

Deviations: TelZodo

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TelZodo

Elissa Malcohn

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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*

Volume 2: *Appetite*

Volume 3: *Destiny*

Volume 4: *Bloodlines*

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

“Rather than stuff judgments of right and wrong down the reader’s throat, Malcohn asks questions, and leads the reader to find his own answers. Further, she develops the ideas of right and wrong from her characters’ points of view, and the points of view of her various cultures. ... Get the whole series, and allot a large chunk of time for reading them, because once you pick them up you won’t want to put them down.”

-Windborn, at HubPages

“If you’re looking for a tale that clearly defines good guys and bad guys, this is not your read. But if you’re looking for a story filled with immense heart, rich character development, vivid world building and-oh, by the way-is nothing short of great, old fashioned storytelling, you cannot do better than Malcohn’s ‘Deviations’ series.”

-K.L. Nappier, at Manybooks

“The series is really good. While reading, I could see myself in the story. It was almost as if I could feel, smell, and touch the other characters. That has not happened for me in a novel in quiet a while.”

-David Bennett, at Smashwords

“[T]he social commentary that is woven throughout the story is thought

provoking and makes you reevaluate what you think you know about yourself and society at large.”

-Lakisha S, at Manybooks

“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*

“Without sensationalized graphic violence or the glamorized pornography of pulp romance novels, Ms. Malcohn achieves what good science fiction/fantasy is intended to do. She has created a believable world, with characters with whom you can empathize, in a good story that is well and eloquently toldI give *Deviations: Covenant* five stars out of five.”

-David Roth, *Examiner*

“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, *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

"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 those who are struggling

Acknowledgments

Welcome to the fifth and next-to-last Deviations volume.

Advisory: This installment of the saga opens with explicit sex. As with the other Deviations volumes, *TelZodo* contains mature language and situations. Please share responsibly.

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About the Author:

Elissa Malcohn's novelette "Lazuli" (*_Asimov's_*, Nov. 1984) made her a 1985 John W. Campbell Award finalist. Her short story "Moments of Clarity" (*_Full Spectrum_*, Bantam, 1988) reached preliminary ballot for the 1989 Nebula Awards. Commenting on "Moments of Clarity" in his review of *Full Spectrum* in the November, 1988, *Out of This World Tribune*, Bruce D. Arthurs wrote, "This one story is worth the price of the entire book."

Elissa's work also appears in anthologies that won awards in 2009. IPPY Silver Medalist *Riffing on Strings: Creative Writing Inspired by String Theory* (Scribner 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 Collection*. Her novelette "Flotsam" (*_Asimov's_*, Oct./Nov. 2009) is on the recommended reading list in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 27th Annual Collection*. In 2010 her story "Judgment at Naioth" appeared in the Dybbuk Press anthology *She Nailed A Stake Through His Head: Tales of Biblical Terror*.

More publications news may be found on her website:

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

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

Crossroads

TelZodo grinned and quickened his pace. He wrapped his fingers in graying hair and squeezed worm-colored flesh. What was her name? Crossroads was so small now, everybody knew each other's name. They certainly all knew his.

It didn't matter.

She had her exotic boy but he had her, thrusting hard while she gasped on the grass.

She spread her legs further apart, arching her back. Cried out a little, but she wasn't there yet. She was just getting started. A virgin, this one. One who hadn't had him before.

Then give her a good show, you bastard.

Her pants were off, crumpled and thrown over his. TelZodo shoved his hands beneath her shirt, pushing thick cloth around her neck. Flaccid breasts, veins vanishing beneath pectoral fur. Sweat tracking to her navel. Stretch marks.

Tired of fucking Masari, are we?

She whispered, "Oh, gods," from swollen lips.

TelZodo took his cue. He reared up, tugged on her hair, and rammed.

So much empty seed in him. So much death.

He coiled, his long limbs pinning hers. Her shirt wrapped more tightly around her neck. Purple crept up her cheeks. TelZodo grinned as she bucked beneath him, keeping up and shoving back. The old ones always did. He ground her into the dirt.

He was either her god or her toy, he still couldn't tell. That didn't matter, either.

He loosened the cloth when her face darkened a shade further. She ran her hands over him, clutching him to her like a magic thing. Like a relic in the flesh.

He clawed her wrinkled breasts, rode her puckered pubes. His muscled stomach lowered again, sliding against her thin skin, thin fur. He smelled the Yata on her breath. His mouth came down hard on hers, his tongue darting out, tasting the remains of her meal.

Her squeals against him turned his belly into a rushing torrent. Lightning arced down his spine. TelZodo groaned and fountained in the deeps, spurting away everything that he was again and again and again and again.

And it didn't matter, because everything he was, was nothing.

He rolled onto his back afterward, drying in the cool breeze of early spring. She panted beside him, unlacing her shirt. It dropped open, revealing neck fur with only a few flecks of white salting dulled cherry red.

She turned her head and beamed at him, still catching her breath. "Happy birthday, dear boy."

He laughed. Who'd gifted whom?

Pines whispered all along the windbreak. TelZodo curled his finger around a grass blade and snapped it. "I thought you'd like this place."

"You're everything they said you were."

"Really."

Toy, then.

She reached out, tousling his plum-colored curls. His father's hair. He had his father's lips and bones, too. A Masari skeleton and pelt. The rest was Yata.

From the corner of his eye he spotted her other hand scratching idly between her legs. TelZodo rolled to his knees, crawled to his pants, and fished out a small tin. He tossed it to her and crawled back as she sighed with happy relief, smearing

cream on rawness.

She asked, "How long have you been doing this?"

He laced his fingers behind his head and stared up at the sky. "Since I was nine."

"So young."

"Not for a Yata." He laughed again. "I'm a doddering old man in Yata years."

"Really." Her smoky voice lilted. "What does that make me, then?"

TelZodo turned to look at her and said, plainly, "That makes you a Masari." He turned back to the sky. "My best friend is a full-blood Yata. He's got four wives, two co-husbands, and at least three kids he knows are his. He's a little more than a year older than I am."

"Evit, is it?"

TelZodo nodded, rolling onto his side. "You know him?"

"No."

"He mixed that cream for me."

She chuckled and handed back the tin. "He's a good friend." Her stretch marks moved as she drew a deep breath, drawing wrinkles taut.

"You've had children."

"Two." She frowned. "Both died in the hunt."

"I'm sorry." He looked upon resignation. "Your husband?"

"Died in the massacre," she said. "Almost seventeen years ago. Before you were born." She forced a smile. "Let's not talk about it."

Her lips remained slightly parted. She blinked and rubbed half-lidded eyes, easing closer. She chortled when she looked between his legs.

"I may be a doddering old Yata." TelZodo traced her veins as she grasped him.

He guided her fingers more firmly around his cock. “But I’m still a young Masari.” He fisted her hair and began to pull, twitching as her chest heaved. His voice turned thick. “You still look hungry. I can tell you haven’t filled up on your meat yet.”

He straddled her, scooting forward as he cradled her scalp. Warm palms pushed against his buttocks. Her breasts mashed against the tops of his thighs as he entered her mouth, driving toward the back of her throat.

“Keep swallowing,” he ordered sharply when she choked a little. He grasped her skull and pushed deeper, feeling her nails by his balls. “Suck me down, demon. Harder.”

She was nothing but lips and teeth and bottomless maw. They matched rhythms. More spittle dropped onto the grass. She had no body any more, but neither had he. She was a voracious beast digesting him, a faceless vacuum that left him gasping for air.

Eat me whole, you Masari witch.

Today his Yata blood screamed, in the place where everyone had disappeared except for him. Hunted down and cut into pieces. Bred in pens and slaughtered. He could have been one of them. He’d lived instead.

He’d been conceived in a meadow, gestated in a prison, and born in a desert. His mother had been sliced wide open to free his big Masari bones. She’d nursed him surrounded by riots.

He remembered none of it. Was too young to remember, even with his quickened Yata growth.

The demon pulled him in, stroking. Squeezing. They rolled on the ground. His balls clenched as though they were worth the trouble. His whole body was a liar, swallowing his miraculous birth and then spitting it out. So much promise, locked away and forever out of reach.

He smothered her in his lap as he spasmed. Filled her stomach with void. He let go of her hair and dropped limp out of her mouth.

She collapsed against him in cloying musk, too spent and too numb to talk. But

she nodded when he held up his fist. Insatiable. Trying to forget as much as he was. The old ones, the ones who remembered the Covenant, always managed to keep up with him.

TelZodo opened up the tin, dipped into the cream, and smiled at her breathing grown heavier. He coated her first, slipping from her clitoris to her labia, his other hand caressing her anus. He teased her with a fingertip while his other hand unfolded its slathered fist and began its gradual crawl. One knuckle disappeared, then another. More fingers. Her moans opened her further.

He had fit inside a Yata, once. He knew how to fill small spaces.

“Masari are allowed in the Meethouse,” he offered, beginning to pump. She was iron around his wrist. “You’ll have a whole room full of people to fuck.”

She groaned, “Only you.”

He met her as she surged. They had all afternoon. They had all evening if she liked, and the next day, and the next. After she left, the parade of giggling Masari girls would hound him until he savaged them in their stupid games.

The Yata of Basc treated sex as an ordinary thing. They made no fuss over him. They merely took TelZodo into their arms and treated him as a carrier of life.

Ignoring, for the moment, that he wasn’t. Conveniently or compassionately, they forgot that the miracle of TelZodo’s freedom from Yata-dependence-what the Masari so desperately craved-would die with him.

CHAPTER 2

SHABRA: Tell me about your exile.

GHOST: It wasn't easy to leave.

SHABRA: Nobody sent you away, did they? You left Crossroads on your own. Why?

GHOST: I knew what I wanted, Shabra. My friends were dying and I couldn't stand it any longer. Nobody else was willing to take the risk, and I wasn't going to endanger my kin by committing my crimes at the Grange. I knew people who would get me the body parts I needed, and I trusted them not to reveal my location.

SHABRA: What about your family?

GHOST: What about them?

SHABRA: You left without saying goodbye, didn't you?

GHOST: What's that got to do with anything?

TelZodo flipped the page. Nothing in these narratives showed him the fine silver tongs in his father's hand, or Ghost's growing lethargy as he was fed a daily diet of Yata, more than he was meant to consume. Shabra, the Cliff's deputy, had been Yata, but killing her own kind had come easily to her in those days.

Now his father's inquisitor was dead, too.

TelZodo had been at that long-ago breakfast table, a tiny fist of flesh lodged in his mother's womb. Piri's eighth child. Her eighth child, and her only child, at one and the same time.

He rubbed the parchment between tapered, coppery fingers. Its brown leather binding rested on his long thighs. He uncrossed his legs and closed his eyes, leaning back against the Rotunda's tall stacks.

His mother's touch-speech had painted the dining room for him as she tapped

out its description on his arm. Goblets and candelabra gleamed in torch light. Landscape tapestries hung on the walls. A plush rug woven in a sunburst pattern cushioned the stone floor. Strains of harp music rose from terraces below. Servants and guards had tended the diners, while a scribe had captured every word extracted from Ghost's tortured soul.

SHABRA: You've come of age, TelZodo. You can leave Crossroads, too.

TELZODO: And go where?

SHABRA: You know where.

He could see and hear the Cliff's deputy as clearly as if they'd actually met in real life: her long black braid coiling by the shiny, seal-embossed pendant of her authority. Her crisp, cream-colored uniform. The crime statistics on her office wall, next to a framed calligraphy of some famous ballad nobody recited any more.

TELZODO: Why should you care? You didn't even want me to be born.

SHABRA: That's not what you wanted, either, is it?

He opened his eyes.

Then he laughed. *Come of age.* He was a mix-child. How could anybody tell when he had come of age?

You lived in Crossroads, you followed Crossroads' rules. If they said he was a child until now, then he was. It didn't matter that he'd worn the body of a man for years, or how well he'd proven it.

Quiet footfalls echoed from below; the old Governor was making his rounds. TelZodo listened to the lopsided cadence, the left foot dragging. He closed the book of his father's narratives and scooted to the railing.

The dragging stopped. Soft brown eyes looked up into his, past a circle of hanging lanterns and golden, filigreed light.

TelZodo quirked a smile. "Smelled me, did you?"

“I didn’t have to.” HigherBrook’s face was thin; his Yata fast would end soon. “I’ve watched you struggle with this place for years. I’m glad you finally came inside.”

Was that what coming of age meant? Mustering up the courage to set foot in Crossroads’ vast library without losing one’s breath?

TelZodo gazed down through dizziness. He slouched on a high platform inside a giant granite egg trimmed in marble and sculpted into coffers. His lungs filled with the smells of leathers and inks that were clean and fresh up top, ancient and musty down below. Stories of countless Yata lives clustered below him, dictated over the eons by the heartbroken hunters who’d killed them.

Beneath those primordial voices lay meat: slabs of Yata sanctified and preserved in neat, treasured stacks.

