admired Crossroads, more than you might think. I still do."

TripStone stood and walked to the window. Rain began to fall, drumming on the roof.

BrushBurn followed her. He gazed into the encroaching dusk. He took hold of her wrists and crossed her hands over her chest, then realized with a start that he'd done the same with MudAdder. Only he was not trying to restrain this time, he was trying to free. "Soon there will be no one left in Skedge for the angels to collect, TripStone. If you don't eat meat from the Farm you'll die, and I've seen

how you refuse me. Another man might force that meat on you. I can't."

She drew his arms more closely about her. "Ever since you showed me who you really are, you haven't forced anything on me."

BrushBurn tried to smile. "Except for the oily tea."

"Except for the oily tea. And maybe a bath or two." Her reflection was pensive. She tried to smile back and grimaced instead. "I never thanked you for that."

He turned her from the glass as his sorrow spread. "You didn't want me caring for you. It seemed to cause you pain."

She nodded. "It did," she said, plainly. "It still does."

"Because of what is happening to Crossroads."

"More than that."

Her fingers traced a line from his curls down through his chops. They touched lightly on his mouth, his chin. They nestled into his neck fur. "I once told you that your courtesy was misplaced." TripStone leaned forward. "Your caring is misplaced as well, but I can't refuse it any longer."

Her palms rested on his cheeks. A flash flood of confusion sluiced through BrushBurn's veins as her lips grazed his, then returned and stayed. She shuddered once, then slowly opened to him, relaxing in his arms.

He held her tenderly, hesitating and unsure, until she pressed his tongue with hers and he clutched her to him, suddenly out of breath. TripStone slid her hands beneath his shirt. Cold fingers pressed against his spine, warming gradually against his pelt.

He cradled her chops, drawn down into an incomprehensible tangle of scent. She kissed him gingerly and then more firmly, until she withdrew and lay her head against his chest. BrushBurn's arms moved under her loose vest and thin cloth, sliding across her knobby back.

She murmured, "That feels nice." Then she heaved a long sigh. She looked up at him and a great vault seemed to unlatch within her. A heavy, lead-lined door

cracked open, revealing a void behind it.

She straightened in his arms and said, almost absently, “Do you remember the first time I saw you, BrushBurn?”

He gentled his voice. “Of course. You almost shot me.”

“No.” She kissed him again and lingered, then pulled her mouth away with great effort. “I saw you before then. You don’t remember, because you didn’t know I was there.”

She dropped her head back against his chest and held him tighter. “I heard you before I saw you. You and SandTail were laughing, about to pass from Crossroads into Alvav as you both carried sacks of Destiny.” Her voice became dreamy. “I tracked you through Alvav and into Skedge, then partway across the salt pan. The next thing I knew, I was being brought back to life by DevilChaser and DamBuster. That’s why I recognized DamBuster’s name when you mentioned him.”

BrushBurn stared down at her. He tried to warm his hands against her thin pelt, but they had gone numb. He whispered, “You knew what was happening.”

She nodded.

“When?”

TripStone looked up and through him, into an abyss. “I imagine it was your last trade with the Yata militia. I first spotted you seven days before the attack. The massacre had been going on for hours by the time I got back home.”

“My gods.” He was afraid to hold her, but he couldn’t push her away. Her eyes had become dead pools, as inert as the night she had first come to his tent. He blinked hard as heartache lanced him.

“You thought I was spying for HigherBrook.” TripStone shook her head. “I’m the one who mentioned SandTail to *him*, not the other way around. All I knew at the time was that you were smugglers.” Her palms grazed his fur. She snuggled closer. “That is why it hurts so much when you care for me.”

BrushBurn froze. He could no more move than the well-wrapped package on the

table.

“You were right in your suspicions.” The dead pools were gone. Her eyes pleaded. “You said back in Crossroads that you wanted to discover what I know. I know what I saw and overheard as I tracked you. I came here to get more information.” She tilted her head back and moaned, “You gave it to me.”

Her fingers slipped around to the front and held tightly to BrushBurn’s pectoral fur, knuckles shaking against his skin. Hoarse words rushed from her. “I expected to keep on hating you, BrushBurn. That would have made things easier for me. My family is dead because of what you and SandTail did. If I hadn’t followed you, I’d probably be dead, myself.” She cried, “Is it any wonder that I wanted to shoot you when we finally met face to face?”

Lead pooled in his legs. He could barely speak. “You should have.”

“Yes, I should have, but protecting the Grange from raiders was more important.” Her nails dug into his skin. She leaned into him nose to nose, her eyes wild, her voice shaking. “Then you showed me what had made you into that terrible creature, *and then the terrible creature dropped away from you before I could kill it!*” Hot tears dropped onto his cheeks, mingling with his own. She whispered, “Then you fell in love with me and almost finished me off.”

TripStone shoved him away. She whirled from him, strode to their pallet, and snatched up the brandy. BrushBurn watched helplessly as she disappeared behind his curtain. He heard the spirits splash into his chamber pot, followed by glass shattering along its edge. Panic seized him momentarily that she would cut herself, accidentally or on purpose.

After a last hard clang of glass against metal she emerged, shaking out her hands. She stopped by the kitchen table and leaned against it, lifted her mug, and sipped. Her gaze followed the grain of the wood as she set the tea back down and dropped into her chair. “Caring about you as deeply as I do was the last thing I expected,” she said, thickly. “I saw a side of you I never wanted to see and now I’m terrified for your safety.” She looked up at him. “Whatever happens between us, I want you to know that.”

BrushBurn closed his eyes. He opened them, staggered to the table, and stood wavering before her as if drunk. “TripStone.”

The only Masari he had ever loved sat slumped in his kitchen, a shell of a woman who looked back at him dry-eyed and empty. She had known all along what he'd done and had taken him into her arms anyway. Muzzled by liquor, downing one bottle after another, hiding a depth of hurt he could not imagine.

Telling her about his initial protests might have been worth something if BrushBurn hadn't grown to like the job. Smuggling firearms and Destiny had become more than just a task performed for Promontory. BrushBurn had looked into undrugged Yata eyes filled with hope. He had seen a formidable people breaking their own antiquated traditions, striving for their own independence against fanatics whom he had never met. At the time, the thought of loving one of those fanatics would have seemed absurd.

The Yata militia knew who they were and what they wanted to destroy. BrushBurn hadn't realized how much they had mesmerized him.

His stomach twisted. Soon more and more Yata would be thinking and behaving like meat. Gratified simply to breed. Beautifully, ecstatically helpless. Perpetually innocent, swelling the Farm, their graceful pantomimes reduced to mindless thrusts. First the deluded Little Masari of Skedge. Then the self-possessed Yata of Basc.

TripStone's arms tightened like clamps across her chest and she hunched almost into a ball. BrushBurn forced his legs to move until he stood behind her. He whispered, "Push me away and I'll go," then rested his hands lightly on her shoulders.

She grabbed them and held on.

He let out a small cry, then took a deep breath. "All right." He knelt beside her and drew their hands into her lap. "You have no idea how sorry I am, TripStone. For everything." He looked into deep gray pools. "Don't be frightened for my safety. It doesn't matter any more."

She whispered, "It matters."

BrushBurn rubbed her arms. "I don't know how, but I've got to save whatever part of Skedge that I can. I can't let it vanish and do nothing." He wiped tears from her cheeks. "It doesn't begin to make up for what I've done, but I must try."

TripStone drew in a ragged breath as her body shook with silent cries. She leaned back, gulping air through her mouth. Birdlike fingers moved to the top of BrushBurn's head. They settled against his scalp, easing through his rusty curls.

An airy touch, a gentle meandering of thanks. So like a Yata's.

He buried his head in her lap and sobbed.

CHAPTER 29

Skedge

Gunshot.

Piri gazed out AgatePool's window, trying to see past a phalanx of columns and facades. Tons of stone blocked her view. She could only hear high-pitched shouts and curses of an enraged Yata mob, followed by the low, booming roars of Masari and then the explosive crack of a revolver.

TelZodo remained fast asleep in her arms. She silently thanked the gods for their magic.

Piri had caught snatches of sleep, but those had been scant. She had too much work to do. Sometimes she and AgatePool held each other up through exhaustion as the truth continued to spur them on. Renewed energies surged through them both with each retelling.

A rock hurtled through the air. Piri backed away as the missile slammed against a mosaic walk. She wondered if it cracked the smooth overlay of semiprecious stones. Other projectiles bore their own colorful and delicate patterns as more and more of the ancient paths were shattered and hacked into crude weapons.

The riots had gone on for days-not Masari killing Yata, but Yata killing Yata. SandTail's agents shot bullets into the air, trying to diffuse the violence and calling for calm. Piri seethed at Promontory's show of concern. It was only a pretense for the butchery to come.

Now AgatePool knew that, too. So did the people they'd been teaching. Eventually their lessons would spread through the crowd, but it was still too soon. Only a few knew about Destiny Farm, and they had to find ways to stay alive.

Piri couldn't see anything more. The columns were too thick. Some of their elegant exteriors were already smashed.

Her scalp tingled as TelZodo fisted the end of her braid and pulled it in his sleep.

His baby fat hid Ghost's cheekbones, but his father's broad lips were already evident.

It was just as well that Piri couldn't see much from AgatePool's house. She couldn't bear to look toward Promontory. Better simply to nuzzle TelZodo's tiny flank and breathe in his scent.

She cradled him to her and walked away from the window. Thick, weighted cloth swung against Piri's pelvis as she moved. A sheathed carving knife from AgatePool's kitchen hung from linen belted around her waist, balanced by a short blade at her other hip.

She had held a carving knife the night she shielded BrokenThread from the monster who had destroyed Ghost's cabin, but she could do nothing to save that child. Now Piri had two weapons within reach. A gun would be better, but she would make do with what she had. Her son had been born at the edge of a blade. If he had to live at the edge of one, then so be it.

A tight rap sounded at the door: once, then twice, then once again. Ghost's old signal; the cabin was gone so Piri had taught it here. Any other rhythm and she would set TelZodo down in the bedroom and emerge with her knives drawn.

Piri eased him onto pillows and used both arms to slide back the heavy bolt. AgatePool hurried inside as sounds of bedlam blasted through the open doorway. WoodFoam ducked in behind her, followed by eight Yata and one mixed-blood dressed in sky-blue coveralls lightly dusted with brown powder. Piri's nostrils quivered. She lifted up her son and backed away from them as AgatePool secured the house.

"Here." WoodFoam reached quickly into the pouch at his waist and pulled out a mask. "It's for the Marsh, but it should filter out the smell of Destiny. I've got more." He stepped behind Piri and tied it around her face, then lifted the other masks from his pouch and placed them on AgatePool's desk, next to the bones from Crossroads. "Ghost's still trying to improve these, otherwise he'd be here. He wants you to have them in case you have to run."

Piri laid a grateful hand on his arm, then motioned AgatePool over and tapped.

AgatePool squeezed her shoulder. "I'll keep as much of it away from you as possible. I'm sorry; we had to come straight from the factory this time." She

scowled. “That won’t happen for much longer. WoodFoam, tell Ghost that our employees are being phased out. SandTail’s been replacing them with Masari a few at a time and distributing the formula for Destiny to his agents up here.” She snorted derisively. “The ambassadors talk about retraining displaced personnel. I don’t believe that for a second.”

The workers removed their coveralls, careful not to raise dust, and set them in a corner of the room. Piri listened to hushed whispers as they glanced at her and then at the meat laid on the stone floor, their faces already lined with pain as their last vestiges of disbelief began to crumble.

“I’ve told you what the bed snuff is.” AgatePool guided her guests toward cushions. “You may have gotten a buzz while making it. The buzz felt good, it helped you work the long hours, but that ends now. Don’t accept any of it as a parting gift. If you receive any food or drink that smells like Destiny, *don’t consume it*. The Farm will try to capture you when you are most vulnerable.”

Piri nodded to confirm AgatePool’s words. She drummed, *Tell them to be especially careful wherever the rioting has stopped. If they see people who are too quiet or too pleasant, they should run*. She listened attentively to the woman’s translation.

Piri looked again upon blue-inked flesh as she crouched with her head bent. Not for the first time, tentative fingers traced out her tattoo as one worker after another knelt beside her. They hugged her tightly, first begging for forgiveness, then swearing revenge.

AgatePool sat by them. “By now you know that the poisoned Destiny killed hundreds of our cousins, not Masari. Promontory wants to capture as many Yata as possible to take to the Farm for breeding purposes. They’ve already begun to succeed.”

She folded her hands in her lap and surveyed the faces, subtle gradations of skin and hair. Even the mixed-blood blended in. “There are no treasures at the Farm. There is no jewelry, no marble, no fine clothing. In fact, you will have no clothing at all. Your speech will be taken away. You will feed on gruel and water, but you won’t care because they will be laced with Destiny. You will have plenty of warm bodies to press against and you will have a *wonderful* time. Until you have children, who will be taken away at birth to be raised by others. Or, if they

are mix-children, their throats will be cut in front of you. But soon you won't care about that, either."

At first Piri had drummed incessantly on AgatePool's arms, hearing her host translate the touches with a shaky voice. The stories had taken longer to tell as tears slipped from AgatePool's eyes and her throat closed up.

Then, slowly, her grief had transmuted to rage as it did now for the people surrounding them. AgatePool had memorized her lines quickly, honing her delivery into the same clipped cadence that she once used to command production schedules.

"I won't ask if anyone here has been treated for overexposure to the drug, because I know that's a sensitive issue," AgatePool continued. "But if any of you have, your experience was *nothing* compared to what goes on at Destiny Farm. Some of what you might be seeing now cannot compare with the addiction there. I've seen rutting in the streets, people ripping each other's clothes off. That is mild compared to the Farm."

WoodFoam held and stroked a happy TelZodo. AgatePool pointed to him. "I've seen this angel pull corpses from one of our cisterns after the last big rain. They were too busy fucking to see the water coming in. Piri tells me they probably knew they were drowning, but that didn't matter to them. And *that* is nothing compared to the Farm.

"I want no one here to feel guilty." AgatePool leaned forward, turning from worker to worker. "None of us knew what we were making and we didn't know who we were. There is a reason for that. Some of us have ancestors who swallowed one large helping of the drug after another, day after day and night after night, so that they could rip into one Masari girl after another and produce people like me. Or rip into Masari boys. Some of it probably happened in this very room.

"The Masari have an accursed appetite, but the Yata pulled the first trigger. All those factories polluting Promontory were once Yata factories. You're going to have to get used to that name. Even those of us who are mixed-blood are part Yata."

Piri stood and gave AgatePool's shoulders a hard squeeze before padding past WoodFoam. She rubbed the angel's arm and kissed TelZodo's head. Then she

retrieved an irregular, six-surfaced paperweight from the hardwood desk.

The bone gleamed in her hand with a high polish and delicately-inked stipples that seemed to move as she turned it. Nestled in a concave plane, a pleasing tangle of serpentine spirals radiated within an ovoid border. Reflected light made them pulse.

Piri squatted next to the Farm meat and placed the bone beside it so that the symbols matched. Then she sat and extended her leg, placing her bare foot in AgatePool's lap.

The black-tufted woman scanned sober, stricken faces. "Each of you has at least one of these, yes? They're beautiful. We never thought to use bones as an art form, but the Masari did in a place called Crossroads."

AgatePool lifted Piri's foot and stroked its outer edge, stopping at the center. "That bone came from a Yata foot, right about here. Only it isn't a treasure, like our jeweled combs and necklaces. Those are just pretty things." She leaned forward and grasped the relic, holding it high. "Every symbol here represents something in the life of the man who once walked on this bone. The symbol for Destiny is there because he fathered many children. I don't know what the others mean, but I intend to find out if we can survive this horrid time."

She raised the bone higher; more designs caught the light. "This man was worshipped as a *god* after he was killed and eaten. He and his family are immortalized in Crossroads, not just in the bones, but in writings. We have the bones now because Promontory helped destroy that system, by arming the Yata over there who wanted to kill Masari rather than be gods to them. In exchange for Destiny, though the Yata there knew nothing about the Farm. They were deceived just as we were.

"The Masari of Crossroads traded these bones for food. It was either that or starve." She set the relic back beside the meat and pointed to one, then to the other. "Right there are two of our choices for existence. The bones lost."

Piri pulled her foot back and nodded at AgatePool, seeing her own quiet rage reflected in the other's face. Then she smiled a little and glanced at TelZodo and WoodFoam.

"Yes," AgatePool said. "The other choices." She took a deep breath. "I'm part of

that other choice. So is TelZodo, that baby WoodFoam is holding. WoodFoam was married to a Yata. Piri here is married to a Masari.” She looked out over the workers. “GoldThistle, did you know your father needed Yata meat to survive?”

A bronze-skinned woman with black eyes and thin yellow fur shook her head.

AgatePool nodded. “I had no idea my mother ate it, either. But *your* mother was a mixed-blood and she died of the wasting disease, though she lived with it for a long time. We now know that it wasn’t a disease. She starved.”

AgatePool jerked her thumb to the side. “WoodFoam tells me there is a place in Rudder where Masari are working to wean themselves from the need to eat Yata, and they’ve been having some success. That gives me faith that Yata and Masari can coexist peacefully and without deception if we try hard enough. We can certainly love each other, but we often pay a terrible price for that love.”

She grimaced. “Right now, we’ve got to resist the Destiny and find a way to fight what’s happening. We’ll have to flee if necessary. We can teach Piri’s language to those of you who can stay longer, but first you need to know more of our history and how to disseminate it. We’ll have a massacre on our hands if we try to disable the factory now, and we can do only limited damage because they’re already making more Destiny down in Promontory. But before we consider our options, we need to tell our brothers and sisters the truth, quietly and discretely.”

The workers sat stone-still, barely breathing as they listened. Piri watched them, a slow peace descending over her as she heard the stories repeated again. She reached out and tapped on AgatePool’s arm, *Perhaps it is time to start telling the children. Children changed Skedge the first time. They can help change it back.*

AgatePool answered her with a sad nod and whispered, “It’s already being done.”

WoodFoam kissed TelZodo and lowered him onto cushions. The angel eased away from the wall and said, softly, “I must get back to work.”

AgatePool stood. “You honor us, WoodFoam.”

“We honor each other.” He enfolded her in a tight hug. “I will do what I can back in Promontory.”

Piri stepped up to AgatePool and drummed, *Tell Ghost that TelZodo and I are fine, and we could use some guns next time.*

She smiled sweetly at WoodFoam through the translation, then squeezed his waist. *Bring as much of us as you can to Ghost, she wanted to tell him. Bring as much of him as you can back to us. We will keep each other alive that way.*

Instead, she rested her head against WoodFoam's chest, feeling the softness of his fur beneath his shirt. Some day, when he could understand her language, she would tell him how much his friendship meant to her. She would tell him how his wife and child appeared in his eyes whenever he looked at her and TelZodo.

Her wordless touches had to do. Reluctantly, she let him go and watched as he slipped from the house.

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Skedge lay straight ahead, black against black. Tapped commands passed down the ranks. Lantern light flared briefly, then flickered out. Gria's army left Alvav behind, emerging as though from a fever dream.

But the fevers were gone, and in their place lay long lines of weathered pine planks struck from their connecting chains, carried overhead in the dark and snaking back toward the border.

Gria had awakened the previous morning to find her StormCloud beside her pallet, returned to her along with her armor. Her pack held down a detailed map of Skedge. She dressed quickly and burst from her tent to meet the broad grins of her soldiers. Had they not all been hiding from the Cliff, she'd have heard joyous whoops echoing around the camp.

Zai had already climbed a shadowed trail, her wiry frame pressed against the foothill's craggy black wall. Dawn clouds scudded above her across a narrow strip of sky, while falcons swooped among hidden aeries. She vanished behind an outcropping, re-emerging as a dark figure on the summit. Her elongated trill told Gria and others watching from the valley that Skedge was already in view.

Chameleons still bustled about, but the Masari were gone. The *yatanii* returned hours later, hauling thick pine boards almost twice their height into camp. Gria had stared openly at the layers of wood piled neatly against the rock face.

Yucof strolled beside her. “Your rafts.”

“Where did those come from?”

“The Marsh.”

BubbleCreek steered another board out of a thicket and leaned it against the others. “We dismantled as many boardwalks as we could without impairing the network.” She placed her hand on Gria’s arm. “Skedge is in trouble. Once we heard from the chameleons who had been there, our decision was clear. You’ll have to move quickly once the sun sets.”

Gria and her commanders had listened soberly to reports of barracks going up in Promontory and a mesa fallen into chaos. The chameleons were about to worsen those conditions by stopping all trade associated with Destiny.

From the border, Gria gazed across a red-orange plain dotted in sagebrush and chalky crusts of lichen. Silver springs shot through patches of dark green. Skedge seemed to float up toward purple clouds, bending the horizon, its salt lake sparkling beside a sharp drop. Her army would have spread a massive stain in daylight, becoming visible from the mesa almost as soon as it crossed out of Alvav. Skedge was no longer simply a staging area that the troops could approach openly. Now it would be a battleground.

They had reached it in less than a night. Now the day dawned gray as Gria stepped from the brush onto a zigzagged trail. Her soldiers flattened themselves against red rock, edging up a massive sandstone monolith.

In a moment she was yelling, “Look out!”

A steady shower of fractured marble rained down on raised wood boards. High-pitched voices shrieked from above, though not from the top of the mesa. They shot among the stones from hidden fissures up and down the pillar.

“I hear crying.” Behind her, Zai shifted from beneath a plank, trying to get a better look. “Gria, those are *children*.”

“Yes, I can hear that,” Gria said, perplexed. “Pass word along that we will advance with caution, but also with care.”

She edged out and looked up. Rocks continued to fall sporadically, but she couldn't see a face. The children had concealed themselves well.

“We are Little Masari from abroad!” she shouted. “We have come to visit Skedge. We mean you no harm!”

Her hairs stood abruptly on the back of her neck as several shouted back, “We are *not* Little Masari any more. We are *Yata!*”

They had barely enough time for shocked delight. Too many others were wailing that their parents had been taken away. Children, hiding in the walls for days, frightened and hungry. Terrified of the people from Destiny Farm who have come to eat them.

## CHAPTER 30

### Crossroads

*“To Destiny!”*

Toasts rose up and down Crossroads’ tavern with a shout. The invaders from Promontory cheered as much from relief as from triumph. Their cheeks were red, their noses redder, their eyes bloodshot. Whoops of jubilation shattered the hazy air after a celebration lasting all night. A rosy dawn leaked through windows spiderwebbed with cracks.

HigherBrook strolled quietly among the celebrants, his hands in his pockets, his eyes ice. The tavern was tattered, its fine oak gouged, lace curtains ripped. Lamp light skewed from cracks in the fluted glass.

News of Destiny’s recreation had loaded the final bullet into the breech. Promontory need only take careful aim at the heart of Crossroads and shoot.

*“To the Yata militia! May their round-up be sweet!”*

*“To the Covenant! Long may it rot!”*

The yells became deafening. HigherBrook slowed his steps as a tankard streaked across the room, shattering on a far table. They had no need for buckets; the walls stank of piss.

“Oh, my.” A patron dangled a leather-clad arm around his neck, unmindful of the StormCloud strapped over black linen. “We’ve made a mess of this place, haven’t we?” The drunkard grinned with mirth, his chops set off by stubble. “Not to worry; we’ll replace it for you. With something a little less dainty.” A mug shoved against HigherBrook’s chest, spilling foam as the man leaned in close. It wasn’t the first stain. “I can’t tell you how long we’ve waited for this news. It’s worth breaking up a bar over. Shame it had to be yours.”

HigherBrook peeled the man away. “Tell that to the barkeep. It’s his property.”

The invader squeezed his shoulder and chortled. “Not any more.” He staggered



to a table, his boots crunching broken glass into the floor.