Given another father, he’d have been a different slab, stamped and packaged and sold in a different place and time. He’d have been robbed of his speech, pantomiming what little coherence he had left while he was still alive.

All those bound-up memories below him couldn’t balance out the unrecorded and long-digested Destiny Farm dead. The ones without voice, without memory. His missing kin.

Sounds of limping rang on one of the many staircases curving up the dome. TelZodo hurried to put the heavy volume away. His father’s interrogation squeaked into place, the first of its kind in this small section of Masari narratives teetering at the top of the egg. The part of the shell the gods smashed first, before they dipped their spoons toward the yolk.

“Stay where you are, Governor. I’m coming down.”

In a moment he was by HigherBrook’s side, wheezing. Had his sandals even touched the steps?

Clean linen came around his back. TelZodo looked down at a nasty forehead gash crusting over. “I’m afraid of a few books, and you’re still stupid enough to hunt at your age.”

“They let me live.” The shorter man shook his head. “I’m more of a lookout,

now. I haven't killed in years."

"You're still a target."

"True." HigherBrook held onto him as they clomped down the stairs. "They'll shoot me when they're ready to."

A hint of brick-colored chops showed through the gray, but Crossroads' leader still looked boyish. Long eyelashes, neatly-trimmed chops and goatee. His short hair clung to his scalp and looked as pressed as his tunic and trousers.

The gods must think we're an entertaining pair. TelZodo's coarse shirt dripped, half-untied. Its tails flapped by his waist and the grass-stained pants hugging his hips, low and tight enough to show young muscle and his instrument of pleasure outlined beneath a plum tuft of abdominal fur. His curls hung halfway down his back in a wine-colored, untamed mane.

He shrugged free of HigherBrook's hold as they passed through the great bronze doors. Pictograms caught a gleam from the setting sun and drew the youth's attention to stamped plumage and mountaintops, stylized watercourses and many-branched trees hammered into the metal. Old Covenant scripture.

The Governor could read the pretty things, but the man looked elsewhere, frowning at discolored haze in the distance and wrinkling his nose at a faint, metallic tang. Pollution was blowing in from Basc again.

"They're dirty gods, now," TelZodo mused.

"I'm sorry you never knew how things used to be."

TelZodo smirked. "In those high, holy days, when I couldn't exist."

"That's not what I meant."

The Rotunda's broad stairway offered a bird's-eye view of the marketplace and its clutch of carts shuttered for the night. A few traders remained, Yata and Masari side by side, hanging lanterns as their awnings lost color and dimmed into shades of gray. More lanterns swung and blinked along a network of paths crisscrossing the meadow, mingling the peoples of this valley.

TelZodo peered toward the distant windbreak as he descended. The Grange became a flat expanse of darkening fields, nothing but helpless cotyledons and empty trellises, winter harvests stored in trench silos. New peas would await him at dinner, but much of the fare would be old food.

It wasn't the food that bothered him.

"I hate crowds," he muttered.

"Too bad," HigherBrook said.

CHAPTER 3

“A fresh-slaughtered goat.” TelZodo pitched his voice to mock-graciousness. Typical, to celebrate his arbitrary milestone by killing something. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Don’t worry, Tel, he was way past his prime.” Evit grinned as he sliced flesh off the bone. His bronze-toned cheeks dimpled. “They let me pick him for you. I gave him a merciful death.”

“Bloodthirsty Yata.”

“Thirsty, yes.” The diminutive man raised a mug of ale, his wrist slick with froth. “Happy birthday, old goat.”

Merriment rippled across the room. The Yata continued to cut, standing on a box and wielding a knife as long as his arm. TelZodo leaned back in his chair at the head of the long farmhouse table. He surveyed this travesty of a party, seeking out eyes as hooded as his own.

They weren’t hard to find. These people celebrated a mirage, the so-called new face of Crossroads, its first and oldest hybrid child. They surrounded him, cheering the day sixteen years earlier, when he’d ripped Piri apart from the inside out and ensured he’d be the last of her progeny.

Once she’d been as much livestock as this butchered animal before him. He couldn’t look at her.

His father seemed mildly discomfited, but only because Ghost, the youngest of five, was now the head of this household. The odd child, the outcast, the outlaw. The reluctant hero and patriarch who’d rather be back working in his laboratory than doing anything else.

Except, perhaps, this.

“I won’t bore you with the stories surrounding TelZodo’s birth, because I know he hates them.” Ghost’s seamed and pockmarked profile towered over the others as he stood. His storm-colored eyes glinted with pride as he raised his mug from

across a spread of bounty. “So I’ll tell them to you behind his back instead. To your survival, son.”

TelZodo drained his ale, trying to drown out the accolades. More froth spilled into his cup. When had Evit stepped off his box?

“Meethouse later,” the Yata whispered. His breath already smelled pickled. Cords stood out on his arms as he tilted the pitcher. “We’ll celebrate the real way.”

TelZodo answered him with a crooked smile. He lifted earthenware in a silent toast. *To the Whore of Crossroads*. He might as well give credit to what he did best.

Talk around the table became a murky buzz. At least they hadn’t grouped all the hybrids together, otherwise someone might actually notice how truly wrong all this jollity was. Between Ghost and HigherBrook sat dim-witted HeadWind, proof that depriving a Yata-dependent baby of flesh-infused milk might not prove fatal after all. The Governor eased loose strands of carrot hair from her mouth as she bestowed a beatific smile on her plate.

The Masari mother who’d abandoned her was dead, a casualty of the central valley’s Games. BubbleCreek had been more skilled, but her intended prey had been younger. This girl would be dead, too, except for the mostly-Yata father who brought her the remains of his own people. Otherwise, she’d have sunk her teeth into him or been left in the far woods to fend for herself. Little wonder that she was flanked by Masari now.

If these people wanted to celebrate so badly, they should raise a toast to Bless. Her younger brother Psalm and her half-siblings had proven themselves fertile at maturity, so she probably was, too. So far, none of HigherBrook’s children had to eat Yata to survive, but Bless’s appetite for anything seemed gone. She hunched opposite the Governor and picked listlessly at her food. She had her mother’s tan skin, her father’s ruddy chops, and the twitching fingers of a sacrificial offering.

TelZodo downed more drink. He was under no pressure to produce, having already proven his worthlessness. Why not enjoy the day?

“What was his name again?” a cousin on his father’s side was asking.

“Antal,” Evit called. He sat beside TelZodo now, looking like a little boy in his Masari-sized chair, his well-muscled legs dangling off the floor. He counted off his fingers. “Antal was the co-husband of my uncle Ila. Psalm is the co-husband of my brother Abri, so he wanted to honor that bloodline.” His eyes twinkled. “How many grandchildren does that give you now, Governor? Sixteen?”

A tuber split in HigherBrook’s hands. “Eighteen.”

“And there’s another on the way that might be your own.”

Bless’s face took on a greenish tinge.

TelZodo snapped, “And our leader wonders why the Yata don’t shoot him in the hunting grounds. He’s plumbed half of Basc by now.” He raised his eyebrows at a warning glare from Ghost. “What? You want me to be more tactful? I’ve seen Evit’s records. The hybrids in Basc mate right back to Yata, so what difference does it make? How in the gods’ names will that save Crossroads?” He snatched up a knife and bent to strips of goat.

“Tel.”

He looked up at the sound of Bless’s gentle alto.

“Shut up,” she said.

Senseless. Crossroads was obsessed with producing mix-children in the hope of breeding Yata-dependence out of Masari, but no one was willing to regulate the pairings. Little HeadWind was one obvious argument in favor of establishing rules, and her father had only a smattering of Masari blood in him.

Nothing is ever certain, TelZodo. You know that.

When had his mother come up behind him, her fingers dancing on his shoulder?

He covered her hand with his own and tapped, *Especially when nobody tries to fix anything.*

Would you rather we forced the Masari to breed, the way they once forced me?

The words stung as much as the stiffness in her touch.

Never forget that I chose to have you. Piri rested her palm against him and squeezed. He felt sick as he watched her climb back into her chair.

Given another chance, he knew she'd choose to have him again. That made him sicker.

But how did one apologize for stating the truth? Who was he trying to save, anyway?

No one. Everyone.

"I meant no disrespect," he said, through gritted teeth. "Let's change the subject."

CHAPTER 4

Basc

“Won’t do you any good.” Evit’s voice cut through the juicy din. “He’s sleeping off his hangover.”

A dulled caress withdrew from TelZodo’s flaccid crotch. He snored in a room full of orgasms.

The others left him alone in his corner. No one fussed over him. Except for his throbbing temples, he was actually enjoying himself. It was fun being a voyeur when he could hardly move; he should come here trashed more often. He snuggled into an oversized pillow, breathing stale musk.

TelZodo didn’t need to look at the brightly-colored silks dripping from ceiling beams or fleece-filled cushions padding the adobe walls. He could picture them with his eyes closed. The Meethouse had fired back to life after being empty and dusty for years after the massacre. Basc’s temple of hallowed lust and sacred procreation returned unfettered by its religion, reduced to being a playground.

Even without Destiny to prod them along, the Yata were still very good at procreating. TelZodo wondered why they’d ever turned to the drug in the first place.

His arousal remained trapped inside a cottony filter as a naked body rolled against his. A furry one, this time. Masari.

Bandaged. A smoothly-wrapped stump touched his thigh.

He whispered, “Dear gods, I’ve missed you.”

CatBird’s smoky reply warmed his ear. “Evit told me you had a pretty tough party.”

Her breasts swelled against his chest, her nipples erect. Her tidy mound of belly felt taut beneath his fingers and just plain wrong. He knew what it meant.

He said, eyes still closed, “It’s passed, hasn’t it?”

“Mm hm. I’ll be flat again in a week.”

The words were double-dulled, through both his hangover and her quiet grief. She’d been plowed with Yata seed more times than he’d had birthdays, growing it, budding it. Each time, the seed had unlocked and spilled its precious secrets, giving itself away, and CatBird’s starving body dutifully harvested its own crop before anything could come to term.

She hadn’t eaten Yata for almost as long as he’d been alive, but her dependence remained. She merely consumed them in a different way.

TelZodo slipped his arm around her and tried not to cling. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Neither do I, and I’m twice your age.”

He watched her through red-rimmed eyes, her creamy skin flushed from ambient moans and saturated air, the rise and fall of her roseate pectoral fur. Her noncommittal shrug.

He didn’t have to say he was sorry, because she knew he was. They understood each other. Seed died in her, and his was dead to begin with. They were long past the days of pretending, when CatBird took TelZodo inside her, wanting nothing to kill, while he wanted her not to be hurt.

It hadn’t done either of them any good.

He rubbed his chops against hers, ignoring the clanging in his head. “I visited the Rotunda.”

She held him closer. “Poor boy. I haven’t been in there since Izzik died.” She barked a bitter laugh. “It’s been fourteen years and I haven’t dictated my memories of him yet. HigherBrook’s finally stopped hounding me about it.”

SHABRA: It’s a shame, you know. She could tell you about Promontory if she wanted to remember.

TELZODO: Leave her alone. My parents told me about Promontory a long time

ago.

SHABRA: They didn't see it the way she did. After it fell.

The deputy's sharp voice cut through fog. TelZodo shook it away.

"You're cold." CatBird hauled herself up on strong arms and cast about for his clothes. He could be a Basc orphan, one of her charges, the way she tried to care for him.

"It's nothing."

She found his shirt and pants and draped them over him like a blanket. "If you say so."

A trio tumbled beside them with gasps and laughter, high-pitched Yata voices. CatBird nodded at her co-wife and two husbands before they rolled away. Their sweat glistened in the lamp light.

TelZodo murmured, "Don't decline their invitation on my account."

"I didn't," she said. "What do you think I was doing before I found you?" She moved his hand to the wetness between her legs by way of explanation.

Once she finished reabsorbing her fetus she would remain chaste by choice for more than a season. When her hunger for Yata returned, she would churn the sheets at home or the pillows in the Meethouse, requiring only fertility from her lovers. Her body would accomplish the rest.

At least she could still have sex for pleasure and not just for food. TelZodo stifled a sudden urge to rip all the parti-colored curtains down. He glared at the congregants around them, who weren't congregants any more but just people out for a good time. Anger at nothing in particular boiled at the base of his spine, driving his hangover to new heights.

Her advice hovered somewhere between heartless and tender. "You learn to manage."

He growled, "That's not good enough."

“You’re young.”

They watched the bodies, the draperies. Undulations of skin and silk. The air turned raucous as TelZodo’s head began to clear. He teased out Evit’s groans from the others and narrowed his focus further, until he could tell who and how many others his friend mated with by subtle differences in sound.

It was a talent, as thoroughly useless as the others he possessed. A way to pass the time before the world ended.

A world too stupid to be disappointed in him.

CHAPTER 5

Crossroads

He was supposed to have been a scientist. He should have had chemical burns on his hands and the stench of aldehydes under his nails. Without pause, he should have been able to peer through an eyepiece, pluck the lenses he needed, slip them into their proper frames on their black scaffolding, and identify every species of animalcule by sight. Count them with a glance. Gauge their speed of division and their rates of death and decay.

Then, once he'd grown old enough to maintain a steady grip, he should have been able to plunge a syringe into the flesh of his living friends, slip scintillating blades through the carcasses of his dead ones, and take everything and everyone apart. If TelZodo couldn't press joy from his work, he should have at least bent to his task with a ghoulish sense of purpose.

Instead, all he remembered was screaming in Piri's arms and burying his head in his mother's breast against the stink of preservatives.

SHABRA: Help me to understand this, Ghost. Crossroads' hunters dismembered Yata all the time. Yet you were forbidden from studying their bodies on pain of death?

GHOST: The hunters prayed over the bodies. I didn't.

SHABRA: What difference was that supposed to make?

GHOST: The Covenant made them into sacred beings, Shabra. I made them into experimental subjects. Into things. TripStone could reduce a dead Yata to its component parts in her sleep, but the thought of entering my laboratory made her physically ill.

SHABRA: Tell me about TripStone.

GHOST:

SHABRA: You look like you've just swallowed bitter fruit. Why?

GHOST: I don't know. Watching her do her job made me sick, too.

“You'd learned to cut easily enough, old man. That's not what you were afraid of.”

TelZodo brushed wet tendrils from his forehead and advanced down another line of herbs. He couldn't tell animalcules apart no matter how hard he tried, but whatever he read was stippled onto his brain. He could still be cross-legged in the Rotunda, trying to puzzle out his father's narratives as the image of parchment floated before his face, blocking his view of the greenhouse crops.

Piri had stood behind Shabra's scribe, watching the words take form when Yata was a foreign language to her. Funny-looking shapes, nothing that escaped livestock were expected to know.

Livestock knew other things. TelZodo's mother had witnessed more of her own people dismembered than his father had, simply by virtue of being locked in a pen when the farm hands held their cookouts. Sounds and smells of roasting flesh would have mingled with the perfume of rutting, the Yata providing entertainment for the brutes lounging around the campfire.

TelZodo jerked as water dripped from a maze of angled irrigation pipes. The windows around him wept with condensation. Every lungful felt like steam.

Tiny snips rode the air beneath murmurs of conversation. His fellow workers vanished and then re-emerged from behind vine-woven trellises, gliding down the rows and adding to piles of harvested leaves. Broad bowls of fired clay were tucked under their arms.

Sinews knotted stems to support branches. Intestines helped ferry some of the water. Chunks of flesh from small animals fed soil rich in worm casings. Even here, TelZodo was surrounded by body parts.

He stooped to the floor and retrieved a deformity that had missed the compost pile. The cotyledon twirled between his fingers, its primary leaves fused. Split, irregular veins crowded together, embossed on pale green.

Doomed plants. His father had been fascinated with them as a boy; maybe that's why Ghost loved his son so much. TelZodo frowned and tossed the reject onto the others, then resumed recording the number of survivors.

SHABRA: Evit's with your father now, isn't he?

TELZODO: I wouldn't know.

If he stopped reading the narratives, maybe her apparition would stop following him around. TelZodo spent a moment mulling over the idea before rejecting it.

SHABRA: Wouldn't you? Whose cart was that outside the morgue?

TELZODO: I wasn't looking.

SHABRA: Sure, you were. How else would I know he was here?

TelZodo coughed as his lungs filled with humidity. He bent toward beds of duskmoss to check blued tendrils for fading, then progressed to the astringent arrow-wort used to preserve the bodies lying in that room he hated so much. He picked over the crops for aphids and star mites, mealy bugs and pop worms. He combed the crops for thrip damage and sniffed for mildew, reaching for jars of growth formula when the leaves looked yellow or the flowers looked anemic. Bugs died between his fingers. He set their tiny corpses aside, cataloging everything.

When relieved of his shift, he would bypass Evit's cart and stroll to the farmhouse, heat his bath water, and scrub dirt and broken carapace from his skin. He would dress in his finer linens and take to the cobblestone streets, letting the cool evening breeze slip its fingers into his open shirt and tease his pelt pattern into new formations.

He'd spend a few minutes strolling past lantern-lit windows. His whistled tunes would reach someone's ears and lead to a dinner invitation, where he would earn his meal whether or not the good clothes came off. It was better than sitting at home, listening to the latest gossip about chemical reactions, trait clusters, and construction plans for Evit's lab over in Basc while the Yata completed his apprenticeship here in Crossroads.

"Bastard." TelZodo grinned to himself. "You've tugged on the old man's pants more than I have."

SHABRA: Better that way, isn't it?

If only he could scream that shriek's voice away from his head.

The snips grew nearer. An earth-colored hand smeared a thrip onto his sleeve. "You missed one."

He peeled it from his shirt and added it to the proper dish, where it joined its fallen comrades. Bless turned her attention to the flyweed training up a wooden pole. The bowl she held to her chest was floured with black.

He'd snort, but that would blow the grains away. "Leave it to you to go after shit."

She murmured, "At least I don't talk to myself."

"You should. It might chase your suitors off."

Her cheeks reddened to the color of her chops. "Lucky you. You don't have to worry about *your* future. My suitors have already proven they're not seedless."

He bristled, then lowered his voice. "Think about it, Bless. All those potent men waiting to test themselves on you. All those people wondering if you'll lose it to a Masari or a Yata. What chances you're willing to take. You won't be making a baby, you'll be cooking another experiment and seeing what it eats. How exciting for you."

"Go to hell."

"Scares you half to death, doesn't it?"

"Look who's scared, Tel." She reached up and continued scraping, avoiding his gaze.

Her coveralls were badly stained; TelZodo wondered when she last washed them. Her ruddy, matted hair looked like a startled animal. Her brown eyes glared at her tools.

SHABRA: Tell me again about the tests, TelZodo. What's it like to have a father and mother who go through everyone's chamber pot? Parents who measure people by the corruption in their blood, getting to know all your friends by what goes in and what comes out? How many bottles do your fluids fill now?

“Maybe Evit could study you when you get big,” TelZodo murmured, his taunting as compulsive as it was half-hearted. “Maybe he’ll be the one to *make* you big.”

“I hear your father’s helping him build a lab,” Bless shot back. “Maybe he’ll help you build a brothel.”

“Maybe you’ll need one to get you in the mood.”

She didn’t answer his retort. Her insult still pricked his skin like burrs.

Whose insults?

Sometimes the voices in his head reduced to just his own, pitiful tenor.

He leaned further over the plants as she passed him, half-tempted to apologize to her. Again. Maybe enough torturing of the Governor’s eldest child would finally get him booted out of town and make his decision for him.

He turned toward her retreating back and opened his mouth to call out. The specter of tapered bronze fingers covered his broad lips, robbing him of speech.

TELZODO: I swear to the gods, Shabra, I will get rid of you.

The dead Yata ruffled his mop of curls in reply, her touch as terrifying as a living thing’s. TelZodo reached up when it scratched his scalp and found a thorny tendril broken free of its trellis. He rummaged for a strand of sinew to knot it back into place and squelched a nervous titter. Shabra hadn’t turned corporeal after all.

It would take more than a wayward plant and a cruel imagination to drive him that far out of his mind.

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He awoke to the pronouncements of insistent crows and the rhythm of unhurried breaths. Aromatics perfumed the broad pallet beneath him.

Eyes still closed, TelZodo curled his lips back and constructed a scent picture of the room, beginning with the downy cheek pillowed on his chest and the limbs

tangling with his own. Another Masari snored to his right, all muscle and sweat, a good wrestler. No wonder they'd slept so deeply.

TelZodo teased out woody odors, mixed with the oily tang of linseed. This was the old Textile Guild section of town. The near-dozen people in this common bedroom still practiced the trade. Two of the old ones had survived, passing generations of family tradition to people like the orphan whose soft moan started vibrating against his sternum. Her limbs tensed.

“Hey.” He squeezed her shoulder, preparing for the flinch. She cried out and clutched him when he gave her a little shake.

Her wide eyes met his. She blinked, chin dimpling by sienna-tinged chops. Her head dropped back to his chest.

She whispered, “Thank you.”

What must it be like to have had nightmares for over 16 years? TelZodo stroked her back, petting the fur to either side of her spine until her breathing slowed again. If the others around him were similarly plagued, they weren't saying.

Dawn light striped the scraps hammered to the wall and designs drawn on parchment, as though this bedroom common were an extension of the workshop across their cramped courtyard. He'd awakened during the night to the sounds of shuffling and charcoal scraping with delicate strokes, brief flashes of inspiration between trips to the chamber pot. The weavers drew in the dark, their patterns still intact. The old ones could probably spin blind.

One of them had left the room. TelZodo listened for clacking sounds arising from a distant loom.

The head against him shook, mumbling against his breastbone.

“Hm?”

“He breakfasts first.” She rolled off TelZodo and stretched.

He smiled. “How'd you know what I was thinking?”

“You get very still when you listen like that.” Coarse linen wrapped around her



breasts. “You pay attention to things.”

What was her name again? TelZodo took her chin in his hand and squinted.

“BarrowBow,” she prompted.

Had she been born able to read minds? TelZodo offered a crooked smile. “My attention isn’t that good.”

She shook her head again. “That’s not your problem.”

He whispered, “What *is* my problem?”

“I’m not sure.” She bent to secure knots. “You live in Crossroads. You work in Crossroads. But you’re not *here*.” She shrugged and reached for her breeches. “Maybe it’s different in Basc.”

The stripes on the walls brightened and began to spread. A chorus of sighs encircled them. Sounds of pissing came from the next room.

TelZodo waited until BarrowBow turned back. “It’s not different in Basc.”

She flashed him a consoling smile. “At least you’re comfortable in bed.”

Shabra didn’t follow him into bed. “You helped with that.” He jerked his thumb at still-snoring muscle. “So did he.”

“I know, Tel. But a bed isn’t a home.”

She leaned forward and kissed his short, narrow nose. Her hand grasped his, cream against copper.

He watched her draw the pants up, glancing first at the puckered bullet wound by her hip, then at the friction burns on her fingers as she knotted her breech ties. One had come from the hunt, the other from pulling fibers through a comb. He dressed quickly and followed her into the kitchen.

Someone descended into the root cellar. TelZodo caught a whiff left over from carrots already in the winterbed, flanking the rows of planted flax to hold down the weeds.

“Mommy!” A girl in stained coveralls scampered into the room, bits of splintery shiv decorating her frizzed hair. She hugged BarrowBow around the legs, smiling up at TelZodo. “You’re not Daddy.”

“Daddy’s still asleep.” She nodded at her guest and explained, “Her dad was your wrestling partner. SkyBee, you remember TelZodo.”

He knelt to be head-to-head with the girl and tried to drive the dismay from his voice. “Hi, SkyBee.”

Every year he spotted more full-blood Masari children growing up here, waiting to have their innocence shattered. They probably already knew the truth, more intimately than he did. Behind the splinters and beneath the frizz, the girl’s cherubic features were considerably different from BarrowBow’s. Did she remember her birth-parent at all?

He screwed up his face at her adoptive mother.

BarrowBow answered by beaming proudly as she patted her hip. She’d taken that bullet so her daughter could eat, and was clearly ready to take another if necessary.

“She’s going to be a master weaver when she grows up.” BarrowBow shifted her weight to her good leg and lifted the child into her arms. “*And* a master hunter. Isn’t that right, SkyBee-dee-dee?”

High-pitched giggles raised goosebumps on TelZodo’s arms. Who in their right mind would deliberately bring a Yata-eater into the world, when the chances of their survival were so slim?

Someone who still had faith in the work to end that dependence, even after so many years of failure. TelZodo watched, straightening, as mother and daughter nuzzled each other good morning.

He cleared his throat. “How many playmates does she have?”

“Enough.” She lowered rough, bare feet to the floor and gave the girl a gentle push. “Go get your father out of bed.”

## CHAPTER 6

### Promontory

*Hello, Stone.*

*First, you can't imagine my relief that you have passed into level seven with no ill effects, and that your other pains have decreased. You and BrushBurn must be ecstatic. Only a few people here have attained that stage of weaning.*

*You give me hope, old friend. Believe me when I tell you I need it.*

TripStone pocketed the parchment in her vest and swallowed a last bite of rattler, washing it down with a swig from her water bladder. She hooked the bladder back on her belt and returned to the body on her dissection table, across from her doctor doubling as butcher.

“How’s Ghost?”

She pulled an apron on, listening to the squeak of oiled canvas. “Healthy. Still working hard.” Her booted foot nudged a waste bucket into place. “Still having trouble with his son.”

“I’m not surprised.” Scant gray wisps lifted from DevilChaser’s once-curly head. A shiny dome faced TripStone as he bent over his own table. “I will never forget that baby as long as I live.”

“He’s not a baby any more.”