HigherBrook watched him go, then continued surveying the rest of the room. He nodded grimly at the barkeep, who nodded back and started preparing another round of drinks. If the alcohol didn't stop these people, the accumulated doses of soporific should.

Promontory's messenger sat near the door, his lean body draped about the chair, barely inebriated but weary. He looked up as HigherBrook passed. "You haven't touched a drop for hours, friend."

"I've nothing to celebrate."

"Yet you're here." He aimed a craggy chin toward the revelry and raised an eyebrow. "You've been the willing butt of our jokes and I wonder why. You've been quite helpful, too, carrying patrons out for a breath of fresh air. I've noticed none of them have come back." Long fingers rested on his thigh by a shiny, holstered revolver. "No one else from Crossroads here but the bartender. You take your chances mingling with an unfriendly crowd."

"They've been friendly enough." HigherBrook looked back toward the bar and waited for the cheers of another toast to die down. "They've been coming up to me all night to congratulate me on the downfall of Crossroads." He sat opposite the messenger, his palms face up on the table: *Be alert*. He withdrew his hands when he spotted a light flickering in a knothole. "They're armed, just as you are. If they're unfriendly, they're exercising restraint."

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Even in the midst of rankness the messenger's clothes still smelled of Promontory's dust, as wrinkled as when he had arrived at the Rotunda the day before, flushed and breathless.

"This is an historic occasion," he had proclaimed, his eyes bright with gloating. "Destiny will enrich all your lives in addition to ours. Not only is Promontory delighted to share its good fortune with the citizens of Crossroads, but it will soon send reinforcements to relieve you of your Yata problem."

HigherBrook had locked gazes with his allies in the Chamber. They had left the session together, traversing the spiraled walk in silence, drumming on each

other's hands before parting ways to alert the rest of the Crossroads militia.

CatBird had been waiting outside, observing the meat cart. "Looks like rain."

HigherBrook took her arm in his and tapped. *The tavern will fill with our visitors tonight. We'll strike there first, apprehend as many as we can.*

"A warm rain, Sir. RootWing tells me the crops are growing well." Her fingers answered, *This is soon. We haven't heard anything from Gria.*

They strolled down a line of people, exchanging greetings. The new trader from Promontory was young and brash, but that didn't matter. He had what the town needed. Promissory notes bulged from his pockets.

HigherBrook had guided CatBird away from the cart, back toward the Rotunda. *We must move now; we won't have this chance again. Deploy your best people at the tavern. Behind the walls. In the eaves.* "How are your studies progressing?"

"Quite well, Sir." Her voice became small. "You were right about the books. I understand what you mean about reading Yata stories to remember them when they're gone." *I miss them, Sir. I'm worried. We should have received word by now.*

Her lip trembled. HigherBrook eased his hand across her back. *I'm concerned, too, but we can't wait. We'll escort our own citizens from the tavern before we begin.* "Which lineage are you reading?"

"Izzik's."

He looked down into large azure eyes. *Your sweetheart's family.*

CatBird nodded. HigherBrook held her closer as she clung to him.

Soon Promontory's agents converged on the bar, exploding with vicious joy. Most of the Crossroads patrons left on their own, shocked and perplexed as the visitors opened their pants and let yellow streams fly. Propriety vanished in the face of victory.

HigherBrook hastened his citizens to safety. "We'll handle this," he assured them. "Bar your doors and stay inside." He returned to the tavern, where he

slowly nursed an undrugged ale and listened to lewd jokes about the penning of Crossroads. Several hours later he'd had the first of the invaders locked in the Rotunda, and had delivered a slow but steady parade of them into his soldiers' hands throughout the night.

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Now he glanced at a shattered window, toward a lightening sky. CatBird should be commandeering the cart. Ghost's kin should be subduing any trespassers remaining at the Grange. HigherBrook pursed his lips as raucous laughter erupted from the tavern's counter and a bottle careened into a lantern. "Those still upright have an accurate throw."

The messenger's hand moved closer to his gun. "That shouldn't surprise you. Some of us like to maintain control of our faculties."

"Yes. Well." HigherBrook drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "I imagine you'll have amusing news for Promontory."

The messenger nodded. "They'll be amused to hear you're incarcerating their citizens after all we've done for you. Amused, but not pleased." His hand touched the holster.

Chairs scraped at several nearby tables. HigherBrook bestowed a calm gaze on the shadows gravitating toward him as the rest of the tavern fell quiet. "Eight men," he murmured. "You want to make sure I'll go peaceably."

The messenger gave a tired nod. "Take his weapon."

HigherBrook slipped his fingers carefully beneath the strap and waited for a resin seal to break as hands reached down and lifted the StormCloud from him. He hid his prize in a loose fist. "It's amazing how quickly one can get used to a rifle like this. I'm sorry to have to give it up." He spotted a hand rising and looked down the messenger's silver barrel, its safety released and its hammer cocked. "Oh come now. I said I'd go peaceably."

A crowd began to gather around the table as he was gripped beneath the arms and lifted. Jeers reverberated. He counted heads; all told, there were fourteen standing. The fifteenth remained seated, his revolver still pointed at HigherBrook's chest.

The shattered glass around him became a glistening meadow, the splintered wood a stand of trees. Breaths carried in the stuffy air, and with them the mingled scents of sweat and fear once he'd stripped away the rest. It was all quite beautiful and natural, even within the confines of a wrecked tavern.

Somehow, despite all of HigherBrook's remonstrations, he had finally let CatBird's teachings sink in. Deep inside, he wondered why he wasn't worried. Then he no longer cared. He must have learned that lesson, too. His nostrils flared as he rode a taut sinew of animal alertness. Each man around him was a signature, as palpable as script.

And CatBird was finally reading the books in earnest. HigherBrook's lip began to curl; he couldn't be happier even as the man holding him began to drag him from his chair. The rising din was enough to mask what happened behind the knotholes and smaller holes drilled into the walls and ceiling. Puffs of air, quiet rips of drug-tipped thorns through hollow tubes. HigherBrook couldn't hear them, but a subtle tang in the air told him they were in flight.

The hold on him weakened. Several men slapped at their neck fur as he twisted to the side and dove to the floor. The messenger lunged above; HigherBrook opened his fist and raised his blowpipe to his mouth. A bullet seared his shoulder, but his thorn had found its target.

He rolled away, grabbing his StormCloud to deflect another revolver as bodies fell. Lead splintered oak amidst alarmed shouts, gunfire aimed at the walls this time and then at the ceiling as hunters dropped from above. Haze thickened as HigherBrook tried to smell past the scent of his own blood gluing his shirt to his wound. Heat climbed as more glass shattered, filling the room with the stench of volatile fluids and burning wood.

Invaders charged the soldiers at the door, shooting. HigherBrook heard traps spring before he saw them, great nets arcing and tightening. Confused yells. He struggled to his feet and immediately slid back to the floor, his mouth cottony.

*Crawl, then.*

Several patrons snored loudly, spilled with their beer over the tables as flames advanced. HigherBrook pulled himself past chests rising and falling, gathering guns and sliding them away from the fire before he edged toward the cache. Nausea swept over him as fresh blood trickled down his arm. He swallowed hard

and smiled upward as Crossroads' new hunters removed the inebriated and the drugged. HigherBrook would haul the messenger to the Rotunda himself if he could. Promontory would miss its courier in a couple of days.

He should post a defensive line around Basc. Time, too, to let the rest of his people know the truth, now that they'd seen what their guests could do. Now that they had secured the food.

More bodies passed above him before he was lifted, himself. HigherBrook caught a whiff of decay as the cotton spread from his mouth to his brain. He reached out with a sticky hand. *How many dead?*

He knew the reply pressed against him, but he felt only the warmth of touch before it carried him away.

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Behind medicinal alcohol and a bandage of Yata skin lay the smells of parchment and ink. Old pallet feathers. Sweetened tea. Freshly-washed linen, a slight tinge of honey-scented soap. The bones of BrokenThread, still coated in dirt from the ridge.

This was his dormitory, then, but HigherBrook wasn't alone. He smelled CatBird and RootWing, along with an unfamiliar odor trailing in from his dining alcove. They spoke in soft undertones to keep from waking him. A woman's low voice registered amazement, then pleasure.

HigherBrook opened his eyes and squinted against the light, feeling the pull of a sling against his arm. He struggled one-handed to a sitting position and leaned forward, trying to hear, distracted by the burning ache in his shoulder.

Soft giggles reached him and the names Izzik and Yucof, before the voices dropped back to whispers. Whoever the strange woman was, she and CatBird had bonded, but what was everyone doing in his dormitory? They must have tiptoed past HigherBrook as he lay unconscious and shirtless. He ran his hand through his short hair, worried his goatee, and looked for something to drape about his chest. The lightweight cloak hanging on a hook would do.

White spots danced before him as he pulled himself to his feet. He swore under his breath.

“Sir!” CatBird was at his side, holding him up. “I’m sorry, Sir. We didn’t realize you were awake or we’d have got you.”

A tall, broad-shouldered woman stepped behind the spots. “I’ll pour him a cup, sweetie. You’re handling him well, but let me know if I can help.”

“He’ll be fine,” RootWing assured her. “He’s just lost a bit of blood.”

HigherBrook muttered, “You can help by telling me who you are and why you’re here.” He grabbed his cloak as CatBird eased him to the table. “Help me get this on.”

“I must sit you down first.”

“For heaven’s sake, CatBird, I’m not an invalid!”

“No, Sir.” She lowered him into a chair, draping and fastening the cloak.

She had hardly enough room to return to her tea in the tiny space; the four of them crowded the table. Their combined body heat made HigherBrook wish he’d remained bare-chested.

“This is BubbleCreek.” RootWing managed to cross his ankle over his knee, shoving his chair against a wall. “She came here from Rudder to question you. I’m here to tend your shoulder.” He pulled two squares of folded parchment from a shirt pocket and dropped one by HigherBrook’s cup. “That’s for you, from TripStone.” He held up the other with a broad grin. “This one’s for DewLeaf and me, from Ghost.”

“And I’ve got a message from Gria.” BubbleCreek reached toward her vest. “I was going to check her story with you, but CatBird and RootWing have already answered many of my questions more than adequately.” She laid the unfolded sheet of pictograms on the table.

HigherBrook shook open the message from TripStone and placed it beside Gria’s, two sets of stylized drawings. CatBird and BubbleCreek moved brown cups aside as RootWing added the third sheet. HigherBrook couldn’t help but smile at a scrawl written around an ink blot large enough to serve as an official seal.

Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he read. Absently he unknotted his cloak and drew it down into his lap. When that still proved too warm, he let it drop down to the floor.

CHAPTER 31

Promontory

The desert scrub exploded with blooms. Ribbony grasses rippled with lupin and poppies, deep purple sprigs, red cupped petals. Fiery spikes strained toward rainless lightning. Enormous yellow butterflies glided lazily from nectar to nectar, taking slow, deep pauses in the narrow swath of the land that remained. They scattered before wide hoes that ripped up the colors, leaving behind gaping wounds of red sand.

BrushBurn paced along Promontory's edge, his hands in his pockets, gazing across the shallow salt lake toward the hazy mesa beyond. Already the shoreline gleamed with discarded steel hooks badly pitted with corrosion. A deepening pool reflected shimmering men and women in high gaiters and coveralls and thick gloves worn up to the shoulder.

They moved slowly as the butterflies, dozens of them up and down the water, wading almost to their knees. Their hooked sticks dipped and rose, pulling and bagging one furious serpent after another before they cinched well-oiled leather and delivered their catch for milking. Couriers packed vials of venom at the water line, before rushing them with scrapings from the canyon rocks to the factory in Skedge and the labs sprouting throughout Promontory. The world yawned open, its innards ripe for plucking and bleeding into Destiny.

BrushBurn looked away from the lake, to band saws screaming against wood on the other side of him. Spirited shouts filled the air, weaving in and out of the din of construction, ratchets and hammers, the thunder of tumbling rock. The Promontory skyline dwindled behind hulking piles of gravel, sand carried up from quarries, and more thick cords of timber hauled in from Rudder.

Rain began to drizzle on shiny black tarpaulins overhead, diverted into spillways. Runners pounded the newly-paved road linking the outskirts to delivery routes, carting building materials in and waiting to haul the drug out.

He could no longer see the house where DevilChaser treated injuries springing from the frenetic pace of work and where DamBuster mixed Destiny in batch after batch. A new factory rose, a bloated tower awaiting the delivery of vats

being molded and poured in the desert.

This land might have been preserved if the flowers growing by BrushBurn's feet had been useful to Destiny. But they were merely pretty and not worth consideration. The quickly-built barracks were more important. So, too, the shooters ready to move into them in anticipation of conquering the mesa.

Not if I can help it.

BrushBurn smiled wryly at the extent of his fury. Not for the first time, he wondered if Crossroads fanaticism had rubbed off on him.

"The Chamber acted quickly to secure this land." SandTail pulled BrushBurn's attention back to wood, stone, and mortar, walking him past a row of squat frames. "You'd be amazed at the upturn in morale when we can pay our people to do this instead of spit out trinkets for Skedge day after day." His grin was triumphant. "Oh, how the fortunes of this town have turned."

BrushBurn growled, "They haven't finished turning yet. We've barely begun to produce Destiny ourselves, and our supplies from the Marsh are days overdue."

"Yes. The chameleons have made themselves scarce." SandTail patted his arm. "Greedy bastards know how much we rely on them. You're going to find them and make sure we get what we need." He shrugged. "If they insist on getting weapons, we still have a backstock of obsolete arms. A destabilized Alvav would be in our best interests."

Workers called joyfully to each other above the pounding as BrushBurn looked away. The gray rain was too bright, the shimmering in the lake too frenzied. "Find another smuggler."

"I'm not asking you." SandTail cast a sideways glance. "Rudder is not Crossroads, BrushBurn. Its hunters have fought armed Yata since the Games began a long, long time ago. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you seem to have enjoyed the gun trade." He nodded at Masari climbing ladders, scaling roofs, running wheelbarrows. "The choice is simple. Either we keep Destiny flowing or our people starve."

"There are alternatives."

“Yes, there are alternatives,” SandTail said, hotly. “When was the last time you saw a *yatanii* with enough strength for the forge? For the quarries? Even the best of them still need to get Yata from somewhere. Don’t talk to me about alternatives.”

BrushBurn winced as he looked down. The factory scars on SandTail’s body could be the cracks of an egg, as much fissures as emblems of tempered hardness. The man was like Promontory itself, frighteningly delicate beneath desperate bravado.

How much of Promontory was similarly terrified of losing everything back to the Yata? How deep went the need to disarm every single one of them, body and soul? The night Destiny had finally taken hold of MudAdder, SandTail had wept with relief in the privacy of a passenger cart as BrushBurn looked on with quiet shock.

“We *need* to consider alternatives now.” BrushBurn gritted his teeth. “With or without our supplier problem, the Farm is in trouble. The poisoning destroyed enormous quantities of Destiny. We can’t produce it fast enough to alleviate the shortfall.” He shook his head, worried. “I should have heard of more cullings by now. I don’t know why I haven’t.”

“You’re causing yourself unnecessary pain, my friend. Even you must realize that.” SandTail spread his hands out, speaking slowly and kindly, as if to a child. “They know we have a Warehouse filled with meat. They’re probably preserving the dead themselves and waiting until we have a place to put the bodies.” The smaller man chuckled. “I know where your concerns lie, BrushBurn, and it’s with the Yata, not the Masari. After we stabilize our trade with the Marsh, it won’t be long before we’ll have enough Destiny to get Skedge and Basc into the pens and keep them there. You’ll have more Yata than you know what to do with.”

They turned toward the house, where SandTail called hearty greetings to a man with a bandaged head, then shook his own. “I’ll be as happy as you when this is over, BrushBurn. These people are working too hard.”

The trader said, softly, “Perhaps taking Skedge isn’t worth it.”

SandTail glared at him. “You know damn well it is.” He pursed his lips. “Though I admit our doctor and apothecary appreciate being paid in non-Farm Yata.

Having an angel stationed here was a capital idea. You said his name was SunDog?”

BrushBurn nodded. “He’s the reason TripStone is eating again. She offered to help him butcher.”

“Excellent.” SandTail toed a pile of sawdust. “Our Crossroads representative deserves a little enjoyment before we take the mesa and the angels are gone, too.”

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TripStone blinked at starbursts and whorls as she and Ghost nailed a curtain into place, hiding the back of the shed. “This is from BrushBurn’s tent. It’s the only thing he had that will fully conceal your work.” She shrugged. “If anyone asks questions, I’ll say I’ve put it up to keep me awake. People here are used to seeing me on the verge of passing out.”

Ghost winced.

“I’m sorry. You’re not used to thinking of me like that.” TripStone offered an apologetic smile. “The messenger knows to look for me at the tavern. When I gave him your letter, he handed me one that HigherBrook wrote after Gria’s army passed into Alvav.”

Ghost anchored a corner. “How much does BrushBurn know of all this?”

“Only that we’re working to protect Skedge. He doesn’t know we’re going after Destiny Farm, or anything about the militia.” TripStone smoothed out a fold and pulled a nail from her pocket. “He doesn’t know you’re here.”

“He knows you’re working with an angel who does more than cut.”

“He doesn’t know *you’re* here. We’ve been using your birth name.” She lifted her hammer and drove the nail into a turquoise spiral. “It makes sense for an angel to want Skedge to survive, but two people from Crossroads working together could arouse suspicion.”

“He’s met my kin, Stone.” Ghost lips curled into a gentle smile. Plum-colored chops rose. “You’ve told me how perceptive he is. He wants to meet the angel

who got you to eat again, and you can't hold him off much longer. He'll know who I am as soon as he sees me."

By late afternoon TripStone was singing prayers as she butchered, raising her voice above the noise of barracks construction outside. She didn't know the name of the Yata on her dissection table, or anything about his surviving kin. Young, unlined skin covered a dulled bronze face beneath thick black hair matted with blood. Bits of marble still clung to a shattered skull. TripStone invoked a peaceful afterlife in a language the deceased had never understood.

Ghost's voice joined her from the makeshift lab hidden behind their festive curtain. His Yata had an Alvav accent and he was dreadfully out of tune. TripStone smiled at the sheer strangeness of him singing any hymns at all, no less bizarre than the loud, parti-colored canvas backdropping the knives.

She dipped bonecolored linen into preservative and wrapped the last piece of meat, then packed it with others in a wooden crate. From behind the curtain she heard an occasional clink of measurement or a sizzle, but the hammers and saws outside drowned out most of Ghost's activities. She disinfected the table and cleaned the floor, steeling herself against the tang of alcohol before dropping her apron and gloves into a basin and turning from crimson water to clear. "I'm washing up," she called. "Then I'll deliver this meat to the house. What do you need?"

The curtain billowed a bit. Parchment passed underneath and curled up from the floor. TripStone's fingers brushed Ghost's as she retrieved the list.

Her knees still buckled as she lifted the crate. She cursed under her breath. Her body knitted back together in tiny, energetic jolts, but she was slow to regain her strength. She reminded herself to be patient.

Bedlam assailed her ears as she left the shed. Wood beams crisscrossed her view of the mesa, eclipsed by piles of gravel and sliced by tarp. TripStone choked down her dismay at the buildings springing up everywhere. She nodded back at a scraggly-faced man who called loud greetings from a sawhorse.

The workers joked with her now, pleased to see her staggering from the bulk on her shoulder rather than from drunkenness. Sometimes she wanted to save them all. Then one cheered the demise of Skedge or Crossroads and TripStone pictured Gria's forces cutting them down.

Fleeting impulses, wisps of shadows. Better to meditate over a blade or a beaker.

DevilChaser greeted her at the door and grabbed the box. He growled, “Company,” as she slipped him the list.

Filling a crate with Ghost’s requested supplies would take time. TripStone stepped down the hallway and settled into a seat at DamBuster’s table.

The apothecary looked spent as he leaned on his elbows over a bowl of stew. BrushBurn sat next to him, massaging DamBuster’s back with one hand, comforting him. The two men could be brothers, MudAdder the blood that joined them.

“TripStone!” SandTail gave her an engaging smile, his snifter at the ready. “You’re looking well. Still could use some fat on you. Join us; we’ve cooked a large pot.”

She glanced at BrushBurn, who nodded. Not Farm Yata, then. TripStone squeezed the trader’s arm and took a bowl to the hearth, returning with stew and tea.

“Take some to SunDog, too.” SandTail gave a magnanimous wave. “The angels should get enough of their own product while they still can. They’ve helped feed this town through our recent difficulties.” He smiled into his brandy. “I’ll make sure they’re gainfully employed afterward. We’ll need more butchers at the Farm.”

TripStone sipped, holding onto her mug and averting her eyes from the snifter. “They might not want to join such a vulnerable establishment.” She dipped into the meat. Contentment filled her as her tongue pulled it off the spoon.

SandTail raised his eyebrows. “We are hardly vulnerable, my dear. Not any more, no matter how badly you want us to go away.”

TripStone swallowed. “The Farm is only as good as the drug that powers it.” She looked over at DamBuster, who still hadn’t touched his food, and wanted to comfort him, too. Soon he’d be back in the lab with no one for company but an overseer. “Promontory may be making Destiny now, but you’re getting many of its ingredients from the Marsh. At your rate of consumption, your suppliers must be over-harvesting.”

SandTail's eyes gleamed. He looked hard at her. "It's good to see you getting healthy again, TripStone. Your delusions are more entertaining when they stem from sobriety." His thumb traced the edge of the snifter. "The Marsh has supplied Skedge for a long time. We've had no complaints on either side."

Her condescending smile mirrored his. "The Yata of Alvav stopped making Destiny because they became too numerous to sustain the practice. Some of their raw materials faced extinction. You know that history yourself, SandTail. You told it to me." TripStone reclined and sipped her tea. "But that was a long time ago. The Yata who live there now are selling as much to you as they can, as fast as you want it. They don't know what it's for. At the rate they're making delivery, you may someday find yourself with nothing."

She glanced toward the hallway. Her crate was still being filled. She didn't know if her argument had any merit or not, but distracting SandTail from DevilChaser's transfer of supplies was more important. She'd engage the little man in debate for as long as she could. "Between your expansion into Crossroads and your need to replace a large haul of poisoned Destiny, you're ignoring natural growth cycles and depleting the Marsh, without leaving time for sufficient new growth to occur."

SandTail mused, "An interesting theory, but you're not the agricultural type."

"I know someone who is."

SandTail turned to his protégé. "This is your family's business she's maligning."

BrushBurn rose, empty bowl in hand. "My family is concerned with feeding people," he said, mildly. "Our expansion has already experienced its share of blunders. If there are any unforeseen difficulties, I'd want to know about them, however unpleasant they may sound."

He rounded the table and laid a gentle touch on TripStone's shoulder. She looked up into pensive steel blue and fought the urge to grasp BrushBurn's fingers before they slipped from her.

## CHAPTER 32

The crate waited by the door. TripStone followed BrushBurn's gaze down the hallway as he gave the apothecary a last hug across the back and left a full bowl behind for DevilChaser. Perhaps the doctor could get his companion to eat.

BrushBurn pushed a second bowl toward her. "That's for SunDog. I'll carry the box." He bowed toward SandTail, who answered with a tiny nod. A knowing look passed between the men, but the trader's face turned blank before TripStone could study it further. She followed him, confused. BrushBurn lifted the crate as though it were empty and motioned her outside.

Once out of SandTail's sight, he sagged under the weight on his shoulder and slowed his steps as they walked the short distance under tarpaulin-covered scaffolding, toward the shed. Rain beat on oiled leather overhead. The trader said, beneath echoes of spilling gravel, "Tell me how you knew."

TripStone cradled the stew in her hands, shaking her head. "Knew what?"

BrushBurn stopped her in mid-stride as water dripped to either side of them. He looked at her skeptically. "You expect me to believe your speech about the Marsh was spontaneous."

"It was." She squinted at him. "I was buying time. That seemed as good an argument as any."