“He’s seen things no one should see. I’m surprised he can make sense of anything.”

Blood spattered into tin. TripStone shook more preservative out of a bottle and worked it into new cavities. She took one look at the corpse’s head, then covered it with a scrap of cloth.

DevilChaser looked up. “Someone you knew.”

“Not really, but I watched that face for hours. He’s the one who beat FlitNettle at the Death bout two summers ago.” TripStone shrugged. “Now someone’s beaten him.”

Her voice sounded flat, even to her. “Flit died at the same age I was when I left Crossroads.”

Flesh yawned open under the doctor’s blade. “Could have been you.”

“I hardly go to the bouts any more, you know that. She should have worked harder at weaning after Rudder re-weighted the lottery. She never had the discipline.”

DevilChaser cocked an eyebrow. “DamBuster’s still at level three.”

“He doesn’t have the discipline, either.” She lifted and set aside the Yata’s heart, taking a moment to admire strong, well-oxygenated muscle where the winning Masari’s bullet hadn’t ripped it apart. So different from the boulder she carried around in her own chest. She took deep breaths until the sensation of heaviness cleared, then answered the doctor’s worried glance by shaking her head.

“Take a break,” he said.

“I just took a break. I’m not hurting.” The corners of her lips curled up. “It takes more than heart willow resin to kill me.”

“The poison damaged you,” he snapped, inserting a draining tube. “Your stupidity will kill you.”

“It hasn’t after all these years. To be honest, I don’t know why.”

She *had* died along with the Covenant; she was just too stubborn to admit it. She’d been a young woman, then. Now the skin on her hands was as tight as the drying flesh on the body beneath her and almost as dark. Wrinkles and discolorations lay between the graying tufts on her knuckles. She wore scars left by desert sun and wind, by long-ago hunts, and by whatever chemicals seeped through her gloves as she prepared the meat.

The back of her scalp itched; she wanted to run her fingers through her hair. She should have braided it, tucking kinky white strands amidst what remained of the

crimson. The tingling was a tiny discomfort, not worth paying attention to.

The dead man hardly looked like food any more, she ate Yata so infrequently now. She prepared him for other Masari, including those like DamBuster, whose low level of weaning stopped him at Rudder's border. After Promontory's annexation, the guards at the pass began turning away anyone less than a level three *yatanii*. Over the years that restriction had increased to include anyone less than a level four and now anyone less than a level five. That city knew how to take care of itself.

Unlike Crossroads, which allowed anything. TripStone laid down her knife as a flush crept up her cheeks.

*Discipline.* She meditated toward calm and lifted her blade again. Crossroads was far from paradise, but closer to it than here. "Ghost doesn't know how lucky he is."

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She scoured the blood off her skin and fur. Her boots beat a hard rhythm on burnished wood as she passed body parts meant for DamBuster's lab and others meant for the Lodge. One cache supported attempts to end Masari dependence on Yata meat. The other cache satisfied that dependence.

Sweat beaded up on her forehead as she passed the hospital's heavy doors and descended toward gravel. Before her lay an expanse of gray and black that reflected heat back to her in waves.

The roads crisscrossing this landscape had once been scrub. This time of year its muted color would have erupted into riotous desert blooms fed by the rains. Now it was barren year-round, except for the constant traffic of transports pulled by runners both Yata and Masari. People who might one day have to kill each other called friendly greetings above the sound of whirring chains and *thunking* derailleurs.

Larger rocks extended out from the searing highway, extending past Promontory's shore and building up the bridge into Skedge. Puddles deepened and joined around limestone footings stained with crusty water lines. Dark promises of the seasonal salt lake climbed toward a broad avenue. The bridge dwindled to its vanishing point where the mesa punched its craggy fist into a

cloudy sky.

Ladders and railings dripped off the monolith, interrupting sandstone and schist. Even from this distance and muffled by overcast, they gleamed with a brightness that would turn blinding as spring passed into summer.

TripStone looked away, toward the north, before she could stop herself. High, jagged peaks stopped at a pass marking the trade route into Rudder. Beyond that metropolis with its tidy laws lay the greener, older, more rounded range that dropped down into Crossroads. Gentle switchbacks led to the old Hunt Guild homes, and the flagstone path ending at hers.

Hunt Guild. Archaic, now. Meaningless. At some point, the Yata dummies in the training fields had finally collapsed, straw and burlap dissolving into the dirt, useless even as symbols. HigherBrook's residence in her old home was probably the only thing saving it from destruction.

She turned her back on the mountains, averting her eyes from the busy bridge. On the other side of town, the man who loved her labored in the Lodge, his head filled with statistics, committing every Masari's craving to memory. In the years following FlitNettle's execution, BrushBurn's mental inventory held him together as tightly as TripStone's memories girded her.

She declined passage in the cart that would bring him the meat she had cut. The runner waved, gliding away from shore and toward the canyon. Walking lightened the weight around TripStone's breastbone. She'd hike in her sleep if she could. It was better than lying half-awake and pinned to her pallet, listening to her husband's slow, buried breaths.

Despite everything, Promontory never seemed more alive. Yata workers poured in from Skedge and took up their shift positions as smokestacks belched black on the horizon. High-pitched voices sailed from the open windows of the Clutter's boarding houses. TripStone turned onto the ghetto's crowded cobblestone streets, nodding at the tall Masari soldier from Rudder who guarded its quiet checkpoint.

Only a few of her people ventured into the Yata enclave sitting like an afterthought in the flatlands. Of those whose weaning allowed them entry, most still avoided the former Little Masari beyond the dictates of forced integration.

Timbers reduced in size. Doorways shrank above flights of baby steps as Yata surrounded her. Cutting across the Clutter was like taking a stroll through Basc.

TripStone blinked at a long row of raised clapboard. She hadn't been in Basc since before the fall of Destiny Farm. She remembered vague clusters of adobe huts bordered by forest and meadow, but factories ringed that valley now.

She had no idea what her homeland looked like any more. She should ask HigherBrook to send her a map, but it kept slipping her mind.

TripStone relaxed more here than when she walked down Promontory's main roads at the center of town. There, Rudder's omnipresent peacekeepers remained stationed in their bright green tunics, alert to occasional flare-ups of tensions.

Nobody bothered her here. During shift changes, she towered over throngs that flowed around her as though she were a column of Skedge marble. She was a fixture, more than a stranger and less than a friend. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to hunger for them.

Her eyes adjusted to bigger everything as she left their neighborhood. The voices around her deepened, before Promontory's tangled streets opened up into the last remaining patch of wildness next to the canyon's deep drop.

Overcast skies plunged the rift into ribbons of shadow. The cracks in the world became dark veins stretching to the horizon, turning the arid lands into a desiccated husk. Rock striations turned to leathery skin. The water trickling far below, swelling with the promise of monsoons, seemed only a mirage.

Even Promontory's recent mudslide, merely a burp from the mountains, couldn't ease the dryness in TripStone's throat. She crossed still-trampled ground where the evacuation tents had been cleared away. Most everyone had resumed their routines after digging out from minor damage confined to the outskirts of town.

Her palms itched against chalk, startling her. How long had she sat at the overlook? When had her legs folded up beneath her, waiting for her to catch her breath?

"I took your advice, doc. I'm resting." If DevilChaser were here, he would kill her for walking clear across the city. TripStone unhooked the water bladder from her belt and took slow sips until cotton cleared from her mouth. She smiled

down at the abyss. “Hello, Hell.”

Beyond the ruins of Destiny Farm lay the remains of a base camp where barrels of tainted water had killed sixty-three hunters and support personnel. The escaped Yata they’d pursued had likely died out a long time ago from more natural, less damning causes.

TripStone lay back against the rock and wondered why DevilChaser fretted over her when she shouldn’t be alive at all. For fifteen years, the effects of her poisoning had dogged her, mutating from one peculiar symptom into another. Even as she rested, a tingling sensation spread below her left shoulder blade, as though she carried her own, private portal into the afterlife wherever she went.

CHAPTER 7

Basc

Ulik, the youngest of thirty-two children, broke ties with his three mothers, his two fathers, and all of his siblings and extended kin when he married Zai. Conceived in a Meethouse orgy, he promised her love without Destiny and life without co-wives or co-husbands. He wanted no one but her, knowing full well the consequences of his actions. His family branded him a heretic, despite his fervent dedication to the Covenant in every other respect.

He had known Zai since before they came of age. One summer night, he surprised her with a bouquet of night-blooming flowers...

TelZodo turned away from the fringed weaving, yellow script against red, and screwed up his face at Evit. “This is how you’re decorating your lab?”

His best friend hauled a box of bottles that chimed when set on the floor. Evit straightened, brushing his hands on rumpled pants. “I’m thinking that maybe if I read it enough times, I’ll understand my dad a little better.”

“He died before you could walk.”

“Yeah. Abri remembers him more.” The Yata laughed. “If he were alive, I’m sure he’d hate what I’m doing. I heard he really believed he was a god.”

Evit’s wives and co-husbands carried more boxes through a hut still largely empty, gossiping amongst themselves. TelZodo keened his ear to the glee from outside echoing off whitewashed adobe walls. Tiny heads popped into and out of windows and made funny faces as sounds of sawing rose from the next room.

TelZodo rolled up his sleeves. “I should go help with the shelving-”

“You’ve been helping us all morning.” Evit’s broad face crinkled with amusement. He smoothed down a spiky black mop that sprang back up. “I’ve never seen you work so hard, Tel. What are you trying to do, move me in here to get me out of your father’s hair?”

“Yeah,” TelZodo smirked. “Like I’m going to try to take your place in *his* lab. The only reason I’m here is because you don’t have any torn-apart bodies lying around.” He frowned. “Yet.”

“I won’t for a while. Not until Ghost says I’m ready for them.” His bronze hand waved toward the wall. “Go ahead and finish reading. That’s only the first part.”

“You’re not going to hang the rest, are you?”

“If I did, I’d have no room for the shelves.” Evit bounded toward the door for another carton. He called back over his shoulder, “The original’s in the Rotunda, anyway. I can look at it any time.”

TelZodo squatted by the stitched narrative hanging from ceiling to floor and wondered what it must have been like to grow up without a father. Zai’s sons had stayed with her brother Ila after Ulik’s death. Then Ila had died during the battle for Destiny Farm, leaving his surviving co-husbands as male role models, none of whom took an interest in Evit the way Ghost had.

“I didn’t realize both our dads were heretics.” TelZodo squinted at the yellow script, murmuring. He pitched his voice as Evit grunted under more supplies. “Don’t you think that’s odd?”

“If you think *that’s* odd, look at who killed mine.”

The Yata’s back receded as he headed toward the saws. TelZodo returned to the tapestry, scanning. A scribe’s recreated signature floated above the fringe at bottom left, almost sloppy compared to the practiced script that came before it.

The weaver had also copied the signature of the Masari who had shot Ulik, and who then dictated his life story after carrying Zai’s memories from Basc back to Crossroads. This valley had been segregated then, when only Covenant-trained hunters killed Yata.

The yellow thread thinned, copying the pen’s light touch. A tentative hand.

TelZodo caught his breath. He cried out, “You’re kidding!”

A high tenor answered over the whine of the saws, “I’m not the one who made that thing!”

“That was my father’s first girlfriend!”

Evit staggered back into the room, convulsing with laughter. “TripStone helped us gain our independence, she broke the secret of Destiny Farm, and she guided our army to Promontory. And all you can say is she was your dad’s first girlfriend?”

“Well, she was.” TelZodo sat back on his heels. “He almost married her.” He narrowed his eyes. “What do you know about her?”

“I barely remember her. She left here when I was small.” Evit scratched his head, thinking. “She was very sad. But so was everybody else back then.”

“Sadder than now?”

“You’d be surprised.” The Yata tweaked plum-colored curls as he walked past. “Why don’t you ask Ghost about her?”

TelZodo scowled. “He wouldn’t give Shabra a straight answer about TripStone. What makes you think he’d tell me?”

“Shabra was his interrogator. You’re his son.”

“Yes, and I’ve hurt him enough.”

Evit heaved an exaggerated sigh and made a fist. “You can be *vyakkak* irritating, Tel, you know that? So you’re not what your parents expected. Stop kicking yourself.” He fingered the weaving. “I try to imagine what my father would be like if he were alive. Somehow, I don’t think we’d have gotten along. Thank the gods the Covenant’s gone. I’d be a terrible sacrifice.”

TelZodo rose to his feet. He looked the tapestry up and down. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“Because your cock can’t read.” Evit reached up and clapped him on the back. “Ask any of the old people around here about TripStone. They all knew her.” He spun toward high-pitched squeals coming from the doorway and yelled, “Yucof! Just shove them out of your cart if they start pestering you!”

TelZodo turned his head and shielded his eyes against light from a high sun.

Children piled into the trader's fast-emptying wagon, screaming as it rocked from side to side. A pale, furry leg peeked out amidst the bronze. "Who's the Masari kid?"

"DirtBall." Evit chuckled at his friend's incredulity. "How the hell do I know what his real name is? That's what the others call him."

TelZodo peered further and raised his voice against a new onslaught of hammering. "He's a biter."

"He bites his friends, he doesn't eat them. He only eats his enemies." The smaller man took one look at TelZodo and choked down mirth. "I'm *joking*. Actually, he's pretty well weaned for his age. Come on, I think I see my equipment. I'm going to need your long arms."

Evit sprinted toward the cart. TelZodo followed, ducking out of the hut.

Yucof waited for them under a raised awning. The trader smoothed sweat from his wrinkled forehead onto a thick, orange braid dulled with age. Coarse linen fell about him, darkening beneath his arms and around his waist. He sat on a weather-beaten barrel, looking exhausted.

Evit shot him a critical glare. "Tell me you rested on your way here from Promontory."

"Of course I rested." Laugh lines crinkled. "In the Marsh."

"That isn't resting."

"It is, between the Games."

"No, it's not. Not even for you."

TelZodo listened to their oft-repeated argument above the din. Finally, he turned away, toward the wooden crates clustered on dusty ground.

Vacuum filtration system. Steam-powered centrifuge. He blinked at the items listed on Yucof's manifest. *Tissue grinders.*

He shuddered and lifted the first box, grunting in surprise at its unexpected

lightness. The lenses inside must have been wrapped in enough fabric to clothe the valley. TelZodo found their scaffolding assembly and levered that crate up, picturing black, serpentine arms and tiny bearings hidden within the framework.

Together, the tools could show him the adrenalin spurting through his body, if he opened himself up to them.

Dual voices called to him from around the corner. "Use the dolly!"

TelZodo hugged the box to his chest a moment longer, then lashed it and the others to Yucof's hand truck and wheeled them inside.

One of Evit's wives handed him a mug of ale. One of her husbands gestured out the window at a clear-cut hill, repeating rumors of demolition.

TelZodo gazed upon the wall hanging, its modern manufacture holding a story lifted out of another world and time. Froth bubbled against his lips. He held the sour brew in his cheeks, breathing in sawdust.

A young woman had signed her name to the narrative, someone not much older than he was now. And his father had been a young man, hidden up in the woods by the Alvav Ridge and laboring in secret over his own beakers, his own lenses and scaffolding. Before everything changed.

Instead of Yucof's cart, Basc's children once tumbled and yelled inside massive transports being emptied of tithes from Crossroads. In return, people like Ulik freely offered their lives up to people like TripStone. No Liberty Farm was wrapped around the Yata village to support it. None of these mountains fell to dynamite, sending up showers of rock in distant, hazy puffs, leaching green out of the landscape.

That had happened only to the massive mountains around Promontory, which had been bald to begin with. First the Yata and then the Masari had stripped them. Now both mined the arid lands together, producing guns and chains and the unsettling tools cushioned in the boxes around TelZodo's feet.

He bent to the nearest one and flared his nostrils, closing his eyes. His lips curled back, but too many scents crowded in on each other. Wood from Rudder, dust and grit from across the region. Was the old smog of Promontory so different from the new smog of Basc? He didn't know. Somewhere, buried inside him, the

sounds and smells of his birthplace had left their tracks in places even the lenses couldn't see.

From above him a knowing voice purred, "Are you staying?"

She had happy-looking breasts, a navel that smiled back at him from the pallet, and she treated him as she did any of her husbands. TelZodo was once one of them. He opened his eyes and looked up at Evit's oldest wife. Her open-faced candor warmed him.

He thought for a moment, then shook his head.

She pursed her lips. "Evit thought you might say no."

"I appreciate the offer." He could manage a winsome smile, but it wouldn't matter. He didn't have to please anyone here. He had only to be himself.

Whatever that was.

CHAPTER 8

Promontory

TripStone waited for the guard to wave her through. His claret chops twitched as he studied her papers. She reined in her impatience, still catching her breath from her climb up broad marble stairs that kept getting steeper.

Finally, she said, “You must be new. I’ve been here countless times.”

“Not during my last Promontory rotation,” he murmured. His tone held the quiet arrogance of a level nine *yatanii* and he was half her age.

“Then you were still in diapers during your last Promontory rotation.” She relished his sudden flush. “Don’t lie to me, you Rudder whelp. Just let me in.”

His green tunic hung off his shoulders, though from his youth or from his fasting, TripStone couldn’t tell. It looked new, freshly creased and unblemished.

And entirely out of place. She started to laugh. “You poor kid. You don’t know what you’re doing, do you? You’re fresh out of training.” She jerked her thumb toward the center of the dome, where buttressed walkways crisscrossed on multiple levels. Yata and Masari bent over parchment, filling rows of tables and chairs. “I was here from before all those were built. I saw bodies *smoked* in this place. Before those glassed-in cabinets, the only things this granite held were *meat hooks*.” Her laughter intensified as she gazed around. “Now the Warehouse looks like the damned Rotunda.”

He focused more intently on her credentials. “I’m aware of the history.”

“You’ve turned a shade paler, too.”

Footfalls echoed from behind. A gravelly voice intoned, “I’ll vouch for her.”

Recognition lit the guard’s face. His shoulders relaxed, making his tunic drip even more. He nodded, handing TripStone her papers back.

She hung onto BrushBurn as he led her to a pine desk covered in missives.

“Even that squirt knows you. I guess it pays to be Promontory’s representative to Rudder. What is he afraid of? That I’m going to steal something?”

His lips brushed her ear. “Sometimes the best weaned are the most addled.”

“Oh.” She slipped thin fingers beneath his shirt. “*That’s* what I have to look forward to.”

Her touch traveled around to his thatch of pectoral fur, still plush against his aged skin. She toyed with his laces from the inside, then released them with a sigh as she freed her arm. They sat side by side and began filling blank sheets from the supply pile between them.

Below them, surviving students pored over the lessons their dead mentors had left behind. Somewhere in the lower stacks were the shortcut trails mapped by DustClaw when he delivered his packages across the mountains, and WoodFoam’s improved preservative formulations. A central vault held all of SandTail’s histories and the chronicles kept by his ancestors. FlitNettle’s own diary, the musings of BrushBurn’s cousin as a young hunter and then as an accomplished Death player, claimed a recessed corner within the shelves.

Elsewhere lay volumes on forging and smelting, mining operations, woodworking and anatomy. DevilChaser and DamBuster had spent time here, committing their memories to parchment. To their professional records, the doctor and apothecary added instructions on tailoring, cooking, and maintaining an herb garden in the desert. Terrace agriculture, stonemasonry, and other treatises filled the Yata side of the dome.

TripStone glanced over BrushBurn’s shoulder, watching him inscribe neat tables of formulae for population trends and projections. His steel blue eyes twinkled at her. She returned his smile and continued writing her exercises and meditations for enduring longer periods of Yata deprivation.

Her book of Covenant hymns remained largely untouched, but she had been allowed to pen and submit them. Her notes on dissection proved more useful.

Around them sat brewer and cobbler, wheelwright and trapper, twitching smooth bronze cheeks or lighter, tufted ones as they bent over their tables and wrote what they knew. Every Death bout claimed skilled workers, leaving gaps among both the Masari and the Yata. Those who couldn’t write dictated to those who

could. Their bodies of knowledge had to prevail, once they had sacrificed their physical bodies on Promontory's altar of equilibrium.

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Fingers trailed over a nipple. A broad palm cupped, then slipped from TripStone's breast and glided over sharp ribs, down to dulled abdominal fur.

She whispered, "I thought you were asleep."

"I knew you weren't."

She opened her eyes as BrushBurn bent over her. Her lips opened to his. She parted her thighs, confirming with a touch the sheath she hadn't heard him put on.

Was she even fertile any more? Whether or not she was, she couldn't take any chances. She no longer had the choice of whether to bring a Yata-eater into the world, because a pregnancy now would kill her.

She lifted her hips, ignoring the pressure around her heart as BrushBurn squeezed inside. They made love slowly. She flowed around him like a pool, gauging his arousal from his restraint. Time held still for them, at last ferrying him back to sleep and her back to insomnia.

In the morning, he asked her, "Do you regret having stayed here?"

Her tea hesitated halfway to her lips. She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No." Her gaze traveled over rusty curls lightened and softened by age. "If I didn't want to be here, I would have gone back to Crossroads."

She could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe her.

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Fused minerals rattled in a marble cup and spilled onto a low table. A card slid off its deck. The quiet atmosphere of AgatePool's study turned Death into a pleasing diversion, far from the mortal struggle it became during the bouts.

TripStone turned from studying the walls. "Who's what?"

“I’m Masari, this time,” came AgatePool’s smoky reply. “BrushBurn’s the Yata.”

TripStone nodded. “He’s a master at applying their strategies.”

The mixed-blood woman drew another card, easing frizzed hair behind her shoulder. “You realize that I pass on everything I learn from him to the Yata who play against me.”

BrushBurn chortled. “We learn from you, too, Aggie.” He shifted on the couch and glared at the bronze-toned leather that squeaked from below. “You’d think that after all this time I’d be used to this thing. SandTail’s been dead for years. I don’t know why you keep his furniture around.”

“And you say you think like a Yata,” his host chided. “I can’t think of a better incentive to win the game than sitting on a countryman’s hide. Besides,” she mused, “it balances out the rest of the décor.”

“For which SandTail would haunt you if he could.” TripStone progressed from one stippled bone to the next. Her thumb ran along the edges of her people’s former relics. “It’s pretty, the way you’ve hung them. But I can show you how the lineages connect better.”

AgatePool mulled over the mix of cards and stylized, rock “bones” on the table. “Maybe after the game. It took me long enough to feel comfortable having them in plain view here.” She eased her bulk forward on a Yata-leather chair, laid down a pictogram-inscribed slip, and looked up. Silver chops rode coppery cheeks. “Given time, I think SandTail might have liked what I’ve done with the place.”

The study seemed the closest and the farthest thing from Crossroads. Scrimshawed bones, symbols of long-ago Yata godhood, hung opposite the upholstered skins of their once-farmed cousins. The adjoining wall still held an ancient Yata musket that had felled unsuspecting Masari at the dawn of the frontier wars. Below it gleamed the plain, single-shot training rifle from the days of reverent, Covenant-era killing, when the Yata had sacrificed themselves.

Proclamations of Promontory’s founding now rested within the Warehouse, but the factory gloves belonging to SandTail’s father remained nailed to the wood. A large paperweight on his desk gleamed, its amethyst façade catching lamp light. TripStone studied the bas-relief symbol for Destiny, hacked out of the Skedge

factory's demolished walls.

She mumbled, "You've got enough memories here to choke on."

"Yours?" AgatePool asked. "Or mine?"

"Mine." BrushBurn rattled his cup. "I lived here with SandTail long before either of you set foot in this town." Quartz and beryl skittered on the wood. "Don't ask me why I still miss the bastard."

AgatePool patted his hand. "Same reason I do."

"Hey, no touching your food."

TripStone turned from their banter, wanting to nap. She could, if the demon thumping inside would let her. Step into AgatePool's bedroom and stretch out on a pallet that ended at her knees.

Instead, she sat on a bench beside cabinets once crammed with bottles of goldberry brandy. Now they held the minutes of Frontier Peace meetings. She smiled at them, her eyelids drooping as her knobby shoulder pressed against the wall. The joking behind her melted into a quiet buzz, the slapping cards so like the viscous salt lake rising on the other side of the city.

Perhaps she had always been here, in this place where so little grew and the fertile fields of her girlhood had been only a dream. A fantasy land where once she wept after shooting straw shaped to look like a person.

The very notion amused her. It must have been someone else.

CHAPTER 9

Crossroads

BarrowBow wasn't the first lover TelZodo had watched hauled in from the hunting grounds. He was sure she wouldn't be the last. But she was one of the few whose death drew tears from his eyes.

He whispered, "Who tells SkyBee?"

Ghost asked, "Does SkyBee know you well enough?"

"I don't know." TelZodo gazed down at the body on its stretcher, still outside the morgue. "She likes me well enough."

His father's glance held a furrow of concern that said, *But can you tell her?*

TelZodo muttered, "Don't worry about me."

BarrowBow looked asleep. Peaceful. She should; she'd been killed by one of the best Preservers. TelZodo cradled her sienna chops in his palm as her executioner bent over her.

Abri laid his hand on the Masari's heart and whispered a prayer. Zai's eldest son still wore his Reckoning rifle, but he had dispensed death by poison. Late afternoon sun darkened the blue band tattooed across his forehead. It seemed a circlet, vanishing into his short, black hairline.

The Yata had harnessed himself into a cart and run her in from Basc, taking the broad trail at the edge of the windbreak. His leather jacket rested over his tunic, unbuckled and hanging open at the front. Despite his loosened uniform and the sweat of the day, he still looked tidy.