"Our deliveries from the Marsh have stopped without explanation." BrushBurn brought his face close to hers. The muscles around his eyes ticced with a mixture of worry and relief. "I can see you weren't aware of that."

He waved jovially to a pair of women transporting wood boards, then became serious again. "I'm leaving for Skedge tomorrow to stop at the factory. Then I'll go into Alvav." When he saw the stew, his voice dropped to a whisper. "You're about to shatter that bowl."

TripStone forced her grip to loosen. "Don't go. You'll be killed."

His eyes widened. "Why?"

“Trust me, BrushBurn.” Her voice turned vehement as his arm steadied her. “I wish I could tell you everything. I can’t.”

BrushBurn stopped outside the shed’s large wooden doors, beneath a tilted overhang, and set down the box. He pried the bowl from TripStone’s hands and placed it on a low post. The wind drove water against them. Rivulets ran between their feet.

“TripStone, I need to know.” BrushBurn gripped her shoulders with unaccustomed force. “SandTail is ready to arm the Marsh in return for our supplies. Going into Alvav is the last thing I want to do. If I’m putting myself in danger, I want to know why.”

TripStone shut her eyes against nausea, shaking her head.

“Then I’ll die. Frankly, I’d rather be killed than enter into the gun trade again. I’ve already done far too much damage.” BrushBurn took her face in his hands. “Please look at me.”

“I can’t.”

The noise of construction lulled her, but the warm palms cupping her cheeks were insistent. She tried to pull his hands away.

Lips brushed her forehead. “You make me wish I had been born in Crossroads.”

TripStone forced herself to look at him. She whispered, “I wish you’d been born there, too. If you had, we wouldn’t be destroying each other like this.”

Rain dripped from the overhang. BrushBurn guided her closer to the shed doors. TripStone clung to him as his arms slipped around her, beneath her cloak. His lungs filled slowly and deeply against her, his lips curling back as her own breaths quickened.

“I don’t think I’ve ever known you to be so frightened, TripStone.” His nostrils flared. Steel blue bored into her. “I’m afraid, too, especially after what you’ve told me. But you are terrified right now.”

She nodded, unable to speak.



“This is about much more than saving Skedge.”

She whispered, “Yes.”

BrushBurn kissed her forehead again, then turned away and snatched up the crate. TripStone grabbed the cold stew and rushed breathlessly after him. Into the shed, past the dissection tables, back to the curtain where he lifted a corner flap and ducked through.

She swallowed hard as he nodded in recognition. BrushBurn’s smile broadened as he gazed down at the man seated beside a table filled with cloth masks and shallow dishes, beakers and stoppered bottles, lenses. He set the crate down and said, softly, “Your supplies, Ghost.”

Ghost looked up. “BrushBurn.” He stood and extended his hand. The trader grasped it tightly and enfolded him in a strong hug.

“That is for saving TripStone’s life.” BrushBurn stepped back, his eyes gleaming. “I’m glad she found you. Now please tell me what’s going on.”

TripStone gingerly placed her bowl on the table and tried to clear the hoarseness from her voice. “The chameleons have stopped delivery. SandTail’s sending BrushBurn into Alvav to offer them arms. I told him he’ll be killed if he goes there.”

Ghost strained pale liquid from one line of dishes to the next. Thunder boomed outside. “You’re probably right.” A fresh blast of wind sent hard rain clattering against the wood. Ghost dipped his hands in a basin and dried them on a towel. He stepped further down the table and prepared a burner to reheat the stew. “It’s your mission, Stone. How much do we tell him?”

TripStone gazed upon a tall frame bent studiously over the food. When Ghost looked back at her she said, “It’s your family.”

Ghost struck a flame, nodding. His shoulders swiveled smoothly in their sockets as he turned from the burner, his neck fur rising as he looked BrushBurn up and down. “What Stone means is that anything we tell you could place my wife and child in more danger than they are already in.” He frowned. “Now that we’ve trusted you with some of our secrets, not telling you could pose that same risk.”

BrushBurn picked up and examined a mask. "I once told TripStone I envied you your time in the Marsh. I know you have a family there. I can only assume your wife is Yata."

"My wife and child are in Skedge."

BrushBurn nodded. "All the more reason to save Skedge, then. But your mission goes beyond that." He held up the mask. "I thought you were planning to gas the barracks and provide protection for the angels. But there are dozens of these sized for Yata, not Masari." He looked hard at TripStone. "Do you intend to use these in Skedge or at the Farm?"

TripStone looked quickly to Ghost and received a calm nod. Both men were trusting her. She sat, leaning on the table, wondering how far she could trust herself. "We're delivering them to Skedge. Though if we had more time and materials, having enough for the Farm would be preferable."

"You're planning to free the Yata." BrushBurn gave her an indulgent smile. "As a child I dreamt all the time about opening the gates." He studied the curtain as lightning flashed through cracks in the wood. "My parents explained to me the foolishness of it. Give the Farm Yata a chance and they'll explain the foolishness of it, too. They have a simple, pleasurable life under the drug."

Ghost took the mask from him and dropped it back onto the pile. "Some do," he said, mildly. "MudAdder, for one." He returned to the burner and lowered the flame, his eyes smoldering. "How many don't?"

"I don't know. I haven't been back there in a long time." BrushBurn's voice dropped. "I believe those Yata who are free should remain that way. Our attempt at expansion was a terrible mistake, and now we're compounding it." He turned back toward Ghost, arms folded across his chest. "But you want to destroy Destiny Farm entirely, regardless of what may result." He nodded at the stew, a look of concern on his face. "The meat the angels provide comprises twelve percent on average of Promontory's Yata consumption. The other eighty-eight percent comes from the Farm. Ignoring for a moment the high security measures already in place against poaching, how do you propose to make up that eighty-eight percent if your mission succeeds?"

He was more curious than confrontational. TripStone looked from BrushBurn to Ghost, who was scraping his stew back into its bowl and mouthing a prayer. The

trader waited in respectful silence.

“I never used to pray over the Yata I ate.” Ghost sighed. “I wanted to eradicate my dependence, not be constantly reminded of it, especially in Crossroads. Now I feel the least I should do is acknowledge them.”

He slipped a morsel into his mouth. Calm spread across his features as he chewed, swallowed. “I don’t have a satisfactory answer for you, but I’ve been studying Stone’s notes from the Milkweed. Weaning is a step in the right direction, but the only time Promontory decreases its consumption is when the Chamber imposes rationing. Otherwise, they view the Yata as expendable.” His gaze was clinical. “Your family is afraid of Promontory starving if they start viewing their livestock as you did. Are the Yata just beasts to them?”

“Of course not. But my family can’t afford to treat them otherwise.”

“You did.”

BrushBurn growled, “I faced the consequences for it.”

“Sunrise and your child faced the consequences for it.” Ghost nodded at a steely flash of anger, the puff of rust-colored fur. “Did you ever go under the awnings again after that?”

“No.” The trader loomed over him. “Perhaps some day I’ll be privileged to know as much about your life as you apparently know about mine, but I don’t see how this relates to sustaining either Yata or Masari. The Farm has successfully supported both.”

“Enslavement by artificial means is not support.”

TripStone rose from her stool. The men seethed before her, breathing hard. She smelled fear on both of them. “BrushBurn.” She placed her hand on his arm. “If the chameleons won’t provide the supplies, how do you propose to run the Farm without Destiny?”

He snarled, “You can’t.”

Ghost swallowed. “Sure you can.” His voice was drum tight, his narrowed eyes reflecting the storm rattling the walls. “You keep your Yata captives in a

compound; you have enough to mine whole prisons out of the quarries here. You herd them into enclosed spaces and gun them down, if you're that concerned about providing a ready food source. Or you poison them as the Little Masari did." He spooned up thick broth, musing at a gob of fat floating in the liquid. "There are plenty of ways to keep Promontory fed."

BrushBurn matched him stare for stare. "They would not breed under those conditions. And even if they did, my family would never abide by those practices."

"Wouldn't they?" Ghost set the bowl down and stepped up to BrushBurn, his spine taut. "Promontory sacrificed its own children to Skedge in the hope of eventually obtaining Destiny and establishing the Farm in the first place. Don't tell me what it won't do."

BrushBurn hissed, "I'm telling you what my *family* won't do, even to feed Promontory."

Ghost's palm slammed against the trader's chest. "Then *who* killed your wife and child when you barely knew the meaning of the words? Who tried to wean you from Yata emotionally so that only the nutritional need was left, and when that didn't work who sent you into a profession where you handled only *pieces* of them?" He slouched toward BrushBurn. "Don't tell me that isn't brutal. It made you hate Masari, and to hate yourself for being one."

Ghost returned to sit by the stew and stared at the wall. Then he jumped up and began to pace. He lifted a lab knife convulsively from the table and put it back down.

They listened to relentless pounding from the rain. Even the construction outside abated.

TripStone watched his muscles jump. She fell in step beside him and looked into haunted eyes. "Don't say anything you don't want to. He doesn't need to know."

"Yes, he does." Ghost glanced back at BrushBurn, who watched them with calm resignation. "We're both exiles from our farms, only I'm welcome back into mine. I'm fighting to protect my wife and child, while his was murdered without a second thought. I've had within my grasp *everything* that's been taken away from him." He called to BrushBurn, "Maybe if I can show you what's possible,

we can put an end to this madness.”

The two men stood stiffly before each other, each pinched in pain.

“You’re right, you know.” BrushBurn turned from Ghost and studied the mixtures on the table. “The Farm has its cruelties. I like to think that I understand the Yata better than I do my own kind, except perhaps for *yatanii*.” A soft smile played across his lips. His voice dropped. “I don’t go back home because deep down inside I still want to open the gates. Then we’d be left with confused Yata wrested from a blissful existence and Masari ultimately starving to death. It’s an impractical dream.”

“Not for me.” Ghost’s chest rose and fell, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, his spine taut. “You say you understand Yata. *You don’t.*” He met BrushBurn’s raised eyebrows with growing fury. “You understand only those who were drugged and grateful for it, or the very young who didn’t know what was happening to them, just as you didn’t know what was happening to you. You understand the naked and pliable ones who had no choice but to be helpless, because you were helpless right along with them.” He moved in closer, shaking his head. “You didn’t try understanding the people of Skedge because they thought they were Masari and you couldn’t stand that. You were barely Masari, yourself.”

Liquids sloshed in their beakers as Ghost pinned the trader against the table, his hands bunching cloth. “You lost one child at the Farm, BrushBurn. *Piri lost seven!*” He roared, “*Don’t tell me your livestock lead happy lives!* You haven’t been back there. You haven’t seen the bones littering the box canyon from all the attempted escapes. You don’t know what goes through their heads.” He turned away, shaking. “Piri’s been very adept at telling me what went through her head. She told me *exactly* what the Farm did to her.”

BrushBurn’s arms dropped to his side. He whispered, stunned, “You’re married to a *Farm Yata*?”

“Yes, and if anything happens to her or my son as a result of this conversation, I will slit your throat.” Ghost returned to his stool and picked up his bowl. “Frankly, I don’t much care what happens to Promontory after what it’s done to Crossroads, but I respect Stone’s concern for the people here. Most of those who support the Farm do so in ignorance, including you.” He looked up, bleary-eyed.

“I’ve said my piece, Stone. Tell him whatever you want.”

TripStone stepped behind Ghost and massaged his shoulders. She looked across at BrushBurn, wrinkling her brow. “The chameleons probably know now what they’ve been trading to Promontory, and that’s why they’ve stopped their shipments.”

“And you think they’ll kill me if I go into Alvav.”

TripStone concentrated on kneading Ghost and said nothing.

BrushBurn gazed at the curtain. “Who would have told them?” He sighed into the ensuing silence. “I’ll be honest with you; the Farm is in a weakened state right now. I haven’t heard anything from there, and that disturbs me.” He glanced at Ghost and shook his head. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you have to realize that most citizens here are deathly afraid of Yata they can’t control. Destiny Farm is about more than just food. The Yata may have been gods to you, but they were demons to Promontory.” He smiled sadly down at the masks. “This is a well-armed town. You’ve seen what it does when it’s desperate. Your mission doesn’t stand a chance, and neither do the chameleons.”

Ghost set his bowl aside again and returned to the beakers. He seemed industrious and detached, but TripStone knew better.

She gave his shoulders a last squeeze and walked up to BrushBurn. “Whatever our chances, I want you to be able to love Yata again, with complete freedom, but first we must take down the Farm.” She took the trader’s hand in hers. “That freedom is more possible than you think.”

BrushBurn slid his arm across her back as they leaned against the table. His eyes glinted as he whispered, “Now *you’re* being cruel.”

“No.”

“Then you’re being delusional.” He gathered her into his arms. “But don’t stop.”

Ghost looked up from his work as thunder rocked the shed. “BrushBurn, some of the roads are washed out by now. You and Stone will spend the night here. I’ll take you across the salt lake in the morning if you still want to go.” He offered the trader a little smile. “I’ve been called delusional for years and I consider it a

compliment. You're going to meet the fruits of it."

## CHAPTER 33

### Crossroads

A mild drizzle coated the morning as citizens shifted from foot to foot, crowding into the market square. HigherBrook listened to a rising swell of voices as he climbed atop Promontory's meat cart.

The cart's emptiness and the sudden absence of 'advisors' had been enough to draw most of his people to the town center without prodding. The others had been asleep, jumping up from their pallets to answer the hard raps on their doors.

Stragglers still entered from the side roads. It was a glorious morning, not a single would-be conqueror in sight. HigherBrook continued to breathe the rain-washed air of freedom for as long as it lasted. If the gods agreed with him, it should last for a long time.

They had granted him this moment. It would be a shame if they spoiled it now.

HigherBrook's linen suit remained in the dormitory as rain beaded up on his dun-colored hunting tunic and trousers. His sling was gone, but bandages still padded his shoulder. He fought the urge to scratch a growing itch.

"I never would have believed we could fit all of Crossroads into this marketplace." RootWing called up from below and to the side of the cart. "Gods, but we've lost a lot of people."

HigherBrook lowered his voice and called back down, "We could lose more."

RootWing nodded. "We won't be alone, this time. That should improve our odds." He looked out into the crowd. "And Gria's." He grinned up at HigherBrook. "I think you should be more concerned about leaving this place in the Chamber's hands."

"After what we've seen?" HigherBrook gestured toward a burned-out building. "I convened our session in the tavern yesterday. Imagine my surprise when all of my proposals passed unopposed." He raised an eyebrow. "That won't happen again."



The stragglers finished filing into the market square. HigherBrook planted his feet further apart, inhaling the last remnants of soap. CatBird and her band had scrubbed the cart down after wheeling it to the Rotunda and transferring its contents.

The cleaning had been done out of thoughtfulness, but their other act filled HigherBrook's heart to bursting. He had hugged CatBird tightly when she told him that her cadre had blessed and purified the Rotunda's hold where they had stored the Yata. Then they had laid each slab into place with a prayer, turning the Farm meat from commodity into sacrament as best they could.

Now he gave a nod to what remained of Crossroads' obsolete census takers. They raised their horns and blew deep, sonorous tones, no longer to recall hunters from Meat Day but to call the crowd to silence.

HigherBrook filled his lungs. "By now you have all noticed that our guests are no longer with us. They are still in Crossroads, but they are locked up and under guard. We have taken possession of the Yata they've brought." He extended his arm toward the tavern. "You may be wondering about their behavior three days ago. As soon as Promontory discovered a way to make Destiny, its agents dropped their pretense of being Crossroads' rescuers and proceeded to reveal their true intent as our occupiers and conquerors. You may discern that intent by stepping up to the bar."

He waited for murmurs of surprise to die down, knowing they would soon grow louder. "Several of us have known their purpose here for quite some time. We have chosen to withhold that information from you because we felt that keeping Crossroads alive was more important. If you want to pass judgment after what I am about to tell you, then judge me. Some wanted you to know the truth sooner, particularly a woman named TripStone."

HigherBrook pointed to thick wood slats below. "We were starving when the cart I'm standing on arrived from Promontory. Our far neighbor seemed generous and kind and the beneficiary of extremely successful hunts. Some of you suspected otherwise when the Chamber refused to endorse its meat, but in light of our hardships many people didn't much care where that meat came from, or how we purchased it.

"I will tell you how we came by that meat." He drew a deep breath to fight a

wave of dizziness and the buzzing in his shoulder. His eyes narrowed. “Promontory wanted to own Crossroads from the start, and it planned to bankrupt us through our hunger. Its agents found a secret society of Yata encamped outside Basc, a group seeking to return to the ancient ways of the time before the Covenant. Promontory obtained significant quantities of Destiny by giving this secret society the arms that killed most of our hunters.”

Shouts of disbelief erupted from the marketplace. HigherBrook held up his hand. “Gria’s militia perpetrated the massacre of our people, but *Promontory engineered it*, lying about its use of the drug, which is to farm Yata.

“Not many are left in Crossroads who can read the ancient tongue, and we convinced those who could to maintain silence. *Destiny Farm* is the translation of those symbols stamped on the meat. The Yata there are not hunted, but are treated as nothing more than breeding stock. *That is what you have been eating.*”

HigherBrook closed his eyes for a moment, but more than that he wanted to close his ears. He steeled himself against the convulsions rippling through the crowd below. Even those citizens whose reverence for Yata had turned to hatred cried out, gripped by shock.

His soldiers stood to either side of the cart, calm and self-assured, the members of the Chamber arrayed behind them. The census takers held their horns at the ready, but HigherBrook shook his head. His people wanted more information. They would quiet down soon enough. He reached beneath his collar and pulled out his talisman of braided skins, letting it drop against his tunic.

The shouting yielded to soft cries rising in the drizzle. HigherBrook waited for them to fade, gazing out over a sea of contorted faces. “There is a reason for Promontory’s actions against us. We have a history of which we were kept unaware, along with much else.” He bent forward to slip off his StormCloud one-handed and lifted it high above his head. He yelled, “The existence of this rifle alone should tell you how uninformed we’ve been.”

He repositioned the strap across his chest. “For now, know that a representative from Rudder has informed its Chamber of our situation, presenting them with a sworn statement from me. Promontory is planning to send another invasion force here, but those people will have to pass through Rudder. That will not be allowed to happen. Rudder has closed its border against Promontory.

“And there is something else you should know.” HigherBrook scanned the crowd, looking for clusters of his advisors to Basc. Their smiles beamed encouragement. He squatted by the edge of the cart to receive a thick loaf of bread from RootWing, then straightened and cradled it against his chest. “Many of you still know the Yata of Basc only within the context of the hunting grounds, if you’ve entered them at all. Many of you still think only in terms of the massacre, and that is understandable. We have lost many friends and kinsmen because of it. Believe me when I say that Gria’s militia suffered dearly for its actions. Without our tithes, Basc faced starvation right along with us.”

He held up the loaf. “You might think this comes from the Grange. *It does not.* Most of our harvest has gone to Promontory, which now considers our farm to be its property. This bread is from Basc, which has established its own farm and its own industries with our help. *This is food aid, delivered to us from the Yata.*”

A thrill ran through HigherBrook’s veins. He chuckled at exclamations of bewilderment, momentarily lightheaded as he returned the bread to RootWing. When he next gazed into the market square, he swallowed a lump in his throat as he spotted tears beginning to fall, filled no longer with pain but with relief.

The massacre had claimed the Covenant as its chief casualty, leaving little hope for peace. Now he saw that hope rekindled in waves throughout the throng. “Citizens of Crossroads, our villages are *repairing* each other. We are *healing* each other. Only a few here have known of the truce we’ve established. If Promontory found out, it would have destroyed both our peoples. It is already planning an assault on the Yata of Skedge. *Its next target is Basc.*”

“And that brings us back to Gria’s militia.” HigherBrook’s hand moved toward his goatee. He forced it back down, letting his fingers curl instead around the talisman. “To either side of me stand the *new hunters* of Crossroads. They are the ones responsible for retaking our village from Promontory. They have also been training with Gria’s army, which now includes most of Basc.” He held more tightly to the braided skins, wondering how much strength flowing into him came from dead Yata and how much from dead Masari.

He cleared his throat. “That army is now on its way to Promontory to destroy Destiny Farm. It was detained in Alvay, but has been allowed to go forward.” He nodded at sudden stillness. “Believe me, I know your fear and I share it. Crossroads almost perished outright the last time Yata possessed firearms, yet

we're trusting them now. When you learn of our history, the idea of Yata with guns becomes even more distressing than it already is. But the Covenant that has bonded our peoples together is helping to save us now."

Another throat cleared below him. HigherBrook smiled down at RootWing, then turned his attention back to the market square. "We have two futures ahead of us. RootWing has just reminded me of one of them." He stepped to the edge of the wagon. "Some of you have been working in Basc. You understand better what I am about to say. Our people have worshipped the Yata as gods. When they turned against us without warning, we were plunged into a hell that none of us could have ever imagined. But Yata are neither gods nor demons. They are *people*."

The braided skins warmed his palm; he couldn't feel where one ended and the next began. "It took a heretic to see that, when a Yata woman who escaped from Destiny Farm received sanctuary in his cabin." HigherBrook peered out over the crowd. "Many of you knew this heretic as SunDog; a few of you may know him as Ghost. He and Piri have recently made RootWing the insufferably proud grandfather of a hybrid child."

He stepped back, grinning, waiting for the rumble of astonishment to lessen. When he couldn't wait any longer, he called out, "We just have to get them home safely, because their home is *here!*"

Shock circled throughout the marketplace, delightfully ticklish. HigherBrook gestured with what he could move. "We're trusting the Yata of Basc with guns, but they're trusting us to protect their children right now. And our new covenant with each other includes the mutual acceptance of *all* hybrid children. If we're lucky, some of them will be free of our dependence on Yata.

"Another part of this future is the acceptance and full support of *yatanii*." He looked to see who smiled broadly. Whose cheeks were too hollow, whose arms too thin. "Not as some of you have practiced it, but as the *yatanii* do in Rudder. They have *decreased that dependence*, some of them dramatically, without sickness and without guilt. BubbleCreek, the representative from Rudder, can probably lift and carry me, but she has gone without Yata for almost two full seasons. And *she* is carrying a hybrid child."

He began to pace in the wagon bed, waiting for murmurs of amazement to run

their course. CatBird grinned up at him with tears in her eyes. HigherBrook grinned up at the gods and blinked against the rain. *If you exist, do not spoil this.*

He returned to the front of the cart. “That is one future.” He resumed pacing, trying to dissipate nervous energy from his legs. “The other future has Promontory bloating Destiny Farm with the Yata from Skedge, overpowering the Yata from Basc, and mounting an assault on Alvav to get what they need to make their drug. That future has livestock rather than people. It erases everything the Covenant has taught us. It gives us food but costs us our soul.” His eyes blazed. “If you think Crossroads is impoverished now, you have yet to see our *complete* degradation.”

His hand moved again to the talisman. “That is why we are trusting armed Yata, and that is why we must help them. After much deliberation, Rudder’s Chamber has assessed the threat to its own way of life and has sanctioned the disbanding of Destiny Farm. Our first job is to ensure that mission is successful. To that end I am leading some of our forces into Promontory to join a detachment from Rudder.

“Our next job will be to heal this region.” The crowded marketplace turned suddenly small, each kin group a fraction of its former size. HigherBrook blinked against a vision of the dead rising from the throng. “That will not be easy, especially after what we are about to do. But we have a longstanding rift with Promontory that must be closed if we are to move forward.”

On one side of HigherBrook the Rotunda blotted out low clouds, a gray mass against a grayer sky. Dozens of prisoners squirmed below the meat sandwiched between books and men. On the other side lay hillsides ravaged to feed acts of war. Both filled the horizon with stately grace, bearing hidden scars.

Between them, HigherBrook sank to his knees.