Beside him, his younger brother Evit lined up bottles of preservative for this brief, outdoor ceremony. Afterward, they would move BarrowBow inside for more significant cuts, enough to retard her decay and keep her intact through the next day's service.

She had gone hunting beneath a clear sky. TelZodo didn't know if she had said any prayers, for herself or for the Yata she sought to kill. He didn't know why she'd taken to the far woods. She might have been ready to break her own fast, or she might have been seeking food for her household.

She'd seemed more practical than pious, in these days when nothing seemed worth any worship. But something must be, from the look of stoic respect on Abri's face.

The Preserver's speech shifted from Yata to Masari, thanking and then entreating the gods. BarrowBow's death had removed one Yata-eater from Crossroads. She might even be a rare Sustainer Masari, capable of nourishing her own people, though the chances of that were remote.

Hushed voices reached TelZodo from behind as footfalls grew louder on the gravel road between the farmhouse and the morgue. HigherBrook approached with a slight limp, his tenor dignified and sad. His daughter Bless accompanied him, sure-footed and already sounding like a leader.

Piri had summoned and now led them to the corpse. TelZodo glanced back at his mother, the shortest of the three. Her mask of detachment didn't end when she focused on him. She gave no indication she'd seen the wetness on his face, but he knew better.

Instead, she greeted him with fingers on his arm. *BarrowBow meant something to you.*

He nodded.

Tell me.

His nose wrinkled at the first unsealed bottles and the sight of his father and Evit with blades and swabs in their hands. He turned away from the body as HigherBrook and Bless began their own incantations.

The small woman beside TelZodo would steep her own hands in BarrowBow's remains before the night was over. Probing, extracting. He fumbled his reply on her outstretched palm. *I saw her only a few times. She didn't care what I was, and she cared about me more than most. That's all.*

They turned toward the funereal shed, which rose from a clearing near the windbreak. Thick timber posts supported a canted roof, with canvas drapes that could be opened to the air or closed against the elements. TelZodo prepared to clean the hall before HigherBrook's sanctification.

Piri gave him a hard look, her chin tilted up as she drummed, *More people care about you than you think, TelZodo. You can't accept that, yet.*

She kept up with his long stride, even though her head barely reached the level of his chest. He forced himself to slow down.

Her fingerpresses continued. *Do you think I didn't see how hard you've tried? You lived in Basc for almost two years, trying to be like Evit.*

SHABRA: (Laughing) You couldn't wait to sire a child. You thought you had such a gift.

TelZodo winced, snagged between the voice in his head and the touch on his arm. "Why are we talking about this now?"

Because you're in as much pain now as you were then, and you're as stubborn and silent about it as your father. Piri craned her neck, her scrutiny relentless. *Do you think I don't know what you're reading, what his narratives say? I was with him when he dictated them.*

SHABRA: I helped free his demons, TelZodo. Let's free yours.

TELZODO: Not now.

SHABRA: Full-blood Yata could be husbands at nine years of age. Evit did it. You thought you could do it. You'd grown so much faster than all those backward Masari boys.

Maybe he could drive the deputy away if he stared long enough at the pictograms burned into wood. Symbols wavered, sliding together as he and Piri neared the shed.

His mother's nails pressed beneath his pelt. *Talk to me.*

SHABRA: Tell her how you decided to comfort the Masari when you couldn't

impregnate the Yata. The lonely, the widowed, the orphaned. The ones about to die. Basc Yata have the Soala to absorb their grief. Crossroads has you.

TelZodo stumbled. Laughed. Whom should he answer first? It didn't matter. He should have remained a diversion, a bundle of pleasure unattached to the people he serviced. Uncontrollable mirth rippled his stomach.

Tiny hands *whammed* against his chest. His mother glared up at him with barely-concealed rage as they stood in an indigo afternoon amidst fields of seedlings.

I cannot speak aloud, TelZodo. She poked him past untied laces, hammering against his sternum. None of my other babies could speak aloud, but you can. You are mangling your own tongue instead. Why? Do you want to be like them?

His hilarity vanished like smoke sucked away. He hugged Piri to him, trying not to clutch her. "No."

I never had a chance to hold them, but I could hold you. Tell me that made a difference.

SHABRA: It's funny, don't you think? I forced your father to talk. All those words. All those stories. Look how they've silenced you.

"Oh, dear gods," he moaned, beseeching the sky. "I can't say anything that won't hurt you."

TelZodo's mother leaned back, a shallow smile on her lips. *It won't hurt as much as the way you're suffering now.*

She withdrew her hands, slipped them into the folds of her tunic, and continued on toward the shed. A short lope brought him back to her side.

He managed to say, "I don't belong here."

Her eyebrow ticced up. They passed beneath a beam covered in scripture. Pretty prayers for help, carved in a desperate calligraphy.

Piri's hands remained in her tunic, bunching the cloth.

TelZodo whispered, "Now who's holding back?" He grimaced as the deputy's

laughter shot through his brain. Beside him, Piri bent to storage bins. She withdrew a whisk broom and aromatics, her face pinched.

He took them from her and turned away. “BarrowBow knew that I didn’t fit in Crossroads. I don’t fit in Basc, either.” He brushed the canvas sheets, herding dirt blown in from the fields into broad piles and tamping them down. Tributes to the dead swam before his eyes as he tied cloth to the posts. “It’s more than my sterility. I thought I could make up for that. Look at CatBird. She watches over every orphan in Basc, and she’s at home there. But I...”

He dropped dried leaves and mulched them with the toe of his sandal. How far had his parents run before they could give him a home? That’s all they’d ever wanted for him, outracing death all across the region.

This valley’s acceptance of hybrids had been a direct result of his birth, but not before Basc and Crossroads had been liberated, themselves. What made living here so hard?

SHABRA: All their misguided optimism began with you, dear boy. Very quaint.

He growled over the sound of his mother’s steady whisking, “What did Shabra sound like?”

Piri turned from her low corner and squinted at him.

“Her voice,” TelZodo insisted. “What was it like?”

She laid down her broom and held one hand up like a slate, pressing words on her palm with the other. *Low, but still higher than a Masari’s. Hard-edged.* She thought for a moment. *Clipped. Why?*

“She talks to me.” He slouched against a post as tension drained from his shoulders. “Not from the afterlife. It’s not really her.” He began to giggle. “Do demons come in the form of people you read in a book?”

Birdlike fingers held onto his shoulders, but then the sensation vanished. Shabra would have to be riding his back to grasp him that high.

Piri crossed the shed, looking pensive. She drummed on his forearm, *What does she tell you?*

He averted his eyes. “How much I loathe myself, mostly. I don’t see why she has to. I do a good job of that without her help.” He shook his head. “But it’s more than that.”

Piri waited in quiet expectation.

SHABRA: Tell her how you beg me to stay with you.

TELZODO: I’ll tell her how you lie to me.

SHABRA: Coward. You can get rid of me with a single thought. Why don’t you?

“She pushes me,” he added.

Fingerpads pressed the tender skin around his fur. *Toward what?*

His mother’s eyes reflected the deputy, a grinning, twisted protectress. His answer bubbled up from nowhere, sounding like nonsense. “Toward whatever is hiding behind her.”

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*“Pay attention, TelZodo. This is what you want.”*

*Shabra mashed her dark breasts against his pectoral fur. She grew impossibly tall, copying his measurements limb for limb. Her fingers tangled in his wine-colored mane and pulled until his scalp burned. Her pelvis ground against his. “Go ahead. Take me.”*

*He panted against her nakedness, unable to let go. “I hate you.”*

*“Good. Do it.”*

*She was a furnace in his hands. He swelled, twitching against her thigh.*

*“I broke your father wide open. Now it’s your turn.” She tugged his head toward hers and grinned, her narrow bronze face swallowing the light. “You’ve come of age, TelZodo. Prove it.”*

*She grasped his buttocks. Moist heat enveloped his erection and he groaned, beginning to thrust.*

*“You only think you’re a man,” she taunted. “You’re a scared little boy, TelZodo. I’m the teat of your imagination that you keep around to suckle until you grow up.”*

*He gripped her as she rode him. He staggered on his feet, helpless, his stomach knotting with twin skeins of pleasure and horror. His nostrils flared at scent as a belly touched the small of his back.*

*Shabra squeezed him inside her and whispered, “That woman behind you. What’s her name?”*

*He wheezed, “I don’t know.”*

*“Of course not. You know almost none of them. You were too busy burying yourself.”*

*More bodies crowded against them, holding them upright. TelZodo’s nerves buzzed as Shabra wrapped her legs around his. He struggled for breath as heat climbed.*

*Their smells thickened the air. Masari and Yata, living and dead, those who worshiped him and those who only fucked him. All of them, inconceivably, the same size.*

*“We haven’t gotten bigger. You’ve gotten smaller.” Shabra’s tongue darted into his ear, sending a liquid rush to his toes. “Just the way you wanted to be.”*

*Nausea chilled him. “I don’t understand.”*

*“Yes, you do.” She slipped against him, sighing. “You have four brothers, TelZodo. Three sisters. That’s all your mother could tell you. She never saw their faces, but she knew to look between their legs as the farm hands pulled them away from her.” She ground against him more fervently. “You’re all she has left, now. I couldn’t bear to leave a woman like that behind. Could you?”*

*The writhing mass lurched, driving him backward. His feet left the ground and he floated without bearings in a sea of flesh.*

*“What could you possibly want in Promontory?” Shabra purred, pouring sweat. “The authorities would have killed you if they found you. You escaped from me,*

*but I was nothing compared to them. Such a hostile place to be born. So much better to be safe here in Crossroads and its last scraps of a dead religion that you never understood.”*

*A great gust hurled him back. Metal fencing sang as he slammed against chainlinks that froze against his spine. His head throbbed. The bodies pressed closer.*

*Shabra’s nipple pressed against his chops. She squirmed until her breast filled his mouth, dribbling gruel.*

*“You’re with your family now,” she groaned, milking his orgasm. “This is your pen. Welcome home.”*

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He twisted away from his father’s hands with a shout. Lantern light speared his eyes.

“Nightmare.” Ghost’s hurried explanation reached TelZodo through bewilderment. “You were screaming.”

He fought through haze, gulping air. “Where am I?”

“The Grange.”

“I can’t tell.”

“That will pass. Give it time.”

TelZodo trembled with shock waves, unable to move. He concentrated on the light, then on the cold where his blanket stopped below his shoulder, and chipped away at his paralysis one sliver at a time.

Gnarled hands threw giant shadows against the wall. “I’m turning up the wick.”

TelZodo nodded and licked his lips, tasting dust. “Is Mother with you?”

“No. Do you want her here?”

His pounding heart began to quiet. “No.” He jerked upright on his pallet, waving

his father away. Trying to stand was like swimming through a hopper of millet. “Did she tell you about your crazy son?”

“Just the troubled one.”

The musk of the breeding pen faded, and in its place rose an equally disturbing blend of spring tea and the astringent odor permeating Ghost’s clothes. The man must have been up half the night, slicing into BarrowBow.

TelZodo pulled his breeches off a hook. He leaned against the wall as he slipped them on, fighting vertigo. “The textile houses rise early. I’d better go.”

In a moment he was pinned against the planks.

“Maybe I didn’t push you around enough when you were a boy.” Ghost’s shaggy head leaned close, storm-colored eyes flashing. “Now that you’re of age, I can fight you man to man. Try to leave without telling me what’s bothering you and I will do that.” He swung away and snatched up the lantern. “You and I have a few minutes before the rest of the Grange awakens. I’ve fixed tea for myself. There’s enough for two.”

TelZodo plucked his shirt from a chair and followed his father out of the bedroom. He muttered, “I can challenge you man to man, then.”

“Go ahead.”

They padded to the common room, where a brown teapot steamed on the long farmhouse table. Ghost turned toward the shelves for a second mug.

TelZodo sat and poured, studying a light green swirl as his voice soured. “I will at least have the decency to tell you when I leave Crossroads. I won’t sneak away night after night, building a hideaway until I suddenly disappear.” He offered a wry smile as graying neck fur puffed. “You have Evit now. You don’t need me.”

Ghost dropped earthenware onto wood, his face working. “If your grandfather were alive, he would tell you that I left the way I did for good reason. But you have only my word to consider.” He lifted the pot, focusing on the steady stream of tea. “As for Evit, he is inheriting my skills and your mother’s, and we care about him. That can’t compare to our love for you, no matter how often you’ve

rejected it.”

“Do you love me enough to let me go?”

His father sipped with both hands around the cup. Thin chops rode pockmarks and wrinkles in a face grown suddenly old. “You’re of age, now. I suppose we’ll have to.”

“Good.”

“When are you leaving?”

TelZodo faltered. “I don’t know.”

“I see. You’re still figuring it out.” Ghost drained his mug and stood, examining a wall filled with farm tools lit from below. His reedy tenor flattened against the wood. “I took almost half a year to decide when to sneak out night after night, because I knew the consequences. For where you’re going, you’ll need papers from HigherBrook testifying to your lack of Yata-dependence, so that you can travel through the central valley. And I would suggest that you secure passage with Yucof.”