“The gods of the Covenant are not enough any more.” He tilted his face up into the rain. Cloaks and armor rustled below as hands joined across the market square. “We need the gods of the Dirt People. We need whatever gods there are in Rudder, in the Marsh, on the Cliff, on Skedge, in Promontory. And, especially, we need the gods of Destiny Farm to help us. We must implore *all* of our dead, especially now, to guide us through this time.”

Songbirds echoed around a crowd fallen to silence. The cart wobbled as CatBird

stepped up to grasp one hand and RootWing the other. HigherBrook squeezed back hard.

Time stopped. Before HigherBrook floated a Yata soldier, her black hair shorn, her armor punctured where his bullet had sped through both her lungs. He could smell her flesh, remember her taste. Russet brown eyes gazed into his above a sprinkling of freckles. Generous lips bowed into a smile.

The apparition produced no parchment, but HigherBrook saw the curve of her brow and the variations in her skin, the proud set of her shoulders. He knew what to look for in her kin, should he chance upon them on his walks through Basc. He would ask them to remember the woman to him. He met the vision's smile with his own and nodded.

She laid tapered fingers across his chops and tapped, *Succeed*.

She vanished as the census takers blew their horns. HigherBrook peered into mist as the murmuring crowd began to disperse. Several citizens stepped carefully among the ruins of the tavern. Others stayed behind with questions, many questions, for the Chamber.

He squeezed CatBird's hand. "Start heading for the transports. I will join you shortly."

## CHAPTER 34

### Skedge

Ghost leaned his long body into the crevasse as rain lashed him. His long fingers and oversized boots grappled with Yata-sized indentations. More than once he almost slipped and fell. Far below the salt lake churned, dotted with amphibious carts and cobbled-together rafts.

“Turn your body sideways more.” BrushBurn’s gravelly voice rose up to him. “The rock will hold you.”

The trader proved agile on the climb, negotiating handholds and footholds instinctively. Even weighed down by a heavy pack, he dodged small avalanches with quick swings that would have sent Ghost tumbling to the boulders below. It must have taken years of steady practice, hauling uncounted guns to Gria and uncounted sacks of Destiny back.

That robust smuggler hardly seemed the mild figure Ghost had viewed in lantern light as an ongoing deluge blotted out the morning and hammered against the shed. BrushBurn and TripStone had slept entwined, his arm around her back, her head pillowed on his chest. Both of them breathed deeply and easily in each other’s embrace. Ghost had awakened them gently, his hands on their shoulders.

TripStone had hugged both men long and hard, resting her chops against theirs before they left. She’d handed Ghost a thick pack stuffed with masks and given BrushBurn a tightly-folded parchment filled with pictograms.

“Show this if anyone stops you in Alvav.” She tucked the message into BrushBurn’s leather vest pocket. “It argues for your life.”

Now Ghost hesitated on the climb, his hair plastered to his face, his body twisted enough to give him a better look at rafts tethered to the rock face far from the crevasse. Dozens of them floated, fashioned of long, narrow planks, completely out of place and yet familiar.

“I see them, too,” BrushBurn said. “And no, I haven’t seen them before.”

“Not during high water?”

“No. But these are hardly ordinary times.” The trader paused, thoughtful. “They remind me of paintings.”

Ghost hauled himself up again. “Paintings of what?”

BrushBurn chortled. “Boardwalks.”

Ghost nodded, his heart thumping. He looked up toward the metal railing at the top of the mesa. No shouts sounded from above. He heard no crash of marble projectiles, no gunshots. This was not the same Skedge WoodFoam had described to him. It was too quiet.

He looked down at the rafts again. There was no mistake; he had walked on that wood. Nothing to do then but climb. Up the craggy rock, onto the top stairs. Ghost paused as BrushBurn stepped next to him, onto the stone platform.

They twitched, then raised their hands slowly as they heard cocking levers pulled.

Armored Yata spilled out from behind columns, shouting. Ghost tried to ignore the muzzle of a StormCloud pressed against his chest as a wiry woman aimed hers at BrushBurn, point blank, her finger on the trigger.

“He’s carrying a message from TripStone, and I have materials for Gria!” Out of the corner of his eye, Ghost saw the trader blanch.

The woman eyed him dubiously. “I don’t know who you are,” she called above the wind, “but I know who this Woolie is and he deserves to die.”

“I’m Ghost, and before you shoot BrushBurn I suggest you show Gria the note he’s carrying. Lower left pocket of his vest.”

Another soldier bound the trader’s wrists behind his back as the woman bent and pulled out the note. She tucked it into her cuirasse, then climbed atop a chunk of marble and spat in BrushBurn’s face, glaring as the rain washed his cheek. Her arm swept across a line of troops shouldering modified training rifles. “You recognize the weapons you delivered, yes?” Her lips curled into a mirthless smile. “We’re bringing them back.”



BrushBurn met her rage with calm amazement, shaking his head at the Yata and Masari hides complementing her armor.

The woman shouldered her StormCloud and stepped up to Ghost, her fingers outstretched. She pulled down his arm and drummed, *You are dead if you're lying. How do I know you're Ghost?*

He answered on her upturned palm, *Piri and TelZodo will recognize me. So will AgatePool.* Ghost studied the woman's shoulders. Two frayed black braids dripped amidst a Masari pelt.

She nodded to her lieutenant to withdraw his weapon, then turned back. "I'm Zai. I'll take you to Gria." She looked over at a bemused BrushBurn. "You've brought us quite a prisoner."

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Crazed marble plates angled up against each other in the jumbled stone walks of Skedge, collecting rain in impromptu pools. Ghost stepped carefully around sharp points and looked over at BrushBurn's ripped breeches, grimacing. The blindfolded trader stumbled repeatedly over jagged edges.

"Don't help him," Zai commanded sharply. BrushBurn offered a gagged, sightless nod, bearing up under humiliation as though it wasn't worth the trouble. He seemed more fascinated than frightened, despite the muzzle shoved against his spine.

Armed sentries patrolled checkpoints throughout the mesa, chatting with citizens who braved the storm to learn rudimentary Yata as readily as they discussed the downfall of Destiny Farm. BrushBurn cocked his head in their direction, his brow furrowed.

"It's Yata," Ghost offered.

"He knows it's Yata," Zai snapped. "He learned the language to enhance his dealings with us." She called back to the trader, "We've destroyed your factory with the help of some former Little Masari who were very glad to assist. You should be happy you're with us or they'd have killed you by now."

She turned away as BrushBurn's boot caught on a sharp, upraised edge. The

trader was agile here, too, his lithe movements belying his physique. More than once he made quick corrections to keep from falling. He could be a boy, tripping over canyon rock, learning grace in the midst of boulders. Ghost observed an ordeal mellowing into a very old game.

They reached AgatePool's fractured columns. Zai rapped on the door. Ghost smiled wryly at the rhythm of his cabin knock. Movement flitted behind windows at both the main house and the guest quarters.

A bar slid from inside. AgatePool opened the door a crack and looked up, past the soldiers, to the bound Masari. She said, drily, "Our ambassador's looked better."

The narrow opening framed slender arms in the distance, a fuzz of violet, a flash of straw-colored braid. Ghost shouldered past StormClouds, half-blind and breathless and unmindful of the armaments. His body jolted with joy. He called, "Let BrushBurn see this."

Behind him Zai said, "You don't give orders here."

"Please. It's important."

Ghost grinned down at AgatePool as she held the door wider, enough for him to catch Piri's triumphant smile, the child cradled in her arms and then passed to a tall Yata woman with graying hair. He ducked beneath the lintel, would barrel through the troops if he had to.

He didn't have to. Piri was shoving them aside.

Ghost cried out as her arms encircled his waist, her fingers reaching beneath his soaked pack and pulling up his shirt, grasping his back. Rainwater spilled from him, drenching her before it splattered on the stone floor and soaked into pillows. She elated against his chest, moaning in deep pleasure as he bent and joyfully nipped her neck. He laughed as her sheathed knives swung against his pants.

She grabbed Ghost's hand and led him before Gria. The general held TelZodo as she would an exotic plant. Carefully and clinically, unsure of its properties.

AgatePool brushed by them and returned with a towel. It didn't matter. Ghost

still dripped on TelZodo as he took the baby in his arms and nuzzled fine down. Tiny fingers tried to gather the water trailing off long curls and fuzzy cheeks, playfully collecting drops. Ghost wondered if the child could tell which came from the sky and which were salty. He trembled at a squeal of delight and clutched TelZodo to his chest. Already his son was longer, heavier, and yet light as heaven.

Three soldiers pushed BrushBurn forcefully to the pillows and bound his ankles, tightening his wrist restraints. But his blindfold was off. He blinked in the light under drips from rust-colored curls, disturbingly calm, his eyes twinkling with relief. The trader relaxed into his bindings, trying to smile around his gag when he spotted Piri and TelZodo.

The others filed into the house, streaming water onto the cushions, the stone. Zai pulled the parchment from her cuirasse and handed it to Gria, along with BrushBurn's revolver. Gria frowned as she studied the pictograms. She dragged her nails across her scalp as she pocketed the parchment, then crossed to the trader.

He met her gaze unflinchingly when she knelt and grabbed his hair, jerking his head backward.

"TripStone asks that I show you mercy." BrushBurn's revolver was enormous in her hands, but training with StormClouds had made her fingers supple. She cocked the hammer back a notch and set the barrel against his chest, watching it even rise and fall. "But you're more than ready to die."

Ghost said, softly, "He's wanted to be culled since he was a boy."

"Yes, I can see that." Of all the permutations of Ata, Gria had never expected to encounter the sickness in reverse. She moved the barrel up, sinking it into the trader's neck fur. "The only thing that disgusts me more is knowing our crime is a shared one, BrushBurn. You and I both swaggered the same way. If it weren't for my greed for guns, you'd be long dead."

The barrel moved up again, pressing hard below BrushBurn's chin. Gria watched, her gaze dispassionate as the trader tried to swallow, his mouth stuffed with cloth. "And were it not for your greed for TripStone, my people might never have learned of Destiny Farm." She nodded as BrushBurn's eyes twitched at the corners, his pupils constricting. "I can see she didn't tell you." Her nails

dug into his scalp as she pulled. “What arrogance led you to force an accomplished hunter and *yatanii* to sell you her body and then believe she did so in order to obtain a *meal*? My army is the direct result of her delivering that meat to *us*.”

BrushBurn moaned as realization dawned. Gria fought nausea. Rusty curls broke off in her hand. “That meat was my downfall as much as it is yours. I was ready to die that day, just as you are now. I refused to believe how many Yata were trussed and gutted because I couldn’t see past my own ambitions. So much blood. I still choke on it.” Gria shook her head; the barrel pressed harder. “My arrogance made me look the other way when you told us Destiny was a spice of communion for the Masari. But you were obsessed with your own communion, yes? You’d already been sacrificed a long time ago.”

She eased the hammer forward and spoke through gritted teeth. “Were it not for the mercy of others, I would have paid for my own crimes back in Alvav, and my people with me, and we would not be here having this conversation.” She withdrew the gun and slid it back to Zai. “When I received TripStone’s messages from Promontory, I couldn’t conceive of what you were doing to her. Now I can.”

Gria released BrushBurn’s hair, wiping its wetness off on her tunic. She looked back at Ghost and Piri. They sat cross-legged on the cushions now, drumming onto each other’s palms as Piri held TelZodo to her breast. Piri looked intermittently in BrushBurn’s direction and nodded, tapping more urgently.

Gria stood. She surveyed the stone walls, wondering how often they’d been scrubbed of ancient Masari blood. “We’ll need to move soon. We’ve been holding prisoners in the factory. They’re probably already missed.” She jerked a thumb back toward BrushBurn. “Confine him to a guest house.”

Troops hauled the bound trader to his feet and dragged him across the rain-slicked floor. He offered no resistance. His sigh sounded almost happy as he looked from one scowling captor to another.

Piri watched BrushBurn as Ghost’s fingers continued to tap. Steel blue eyes gazed into hers as though nothing else in the room existed, as though the trader were a long-lost brother yearning for home. Her fingertips caressed Ghost’s palm.

Ghost asked, *Are you sure?*

Yes, she assured him. *I will be all right.* She pointed to the knives slung by her hips. Still holding TelZodo, she crossed to AgatePool's table and retrieved her collection of written sounds.

Ghost waited until the trader was gone and AgatePool had closed and barred the door, then shrugged off and opened his pack. He laid out masks, gas canisters, launchers. "These will help you take the Warehouse. You'll experience eye and skin irritation, but the guards will suffer much worse."

Gria raised her eyebrows. "You move quickly."

"The masks were to protect my family in the Marsh. I've been working on them for close to a season. I learned about the mission only a few days ago." Ghost leaned back on his heels and squinted critically at Gria. "BrushBurn helped TripStone and me conceal their manufacture. I trusted him with the same trepidation I feel about trusting you."

Piri lowered TelZodo into Ghost's arms before reaching for a cloak. She safeguarded her papers in woolen folds, drew the hood over her head, and strode across a room filled with warriors before plucking the blindfold from Zai's pocket. She rummaged in a corner for rope.

Zai spluttered, "You're not going to him."

Piri nodded. She motioned soldiers aside before she slid the door's heavy stone bar with both hands and stepped out into the rain.

CHAPTER 35

The guest house had been cleared of furniture, leaving only a large, cold cell webbed in pink-veined marble. Piri tapped her gratitude to the sentry who opened the door. She brushed water from her cloak as she stepped inside.

The trader lay on his side before her, doubled over and drenched, his cheek resting on the puddled floor. Rope wound about his legs and held his wrists together behind his back. He opened his eyes with a sleepy flutter as the door thudded closed.

His drowsiness vanished as Piri lowered her hood and slipped out of her cloak. She smiled at his stare. He was not as heavy as NightShout; with enough effort she could drag him out of the wet. BrushBurn stopped her with an alarmed grunt as she tugged at his ankles.

Piri understood as he rocked himself back. She aided his momentum as he rolled onto dry stone.

He was still gagged. Neither of them could speak.

Piri coaxed BrushBurn onto his stomach. She slipped out a knife and cut one arm free, binding the other to his side. She rolled him onto his back and took his hand in hers. He held onto her fingers tightly, his eyes moist. He moaned his gratitude when she positioned his head in her lap.

Piri held up the first sheet and pointed. She spread the trader's broad palm for the first fingerpress. So much easier to simply indicate the written sound groups and string them together, or to grab a pen. Her life on a page, not on a body.

She had to be patient. The words had to sear into his skin.

She pressed again, had him repeat back to her, moved on to the next sound.

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BrushBurn's restrained limbs were numb and his wet clothes sent chills through his body, but that wasn't important. Neither was his thirst, or the wadded cloth so

saturated with his own saliva that it made his teeth itch.

He tried to imagine Ghost's wife in the breeding pens and couldn't. The woman who taught him was single-minded and insistent, forcing his hand back down if he so much as tried to touch her cheek, let alone his bindings. Sometimes he caught her looking at him curiously, as spellbound by him as he was by her.

He had pointed to the back of his neck, then fixed Piri with an intense gaze until she nodded and bent before him, holding her braid aside. BrushBurn ran his fingers gingerly over her tattoo, before he jerked them away under the onslaught of lot numbers.

Massive books filled his brain, rows and columns of gestation periods, pedigrees, disease records, culling dates, returns on sales. Fertility trends, projected yields, poundage. Statistics swarmed around each naked Yata, converging on a single brand, each digit a different piece of identity.

Suddenly he was looking at meat. He twisted away from her, his heart thumping. She pulled him back, turned his palm up, drilled him again on the sounds.

Now she left his side to light a lantern. Piri knelt before the flame. It took BrushBurn several minutes to realize she was praying. She returned to his side afterwards and lifted his hand unceremoniously. *You understand what I am saying now, yes? Tap, don't nod.*

*Yes.*

*Good. Lie on your stomach.*

He looked at her quizzically; she nodded. When he complied, she grabbed his hand and roped it behind him. Her fingers moved to his cheek. *I will let you speak after I have told you what you need to know. Roll onto your back.* She levered him up and over as he rocked, then grabbed the blindfold and plunged him back into darkness, making him into a creature trussed, blind, and mute.

A soft rustling neared him, wool on marble. Warmth draped about BrushBurn and the chill began to leave his bones. The ties on his wet shirt loosened. He nodded when fingerpresses on his chest asked if he understood.

*You have been to the nursery at the Farm? You can still see it? Good.*

Her fingers brought him back there. A baby girl passes from hand to hand and breast to breast, one smell to another, already unsure where one body ends and the next begins or that bodies exist at all. A strange harmony of humming. Tangled song. They are all pregnant and lactating, but she is not their child, yet they are all her mothers only for the duration their nipples are in her mouth; and the children they birth will not be their children. She floats without bonding, fed and comforted but alone.

The musk of the breeding pens overpowers everything, sounds and smells and sights of sex heightening her senses, changing her, conditioning her, frightening her. The pens are not gentle but frenzied, pumping through her naked dreams before she can walk.

*All day and all night; do you understand? Constant stimulation. I awoke aroused and I went to sleep aroused, as though the Destiny were already in me. You were there, you must have felt it, too, but you knew it was not your future. We knew.*

She runs under the awnings. Up and down the fence perimeter that always brings her back to the pens, that sends her whirling in circles. She claws metal, tries to reach sunset-colored rocks beyond. She calls wordlessly to the birds to carry her away, she and the other children. They speak in bird, their calls for help mistaken for shouts of glee.

*The more we could play, the more we could forget. We never told the Masari children how much we knew. We pretended we were as unsuspecting as they and we loved them for it.*

BrushBurn tried to squirm away. Piri held him down. His limbs were nothing but pinpricks.

*Destiny does not create happiness. Her fingers danced over his heart. It deadens. It deadens by forcing life.*

The girl does not know she is a girl or that she is even a person, but her hips widen and her breasts bud and she understands the call of the musk. Masari hands test her, every touch hot. She tastes a brown powder and throbs. More hands, enjoying her but careful; she is ready to produce and she must produce meat, not waste. She has played at sex with the other children but now the fondling prepares her further, for the bigger bodies of the pens, for the multitudes. More powder passes her lips. She can almost forget why she is there.



Fingers move deeper; mouths suck. They adore her. She is passed from hand to hand, from pelt to pelt. Across the room another child is pleased, and another. The birds fly away. Part of her still reaches for them, but their outlines begin to fade.

She is dazed and still throbbing when she staggers with her playmates through the metal gate, and then the hands are all over her. Meat hands. She is one of them now, a vessel for seed, grower of livestock, exuding her own musk, mounted. Entered and filled and emptied, entered and filled and emptied, entered and filled and emptied. Screaming as her babies are taken away from her before she is drugged again.

*We never forget the birds, BrushBurn. She broke no skin, but her fingers perforated his chest as he twitched beneath them. He was riddled with holes. We smell our flesh when the farm hands cook us. We are already dead; the rutting is to make us believe we are alive. We are nothing but flesh inside the pens and we are nothing but flesh outside the pens.*

When she is asleep she dreams of rutting. Or she is rutting in her sleep, it doesn't matter which. Every sip of water, every mouthful of gruel shivers her with lust. The trough tugs her back until she hooks her fingers into chainlinks, resisting the pull. The metal cuts into her. She bleeds onto many layers, generations of dried blood.

Even as she resists the drug another body shoves into hers from behind. She moans, thrashes. Laughter comes from outside the fence, fingers tweaking her nipples as they press through the wire holes. She holds on, she wants more, she still holds on, she gets more. Farm hands slip gruel through the fence holes, squirt Destiny-laden water into her mouth until she lets go, still impaled on thrusting meat, her skin imprinted with patterns of steel.

BrushBurn's body was insensate, all except for his pectoral muscles held captive by tapping Yata hands. He wanted to lose all feeling and couldn't. She didn't let him. He tried to free his wrists and rope bit. He opened his eyes against the blindfold, but the Farm wouldn't go away.

*The cullings made us grieve, but we didn't know whom we were grieving for. There was no "who" among us. The screams of the slaughterhouse were our screams. They died, we died.*

She goes from the breeding pen to the nursery and watches the waste children be disposed and the meat children carried away and she nurses other women's babies until she delivers more meat from between her legs and watches that taken away for other women to suckle and then she floats drugged back to the breeding pen and fucks through her dreams and screams to drown out the birds and more meat grows inside her and she is taken back to the nursery.

She plunges her face into the trough to forget, gulps drugged water until the slightest touch drives her into yowling heat. She curses the birds. She curses the farm hands, not because of what they do but because she knows what they say. They speak of the weather and she understands. They describe the market in Promontory and she can imagine it. A young girl recites her lessons from outside the fence and Piri learns them. Words and concepts pollute her. She knows what she can be, and she knows what she is, and no amount of the drug can make that knowledge go away.

*Every time I tried to forget, I had another child. Every time I had a child, I swore I would never forget and then I tried to forget. I swallowed the Destiny, swallowed and swallowed, and swallowed.*

BrushBurn's stomach lurched. Suddenly Piri was TripStone killing herself on drink, sucking brandy from a bottle as though it were a water bladder and staggering to grasp another. Eyes dulled and unfocused as her flesh wasted away, a tiny, sad smile on her lips for as long as her oblivion could hold her.

Piri pulled hard on BrushBurn's shoulder and hip, levering him onto his back again as he tried to curl into a ball. She pressed more words into his chest until he couldn't breathe.

His own hand guided the gruel and squirted the water. His own fingers slipped into Yata mouths and smeared powder inside them. He was in a room of raised pallets, preparing one quivering body after another for the pens. He was in the nursery, a youth with a talent for dispensing pleasure, comforting the bereaved with Destiny. Holding them, feeding them, helping them forget. It was expected of him, part of his chores once he'd left the awnings behind.

He could not have been Masari. He must have been Yata; how else could he have erased their pain? Their gasps were his gasps, their gratitude his gratitude. "You're going to be all right," he'd murmured, telling the first of many lies he'd

prayed were true. “I promise. You know I would never hurt you.”

The fingers on his chest split him open. BrushBurn choked on his gag as buried memories shot from mud and took form, hissing. They could not be true and yet they were; he had lived them. He had taken them all, the Tourmalines and Cactuses and Wrens and Basalts and locked them inside the drug. He had killed all the Sunrises without drawing a drop of blood.

And MudAdder as well, returned to the grip of Destiny, whose own fingers had drummed over BrushBurn’s heart *I love you I love you I love you...*

BrushBurn tried to flee them and squirmed up against a wall, trapped by cold stone. He groaned when Piri draped her cloak about him again. It was too kind a gesture. He shook it off.

Her footfalls receded as the door ground open and a healthy squall filled the room. Cloth rustled as a second person sat. The yells stopped abruptly, followed by suckling, humming. Piri and Ghost tapped to each other, leaving BrushBurn alone with afterimages. TelZodo’s nursing echoed a thousand times. The trader clawed past the afterimages, stripping the sound down to just the one child.

Seven taken from her, and she at least ten years into breeding. Did Ghost know, did she know, how low her rate of production had been? Given the Yata gestation period, Piri could have borne twice as many children. Had she remained at the Farm, she would have been one of the first culled when Destiny fell into short supply.

Yet she was here, *speaking* to him.

TelZodo drank his fill, making happy sounds that trailed off, muffled in Ghost’s cloak as the door opened into downpour. Piri’s tunic closed with a whisper and she was at BrushBurn’s side again. *Roll onto your stomach.*

Everything hurt. His joints, his skin. Fire seared BrushBurn’s arm as Piri freed it, a dead weight dropping down his side. How could he speak to her when he couldn’t bend his fingers?

She massaged his arm, hand, fingers, palm; he was shot through with needles. Thirst wracked him as she kneaded his back and neck. His lips cracked against the gag.

Piri helped him to sit and leaned him against the wall. Her hands enfolded his, rubbing stiffness away. She tapped onto his palm, *Can you feel this?*

Painfully his fingers answered, *Yes.*

She sat beside him and took his hand into her lap. BrushBurn flinched. Better to handle just the cold bodies, dole out anonymous parcels to which no further damage could be done. Better never to have known Yata at all. He tried to still his twitching as Piri shifted closer, her warmth pressed torturously against his side.

She took firm hold of his wrist. *Tell me what the Farm did to you.* Her fingertips pressed slowly, deeply. *Start from the beginning, BrushBurn. Spare nothing.*

He shook his head. *You would hate me.*

*The farm hands joke about a boy from years ago who kept shaving off his pelt. Who ignored repeated punishment.* Her palm grazed fingertips turned suddenly to ice. *I do not hate that boy.*

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Storm clouds boiled over Promontory, beheading the mountains. Gria watched great gray sheets, oddly gossamer in the distance, blow down shrouded slopes across the salt lake. From the summit of Skedge it was a meditative sight.

Children ran screaming among the troops, kissing rifle and soldier alike, their noses quivering at the smells of wet leather. Zai carried the one named PetalDove. The girl clung, still screaming for her parents, but her parents had been taken away.

“Gria, you’re not going up against ill-equipped, unsuspecting, and predictable Masari hunters this time.” BrushBurn limped on stiff, unbound limbs as soldiers escorted him to the crevasse. He yelled above the din. “This is a gun town and most of our citizens hate Yata. I don’t care how well you arm yourselves. They will come after you and will not stop until they’ve killed you all.”

“Then we will die fighting.” Gria stepped over rubble, her lips set in a thin line. “We’re here to destroy the Farm, not Promontory. Tell that to your people.”

BrushBurn shook his head, the worry in his eyes acute. “It’s a meaningless distinction! The Farm Yata were depleted by more than a third before you got here. Now the factory and supply lines are gone and there isn’t enough Destiny to sustain the rest. You’ve already accomplished your mission.” He scowled up into the rain, then down at her. “Slaughtering Yata is the next step. By coming here, you’ve merely saved Promontory the trouble of invading Basc.”

Gria looked into red-rimmed eyes and knew the trader hadn’t slept. “Then you know that Promontory condemns itself to death.” Heavy rain continued unabated, sinking midafternoon into twilight. “You know there are other options. You’d make a good intermediary if we can contain this attack.”

He grumbled, “I hardly see why you would want us to survive.”

“Because I underestimated the strength of Crossroads, just as you had. I’m not about to make that mistake again.” Her brow furrowed. “For a while I had underestimated you as well.”

Gria had received word from Piri at dawn. Soldiers dragged the trader back to the house, where Piri held her short blade up to catch Gria’s eye before freeing BrushBurn from his bindings. Ghost’s wife had been drawn and pale, but the trader looked worse, tumbling onto AgatePool’s cushions when the soldiers released their hold. He’d convulsed with dry heaves when they removed his gag.

But his eyes held a spark Gria had not seen before. One that told her he had survived his own culling.

Large chains clacked against pulleys as the crevasse came into view. Death boats coated with fresh resin dropped slowly down the side of the mesa, filled this time with the living, before they were struck from their chains to float across the salt lake. From far below came the decisive *thocks* of an axe splitting metal.

Soldiers glided down the crevasse and advanced single file along a rocky path to lines of rafts tethered to the mesa. They traveled with lanterns unlit, gray figures in low light. One by one the rafts departed, filled with troops. Their wakes intersected those of the gondolas and captured amphibious craft, slipping quietly and darkly across the water.

CHAPTER 36

Promontory

TripStone raised her head from Ghost's table. It was still dark; how long had she been asleep? She lit the lantern beside her. Ghost's instructions had drifted to the floor. After two days she hardly needed them any more, taking solace in the repetition of chemicals and cloth.

Completed filter masks rested by her elbow in a heap, each representing another worry that she'd managed to drive away in two days of working alone. This time the bottles she emptied were smaller and she tipped their contents into dishes rather than down her gullet. Her supplies were low again. She would have to slog through the storm for more.

Shouts reverberated through the barracks and into the shed. TripStone strained to hear. They were not the repetitive barks of continuous construction shifts. The yelling outside seemed different this time, more urgent. Bottles chimed faintly against each other as the earth shook and a low rumble traveled up her spine. It was not the sound of gravel being poured. It came from farther away.

She started as the doors slammed open on the other side of the curtain and raised voices filled the shed. Several cried out in pain.

TripStone hid the masks in her pack, slung it and her StormCloud over her shoulders, and rushed toward the dissection tables. Stretchers lined the floor, filled with Masari bodies folded and crushed and covered in grime.

"They need cutters in the barracks." WoodFoam's hand came down on her shoulder; he eased her out of the way of bustling that seemed well-practiced, almost routine. Lamps slid onto wall hooks. Knives glinted. "There are enough of us here, or I'd tell you to stay."

Thunder boomed. "What happened?"

"Mudslide."

TripStone grabbed and threw a cloak over pack and rifle. She gave WoodFoam a

quick nod and hurried out the shed doors, clutching the wool tighter as the wind snatched her hair and tried to drive her back.

Water poured from a pitch sky. Lightning flashed. Half the lanterns hanging outside were snuffed out or shattered. Scaffolding listed to the side as tarpaulins blew out over the lake. Splintered wood rushed around TripStone's boots in flows tinged with red mud.

She splashed toward the barracks. Beyond great piles of timber, a long line of lights wove and dipped along the washed-out road. Men and women covered in muck ran stretchers up and down flooded walkways, carrying broken bodies into half-completed structures. Each face showed the same accustomed grimness, the same stark competency.

"TripStone! We could use you!" SandTail boomed above the wind. His clothes were soaked through; water streamed down his hair and chops. "You're switching from butchery to surgery, my dear. In there." He pointed to a half-roofed frame draped in tattered tarp and turned away to direct more bodies.

Rows of raised pallets filled the inside, protected by tremendous swaths of oiled tent canvas tacked up where the wood still gaped. Dun cloth billowed in and then out as the wind shifted. Driving rain spread puddles on the floor. The uninjured glided from one patient to the next, binding Yata skin about gaping wounds, splinting broken limbs, pressing analgesic masks against screaming mouths.

"Over here!" DevilChaser's shirt was plastered to his skin and pelt. "I've given him a shot, but I've had to dilute my supplies. Help me amputate before he comes to."

Beneath him, a young boy still partly drenched in mud lay unconscious. TripStone looked upon patches of downy pelt. The child was younger than FeatherFly had been, naked below his torso, his clothes stripped away.

The boy's right leg bulged with fractures. TripStone held it down as DevilChaser grabbed a tourniquet and screwed leather down with a stick.

The doctor scowled. "The construction injuries have left us in short supply. We'd have enough curatives if DamBuster hadn't been forced into making Destiny to the exclusion of all else." He heaved a sigh, glaring at wood beams as he leaned

in. “At least this time we have something more substantial than tents to work in.”

“Aren’t there more medicines in town?”

“Yep. Buried.” He taped the leg lower down and lifted a muscle knife. Flesh ripped quickly. “I’ve seen worse. Most of the injured are already here. Everyone else has evacuated to the canyon edge.”

TripStone choked down the tremor in her voice. “The large open area outside the Warehouse.”

The doctor nodded as tarpaulins snapped overhead. “They clear the scrub and pitch tents, and wait until we can start to dig the town out. Hold his muscle back while I saw.”

TripStone slipped another leather strap around exposed bone and willed her hands to remain steady as she fed one end into a slit and pulled. Let DevilChaser think her nervousness stemmed from the slicing of living bodies rather than dead, from the dismemberment of Masari rather than Yata. TripStone had planned for Gria’s soldiers to cross the same bleak, nettle-filled wasteland she had. Her mapped approach to the Warehouse showed it as empty space. If the army arrived now, it would clash with a refugee camp of citizens displaced by mud.

DevilChaser said, softly, “Pay attention, TripStone.”

She pulled the strap back again, maintaining tension as he leaned into the saw.

SandTail entered the far side of the barracks and moved smoothly among the pallets, holding hands with whoever was still conscious. TripStone followed his progress as he cleaned bodies, removed waste, held lamps.

He addressed each person by name as he had in the tavern, reassuring them over a chorus of groans and thunder. He kept family members abreast of each other’s condition, the concern in his eyes genuinely deep, as though every ailing citizen were kin. With a start, TripStone realized that SandTail knew Masari lineages and life stories as intimately as she knew those of Yata. He wrapped a grieving man almost twice his size in a tight hug and moved on.

She forced her gaze back to the boy as DevilChaser pressed a long, crooked

needle into her hands. TripStone inserted it into the stump, taking care as she pulled out arteries to be tied off. Voices drifted around her in quiet, stoic urgency beneath clattering water.

“At least nature’s brutality is impersonal.” SandTail stepped up beside her, setting down dressings of lint, linen, and wool. Weariness edged his voice. “Driven by neither greed nor vengeance. You do fine work, TripStone.”

She concentrated on the stump, easing the needle back in. “He reminds me of my brother.”

“His name is StemIron.” SandTail’s tone hushed behind her. “Lives with his uncle and two sisters. One sister now.” His words took on a curious lilt. “I see your compassion is not limited to the Yata. It’s good to see you sparing some for Promontory.”

“I’ve seen yours,” she whispered. She wanted to tell him to run to the canyon and clear the tents from around the Warehouse. She didn’t dare.

He laid a light touch on her cloak. “You seem outfitted for travel, my dear.”

TripStone glanced back at him. She had forgotten the pack and rifle hanging off her shoulders, the irregular lump they must make beneath the wool. “I was awakened suddenly. I didn’t know what to expect.”

The doctor straightened and reached for a large bottle of treated Yata skin. “Loosen the tourniquet.” He pressed gel against the stump as SandTail wrapped it with pledgets of lint.

Their hands were all on the boy. TripStone swallowed hard, fighting a fresh wave of nausea. When SandTail looked at her she bent back to wood and leather, taking deep, shaky breaths.

SandTail took her arm after she slid fillet and stick free of the stump. “You’ve just grown pale, and you’re not the squeamish type. You’re armed and outfitted for something, TripStone. It’s best you tell me what that is, because I can see your misgivings about it.” He looked around the barracks. “Just where did you plan to open fire?”

TripStone reached for bandages; his hand closed around her wrist. She looked

into eyes as frightened as her own. She tried to turn away and felt the muzzle of SandTail's revolver against her chest.

DevilChaser said, softly, "Don't."

"Tell me what's happening and I'll release her."

"She's trying to save Skedge," the doctor answered, rolling strips of linen against the stump. "That's all."

"Skedge is the least of it." SandTail loosened the ties on TripStone's cloak and watched it slide into a puddle. His eyes blazed. "Our operatives there have fallen silent, but so have our suppliers in Alvav, our courier in Promontory, and Destiny Farm itself. You tell me how a solitary, skinny drunk can accomplish that much." He reached for a ruddy blade and cut the pack from her shoulders. It splashed into the water as he slipped the knife toward the strap of her StormCloud.

"Let her go, SandTail."

TripStone turned toward the gravelly voice from across the barracks and stared. The man just inside the tarp listed painfully to the left, drenched and panting, blinking in lantern light. Mud smeared his body, as though he had dragged himself from the lake. His hands dangled weaponless as he leaned against a wood beam.

A white kerchief was knotted about his forehead, almost unrecognizable beneath layers of filth and blood. TripStone caught her breath as she discerned delicate patterns of manufacturing unique to Basc.

"They left me with only a rowboat." BrushBurn began to sink toward the ground. "And my clothes. I got here as fast as I could."

SandTail squinted at him, alarmed. "*Who* did?"

TripStone slammed her boot on the smaller man's instep, twisting the revolver free as he yelled. She muttered, "Your tavern joke."

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Gria raced toward the Warehouse, screaming through her mask as her soldiers overran tents scattered to either side, their shouts triumphant. Surely they believed hers were as well, but they weren't. She was in agony.

Her army had risen in waves from the lake, driven onshore with the slanting rain and pouring row upon row across darkened scrub. Far ahead of them, lit by lightning bolts, the Warehouse thrust up its great granite teat.

They were to advance quietly, secretly, getting close enough to launch the first canister and then the second. The army would split, masked Yata spilling into the armory while the rest carried rafts down into the canyon, riding the floodwaters toward Destiny Farm.

They were to engage only the guards. Suddenly her troops yelped as their boots tripped tent lines, as cloth ripped and children screamed. Lanterns flared to life and Gria looked upon terror the likes of which she had never seen.

Promontory's citizens had frozen in horrified disbelief, face to face with ancient nightmares come to life, with demons in the flesh.

"Disarm them!" she yelled. "Defensive maneuvers only!"

But the din was too great, the concentration of Masari too overwhelming.

Guns blazed behind. Troops engaged citizens who burst forth from darkness, shrieking. This was not an ambush set for her. The barracks were elsewhere, not here. These tents were *accidents*. Their occupants were barely armed; they were not put here to wage an attack. They were not expecting to have to *defend* themselves.

Now Masari rushed toward the Warehouse as well, outpacing Gria's troops enough to become targets. She shot to disable, but her forces shot to kill. Gria groaned as the large bodies fell. She screamed fury at the gods and pressed on.

The Warehouse lit up from within as its guards scrambled. Launchers fired as Gria's front lines passed within range. She dove to the ground as shots struck their targets behind her. Canisters soared high overhead and slammed against the granite blocks, raising thick haze.

Gria sprinted into a toxic cloud and past a retching guard, firing at a ground-

level door once, twice. Tears streamed from her eyes. Her skin burned. The door didn't budge.

Windows, then. Lightning flared as soldiers clambered toward narrow slits in the stone and tossed more canisters in. They waited for the guards to emerge gasping for breath, then fought their way through.

Gria's own lungs began to burn as her mask filter clogged with particulates. Her stomach heaved as she ducked into the smoke. One glimpse of the headless, naked bodies hanging on hooks and she spewed.

She couldn't tell any more whether the sickness she heard came from Yata or Masari. She couldn't tell which was worse, the innocents draped lifeless all around her or those caught unawares in their tents, being slaughtered outside.

*This is Basc.* She forced herself past the levels of corpses, gagging. *This is Basc if we fail.*

It was Basc, but now it was also Promontory.

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TripStone passed BrushBurn a second water bladder, half-holding him up as they stumbled through rubble. He was not so dehydrated now, better able to walk if not yet run. The barracks' chaotic lights flickered far behind. Thunderclaps melded with the fire's incessant crackling up ahead. Screams came from everywhere.

She had to get him to the canyon, otherwise she would simply lie down and be sick. "We never wanted this, BrushBurn. We were going to hit only the armory and then the Farm." TripStone held fast to his soiled shirt. "Promontory wasn't a target. It's not supposed to be like this."

BrushBurn moaned, "It never is."

TripStone had pressed SandTail's revolver into BrushBurn's hands before diving for her pack. She grabbed water, threw him a bladder, and dragged him from the barracks with her StormCloud unslung. She had laid down fire, hobbling whoever drew a gun as SandTail shouted frantically for help. Swearing with grief, she disabled people still trying to heal their own.

Dimly she was aware of BrushBurn squeezing off one warning shot after another, loath to wound let alone kill anyone. In minutes, hunting down the invading Yata became more important and their pursuers changed direction, swinging directly toward the Warehouse.

“Piri has my gun.” A giggle burred from BrushBurn’s lips as he staggered. “A Farm Yata has my gun. Don’t you think that’s funny?” He swallowed hard, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Ghost is still in Skedge. Defending it.” He tilted his head back and gulped water, his eyes unfocused. He held up his hand when TripStone reached out to steady him, waving her away.

The Warehouse glowed in the distance, afloat in a yellow haze the rain couldn’t disperse. TripStone cried openly as they stepped over tents and bodies ripped apart, warriors and mudslide victims tangled together and left behind. Far ahead, shouting masses of Masari completed their journey from the barracks and poured shooting into the fray.

Flares lit the battleground, but TripStone couldn’t tell anyone apart. There was too much of everything, too many smells and sounds melded together into one writhing mass, first pushing toward and then away from angled descent.

“Their access to the canyon is blocked.” She tried to turn away and couldn’t. “Gria can’t get down there, but neither can we.”

“We can get down.” BrushBurn raised the water again and drank deeply, concentrating. He steered her away from the fighting and toward a notch in the rim, his steps cautious but surefooted.

TripStone looked over her shoulder. He turned her head gently back. “I’ve got to get home, but I don’t know who I’m trying to save any more. I won’t blame you if you’d rather stay here.”

Beyond him the canyon strobed from lightning and explosives, leaving searing afterimages of sheer drop. BrushBurn’s hold on her tightened. TripStone spotted the knowing look in his eyes as the sky erupted. She wondered which scent told him she was ready to throw herself over the edge.

She clutched him, beginning to shake. “I don’t know what to do.”

He cradled her against his chest. Her stomach heaved as the wind shifted and he

drew her down to the ground, beneath the reach of the gas. The mud was pungent with decay. For a moment TripStone was thrust into another village, another massacre. She clawed the sludge of blood and dirt, groaning, “I never wanted this.”

“I never wanted what happened to Crossroads.” BrushBurn’s hands guided her over the lip of the rim and folded her fingers into handholds. His legs maneuvered hers onto a narrow shelf until he half-covered her. “Whatever has gone before, let’s trust each other now.” His soft entreaty tore her like a blade. “Please.”

TripStone nodded. She choked, “I’m so sorry.”

“Shh.”

He walked her down the canyon wall as they bent themselves into the rock. Each flash of light brought everything into stark relief, but TripStone alone flinched. She wondered if BrushBurn’s eyes were closed. She shut her own, trying to tame her fear.

From behind her he said, “Better.”

She followed his lead as he edged her sideways. She whispered, “You could have told me.”

His tender whisper warmed her ear, “You could have asked.”

TripStone didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as they rested, BrushBurn’s chops against hers, his arms and legs leaning them both into the wet wall.

“This is a very old path. Not many know about it now.” His lungs heaved with exertion. “I came here for years after I left the Farm. It was as close as I could let myself get.”

The heavy sound of her own breathing faded. Sharp rock edges dug into her forehead as she heard the first warbles of dawn, a quick skittering. The battle still raged high above them, distant and muted.

Thunder still rumbled as it moved away. The sky was still dark when TripStone opened her eyes and she closed them again. Her clothes were soaked, her hair

dripping. She shuddered.

BrushBurn squeezed her hand. “Time to move.”

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The rain lightened to drizzle but the wind continued to bluster. Mud sucked at DamBuster’s boots as he slogged through the battlefield’s edge, his pack heavy with the only medicinals he had left. When the alcohol ran out, he’d just have to start pissing on wounds to sterilize them.

The air stank with more than just the dead. The apothecary looked toward a canyon still reverberating with continuous gunshot, but all he could hear were his own heartbeats and the questions that whirled incessantly until they fused together and became mud themselves.

Two seasons earlier he had sewn a slab of meat into a young woman’s vest and returned her to Crossroads, but this battle had begun long before then. Still, she could have warned him about the Yata militia. He’d warned her.

“And then what?” DevilChaser spluttered as they’d raced away from the barracks, leaving a meager crew of caretakers behind. “You saw her, DamBuster. She was already half out of her mind and three-quarters starved. She hardly had any place to go *back* to. What would we have done?”

DamBuster couldn’t argue. They had both gawked when SandTail introduced them to BrushBurn’s guest, pushing before them a skull and its contrite grin. “The starvation of Promontory,” he’d called her. DevilChaser had rushed TripStone to a chair as DamBuster sped to fill a bowl for her at his hearth.

“I’ve seen Ghost,” she’d whispered, after SandTail left with BrushBurn to inspect the lab. “He’s at the angels’ workshop, but we’re bringing him here to cut in the shed.” She’d grasped both their hands with bony fingers. “Call him SunDog.”

They should have asked questions then, but she had looked so pitiful. When she raved breathlessly about saving Skedge they indulged the fantasy, believing not a word. Let Skedge be rescued, let Ghost be SunDog, so long as they could get her to eat.

Clouds galloped. Buzzards wheeled above DamBuster in milky morning light from a fuzzy sun. Ahead of him, DevilChaser knelt on bloodied breeches and rolled a dead Yata off a still-breathing Masari. “One for the angels,” the doctor grumbled. “One for the infirmary. Hand me a bottle.”

The fallen Masari’s breathing was slow and deep, peaceful. The apothecary squatted and said, “He doesn’t seem to be in any pain.”

“Check for puncture wounds.”

DamBuster lifted the upper body and something tiny and hard dropped onto his palm. He examined the thorn closely. “I’ve found a puncture wound. A very small one.”

He froze as a muzzle pressed against his back, then straightened as he heard dual clicks.

“If you move or call out, we’ll have to shoot.” The Yata behind him was somber, almost apologetic. A small drawstring bag thudded next to DevilChaser’s thigh. “That’s to stanch bleeding in the others. It’s all we can spare right now.” His voice became hard. “Tell your people that we did not expect the tents. We’re here only to take the Farm before it can take us.”

His hand tugged at DamBuster’s belt and removed the apothecary’s gun from its holster. DamBuster turned his head slowly and met a scowling woman disarming DevilChaser.

The doctor pointed to the sleeping man. “How many are like this?”

“More than are dead,” the woman said. “Though it took a lot of deaths before we realized we weren’t fighting soldiers, and our mission isn’t over yet.” She eased the muzzle away. “Treat your wounded.”

The man backed off. “Let’s go, Teza.”

They sprinted away, ducking low. DamBuster caught a glimpse of the man’s short braid and thick black beard; the rest became a blur. Too late he heard the footfalls pounding to meet them.

DevilChaser bolted upright and tried to wave the Masari down. “*Hold your fire!*”



A loud crack drowned him out, and another as the bearded man crumpled. Teza screamed before a third shot silenced her and she fell.

“Dear gods.” DamBuster pulled his yelling partner down, grabbing and restraining raised fists. “It’s over. They’re gone.” He pressed the drawstring bag into DevilChaser’s hands and snatched his pack. “We’ve got wounded,” he gasped. “You heard what they said.”

Uprooted tents rolled lazily toward and over the canyon edge, deceptively animate in a field full of corpses. DamBuster blinked. He couldn’t tell which chests rose and fell and which were permanently stilled, but it was time to find out.

Canvas floated briefly past the precipice before it dropped. Wind roared, carrying Teza’s cry out across the gorge. The hawks picked it up, screaming *Ila*.

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Banners snapped along the high ridge and strained toward Promontory, almost pulled from white-knuckled grips. Tall, bonecolored flags with black pictograms flew from a row of transports stopped cold.

The road descending from the pass cut a broad, serpentine arc toward the sparkling salt lake. It swiveled back, flattening into a plateau, before it dipped down into the curve of the range and ended abruptly in a tangle of torn, exposed roots and unrelenting drop.

The mountain beneath it fell in great, bulging wrinkles littered with split boulders and debris, birthing a grotesque red-brown beast still oozing across the landscape. The mud devoured gravel roads, suffocated mortar and brick, dripped into quarries and mines. It swallowed Promontory whole, bloating with tortured metal.

HigherBrook listened to the faint crackling of firepower coming from beyond the beast. A distant, black mass squirmed at the threshold of a blacker scar seaming the ground. He leaned back into the wind as BubbleCreek passed him a handheld clarifier. Carnage flared into sharp relief.

HigherBrook lowered the slim tube, blanching. The main road would have brought them to the combatants, but that road was gone. “The chameleons’ trail

will take us to the edge of the lake, but these transports won't fit. We'll have to proceed on foot unless there's a better way."

BubbleCreek shook her head. "The ridge traverse will get us to the trail, but I don't recommend it. We risk being blown over the edge."

"We can crawl."

She nodded, thoughtfully. "We can crawl." She yelled into the wind, "Furl the flags and disembark!" Her chin angled toward the lake as the transports creaked. "You can start mending your relations with Promontory by giving medical aid over there. That's where our route will take us."

HigherBrook gazed down at pale, splintered barracks. Tarpaulins lifted off roofs; broken stretchers tumbled end over end. Beyond them an incomplete factory shell gaped, a giant flooded cistern now, its walls laid open as if by a single, massive blow.