TelZodo bristled. “I didn’t say where I was going.”

“You don’t have to.” Ghost shrugged as he cleared the table. A new wave of scent overwhelmed the delicate tea leaves, making a lie of his nonchalance. It nestled under his nails, like the preservatives. “I could be wrong, but it is no longer my place to ask. You’ll tell me when you’re ready.”

CHAPTER 10

Bless wrote with a steady hand, switching from Masari to its Yata translation and back again each time she dipped her nib. A tangle of ruddy hair swung beside her chops. "I'll miss our little chats."

TelZodo laughed. "I thought you'd be thrilled to see me go."

"Part of me is." She brushed the oily locks behind her shoulder, leaving ink stains, and raised her head. "You'll have to send me some scathing notes from Promontory, so that I can keep toughening up."

"*Keep* toughening up? You're so frozen now that it would take a blasting wedge to spread your legs."

"That's what I mean." She bit down a little smile and resumed writing. "You give me good practice for the Chamber sessions I'll be facing some day. They're tough *and* powerful."

"Why don't you screw the Chamber, then?"

"It's been suggested." She blew on the parchment, then reached for wax. "In kinder words."

TelZodo turned away from her diminutive desk, set opposite her father's larger station. Signs of bureaucracy papered the walls and lay in stacks on the floor. No reminders of TripStone's bedroom remained in the home office it had become. Only the two single-shot rifles kept in a glass case in the common room indicated that this house had once been hers.

Through the window he spied a line of cottages standing in empty fields, fallen into disrepair or dismantled for materials. He'd already walked through knee-high grass that would hide Bless almost to her hips.

The governor's daughter had cleared the flagstone path of growth. Leftover grit turned her skin a darker shade of brown. She smelled of physical labor spanning several days, working up a stink that would be ripe by summer.

TelZodo wrinkled his nose. “They’d have to air out the Rotunda afterward.”

“You should sit in on some of the Chamber debates. They should ventilate it now.”

Soft splatters hit parchment.

He glanced back at dripping wax. “Shouldn’t HigherBrook be doing that?”

Bless angled her head toward a proclamation hanging beside her desk. “I’m his proxy.”

“You’re still underage in Crossroads. You don’t even have an office in the Rotunda yet.”

“I can’t make the laws, but I can help enforce them.” Bless snatched a seal from a cubby and pressed down. “My father’s given me clearance to write your voucher. He’s spending today in the Meethouse.”

TelZodo turned as her voice changed from sharp banter to hollow echo. “Does he know how much that bothers you?”

She leaned back in her chair, pasty beneath her scowl. “He’s been gifted with the ability to sire non-dependent, fertile hybrids. That’s the best way he can think of to preserve any Masari traits at all.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Why should you care?” she snapped. “He’s careful in choosing his mates. You fuck anything.”

Her words sand-blasted him. If she looked away, maybe he could rub the tingling from his ears and pat his neck fur back into place.

Bless nodded, pursing her lips. “Your concern is duly noted. But rest assured that his virility bothers you more than it bothers me, and my virginity bothers you more than it does him.”

He reached across her desk and lifted grimy fingers. “Then why do you keep yourself so filthy?”

“Take your hand off me, Tel. I don’t know where it’s been.”

Her brown eyes bore into his, but her fur remained unruffled. She was less upset with him than she pretended to be.

TelZodo looked away as she returned the seal to its cubby. Despite her physical appearance, Bless kept her workspace as tidy as the governor’s. Her sturdy letters labeled everything.

“You did well, yesterday,” she said, holding the voucher out to him.

He frowned as he took it from her. “Yes. I’ll miss ‘anything,’ and so will SkyBee.”

Bless winced. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“Why not?”

His lips twitched into a mirthless smile. “Because I do fuck anything. Unlike the Governor, I have only a good time to give them, and I’m glad I could give some to BarrowBow before she died. At least now she won’t have nightmares any more.” He folded the parchment and slipped it into the leather pouch at his belt. “I don’t know if I can say the same about SkyBee. She was confused and frightened of all those people around her at the funeral. She clung to me almost as hard as she did to her father.”

“I was SkyBee’s age when my mother died. I was confused and frightened, too.” Bless stood and stretched, flexing her fingers. “My father tried to explain the hunt to me, but I could see how hurt he was.” She glared up at TelZodo. “As often as he’s become a father since then, he hasn’t been a husband to anyone else. But he supports his mates and his children because he wants to do what’s best for this valley.”

TelZodo inclined his head. “Because a stud is nobler than a whore.”

“I hear self-pity is punishable by death in Promontory.” Bless strode past him, toward the door. “I’ll miss your whining, Tel. Be careful over there.”


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*TELZODO: You haven't tortured me in days, Shabra. What's the matter? Lost your touch?*

*SHABRA:*

He rubbed the gooseflesh on his arms between swaths of pelt. If he tried hard enough, he could picture a static figure flat as a drawing, silent and inanimate. Finally, his imaginary playmate was truly dead. She'd left him to face his passage alone, taunting him by her absence.

A dark silhouette rose atop the Alvav Ridge, tiny in the distance, and descended toward new growth. Yucof must be headed toward Basc, taking the trails around stands of young trees. The reborn forest grew taller every year, rising out of the ash.

As though that tract made up for all the muffled blasts coming from the hillsides, trading one green landscape for another. Whatever the Yata were doing, it wasn't pretty.

What made that ugliness so hard to leave?

Promontory possessed its own brand of ugliness. TelZodo squinted at a thin layer of haze. He might as well look forward to the change of scenery.

The cart disappeared beneath the budding canopy. At least the valley's controlled warfare remained limited to the far woods, with no need to expand back into what had been the original hunting grounds of the Covenant. Many of the armed Yata were Preservers on the lookout for hungry Masari. Crossroads welcomed everyone, but the lesser-weaned coming from abroad went up against elite soldiers who usually ended their appetites in short order.

The old people remembered a village far larger than the one TelZodo prepared to leave, yet one that continued to shrink. Across the meadow, Basc kept building.

And to think that the Yata couldn't even grow their own food in the days when his father had been a boy. TelZodo was sure that had been a myth, one of the Covenant's many twisted fairy tales. Then he'd seen the Rotunda's volumes and the literal weight of their testimony.

Drizzle began to fall as he walked home. His groin still ached from saying goodbye. He tilted his face toward the clean smell of rain that ducked beneath his clothing, soaking into perfumed salves and rope burns. It washed his bruises, cooling him where he still felt tender.

For days he had been a blinding procession of god and demon and whipping boy, the standin for dead sweethearts and living memories. Sometimes, during brief, dim encounters, he had risen from being a thing among things and began to choke on rarefied air. He'd dove back into oblivion before clarity stripped him down to his bones.

His face broke into a grin. Whatever would this place do without him?

The rain fell harder as he entered the Grange, teasing mud onto his sandals and between his toes. Yellow and orange squash blossoms peeked out from beneath massive leaves. TelZodo listened to the drumming on their surfaces, trying to wrest speech from the weather. Dripping corn had grown high enough to look like corn instead of like tall grass. Somewhere a woodpecker hammered through the downpour.

Closer to the farmhouse he passed shrieks and slap-happy body slams on softened ground. Small coveralls bulged with fistfuls of mud, the air dancing with high-pitched laughter.

TelZodo could tell the dirt-smearred girls apart by their size. SkyBee, the smallest and youngest, was quickly butting her way to supremacy over the other two, but HeadWind didn't seem to mind. Yucof's daughter brayed with delight whenever she fell, short and squat but a giant among playmates less than half her age.

TelZodo's cousin, seven-year-old WingLeaf, flitted between her roles as babysitter, competitor, and child. He watched the trio's tangling until a brown gob smacked against his soaked shirt. He couldn't tell who his challenger was, it happened so quickly.

It didn't matter. For a while he could forget what being a grownup was like.

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Giggles continued to echo from the next room, their sound contagious. TelZodo chortled as he scrubbed mud from his face, soaking in tepid water the color of

loam. He dipped his finger into soap scum, swirling it into lazy wheels.

The four of them had created a stir at the door, standing caked and begrimed and at mock-serious attention. Ghost had answered their clattering knocks, taken one look at them, and whooped. The mug in his hand and the ale on his breath was a sure sign that Yucof had arrived.

Piri had marshaled the girls into the tub first, leaving TelZodo a slurry in which to bathe. He rinsed himself off as best he could with water from a kettle, then slipped into dry clothes and strolled barefoot into the common room. “I’ll bet you could toss seeds into that tub and something will grow.”

Ghost nodded, still smiling. “Mold. I tried it when I was your age.” His brow furrowed. “Very pretty mold, as I recall.”

Yucof smelled of brandy. He cradled HeadWind, who gnawed on a strip of Yata jerky with a faraway look on her face. The larder must be full of it now, enough to hold her until her father returned with more. Her carrot curls rested against his graying orange braid, her pale skin pressed against his weathered, bronze cheeks.

SkyBee and WingLeaf scurried to TelZodo as he sat, jockeying for position to see who could plait his dripping mane the fastest.

“Three braids for each of you,” Ghost called to his niece. “Then take SkyBee to your room.”

“Okay.”

TelZodo waved away the drinks, then arched his neck over the backrest and let the girls tug.

Piri’s tapered fingers rested on his cheek. *I’m going to remember this moment.*

He smiled up at her and mouthed, *Me, too.* Maybe he could untangle all their knots by the time he got to Promontory.

He wondered if his mother felt as lighthearted as she looked, or if his own quiet joy colored the room. He could have been scraping Crossroads from his skin and off his fur, leaving it bright and fluffy as he peeled away a valley’s worth of

burden.

“Tel.”

He tried to lever his head forward, but the girls held his hair fast. He’d have plenty of time to talk with Yucof face to face. “I’m listening.”

“I can use an extra hand on my rounds. You’ll pay me through your work during the trip.”

He tried to nod. “Agreed.” His scalp stung. “Does that also mean procuring food for HeadWind?”

“If you’re asking me whether I’ll want you to kill anybody, the answer is no.” The trader sounded sober despite the liquor on his breath. “But you’ll help me defend my goods.”

TelZodo raised his eyebrows. “Against what?”

“The Alvav gangs.” More liquid poured. “Predator hybrids. They’re feral children, mostly. Not well-organized and not very bright, but they can smell Yata across the central valley.” The bottle thumped back on wood. “We can make other arrangements if you want to limit your travel to going through Rudder.”

TelZodo listened to the girls’ whispered debates about the studious mangling of his hair. In a few years they’d both take guns into their hands, if they weren’t shooting already.

He called softly behind him, “WingLeaf.”

Her fingers paused by his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Are you learning how to hunt, yet?”

“Uh huh.” Her answer rose from his curls, half-distracted. “I go on tracking practice and I clean the guns. I found all the traps at school.” Long locks twisted, hand over hand. “I help make the bullets.”

SkyBee shouted, “I pick them up!”

WingLeaf grasped his shoulders. “Don’t squirm!”

TelZodo tried to ignore the ringing in his ears. “Sorry.”

“SkyBee picks them up after target practice,” WingLeaf continued, unperturbed. “She finds them the fastest.”

To his left, Ghost asked, “Would you have wanted to learn?”

“You’re asking me now?” TelZodo massaged a crick in his neck. “I never thought about it.”

“You wouldn’t be hunting,” Yucof offered. “Only protecting the cargo. I’ll teach you the basics.”

A warm palm rested by his temples. TelZodo looked away from ceiling beams and into his mother’s proud, challenging smile.

He stopped massaging and positioned his hand for a reply. “Have you ever shot anyone?”

No, and neither has your father, she drummed. But where you’re going, we were ready to.

The short trader sitting across the table was the only murderer in the room. TelZodo wished he could look Yucof in the eye and ask him if he’d killed or scavenged the Yata now nourishing HeadWind.

“Let’s go through Alvav,” he said.

PART 2

CHAPTER 11

Promontory

Spirited conversations melded up and down the lakefront and solidified into a thumping headache. TripStone leaned back against BrushBurn and closed her eyes for a moment. If she listened carefully, she could tease out the Yata gossip from the Masari, but why bother? Everyone was chattering about the same thing.

He offered, “I could take you home.”

“And have me miss this insanity? I wouldn’t think of it.”

“You must admit,” he added, tickled, “we’ve never had such an integrated crowd for a single event.”

She rested her head against his shoulder as his arms came around her. Who wouldn’t line the road to watch industry grind to a halt for the sake of a toy? Let Rudder’s Chamber deal with the economic consequences if it wanted to declare a holiday.

She flared her nostrils and inhaled salty air permeated with sweat. Up and down the lines, the furless Yata mopped themselves with kerchiefs, fidgeting. TripStone’s own perspiration proved more sedate, darkening her shirt around her pelt pattern. She murmured, “We make prettier stains than they do.”