"I'll volunteer." RootWing's voice carried from behind. "That will give me the shortest approach to Skedge. Ghost's family is there."

"Agreed." HigherBrook nodded at the farmer's expectant face. "You'll assemble a team when we reach the foothills."

Warriors shifted up and down the ridge. The mountains extended far beyond the chameleons' trail, bending back from the lake and continuing behind a broad, brush-covered plain shot through with silver springs. Through the clarifier, HigherBrook spotted masses of Yata poised on distant peaks. He handed the tube to BubbleCreek.

She peered through the lenses. "Those would be soldiers from the Cliff." A soft whistle followed. "And combatants from the Marsh."

HigherBrook's eyebrows twitched up. "Freed prisoners?"

"Temporarily, I'm sure. Some of the Cliff's weapons are trained on them, probably to prevent desertion. But they're defending their border together, in case Promontory tries to invade Alvav."

HigherBrook stared back through the plain. Crossroads had been alone in its

misery before its tenuous peace with Basc. Now the entire region was engaged, hanging on the battle raging by the canyon. Everything had already changed, regardless of the day's outcome.

CatBird leaned forward as the air roared around them, her furled standard held tightly to her side. "Crossroads is ready, Sir."

HigherBrook nodded at her and then at BubbleCreek. He stepped aside as Rudder's warriors took the lead. They inched along jagged rock, looking away from high clouds speeding toward the gorge.

CHAPTER 37

Capturing one revolver only moved metal from one hand to another. Plenty more could be had. A child knew that. SandTail chuckled at StormClouds crossing his slits of vision. The long, lumbering rifles were easy to spot. They ill-fit the smaller bodies, no matter how deftly they were carried and no matter how proud the Yata who toted them.

Those fat black rifles swelled them up, making them clumsy and obvious and utterly naked. Small bodies were built for small guns and small places, crannies within the rocks, secret spots among the Warehouse's great granite blocks.

SandTail had lived here for days, keeping company with the carcasses. He knew the Warehouse now. Knew where to fit his compact form, knew where all the holes were.

He squeezed off another shot and vanished, didn't need to watch the meat drop. Didn't need to hear gasps of surprise at the betrayal of punctured armor. The facts lubricated themselves. The machinery of death ran smoothly. One needed only to constrict a finger, savor the recoils, reload.

His pockets bulged. He'd saved his best ammunition for a single, elusive target. It was too late for the Farm; he knew that now. There wasn't enough Destiny and there wasn't enough time. Might as well make the best of what was left of both. He could wait.

Bullets tattooed the marble façade where only the smell of SandTail's sweat remained. He watched its cracks spidering, its veined scales falling away. Idly he counted the shots lobbed at what was never alive. It became a game, this measurement of stupidity. This indifferent appreciation of waste.

The gas dissipated. The Yata's advantage was gone, and still they wanted more guns that trailed between their short legs, making them into something hilariously obscene. Behemoths hefted in well-muscled arms.

Pop. Dead arms, now.

SandTail was done grieving. One did not grieve over slag; one tossed the

befouled and then recast. Feed as many as could be fed. The rest would starve, but that couldn't be helped. It had happened before.

Perhaps all the better if he starved as well. Take his cue from TripStone and let the brandy work its magic. If she had taken it only a little further, he might not have to be here, shooting.

A stinking drunk defeats him. Extraordinary. He couldn't help but smile. She and BrushBurn, both of them so delicate SandTail could close his eyes and hear them break. How fitting that they have broken him as well. *Pop.*

Slag now, both of them, but they were Masari. He couldn't help but love them. *Pop.*

More meat fell. Inside now, over the railing, pitching past smoked flesh and cracking on cooled cinders. SandTail rolled and tumbled, his movements whispering into obscurity. He slipped his barrel into a snug notch and tracked the echoes of Yata footfalls. Here's to slag.

Pop.

Welcome to my hunting grounds.

It didn't matter that tears blurred his vision. He didn't need to see.

So much to eat, and yet Promontory will have to ration more stringently than ever, find a way to survive for however long it took to regain strength, mount an assault on Alvav, start over. See if Rudder had the guts to retaliate and put this town out of its misery.

Your mines, your factories now. Your responsibility. Come get it.

Might as well let the Yata down into the canyon. What more could they do? Let them trap themselves. The only way to get out was to go back the way they came. No sense letting more citizens die for a lost cause.

SandTail rolled from gunshot and sighed as a bullet *thunked*, lodging in a smoked bronze rump. He aimed and fired, turned away. Popped out of the Warehouse like a bunny from a warren. Reeled from the dead salting the battlefield. He squinted into the distance, where DamBuster and DevilChaser

hovered idiotically over motionless Masari.

Perhaps they'd turned to slag as well. It became an enviable state.

He sighed again, turned back, and there she was. The tall one, helmeted and masked. Magnificent beast. SandTail didn't need to see her face; her body told him all he needed to know. He filled his revolver and waited until she was alone and distracted, positioned aside the granite just so.

He charged.

Gria unslung her StormCloud, but SandTail was faster, bent double, a small target ramming her, pinning her against the wall. Her breath flew from her lungs. He kicked the rifle away, whipped her helmet off, slammed the back of her head hard against the stone block once, and again as she reached for him. He smiled at sticky red lines dribbling down the gray.

"Not here." He nodded at her stunned blink and hoisted her. If she could stand upright he'd look up to her, but she could barely lift her head as she struggled to keep conscious.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am for this moment, Gria." He dragged her as she flailed, her movements uncoordinated. "I imagine you're dizzy. Let's help you breathe easier." He stopped at a tucked-away alcove and propped her up against the wall. Admirable, the Yata and Masari hides adorning her breastplate. Quite useless. SandTail reached up, ripped off her vomit-encrusted mask, and tossed it away. "Better?"

She wheezed, still trying to catch her breath. Still trying to focus her eyes.

"Stay awake, Gria." SandTail dipped his hand into a pocket and filled his palm, then grabbed her chin and crammed a clod of powder into her open mouth. He held her jaw shut as she struggled, gagging, her eyes suddenly wide with alarm.

"Yes, that's exactly what it is," he said, encouragingly. "It doesn't take long for full strength to work, my dear. Even for you." He pinned her to the wall and held her there; her muscles were no match for her concussion. She was muffled against his hand. "It will take the fight out of you, I promise. Give it time."

She tried to lunge but was blocked by her own hurting brain. SandTail smiled at

the depth of his satisfaction. Their time together distracted him from his lamentations. For a while, at least, he could forget how many of his people were dying, had yet to die.

Gria's breathing quickened with rage rather than lust, but he could remedy that. SandTail released her long enough to let her move, then slammed his fist into her stomach as she yelled. He fished out another gob, listening dispassionately to dry heaves. He straightened her up, clapped his hand over her mouth, stroked her throat until she swallowed, and shoved her against the wall again.

She was a masterpiece of dulled reflexes and stifled screams. She twisted against him, still battling. Her teeth sank into his fingers, drawing blood.

SandTail studied her panic with meditative calm. "You've won, but I have you now. I suppose it'll have to be a fair trade." He pinned Gria more firmly, pressing the flesh of his palm against her lips. "All that Destiny gone. All that work. So much sacrifice." He smiled as she tried to speak against his hand. "You know what my kind went through, don't you? What your kind did to us. Not that it matters to you, or you would have stayed away." A delectable warmth began to radiate, a hapless squirming. "No need to apologize."

She slumped against the wall, softening in his hands. SandTail sighed happily at her growing stupefaction. Red speckled the stone when she turned her head to the side, trying to flee.

Shots still crackled, reports echoing off the granite blocks. SandTail spent a moment listening to the sounds of suffering distilled through a cavern of interlocking passageways. The stone curved into tiny wind tunnels, ferrying pulses of air pressure.

He flattened her against the wall as she struggled again; she was easier to force back now. "All those years of mixing Destiny and you've never had a chance to enjoy it." SandTail looked upon tight-shut eyes, resting his palm against a chest convulsing with attempts at controlled breathing that became increasingly fruitless.

"Here. Have more." He pushed another handful into her against loud moans of protest. He watched serenely as her forehead beaded with perspiration and smiled as a flush spread across her cheeks. "You can feel it now; it really is quite a marvelous drug. You have no idea how delighted I am to see you taking to it."

Her breathing became lusciously heavy, but her muscles remained taut where she still tried to resist. Cords stood out on her bare neck beneath a grimace of concentration. Her body fairly shimmered with growing heat.

SandTail lifted his hand from her mouth and gently wiped moisture from her upper lip as she panted. “Keep fighting it, Gria. Use up your strength before the Destiny wins, because you know it will.” He spilled more past her lips, holding her as she thrashed against him.

Beneath her loosened cuirasse her stomach rippled, her bronze skin a furnace as she choked. She gasped as he rested his palm lightly against her navel.

“It feels good, my touch,” he murmured. “Any touch.” He waited patiently as she jerked away one moment and leaned forward the next, pressing her muscled abdomen firmly against his palm. Ripped in two. “I am your worst enemy, Gria, and I can smell a need in you so great it would excite me if I weren’t already dead.”

He settled them more snugly into the alcove and listened to reverberations of slaughter coming from the canyon edge, breathing in the rarefied air of privacy. Her hands dangled at her sides now, no longer clutching the wall. He lifted one and moved it to his shoulder, nodding at the involuntary squeeze from her fingers. “There.”

He caressed Gria beneath her cuirasse, moving his palm in small, lazy circles, then larger ones. He purred as she trembled against him. “You are holding back such a moan of pleasure, Gria. I can feel it right here.” His hand dipped lower, then suddenly withdrew. He chuckled as her eyes sprang open in confusion. “I tease you,” he said, sympathetically. “I shouldn’t.”

He dipped into another pocket, cradled her head, eased her lips apart. “Sometimes I wonder why they cut the tongues at all. It isn’t necessary, is it? You can’t even speak.” He stroked her throat, but that wasn’t necessary, either; she was swallowing quite readily on her own. Shuddering, relaxing. He scooped from the pocket, scooped again, hand fed. “I can’t tell you what pleasure it gives me to see you like this. To watch you lick my palm because you can’t stop. To strip you of everything.” One more powdery clump, held tantalizingly beside her open mouth. “This is the last of it. I’ve saved everything for you.” He patted her stomach affectionately as she lapped it reflexively from him.

Her head lolled as he held her against the wall. SandTail smiled into glazed eyes as he loosened her breech ties. "I hate Destiny as much as you do, my dear. Maybe even more. I am deeply gratified for this chance to share it with you." His fingers slid between her legs, probing, plunging. She turned her head away as her hips twitched; then they rocked to meet his hand. She moaned softly. Again, louder.

"See? You feel better." He listened quietly to the full-throated song of the drug building as he began to pump, holding her closer as she moved with him. "You're doing so well."

SandTail's heart began to gallop. "I will melt you down, Gria. I promise you there will be nothing left by the time we're through. I will render you completely unrecognizable, and still that will be nothing compared to what Promontory had to endure." A slick, sucking rhythm filled the air, a lovely peace descending amidst the noise. Fulfillment.

She hesitated only briefly when he withdrew warm flesh and inserted a cold metal barrel, easing in up to the trigger. Sliding, grinding as she resumed pushing down against him.

It was an exquisite moment. SandTail refrained from cocking the hammer, spending time in the company of deep groans and heady scent. "You wanted a gun, Gria." He turned her head back to him, his own eyes moist. "Now you've got a gun."

He caught her hand as her fingers trailed across his lips, looking into dullness as she thrust. Tears wetted both their cheeks. Neither looked away.

He was dissolving her. Slag poured over the barrel and onto his fingers. Slag swelled her breasts, ran in sweat from beneath her cuirasse, filled her arching neck. She was tender now; she would melt in his mouth. SandTail pumped more quickly as her breaths raced. Joy coursed through his veins.

His thumb hovered over the hammer, slipping against it as her moans rose. She was a puddle on his plate, nothing but meat under the armor. A head to be stuffed and mounted on his wall. His mouth watered. Already he could feel his stomach distend as she cried out, spasming, nothing left of her but swollen flesh. He found the hammer again, edging it back as her hand touched his mouth.

He kissed her fingers, letting them meander past his lips, around his tongue. Such a sublime, mindless gesture. He was tempted to nibble at them, laughing deep in his throat until he suddenly gasped, reeling in pain.

Her nails sliced into him, her eyes sparking. For one extraordinary moment he was deliriously numb.

Then Gria yanked. Her moans become a furious shriek at the flash of a blade. SandTail's revolver clattered to the floor as his mouth filled with blood.

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Gria said, thickly, "Tongue."

Her own was still swollen as she struggled to form the word. She held SandTail's up, bloody and limp, then threw it away. He was doubled over, his mouth spurting bright red, his screams trapped in the alcove.

She straddled him, howling uncontrollably. Oh, how she wanted. She couldn't call to the gods. She couldn't call to the demons. She could barely think of them. They were all too complicated, too far away. Her head hurt. Everything else was hungry. Ravenous.

Gria laughed and hugged SandTail hard. How good he felt. She threw off her cuirasse, her wrappings. She ripped his shirt away. Too hot.

She sank her knife into his side, carving, pulling, twisting, holding on as SandTail bucked wildly beneath her. Friction. Wonderful struggles. His yelling vibrated through Gria until she covered his back. She groaned her happiness into his ear. She laid her cheek against his cold sweat. Her giggles became fervent cries as desire inflamed her again.

She exulted, half-sobbing as she pulled and sheared away a gob of flesh. She pressed the slippery lump against SandTail's cheek and forced the language to come, her swollen lips to move. "Tenderloin." Gria's breeches hung halfway down her legs, caught on her greaves; it didn't matter. Her skin still burned. Everything throbbed.

She laughed hysterically against his spine. She wanted him. After everything he'd done, she wanted him. She wanted anything. A gun muzzle, his sticky hand,

the handle of her knife, the blade. The vibrations of his pain, the slices of him. It didn't matter.

They yelled together as her knife poked, carving. Gria braced her knees about SandTail's waist. The more he tried to shake her off, the better it felt. She arched her spine and bayed, slipping up and down, up and down his bloody back. She ripped triumphantly and swiveled, dropping the gory hunk. She said, huskily, "Rump."

She couldn't think. Didn't want to. She crammed her fingers into SandTail's wounds, pressing, massaging, shaking with glee as he jerked beneath her. Pleasure burst. He was so good to her. She reached back between his buttocks. Nicked.

SandTail gurgled; vomit swirled with blood. Gria hugged him around his stomach, staying her hand from disemboweling him. She couldn't kill him. He had to keep moving for her, relieving her, releasing her.

What a wonderful body he had. So cold, so pale. She groped him harder and tried to pour her heat into him, tried to cool off. When SandTail slowed down, she nicked him again and moaned her gratitude. Howled her ache.

She sawed, slipping her knife through layers. Sweet, thrilling screams, fingers of sound filling Gria until she bucked, too, laughing and sobbing at once.

She scooted to SandTail's shoulders and rested her lips against his ear, slapping the slice against his cheek. "Flank." She cackled as he sank to the ground. They reeled against each other, gushing, red from him, white from her. She rubbed herself feverishly along his matted pelt.

The words were so far away; they were like stars. Like the dead, passing through portals into another world. She had to die to reach them, pull them back to her. *Help me.*

She still wanted him. Any touch, smell, caress of sound. Every whimper swept her up in heat. She smeared herself against SandTail, sticky head to foot, luxuriating in his quick, shallow breaths. Reaching around to his stomach, into his shredded pants, fondling, squeezing until he jolted with pain. She fought mightily the urge to turn him over. Urine spilled onto her fingers, warm and pleasurable.

She reached along the polluted floor and gathered bloody bits to his face. “You wanted meat.” Her voice slurred. So hard to form a sentence. “Now you’ve got meat.”

The effort exhausted her; her head threatened to split. She wanted to sleep, but she couldn’t stop rocking.

Gria still thrust against SandTail, wailing against his twitching back, when hands lifted her away. So many fingers, so hot. She screamed when they touched her. Her body still sizzled with Destiny.

She lunged for the revolver, ready to grab the gun herself, shove it between her legs, pull the trigger. She sobbed as strong arms stopped her, undulating her hips as others pulled up and laced her stained pants.

Zai’s concerned face blurred into view. “Stay with us, Gria. You’re going to be all right.”

The hard-edged voice made her quiver with need. Gria licked her lips, struggling for words. She hiccuped and whispered, “Bind me.”

“It will wear off.”

She moaned, “I don’t want it to.”

She sighed deeply against the press of rope when Zai gave the order, then gasped as other hands draped a tunic over her bare breasts and as gentle fingers examined her head wound. No touch was too small; she was lost in them. Oh, what they could do to her.

A lever cocked. Gria’s excitement almost blinded her to Zai’s raised rifle and its impotent target. “No.”

Zai glared down at SandTail. “Why the hell not?”

Too much to explain. All Gria could do was laugh. Before her Zai stood at the ready, her StormCloud still aimed at the mangled pulp on the ground. Dear, sick pulp.

Gria clenched her bound hands into fists, forcing the language through her brain.

“He’s already dead.”

It would have to do. She sweated again with lust, couldn’t concentrate. Her head lolled back. She wanted to drag the soldier holding her down to the ground. Wanted to give the order for someone to unlace her pants again.

No. She couldn’t order any more. Her smile pleaded with Zai. “Take command.”

A soft cry rose from the floor, shivering Gria with delight. She tried to turn around, her hips straining. She mewled longingly back as Zai led her away from the alcove.

## CHAPTER 38

### The Canyon

TripStone knelt alongside BrushBurn as he turned a corpse face-up. The trader held the kerchief from Basc against his nose and mouth, his face tinged with green. He turned quickly away.

The floodwaters frothed below them, similarly green and carving the canyon imperceptibly deeper. TripStone listened to the river's continuous roar, watching intermittent spray drench the body up ahead. So far, the trail had yielded six bodies, four Masari and two Yata. The seventh up ahead was another Masari, like the man beside her.

Gria's forces were nowhere. They couldn't have done this; these corpses had lain here for days. TripStone's nostrils flared, her curiosity taming her nausea.

She looked down at a chest cleaved open. What the buzzards hadn't claimed crawled with maggots. Everything else left inside the body bloated. The flesh of the man's face had been stripped away, clean bone gleaming around empty eye sockets.

Only the color of his curls told her he might have been BrushBurn's kin. TripStone hadn't asked about any of them.

She didn't remember when the rain stopped, when she heard just the wind and then the flood's rampant courses. She'd clung to the rock face, looking down past her boots and through morning haze into what at first seemed steam, before she could track the currents.

She'd whispered, "The canyon's impassable."

"Not all of it." BrushBurn guided her to another ledge chiseled into the wall. He still half-covered her, making sure she wouldn't slip. He spoke low by her ear. "There are trails carved above the water line. We had to maintain clear passage to Promontory."

They had descended veins of red and black, passing compressed lines of

sedimentary rock and stepping at last onto an unusually wide ledge. The stone became concave, the chalky trail underfoot a beeline extending in both directions.

The first of the bodies lay behind them. They backtracked to find a Yata man and a Masari woman, both equally eaten away. TripStone examined them, confused, while BrushBurn leaned over the edge of the trail and emptied his stomach into the torrents.

The Yata had been killed by bullets. The Masari had been butchered.

BrushBurn walked unsteadily toward another body, stopping to lean against the curved wall. The numbers of corpses increased as they approached a seasonal lake still slowly rising. It floated more misshapen remains. Distinguishing the dead became harder. TripStone peered over the rim of the bowl, squinting until she was sure most of them were Masari.

She looked away respectfully as the trader faced into the rock and struggled toward composure. She waited for his chilled hand to touch her shoulder and then for his listless nod, the grimy kerchief still pressed hard against his face.

Stench stung their eyes as they circumnavigated the lake, stepping over more dead as they approached trails that rose toward startling vegetation, sudden rich infusions of green. BrushBurn's hold on her tightened as they walked side by side, climbing toward the oasis.

*They would have culled.* His fingers moved stiffly against her shoulder. *Even if a Destiny shortfall meant having to kill the entire herd.*

She shook her head. "Something stopped them."

The gate before them had been left wide open beside crumpled chainlinks and barbed wire twisted out of its coils. TripStone looked up at Piri's tattoo writ large, and shuddered involuntarily at the ancient pictogram hammered into metal.

More bodies lay scattered inside the fence, interrupting wide open spaces where the smells of death were less concentrated. BrushBurn carefully lowered the kerchief from his mouth and swallowed. His voice rasped. "House." He laced clammy fingers into hers, steering them past flattened pens.

Falcons soared across a clearing sky, screaming. Carrion birds strutted. TripStone turned her head, drawn by the sound of loud, insistent flapping. She spotted colored stripes in the distance, giant wings straining upward. The ripped awnings danced, ribbons throttled by the wind.

The buildings were silent. No one mated in the barns; no one cried out from the slaughterhouse. Quiet, diligent tearing rose from vultures perched on Yata and Masari dotting the fields.

“I’ve never known this place to be so quiet.” BrushBurn rubbed TripStone’s shoulder compulsively, bewildered. He turned red-rimmed eyes to her. “This wasn’t your fault.”

She hugged him around his waist and let him lead her to the house. From the yard she could see an open door half-torn off its hinges. Someone lay just beyond the threshold, face down, a bushy rust-colored halo dipped in a pool of blood. An outstretched hand, the flesh of its fingers torn away.

BrushBurn sighed heavily and again lifted the kerchief to his mouth. A sob rose in his throat. Gravel crunched underfoot before it yielded to wood and slate. Together they stepped into a massive, ruddy smear. A large buzzard flapped across the slippery floor, perturbed at the intrusion.

TripStone clutched BrushBurn’s arm as they approached the kitchen and its bedlam of drawers ripped from runners, overturned cabinets. Implements were scattered everywhere, most of them wood. Almost nothing gleamed.

She whispered, “All the knives are gone. There’s nothing sharp left.” She looked up at BrushBurn. “The Yata knew to come here.”

“They remembered.” His voice thickened behind the kerchief. He glanced helplessly about the kitchen. “The children weren’t penned until they had to be, there were so many. We thought nothing of letting some of them run through the house.” His back thudded against a demolished counter as he twisted in pain. Dishes rattled as he bellowed at the wood-beamed ceiling. “*Are you pleased with your expansion, SandTail? Is your vengeance complete now?*”

His fists slammed blindly, repeatedly against splintered oak. TripStone held him as he shook with rage.



“It’s good there aren’t any knives left.” He gulped foul air, choking. “I’d be in pieces now if there were any knives left. You didn’t have to suffer, TripStone. You didn’t have to lift a finger. We’ve accomplished your mission for you.”

TripStone cradled him against her; they rocked together. She found the kerchief balled in his hand and raised it to his face. “Stay alive, BrushBurn.” She cried against his shirt, grasping his back as he enfolded her. “Whatever you do, please stay alive.”

He struggled for breath, his voice breaking. “You, too.”

“Me, too.” She gripped him tighter and couldn’t tell which of them was whimpering. The sound carried, bouncing off the walls at odd angles. High-pitched. TripStone held still, listening beside a silent BrushBurn.

Her eyes widened. “Someone’s still here.”

He nodded. They stepped quietly from the kitchen, following the sound down a blood-spattered hallway. They turned a corner and advanced down a row of open doors.

TripStone glanced into small, tidy spaces. Neat pallets, compact bureaus holding pretty polished minerals. No dead bodies. No one around at all. BrushBurn gestured toward a spot farther down the corridor, where the door was closed.

The whimpering became louder, more fearful. A young girl’s voice. They quickened their steps until they came to a heavy wood bolt set in external hooks.

“Punishment,” TripStone murmured. “Someone’s locked her in.” She helped BrushBurn lift the bolt and laid it carefully aside. “She must have been in there for days.” She stood aside as the trader cracked open the door.

*“Don’t hurt me!”*

It was more a command than an entreaty. The stink of stale chamber pot wafted from the room.

“We won’t,” BrushBurn called back, softly. “No more hurting.”

TripStone glanced down at the bolt and counted its indentations, patterns of use.

Whoever the girl was, she'd been punished many times before.

They edged into the room. A thin shape huddled in a far corner, head ducked against the wall, frizzed chestnut braid dropping down soiled tan coveralls. Her pallet was unkempt, her pretty stones thrown until they'd split into pieces. Compared to the rest of the Farm, the cloying air inside her room was inconsequential.

BrushBurn squatted and gave TripStone's arm a light tug until she crouched beside him. He lowered his voice. "What is your name?"

The child muttered, "Everybody knows my name."

"I don't. I left here before you were born." He leaned forward amidst broken geodes. "My name is BrushBurn."

The girl stirred and turned around. Her eyes wavered, floodwater-green, doubtful. "FlitNettle."

"We're cousins, then."

She looked away, breathing hard, her face working. "No one has ever wanted to be BrushBurn, even to trick me into thinking he was here." She hugged her knees to her chest. "Even to pretend."

"I'm not pretending." BrushBurn tried to smile. He inched closer. "I have no choice."

FlitNettle stared past him, startling at the sight of the open door. She flinched with panic. "Something terrible's happened. The Yata need me."

She tried to stand. BrushBurn rushed forward to catch her as she flailed off-balance.

"She needs water." TripStone reached for the bladder by her side. "And food." She keened her ear to the door. "I know you've been in here a long time, but it may not be safe for you to go outside right now."

"The Yata won't hurt me." FlitNettle sipped uncertainly, nestled in the crook of BrushBurn's arm. She started to tremble. "I have to tell them everything's going

to be all right.”

The trader squinted down at her. He held the girl more securely and whispered, “Everything is not all right.”

FlitNettle clutched the bladder. “I was bringing them water from the cistern. I wasn’t supposed to. That’s why I got locked up.” She burrowed into him. “They only wanted to grow again. I didn’t think they would rush the gate. I heard such horrible things.”

BrushBurn wrapped his arms around her as she quaked. “How long had they been drinking from the cistern?”

“That was the first time.”

“It wouldn’t have made much difference, then.” He stroked her back. “They would have gotten Destiny from the food. They would have been monitored. Controlled.”

FlitNettle shook her head against his chest.

“There wasn’t enough Destiny here to grow the herd. We were making more for that.” BrushBurn continued to stroke absently, looking up and down the walls. His voice became faraway. “I wanted to free them once, but they’ve gotten out by themselves. I don’t know how.”

The girl began to cry.

BrushBurn offered a wistful smile. “My room was almost directly across from yours.”

TripStone winced. “FlitNettle,” she said, gently, “tell us what happened before you were shut in.”

~~~

TripStone tried to picture the little girl standing outside the pens, hair straggly, feet bare, swimming in dirty coveralls and looking upon a vast field of nakedness. Reading her lessons aloud as her nose twitched with animal smells. Concentrating past the grunts and sighs and climaxes, uncaring as to whether

anyone listened or not.

Grammar exercises. Poetry. Housekeeping rules. The farm hands indulged the child as long as she kept out of their way. When they had to subdue the Yata with more Destiny, she moved aside. Or she stood outside the chainlink fence, holding her slate and chalk before her, reciting until she had learned everything by rote.

She kept the Yata company. They did the same for her, even though their attentions were elsewhere. Reading to them was more important than doing chores, especially those chores that were unkind. She refused to drug the gruel and was locked away. She would not help take the babies from their mothers' arms and was locked up for that, too. She never learned.

“Everybody teased me.” FlitNettle sat on the floor, leaning back against the trader's chest. “I kept telling myself it didn't hurt, but it did. When they started calling me a BrushBurn, I didn't know what it meant.” She gazed up at him. “Then I started listening to the jokes. I decided I liked you.”

BrushBurn closed his eyes. His hand squeezed TripStone's until the blood drained from her fingers.

The Yata children pantomimed to FlitNettle, leaping over rock outcroppings with tales of flying away. FlitNettle pantomimed back. They pretended to be birds together. The Yata grew and were taken to the pens. FlitNettle followed them with her slate.

At the dinner table she asked which number she ate. She looked up the numbers in the great books, tracing them column to column to tattoo. Sometimes she spotted the descendants of her food and called out her thanks to them. It didn't matter that they didn't understand.

She listened in her bedroom to the cullings, knowing that tempers flared whenever the Destiny ran short. She became a burden, resisting the chores, refusing to earn her keep. She lay on her side, sore from repeated paddling, but she still didn't learn. Her parents tired of locking her up and threatened to send her away as soon as she came of age. Away from the Yata, off to Promontory. To her cousin, the pitiable BrushBurn.

FlitNettle drew the trader's arm more closely around her and whispered, “Then

the poisoning happened.”

She was reading arithmetic problems when the sounds within the pen began to change. Monstrous sounds, harsh glugs and guggles, splatters. Shit smells. Strong arms grasped her and carried her away as she screamed summations and subtractions, pressing the equations to her face until the numbers smeared and all she could smell was chalk.

TripStone smoothed the child’s hair back as the room filled with dull recitation. Her other hand was still in BrushBurn’s, but he didn’t squeeze so tightly. Instead, his eyes remained closed, his breathing too even. FlitNettle snuggled up against him, her sight trained on gouges in the wall above jagged black shards.

The girl said, “I had to clean it up.”

Others worked with her, watching her at first, but it was a chore she didn’t refuse. It hurt no one. FlitNettle was still too small to help carry the dead, but she could spread sawdust and shovel the stink into waste troughs that she emptied later. She made the troughs proper for when the living Yata needed to squat, so they could be more comfortable.

She had found her calling. She could earn her keep.

“Almost everybody went into town with the bodies.” FlitNettle sighed against BrushBurn’s chest. “There was so much to do. They moved the Yata to nicer pens and went away.” She looked up at him. “Where did they put all those bodies?”

“The Warehouse.” BrushBurn leaned back into the wall. “It’s a very big place.”

She touched his chops. “You’re crying.”

“I was there that night.”

TripStone whispered, “So was I.” She held tightly to BrushBurn’s hand as he turned a bleak gaze toward her, then toward the ceiling.

So little Destiny remained. So few workers maintained the Farm. The next culling took longer. Other chores got neglected; it was all they could do to keep the living Yata sedate and kill and preserve the excess. They diluted the Destiny

carefully.

FlitNettle continued to clean. She couldn't read to the herd any more, but she still talked to the people squatting. Sometimes they turned their heads and smiled sadly back at her. Their numbers were fewer; it was easier to find someone related to her dinner. One large pen held them all now.

Gradually the farm hands returned, bringing more Destiny. A cart rattled in, carrying a Yata man who stepped from a bed of hay, wavered unsteadily before the single pen, then rushed inside it. He started jabbing people with his fingers, even while mating. They only hugged him harder. Finally, he stopped jabbing.

"MudAdder." BrushBurn smiled down at FlitNettle's confusion. "The experimenter in Promontory named him. The tapping is a touch language."

TripStone shook her head. "He would have needed the sounds to teach them."

"He pantomimed afterwards." FlitNettle stood shakily to demonstrate the motions. TripStone looked from the girl's slow and deliberate gestures to the growing alarm on BrushBurn's face.

CHAPTER 39

Leaves rustled beneath a burst of wind. They sounded like snakes rattling in the trees, but not so frightening. The snakes hid, but lizards skittered on the ground, stopping to bob their heads and inflate red throat sacs. It was arousing, but not overly much.

Someone was in labor. The baby would come soon; that's what the women said. That's what they *seemed* to say. Some of their gestures were still unfamiliar. MudAdder turned his head in the direction of huffing and humming and thought of Piri.

Sun-dappled buttocks blocked his view. Some of the men were watching; they had never seen a birth before. They huffed in tandem with the contractions, or they hummed with the women in attendance. They lent comfort, either way. That was mildly arousing, too.

Children ran everywhere, laughing, their minds bell-clear. Yellow butterflies the size of MudAdder's hand drifted amid blossoms inside a deep wrinkle of the canyon. Water still trickled in even after the rains had stopped, funneled from natural stone depressions high overhead, near the lookout. A man collected the water in a bag made of Masari skin. A pregnant woman cracked a finger to suck out marrow and sneezed at the tickle from a tufted knuckle, startling the infant at her breast. She took hold of a blade and scraped the pelt away.

Once the Masari were no longer edible, the Yata would turn to the squirrels.

~~~

Rain had been falling when MudAdder's cart stopped jostling and its door opened, a lifetime ago it seemed. He had rolled sleepily awake on his bed of hay, already mildly erect and hardening from the smell of the Farm. His body tingled with Destiny but only a little, the drug was so sparse. Soon enough his people and the food trough would take him the rest of the way, making him blissful again.

He disembarked and staggered before the pen. So many gone. The sight stunned him. He could still hear the slaughterhouse beyond the songs of sex. Hands

pulled him past the gate and he sank into his people, moist and warm and home.

And so very sad. Everyone around him throbbed with grief. He came and wept, came and wept again. *There isn't enough*, he drummed, panting. *They are still killing us.*

Nothing. They only gripped him tighter, pulled him in further. He bent over the feed trough and slurped from his palms and ruttled, but the numbers he'd learned didn't go away. Destiny was being consumed faster than it could be replaced. They would use it up and then they would all die.

His brain itched. MudAdder could still hear Ghost's ruminations and then DamBuster's as they each labored in the lab. They hypothesized, turned words around. Made them run backwards.

*We use up Destiny, we die.*

*We might not die if we don't use it up.*

The drug made one have sex. Maybe sex could help one resist the drug.

The food gate opened; gruel slid into the trough. MudAdder wandered over to feed and was about to plunge his hands in when he remembered. He could still think. He straightened.

A woman approached, hungry. He stopped her, held her hands, moved them down. She relented, let him mount her. Afterwards, he blocked her from the trough again. Pantomimed.

Yata produced meat. Meat came from sex. Sex came from Destiny. If the Masari saw sex they would think the Destiny still worked. They would use less of it, make it last longer. The herd would last longer, grow back again.

*Piri had a child without Destiny.*

MudAdder fasted. Pantomimed. Fucked and fucked and fucked. When the women's heads began to clear they remembered the nursery, and the pantomimes began to change. Small, hidden signals, more dangerous.

Their deception evolved as more of them weaned. Some of the gruel had to



disappear.

MudAdder was emptying the last of his bowels when a Masari girl leaned into the chainlinks behind him and whispered, “I know what you’re doing.”

At first he ignored her.

“I know you’re mixing food into your shit.”

He rose from his squat and turned around. She was barely taller than he and her eyes made him think of DamBuster.

MudAdder placed his finger across his lips. When the girl nodded sagely he smiled at her, blinking back tears, and laid his hands over his heart.

~~~

The newborn’s yells drowned out soft crackling from afar, but MudAdder heard the long call sounding from above. A siren rose and pulsed, lungs and diaphragm doing what the tongue could not. It almost sounded like speech, coming from a captured Yata. Someone who once had talked.

MudAdder scrambled up to the lookout, knives sheathed at his sides in a crude, furry belt. He dropped to a gray limestone platform beside a man with a shoulder badly purpled from recoils. Their captured rifles were too heavy and uncontrollable, all but useless. Blades were better.

It had to be a trick of the light and distance, the Yata pouring through the Farm’s main gate, raising even bigger guns, their armor shimmering in the sun. Several fell beneath Masari fire but others took their place, continuing to hold ground.

MudAdder shifted as more people clambered to the lookout. They gestured back down to upturned faces. Soft, wordless calls reverberated. The children grew quiet as flesh began to vanish into crevasses. This was a different battle now. Promontory had come for them. Time to hide.

The Farm Masari had not been easy to cull, but they had been unsuspecting and far outnumbered by the masses who waited for the day’s feeding. MudAdder’s people had listened carefully, burying their fears inside each other. He had humped slowly and smoothly, barely swollen in his nervousness, prepared to

pull out as he heard the chains unlock and the woman beneath him moaned her readiness to rush the gate.

The trail beyond writhed with combat. New bodies rode in on the floodwaters, cobbling the lake. Great horns blew from nowhere, echoing above the battle again and again, so remote they sounded like humming.

MudAdder did not know that bonecolored banners descended beneath the canyon rim. They were too distant. Even if he saw them, he would not have recognized the old Covenant pictograms. The man beside him, the one with the badly-bruised shoulder, might have puzzled over their resemblance to a pretty paperweight left behind in Skedge.

The men dropped down from their perches in search of darkness, slipping into a cave filled with hushing. Had they stayed at the lookout, they would have watched the canyon sparkle as hunters from Rudder raised defensive shields, a moment's scintillation before plunging into shadow. Paralleling the torrents, mournful horns continued to blare beneath wind-whipped flags.

No one in hiding saw brief shivers flicker across the Basc militia, quick glances exchanged at the ancient sound. Or the sudden rush to the oasis, rear guard sprinting up the trails while others peeled away and tumbled lifeless onto floating corpses. Another trick of the light, Yata herding Yata toward the pens, fighting their way past Masari.

~~~

Zai gave the order to close and barricade the gates. She set up a new perimeter, not liberating but shutting in with layers of shielding, turning the Farm into a fortress. Her soldiers dismantled the pens and spread chainlink panels, collapsing the barns for wood.

Inside the farmhouse, FlitNettle shook in BrushBurn's arms. TripStone rushed to the open door and held her breath. She listened at the threshold, wide-eyed with disbelief.

"Those are census takers' horns." She leaned out into the corridor. "From *Crossroads*."

BrushBurn barked a mirthless laugh. "Come to conquer Promontory."

“They’re not horns of war. That’s the sound to recall hunters.” TripStone looked back. “Under the Covenant, they told us when the killing should stop.”

He shook his head. “No one here would understand.”

“Basc does. That yelling outside is in Yata. They’re not on the offensive any more; they’ve been setting up fortifications. Promontory’s shooters can’t get in, but they can’t retreat without a fight because Crossroads flanks them on the other side.” She hurried back to BrushBurn, pried the kerchief from his hand, and re-tied it around his forehead. “Stay here and don’t take this off. It was made in Basc. It will identify you as an ally.”

He grabbed her wrist. “If you’re going out there, you need it more than I do.”

“The Yata know me.” TripStone eased his hand away. “I helped get them the skills and resources they needed to rebuild. That’s where I was going whenever I passed your cart.”

She kissed his concerned frown, then crouched by FlitNettle and placed the girl’s hand in the trader’s. Split geodes scattered beneath her boots as she sped to the door, unslinging her StormCloud.

“Take care of him,” TripStone called over her shoulder. “I love you both.”

~~~

The perimeter shifted. Rows of soldiers scissored forward to shoot, back to reload as barricades rose. Boxes of ammunition were spirited to the front as crates unlatched beneath ripped awnings. Snugged flat on the farmhouse roof, snipers scanned for Masari scaling the walls.

The blaring from Crossroads intensified as its hunters closed in. Zai glanced up as the whole canyon lowed, sonorous and somber. *We have enough to fill our bellies with you. Go home.* The horns once had chilled her in the forest after a Reckoning. Now they conjured up images of floodwaters frothing black with ink.

The hunters shouldn’t be here. Their mission was to defend her home and its children. Either enough was left of Crossroads to protect Zai’s people, or there were no people left to protect.

“Tell me you’ve made an alliance,” she muttered, grabbing a bandoleer. “Tell me you’re still protecting Basc, HigherBrook. I want to see my boys alive.”

The shooters from Promontory fell back, one winged and then another as their shoulders splintered in precise, deliberate maiming. Skillful shots, precision learned over the course of years rather than seasons.

TripStone. About time she showed up.

Zai turned her attention toward the gate. Concentrated clusters of bullet holes fractured wood boards from without as the chainlinks vibrated, their metal cut. More than gunfire crackled. Zai flared her nostrils and smelled burning tinder before blazes streaked overhead.

Barricades ignited. The snipers dove from a farmhouse roof roaring into flame.

~~~

Promontory’s dead walked haltingly among the living.

Their homes were buried in mud. Their tents have blown away. They had awakened in the night to a sight so hideous that they’d perished where they stood.

They had heaved upright again in devastated scrub as the sun climbed. Rising in a daze, the faces above them blurred. The stench hit them before their vision cleared. They staggered across the field choking, weaving crooked lines through clouds of black flies. They raised more dead and left the irretrievable behind. Thorns fell from their necks.

A doctor and an apothecary crawled among them, jabbering inanely that Yata had spared their lives. Yata armed with StormClouds, covered in pelts from slain Masari, merciful. The dead shook their heads and called the men mad.

Now they were mad as well, descending into the hell of the canyon and lurching toward the oasis, threading through Promontory’s guns. Apparitions in search of kin, begging them to cease fire. Raising their voices as horns fell silent and rifles paused. Smiling into faces turned white.

“There are many more still alive!” HigherBrook called into the hubbub from

behind. “They were drugged, not shot. They and the rest of your wounded are being treated at the rim.”

He swayed on his feet. Everything reeked; it hurt to breathe. Beside him BubbleCreek was equally pasty, leaning heavily on her shield to remain upright. Crossroads’ hunters, Rudder’s warriors, Promontory’s shooters; there wasn’t a person standing outside the gate who wasn’t sick.

Behind the gate cistern water sizzled, splashing from pails, the work of many hands. Acrid smoke billowed from blackened wood.

Zai drowned another fire and moved on. Her arms ached from throwing water on the barricades. Only pockets of flame were left, burning between broad swaths of char. Another plank split from sporadic gunshots that began to fade.

The farmhouse was supposed to be empty, but TripStone had run screaming toward its collapsing beams. Zai turned toward the hunter’s sharp cry of relief as BrushBurn stumbled from the wreck, coughing through a veil of smoke. A Masari girl curled up in his arms, clasping his neck. He handed the girl to TripStone and collapsed onto a pile of cinders.

Almost nothing remained to shore up defenses. The wood was bullet-spattered and burnt. The chainlinks were compromised. Only voices held the Masari back. Threats floated from the rear of the mob, one from Crossroads, the other from Rudder, promising retaliation if Promontory attacked the Yata. Other voices, close by, spoke in tones of fear and amazement, wondering aloud why they still breathed.

Urgent pleas drifted in, one Masari to another. Anger swelled and subsided in waves. Zai pictured hands laid on wrists, rifles and revolvers pressed toward the ground as BubbleCreek called out in the canyon. The Yata running free were not the Yata of their nightmares. Ancestral fears could be overcome on both sides. They could all implement new modes of survival.

The mob roiled. They’d already seen too much death. Several tried to shout the *yatanii* down.

“The Farm was already destroyed when we found it.” BrushBurn limped up to the smoldering gate, wiping soot from his eyes. “They need to know that.”

Zai glared at him. “I hadn’t counted on trapping us here, only to find your meat supply’s already been killed.”

“Our meat supply freed itself.” He waved weakly toward limestone crevasses beyond the awnings’ frayed strips. “Most of those Yata are still alive, probably back there. It’s the farmers who are dead. That child you see with TripStone is my only remaining kin.”

BrushBurn wobbled on his feet, straightening. Zai traced his gaze back to TripStone, who sat with her arm around the girl and talked with a soldier squatting beside them. The girl touched the soldier’s armor gingerly, and the hides. The hunter had never seemed so thin.

Zai nodded. “My brother and one of his wives died here. You’re not alone.”

The only Yata remaining to be freed were the militia. Zai ran her fingers through her short black hair and stopped. How long since she’d picked up that habit of Gria’s?

Arguments droned on the other side of the gate. Property and sovereignty, wildlife and livestock. A massive butcher’s scale measured the flesh of Basc against the flesh of Promontory. The siege would not end soon.

Though it was hardly a siege. Boards creaked; cracks widened. Walls began to crumble and fall away. No one tried to rush past the openings. The Masari shouted through their nausea but all the guns were silent, including Zai’s.

The trader wasn’t the only one who wobbled. They all did.

Farther back from the barricades, the conversation at hand proved more intriguing. TripStone listened curiously as FlitNettle grilled Izzik on the finer points of snares. Did predator and prey get to talk? Was anyone ever released? What if you’d be satisfied taking just a leg? What did Masari taste like?

The young Yata soldier divulged no secrets and the girl was still too young to hunt. TripStone corrected herself: too young to hunt in Crossroads. There was no telling what would happen in Promontory. There was no telling what would happen where they sat, surrounded by corpses percolating in the day’s growing heat.

They looked toward the barricades as a buttress turned into charcoal and thudded, raising a cloud of chalk and ash. Wood yawned inward. TripStone held FlitNettle closer, watching its slow yield to gravity until a gravelly voice dropped from overhead.

“Everyone’s yelling, but nobody out there knows what happened here.”

Soot darkened BrushBurn’s pelt to slate, rendering illegible the kerchief still clinging to his forehead. He addressed the canyon wall beyond the awnings. “No one knows everything that led up to this, TripStone. We all destroyed this farm together.”

“Convincing Promontory of that will take time.” She met his lowered gaze, nodding at the sharp edge gleaming in his blue eyes. “But your people are survivors.”

He reached down. “Let’s go talk to them before they grow hungry.”

## CHAPTER 40

### Skedge

A slow-moving speck glimmered on the salt lake. It was probably one of the larger transports, shrunken by distance. Not for the first time, Ghost wished he had a clarifier in his hands. It might keep him from pacing.

*Not a chance.*

AgatePool's rooms were no match for his long legs. He'd barely turn around and be faced with another wall. The guest houses were worse, reminding him of the one Gria occupied. Harder still to watch Piri make her visits there. She left skittish and returned exhausted.

There was no sense tiring her further, just because he couldn't keep still. Even TelZodo was bored with him, no longer entranced by his perambulations. The child fussed. Weren't babies supposed to enjoy mindless, repetitive movement?

The edge of the mesa eased Ghost's cabin fever but not his worry. None of the rubble tripped him any more; he knew exactly where to step. He'd passed repeatedly the chiseled stairs and metal rails, the cracked facades and shattered inlays. Massive pulleys and chains hung slack, their gondolas chopped away.

If the far-off plume of smoke was any indication, the death boats had met their own demise, along with most of the boardwalks. The raft that briefly returned had been badly singed. The commotion attending its arrival had made Ghost wonder whether an invasion of Skedge was actually underway, whether he'd have to use the StormCloud he'd been given.

No. Not an invasion but a medical emergency. One to which his lab work didn't apply.

*She will be safe here.* Piri's fingers had never trembled so much. Ghost knew his wife tried to convince herself. *She is finally unconscious.*

The rest of Gria's army had been impossible to make out as it engaged Promontory. Ghost could barely find the Warehouse even after the rain cleared



away. The canyon was lost in haze.

Closer, but still microscopic across the lake, a swarm of soldiers had glided down the mountain along the same road Ghost had run the day TelZodo was born. Only then, looking farther, did Ghost realize the full reason behind Promontory's silence. He had girded for a battle that never came. The Yata patrolling Skedge eased their vigilance and concentrated instead on practicing their new language, both spoken and touched.

The children had pointed out the mudslide first.

From here it was a dollop on the horizon, a congealed brown cream. It did not look threatening at all but almost funny. Like his old kitchen experiment overflowing the bowl, a miscalculation of yeast, so engaging the first time that Ghost had set up dozens of variations in secret corners of the Grange farmhouse and then waited patiently for results.

He'd gotten them. DewLeaf had begged him to return to his study of pollens.

Ghost gazed across the lake, frowning. Yeast did not bury what that mountain had. The destruction of Destiny Farm seemed like an afterthought, but he had no way to know the outcome of the mission from here. Days after the battle, the only outcome he'd seen lay in a guest house and in Piri's shaken touch.

The speck on the lake drifted imperceptibly closer. It must carry news, but that news would take hours to arrive. Nothing left to do but walk.

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"He's up there."

TripStone handed RootWing the clarifier. Ghost's father took one look through it and nodded. He gripped her shoulder, hard.

Beside them, HigherBrook pursed his lips. "I couldn't discern any features. You must know his stride." He squinted at the mesa before turning his attention to the lake. Clouds of mud rose and settled. Water slapped placidly against the sides of the boat. His nostrils flared at a clean smell of salt that was hard to accept, overridden by his memory of the canyon.

WoodFoam stood closer to the bow, his pelt riding well-muscled shoulders. He'd tied his shirt around his waist. A crossbreeze lifted ruby fuzz from his back as the sun beat down. His pole ratcheted smoothly in a relaxed cadence, extending his reach. The transport barely slowed between strokes.

The pole's small gears chattered like cicadas. TripStone smiled at the pleasing friction and closed her eyes for a moment. Such tranquility would be hard to come by soon. It was hard to come by now, to feel the force of RootWing's breaths and inhale the tang of his impatience.

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. "Now I know where Ghost gets his jumpiness from."

He gave her a craggy grin. "It's been six years, Stone. He's got a family I haven't seen yet. If I weren't jumpy, I'd be dead."

TripStone hugged RootWing across his back and gazed up at Skedge, trying to imagine what TelZodo looked like. She'd find out soon enough. Then, at least for a while, she would have to retain the memory.

The boat jerked, picking up speed. Up ahead, WoodFoam pulled his shirt back on. He gestured in the air, explaining the ratcheting mechanism to Zai, but that seemed unnecessary. She was putting her back into her work. Grunting, spacing her hands farther apart to compensate for her smaller size.

Those poles were not built for Yata. She would exhaust herself if she wasn't careful.

TripStone stepped lightly to HigherBrook as he started to head toward the bow. She took his arm, shook her head, and whispered, "Let her."

"She'll have no strength left by the time she gets to Gria."

"She'll have none left if she doesn't do what she's doing. Let her."

From the stern, the barracks dropped back. They looked like pebbles on the shore. Too small for the naked eye to see new scaffolding erected and repairs already underway.

DamBuster had begun with a lab. Now he and DevilChaser had a hospital.

The two men had paused in their ministrations to watch BubbleCreek lead a long and diverse procession that rounded the lake shore and filed quietly past the buildings. Rudder's warriors had marched with their shields down. The Yata of Basc had followed, Crossroads bringing up the rear.

The weary line had angled away from Promontory, bearing its own wounded as it advanced down a narrow dirt road, taking the chameleons' route and switchbacked climb toward Alvav. People who were mobile came out of the barracks to watch them go. Mudslide victims stood shoulder to shoulder with citizens from Rudder and Crossroads who stayed behind to dig out the streets and bury or process the dead.

HigherBrook followed TripStone, joining her to watch Promontory recede. "You'll send reports."

"Yes. For real, this time. The surviving Chamber members are ready to listen to me." She shrugged. "That doesn't mean they will."

"If I can be a hunter, TripStone, you can be a politician."

She scowled. "You had a teacher."

"I can think of no better teacher than a salesman." HigherBrook angled his goatee toward haze. "BrushBurn's with them now?"

"Since this morning. The center of town is submerged, so they're meeting in the Warehouse. FlitNettle went with him because she wanted to see the carcasses." Tiny whirlpools formed as the transport continued to jerk. "I read BrushBurn's notes. He's arguing for developing hunters and *yatanii*. And for building a place like the Milkweed." TripStone sighed. "I don't know if anything will work. His census figures are frightening."

"So are ours." HigherBrook dangled his hands over the rail and gazed wistfully toward the mountains. "But I'm not as frightened as I used to be."

He reached beneath his collar and eased out braided skins. "Here." He slipped them over his head, pressing the talisman onto TripStone's palm.

She lifted it to her wrinkling nose and sniffed delicately, smiling. "Something to remember you by."

HigherBrook laughed aloud. TripStone adjusted the strips around her neck.

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Piri set parchment before AgatePool. Together they examined sequences of jumbled lines obscured by splatters, rips in the fabric. Ink careened on the page.

AgatePool grimaced. “It was an idea.”

*She can't feel the pen.* Piri leaned back into cushions, drawing her knees up to her chest. Her fingers jerked against her host's palm. *It either drops out of her hand or she crushes it.*

They traced the progression of broken nibs. Nothing was recognizable as script, either Yata or Masari.

“I wish I knew how much is from the head injury and how much is from the overdose.” AgatePool lowered the sheet onto marble and waited for blots to dry. “None of our doctors has seen anything like this. Ghost is stymied.”

Piri blinked back tears of frustration. Her fingers twitched. *Her sense of touch either flares up or it shuts down completely. I can't talk to her. She is speaking again, but I can barely understand what she says.*

AgatePool heaved herself off the cushions. She glanced down at a sleeping TelZodo as she stepped to the window. Outside, she could see only fractures. They were oddly comforting, the scars of Skedge finally made manifest. Dark, spidery cracks. Her shoulders began to shake.

She rested her coppery cheek against cool stone, the hairs of her black chops bending.

She moaned, “I thought I knew him.”

The soldiers had not said much, pressed to return to battle. They'd given the name of Gria's attacker, said he'd been spared execution, and added that SandTail had probably bled to death.

AgatePool had whispered, “Don't be so sure.”

Her fingertips remembered. SandTail's nakedness had been a raised pictogram in the dark, touch-talking stories of what his body had already survived.

~~~

A breeze helped carry the transport in. WoodFoam stowed the pole, listening for a faint crunch of gravel beneath the bow. Rope looped about his bare chest. Off to the side, Zai leaned her back against the rail, a faraway look in her night-colored eyes. Her tunic and pants were stained with sweat, but she was no longer winded. Her fingers skittered through her hair.

WoodFoam said, softly, "You can still climb." It was more question than statement.

She started and glared at him, then softened. Nodded.

The angel bent to his gaiters and reapplied waxy repellent. He called to the others, "The adders are dormant, but I'm not taking any chances. Not all of them follow the rules. Don't try to leave until I set up the plank."

He edged along the bow, trailing rope from its cleat, then hopped the rail and splashed down to tether the boat. At least the others waited for his signal this time, before cramming toward the front. Halfway across the lake, WoodFoam had feared the transport would nosedive from their eagerness.

Gravel yielded to stone. Craggs jutted above him, interrupting portions of the summit. Even with a clear sight line, the sun was still high enough to be blinding. It didn't matter. WoodFoam knew he was being watched.

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From above he was the size of a bean pod. A fuzzy one, tilting back with his hand shielding his eyes, squinting. Running the rope to the overhang, disappearing from view. Parting from the rock and splashing back to the boat.

Ghost recognized the movements, the shock of ruby hair and pelt catching the light. He shook out his arms and stretched, but he couldn't stop twitching. He tried to squeeze another drop of patience from his frayed nerves. WoodFoam hadn't come for corpses this time, he'd brought passengers. Whoever was down there would still have to climb.

Ghost's pacing slowed. Stopped. He peered over the edge as the plank thudded into place.

The transport rocked from side to side. Bodies pressed toward shore, too small to distinguish from each other, but suddenly Ghost was out of breath. Every muscle jumped. His body was singing and he had no idea why. A small kernel of him tried desperately to hypothesize. How did his heart know what his brain couldn't process yet?

Instinct. Animal sense. The thought fled beneath his pounding boots. When did he break into a gallop? When did he snatch the gleaming gondola chains and leap over the precipice, dropping hand over hand past inscribed pulleys, past giant hooks and pins?

Ghost wrapped his legs about the line when his lungs began to burn. He hung in place, gulping back his strength, staring at the metal in his hands. However he came this far, he would do no good to tumble now.

"Don't worry, son, we'll *wait* for you!" A sweet timbre blanketed the mesa, reflected from everywhere. It couldn't be real, but it was. Blurred around the edges by age but still vital, still fully recognizable in this impossible context. Yelling again. "Stone told me you've grown some muscle, but I can see that's an understatement."

RootWing's voice floated up to Ghost, joyous. It was the sound of a liberated Grange, of exile dissolving. Of mix-children dashing through fields unafraid. Ghost clung and trembled, laughing into the chain until he wept.

Other boots hammered the chiseled walkway below. A solitary figure raced past the chains, toward the crevasse. A small, bronze-skinned body, Yata. Someone as feverish as he was.

Ghost flexed his fingers and wiped sweat off on his shirt. He edged lower, more carefully now, calling back to an encouraging chorus clustered on the ledge. His limbs tingled when he finally let go, dropping the last few feet into waiting arms and turning with a small cry.

He buried his head in RootWing's shirt. "Oh, gods," he gasped. "I haven't smelled the Grange in so long."

RootWing's grip cinched bone. His tenor lilted. "You could have asked Stone to bring you some dirt."

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HigherBrook smiled down at the squalling baby in his arms. TelZodo's coppery face had darkened by a couple of shades. His little mouth roared. His arms and legs were fuzzy violet windmills trying to fend off a crowd sprawled on so many pillows that hardly a trace remained of AgatePool's mosaic floor.

The child had craned his head all about while swaddled in RootWing's arms, and started fidgeting in earnest while in TripStone's. By the time he reached HigherBrook, his wrath had become full-blown.

And it was a *glorious* wrath. This little tempest will be Basc. And Crossroads. Never before had HigherBrook witnessed anything so marvelous. He handed the baby up to Piri with a boyish grin. "He's lovely."

Piri beamed back at him. She jerked her head toward the door, motioning for him to follow, then walked the raging bundle outside.

Murmurs accompanied soft lantern light. HigherBrook rose from the pillows and passed clusters of people already divided into those who would accompany him to Alvav in the morning and those who would stay behind. For a moment the contrast stopped him, before he forced himself to move on.

To his right, TripStone lifted the bones splayed by her knees, tracing their stippling for AgatePool and explaining their ancient codes. WoodFoam squatted by the two of them, following TripStone's teaching with mild interest. In the morning he would ferry them both to Promontory.

Ghost and RootWing shuffled parchments at HigherBrook's left, speaking softly and excitedly of rebuilding Crossroads' burnt tavern into a weaning center and establishing a laboratory at the Grange. The sheets overflowed with drawings and equations having as much to do with dissection as with nutrition, but the men's attention was elsewhere. Their long limbs draped over the cushions as they leaned, an entranced mirror of father and son unable to stop touching each other's hands.

At daybreak they would cross the mesa, head opposite the lake and toward the

rocky, zigzagged trail leading down to the plain and then into Alvav. Forces from Basc and Crossroads camped there now, treating wounded. This time the Cliff sanctioned their passage, welcoming Yata and Masari victors alike.

HigherBrook would join his soldiers and Zai would take Gria to theirs. Their long march would take them first into Basc, filing past adobe dwellings and then down new paths connecting to Crossroads. Those continuing on would enter dense pine stands, emerging finally from the windbreak at the edge of the Grange, where Ghost's kin waited to welcome him and his family home.

HigherBrook stepped outside and gazed up into a carpet of stars interrupted by high cirrus clouds. He was a pinpoint on top of a monolith, wondering if he could simply reach out and touch the universe on a clear night. The clouds blocked complete clarity, so partial clarity would have to do. This calm couldn't last for long. He smelled rain.

The air was pleasingly warm and the baby was asleep. Piri held TelZodo, standing next to a column that appeared less savaged in lamp light than it had during the day. Beyond the column lay the guest houses, lost in shadow except for one glowing window.

Piri laid a hand on HigherBrook's arm. *She wants to see you.*

He jolted unexpectedly at the request. For a brief moment he wished he still wore his talisman.

HigherBrook followed mother and mix-child down a battered walkway and up to a polished door. He waited as Piri knocked: once, twice, once again. Then she turned away, leaving him alone at the threshold.

Zai answered the door, her face pinched, her eyes defiant. Hours earlier, HigherBrook had watched her haul herself up the mesa before Ghost finished descending his gondola chain. The wiry woman had sprinted to the guest house and hadn't emerged from it since. While the others dined with AgatePool and clung to each other's company, Zai had remained steadfastly at Gria's side.

Behind her defiance lay worry. HigherBrook could see it in her mouth, smell it in her sweat.

I pray to the gods I can trust you as much as she does. Zai's fingers brushed his

arm. *We are indebted to you for saving us, but that does not erase the fact that a Masari did this to her.*

Her touch conveyed more anguish than challenge. He nodded.

Gria has great respect for you. Do not betray that.

Her soldier's protectiveness covered something else. Zai's entire body pleaded. She was afraid to let him through.

It was just as well. HigherBrook was afraid to step inside.

He reached out to her, measuring his reply. *I consider Gria a friend. I'm thankful she has you.*

Zai blinked and patted his arm uncertainly. She guided him past a small table lit by a lowered wick in a deeply-shadowed room. HigherBrook squinted to find its raised pallet and single chair before the shadows moved. Zai sat, leaning forward as he edged toward the bed.

"HigherBrook." Gria's slurred voice startled him. She spoke slowly, struggling. "We both survived. I'm glad."

She was limp on the pallet, her head wrapped in a bandage, her body a mass of bruises. Her muscles tensed and relaxed as though controlled from without. Her armor was gone, and her hunting tunic. Instead, her chest heaved beneath a simple nightshirt. Never had she looked so vulnerable.

HigherBrook whispered, "I hadn't realized the extent of the beating."

She responded with a sudden, low moan. It wasn't one of pain. He flushed.

"Don't be embarrassed." Gria tried to smile. "Your voice touches." She raised a quivering arm, her face pinched in concentration. "Sometimes I feel everything. Sometimes I feel nothing, and that's when the bruises happen." She turned her head slowly. "Zai-help me sit."

"Are you sure that he should see this?"

"Yes." Gria's breaths turned sultry, her lips slightly parted. "She questions me all

the time, HigherBrook. I couldn't ask for better. Promise me you'll work with her."

Her deliberate relinquishment was no less unsettling than her involuntary tremors of arousal. HigherBrook kept his voice low. "I'll work with you both."

Zai stepped away from her chair and bent over the bed to lift. HigherBrook winced as Gria arched her spine, braying with laughter. But he saw her degree of restraint, how hard she trembled, how delicately Zai handled her. The air thickened. By the time she was upright both women were breathless, grinning fiercely at one another. Zai stepped gingerly away from the pallet.

Gria panted, "It's good you don't look away." She leaned back into the wall, spasming, exposing her neck. The overdose wrung another groan from her. She licked her lips; spittle dripped down her chin. She said, with wry amusement, "How powerless we are."

Zai stirred in her chair. "We will recover from this, Gria."

"We will still be powerless. He knows." She looked up at HigherBrook. "We kill and preserve each other at once. Split, both our peoples. I understand it better now." A shaky finger pointed to the far side of the room. "You see?"

There was nothing to see. Shadow blackened the corner. HigherBrook followed the line of her arm and gazed into emptiness, confused.

Gria extended her hand toward him, her gaze still rooted to the far wall. "I have gone through the portal to the afterlife, HigherBrook." She began to gulp air. "I am trying to come back."

He looked down at her palm, up at the shadows. His heart lurched.

Destiny had possessed the body on the bed, but its chemicals inflicted only part of the damage. HigherBrook forced himself to regard a woman shot as surely as if SandTail had pulled the trigger. Shimmering reflected in her eyes, the image of a spirit trapped behind the threshold.

A Masari had split her. HigherBrook shivered, frowning at the ruddy tufts on his knuckles. No wonder Zai had been afraid to let him in. She stood to his side, radiating waves of dismay. Gria turned toward her companion, bestowing a look

of utter dependence.

Fingers beckoned to him from the bed; HigherBrook could count Gria's heartbeats in their twitches. She was raw beneath him. Behind her physical turmoil lay intense calm, but behind that was terror swallowed up. Digested. Processed and repackaged and unwrapped.

Like his own. Watching her war with her own frailty, HigherBrook felt nothing but his own meat. No matter what defense, what preservation they devised, Yata and Masari remained helpless before each other. Perpetually vulnerable. It was a covenant neither of them could control.

"Your fur," she gasped.

He rested his palm against hers. She struggled to hold still and whispered, "You feel so strange."

He whispered back, "I won't do more unless you tell me."

She hesitated, then nodded. HigherBrook curled his fingers slowly, touching her with the back of his hand, the edges of pelt.

She shrieked, a tangle of agony and rapture. She jerked away, barking a laugh. "Too soon." Her serene gaze toward the dark corner belied her body straining against the pallet. "But I have not fled farther. I am still in the room."

Zai said, tightly, "The drug needs to wear off."

"Maybe it already has." She turned toward HigherBrook and managed a shallow smile. "Thank you." She nodded toward the door. "Let me say goodbye to TripStone."

~~~

The birds were out on the plain at dawn, lining the edges of seasonal springs. Feathered boulders, folded and compacted, their long necks tucked inward. Skedge cast its broad shadow across the landscape, turning them gray.

TripStone tried not to look at them, or at the rocky, oxidized trail leading down from the summit. She kissed TelZodo's forehead and passed him to WoodFoam,

then took Piri into her arms. Words of affection meandered across her back as her own fingertips pressed in reply.

HigherBrook and Zai continued slowly onward, a stretcher between them. On it Gria lay motionless, strapped down and sedated, as unnerving in her peacefulness as her bearers were in their stoicism. TripStone followed the trio's descent until a hand on her shoulder made her turn around.

She smiled at Ghost with tears in her eyes and whispered, "Nothing is easy."

"I used to think that." Ghost enfolded her, laying his chops against her own. He squeezed her tighter. "I'm not entirely sure whether I've changed my mind."

She pressed her lips tenderly against his. "Take good care of each other."

"You, too." Ghost looked over her shoulder at RootWing. "You're not getting away from Crossroads that easily, Stone. My kin has me back, but we're not going to lose you."

"You've got me." She rested her hands on his cheeks. "We might settle back in Crossroads. We don't know yet. It depends on how much we can do in Promontory." Plum curls flowed between her fingers. "FlitNettle has the makings of a good hunter; I want you to meet her some day. And we're all *yatanii* now."

"Using Rudder's guidelines."

TripStone nodded. "Let me know when you find a better way."

Ghost grinned. "If."

"*When*." She grinned back. "You're stronger, you're not hiding any more, and I've seen your plans for the lab." She angled her head at Piri. "And your lab assistant expects nothing less from you."

He laughed. "*When*, then." He held her close. Storm-colored eyes twinkled. "Tell BrushBurn that he and FlitNettle are family to us."

TripStone's throat closed up. In a moment the chops against hers were coarser, the cheeks more leathery. She hugged RootWing hard as he cinched her ribs.

Then there were only the birds. Long yellow beaks, smooth plumed heads emerging from downy clefts. Sharp blats sounded up and down springs beginning to catch the light. Feathers drifted into sage as the landscape preened.

She turned back toward jumbled marble when they rose all at once, shattering the sky. She followed them to the lake.

~~~

“About time I saw what all the fuss was about.” AgatePool wrinkled her nose as WoodFoam’s boat cut through midday mist. “I’ve always wondered what Promontory was like. I hadn’t realized how much cleaner Skedge smells.”

TripStone reached the bow. “I was surprised at how quickly I’d grown used to Promontory’s stink.” She shrugged. “Probably because I’d begun to match it.”

“You’ve washed yours off.” WoodFoam flexed his shoulders, slaking his thirst with drizzle. His pole ratcheted smoothly before them, side to side. “What will you do now?”

TripStone smiled. “I don’t know.” She turned and stepped quietly toward the stern.

The mesa dwindled. Now a horizon extended behind it, flatness edged in mountains. She paused at the rail before she pivoted, ambling again toward the front. Floating between worlds, unable to keep still.

AgatePool snorted. “There must be a better way to smelt. I wonder what the Yata did when they controlled the factories.”

WoodFoam planted his feet wider apart. A long stroke sent the boat on a slow coast as he raised the pole above his head and stretched. “They didn’t supply the Masari.” He craned his head to watch TripStone’s receding back and lowered his voice. “How many times do you think she’s walked across the lake?”

TripStone called from amidships, “Pacing helps me think.”

The white-winged birds glided low to the water, toward a curtain of mist softening the Alvav foothills.

TripStone paused at the bow and listened again to WoodFoam's pole ratcheting, imitating cicadas. They were close enough to Promontory that its remaining houses eclipsed boils of mud. Dogged construction continued at the shore.

Two days earlier she had awakened in BrushBurn's arms to the predawn cadence of digging and an impatient commotion as FlitNettle pulled shovels out from beside the hearth. The town's citizens might starve, but they would not starve without shelter or roads.

TripStone sighed; she would rather dig than negotiate. There was so much to do, so many people to try to persuade. Maybe Promontory would exhaust itself at the mounds, driving fear and anger away with simple weariness. Maybe it could learn the sacred uses of a gun.

Maybe. Then what?

She murmured to AgatePool, "How many have seen a mix-child, do you think?"

"Some of their parents." Drizzle plastered black curls to ample cheeks. AgatePool looked up at WoodFoam. "Angels. Ambassadors. They can educate the others about Skedge. They'll need a collective voice if we're to re-establish any kind of truce." She frowned. "Now that we know what our ancestors did, we'll need to convince Promontory that we're not them. Even if we return to warfare."

Her dark eyes clouded over. Her portly body tightened, shrinking as she crowded the rail. She shook her head as though trying to ward something off.

AgatePool knew how to manage a factory. She could address the subject of mixed blood, serving as an intermediary in Promontory as well as in Skedge; but none of that had driven her here. TripStone touched the shorter woman's arm and felt muscles bunch beneath the damp cloak.

She whispered, "Tell me if you find him."

AgatePool's shoulders drooped. She raised her face to the rain. "Why do I even want to look, TripStone? I must be mad."

"SandTail had feelings for you. And you're part Yata. He couldn't have hated everything about them." TripStone tried to smile. "Look who he chose to

mentor.”

AgatePool shuddered. She leaned and spat over the side.

Slow walk to the stern. TripStone’s boots thudded softly on wood. The mesa faded toward monochrome, its crags and rifts smoothing out, swaths of light and dark blending together behind a steamy veil. Salt lake and sky formed twin silver-gray mirrors. When the birds dove, TripStone looked up to see if the clouds split.

Somewhere, behind thickening fog, there was a border.

She had a bone. Part of an ilium, a smooth, polished plate stippled with multitudes of stories. Richly dyed in layers of inks, submerging and resurfacing in tricks of translucence. It was buried in her pack and rested against her hip, held against her by the strap of her StormCloud. AgatePool had snatched it from the desk before they left the house and pressed it into her hand.

Extraordinary scrimshaw. ShadowGrass would have loved it.

TripStone squinted into the mist, finding her mother along with the rest of the dead. They floated on the water with her, cutting through haze. She was etched with them.

She would enter a home with walls left empty for so long they teemed with memory. The relic would shout from the blankness; she should hang it with care. Behind those walls lay the spirits of Yata she had never known, who still spoke to BrushBurn.

She would ask to know them, but first she had to unearth Promontory. Dig deeper, join the spirits who walked the roads. Learn Masari lineages one citizen, one rugged, hungering life at a time.

WoodFoam slowed his cadence. Voices sailed out from shore. TripStone turned away from the stern. AgatePool flashed her a worried smile before facing front again, hanging onto the rail.

Scaffolding still abounded. Spillways still dripped. Red slurries still oozed down the walkways. WoodFoam lifted his pole, preparing to drift in as TripStone neared the bow.

Wildflowers ringed the Promontory shore, a thin ribbon of them blooming between the slurry and the salt. They glowed in muted light beneath the clouds, their beauty so tightly concentrated it pulled TripStone in. They were the rich paintings at the Milkweed, the festive whorls of a trader's tent brought to life. Butterflies shimmered, resplendent, sated with nectar at the end of their season.

She almost forgot to look up until she heard voices past the clatter of rebuilding. Survival's din reduced to a fine line as BrushBurn and FlitNettle called her name.

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