His thick chops twitched above her. “What was that?”

She shook her head. Clouds massed as the sun climbed, promising afternoon rains that would drench everyone. If the authorities planned to hold this witless demonstration at all, it had better be soon.

DevilChaser’s annoyance reached TripStone from behind. “I told you to bring along a chair for her.”

“She wouldn’t let me.” BrushBurn’s embrace tightened into a secure cushion.

“I’m holding her up.”

“She’s about to collapse.”

TripStone craned her neck. “I have a headache, that’s all. Don’t add to it.” She smiled at his muffled splutter.

Beside the doctor, DamBuster observed, “I see a lot more Yata here than Masari.”

“Makes sense.” TripStone yawned. “Yata invented this contraption.”

“It was a joint project,” BrushBurn corrected her, “but Yata took the initiative. That’s not why more of them are here.” He gazed out over the dual lines snaking on either side of the road, all the way back to the canyon edge. “They outnumber us now.”

DamBuster’s tone brightened. “That should put an end to the Death bouts soon.”

TripStone stiffened as her fur puffed. “You can’t expect enough Yata to die from other causes. It isn’t that simple. And you certainly shouldn’t use it as an excuse to keep whetting your palate on them, or pretend to have more willpower by eating Sustainer Masari.”

Behind her, DevilChaser growled, “His constitution is different from yours.”

A whiff of sadness from BrushBurn kept TripStone from answering. She lifted her husband’s hand from her sternum and planted a kiss on his knuckles.

Far be it for her to pressure the apothecary into weaning faster when he’d been stuck at level three for years. He must know by now that the lottery was weighted against him. FlitNettle had known, but she’d been too young and cocky to do anything about it.

The crowd pressed toward the road. Green tunics darted in and out among merchant aprons and factory coveralls, but Rudder’s peacekeepers were here for reasons other than quelling unrest. Instead, they positioned the shorter Yata in front, ensuring good views for everyone. More Yata mobbed the Skedge Bridge to TripStone’s right, leaving the carts no room to pass. Unharnessed and perched atop their wagons, the runners didn’t seem to mind.

“Back from the rail.” An officious arm wove the air, trying to sculpt the throng. TripStone began to chuckle. So much fuss over nothing.

Worse than nothing. How much water and wood was Promontory wasting to put on this show? And they’d be even more dependent on Rudder for those raw materials after the rains ended.

She called to the young guard as he passed within hearing, “I thought we were already in enough debt to you people.”

“Not us.” The tall Masari motioned more Yata forward, guiding them in front of her. “Alvav is subsidizing this. And Basc, I think. It’s their trade route.”

“Sending that silly thing over the mountains.” She tried to remain polite for the Yata chattering around her, but gave up the attempt. “Which is why we’re all going to cheer it on as it creeps along this level ground.”

“It’s a prototype.”

It’s dandified slag. TripStone held her hand over her mouth to rein in her laughter. Would SandTail have loved this moment of Yata-inspired nonsense? Or would he be horrified at how much its proponents were now in the majority?

Distant cheers added an undercurrent to a hubbub growing in intensity. The air around TripStone crackled, but not from lightning.

“It’s left the canyon rim,” BrushBurn said into her ear.

“About time.”

She unhooked her water bladder from her belt and sipped, listening to excitement unroll like a heavy fog down the lakefront. Yata workers in front of her clapped each other on the back. Flasks breathed open, liquoring an already pungent and thoroughly senseless day.

“Clarifier?”

BrushBurn’s hands left her waist as he took the spyglass from DamBuster. He chuckled. “I can’t see a thing. Too many people.”

“Look above the crowd.”

After a moment, his soft whistle cut through the din. BrushBurn passed the clarifier forward.

TripStone waved it back. “I’ll see it when it gets here.”

The Yata ahead of her turned and cast a sideways glance. “Afraid of progress?”

She couldn’t figure the man’s age, but he smelled of the foundry. His rolled-up sleeves told her that as many scars came from fights as from the machines.

She snuggled back into BrushBurn’s arms. “I’d say this is more expense than progress.”

“Progress is not having to make Destiny for you beasts any more,” the worker said, coolly. “All that energy to keep you fed. You’re finally becoming manageable.”

She met his glare with her own. “You never made Destiny for *me*. Waste your newfound energy on this folly if you must, but don’t do it on my time.”

Her skin prickled as a shout went up to her left, hands raised and fingers pointing. White puffs uncurled and darkened in the distance, vanishing into the overcast. All around her, bodies of every size jockeyed for position.

She strained to hear above the noise. “Someone’s screaming.”

The Yata ahead of her smirked. “That’s the safety valve.”

She looked over his shoulder at notched wooden rails, eyebrows cocked. “You can’t even maneuver it. How much more safety do you need?”

The lakefront took one giant breath, and then another, matching its rhythm to the pounding in TripStone’s head until she realized the echoes came from an engine. Green tunics paced up and down the road, keeping spectators in line.

A smokestack-topped boiler grew larger as it neared them, sending up steam. More of the crowd shrank away from the road ahead of the heat. As TripStone’s line of vision cleared, she could make out a wheeled base, then followed more

huffing sounds down to a bellows that kept the fire alive.

DamBuster asked, “Who’s running it?”

She leaned further forward. “There’s a turbine powering the wheels on the rails. A drum on one of them is working a pulley, and that’s what’s controlling the bellows.”

“No runner?”

“Nobody that I can see.” She shook her head. “It’s clever, but it’s taking forever to get here. I crawled across the salt pan faster than that.”

DevilChaser piped up, “You didn’t make it across the salt pan.”

“My point exactly.” She reached back. “Hand me that clarifier.”

She blinked dizziness away as she raised the lenses to her eye, her other hand gripping BrushBurn’s. Another sudden scream and she almost dropped the tube.

She scowled at the hysterical valve, wishing for a moment that the boiler would just blow up and be done with so that she could catch her breath. Beneath its stout metal belly, block Masari letters and thick Yata script spanned the top of a raised gate. “Iron Messenger,” she read.

She turned her attention to the Yata worker before her, who jotted notes down on a small pad. “Those rails will rot into the mountain long before you can get that thing into Alvav, let alone Basc. You’re an ironworker, aren’t you? Why are they using wood?”

“Slippage on the metal,” he said, not looking up. “We’re still trying to solve that problem.”

“You could always burn the tracks for fuel,” she quipped. She shook her head. “I don’t see the advantages here, and I see a lot of problems. A runner isn’t limited to a single path, can move more than twice as fast, and consumes far less than this does. What’s the point?”

He kept writing. “And tandem runners?”

“The same is true for tandem runners.”

He nodded. “What about ten of them?”

TripStone tried to imagine ten runners in harness, lengthening and shortening chains with every shift in grade and manipulating multiple gear levers through each switchback. Even before she considered the weight of cargo requiring that much strength, she could gauge its futility. “Ten runners is as much fantasy as a hundred.”

His smooth bronze cheeks dimpled into a smile. “That ‘folly,’ as you call it, is pulling ten wagons filled with ore. One thousand spring apiece, not counting the weight of the wagon.” He gestured toward the clarifier. “Your ten runners.”

She raised and squinted through the tube again, trying to peer past the limitations of a level straightaway.

His high tenor sailed up to her. “You can count them as they pass us.”

“No wonder you’re demonstrating this thing on flat ground,” she murmured. “I don’t care how many chains you use. All that ore’s going to tumble to the foothills as soon as you try to climb the range.”

“We won’t be climbing the mountains.”

She stared at him.

He grinned back. “We’ll be going *through* them.”

CHAPTER 12

Alvav

Spots of mica reflected sunlight off the Cliff, a thousand flashing eyes at midday. They made the alabaster curtain look flat and its terraces hard to see. Broken banisters emerged as shadows fell away, next to naturally-formed wrinkles in the rock.

TelZodo stopped on the trade road, dazzled as the Alvav woods opened into a vast clearing. The white wall to his right was a shiny blade slicing into the world, opposite the river forming Rudder's western border. He hooked his thumbs into his harness straps, listening. Streams trickled toward the river, scribbling silver across distant mountains

Somewhere, in a meadow near here, his parents had drawn each other down into the grass for the first time, and then again, making him possible. Homeless, ragged wanderers, they'd carried literal scraps of data from a ruined laboratory of which only a granite marker survived on the Alvav Ridge, barely on the Crossroads side of the border.

His father had stayed alive by consuming the remains of a dead Sustainer Masari girl in cooler weather, when the insects were dying. Now spring warmth hatched enough creatures to hobble an army, Gria's in particular. Yucof hadn't tired of reminding him of that fact. TelZodo uncapped his medicinal flask and tried not to gag on its syrup. Soon, he'd have to reapply lotion to keep the bloodsuckers from latching onto his pelt and burrowing beneath his skin.

Even the paving beneath his feet succumbed to the season, buckling slightly as it rose above mud and extended toward stone walls half-hidden behind thick groves. He listened to the bickering of invisible waterfowl, then turned as the cart rocked.

In a moment Yucof stood beside him, already slathered in salve that made TelZodo's nose itch.

His short guide pointed. "The road forks up ahead. We'll bear right."

TelZodo followed Yucof's arm and scanned a line of dead fountains. "But the Cliff's abandoned."

"The city's gone, but there's a survey team measuring for tracks and laborers preparing the surface. That means trade." He nodded toward the controls by TelZodo's hands. "I can take over."

"I'm not tired."

"You've been pulling all morning."

"I'm working for you to pay my way, remember?" TelZodo flipped levers as he stepped forward, letting out the chains. "Besides, it took me long enough to fit these straps."

Leather pressed against his chest as the wheels began to turn. TelZodo concentrated on the weight on his sternum, trying to distract himself from the revolver hanging by his hip. Promontory-issue, like most of the region's firearms. This one had old-style tooling, with flourishes absent from the newer guns.

It clearly wasn't intended for Yata, but his mother had hefted the weapon in her tiny hand, giving it the illusion of weightlessness as she held its handle out to him.

"I didn't know Father had this," he'd said.

Piri had squeezed his arm and tapped, *It wasn't Ghost's*.

He should have asked them more questions. But how could he, when every fabled tale of his birth had carved another hole in his gut? Crossing into Alvav stripped that sheen of legend from his body. He'd peeled out of it like a newborn, filling his lungs with fresh air.

Then all his unasked questions and all the stories he'd pushed away drifted back, settling on him like thick dust.

"You've got a couple hundred workers up there who have migrated from Basc," Yucof was saying. Tiny figures appeared and disappeared high on the summit, approaching and withdrawing from the edge. "Many had parents who were

slaves here. I knew some of them.”

TelZodo craned his neck to get a better look. “I’d heard rumors of a steam transport.”

“The rumors are true. That’s what all the dynamiting of your mountains is about. The Cliff is perfectly suited for rail.” Yucof’s voice lifted. “If it works, I’ll be out of a job. But this place would finally see some honest profit.”

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The afternoon grew sultry, carrying the perfume of decay from hidden bogs. TelZodo wrinkled his nose at a stronger stench.

Beside him, Yucof nodded. “It’s ahead.”

“It smells awful.”

“The dead usually do when they haven’t been preserved.” He pulled a kerchief from his vest pocket and tied it over his nose and mouth. Cloth muffled his instructions as TelZodo followed suit. “Stay on the road and prepare to breathe in a lot worse.”

“How much closer are we going to get?”

“Close enough for target practice.”

TelZodo stumbled on legs grown rubbery. “That’s a person you’re asking me to shoot.”

“It’s a dead person who won’t feel a thing.”

Whoever lay in the mud could have been thrown from above, or might have fallen where a balustrade had crumbled. TelZodo peered skyward, swallowing nausea.

“Most likely disease,” Yucof offered. “Or starvation. Those and gunshot are the main causes of hybrid deaths here.”

The harness turned suffocating. “How do you know it’s a hybrid?”

“I don’t, but chances are good that it is.”

Yucof’s forehead glistened with sweat that looked chilled. TelZodo geared down to lighten his load but still struggled to pull the wagon before he realized he was holding his breath.

A soft whine grew into a buzz. They approached a black, writhing form, amorphous before it resolved into limbs and a torso exposed beneath coarse linen scraps. Its dull pallor peeked out from beneath the flies, showing limp brown tufts on bare feet.

TelZodo dared not look at the head. White spots began to obscure the rest as Yucof said, “Unharness.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m too sick to joke, Tel. Unharness.”

Somehow the straps slid from their buckles. TelZodo wiped his palms on his trousers, swaying. He began to choke.

“I know it’s hard, but you have to breathe. Lean against the wagon.”

Bile shot up into his nostrils. “I can’t see too well.”

“You don’t have to.”

Yucof unholstered his gun and planted his feet wide. A loud pop sent the flies up into a cloud. In a moment they settled back down as Yucof’s bullet lodged in little more than a skeleton. “Your turn. Position your arm like I showed you.”

Couldn’t they just keep aiming at rocks? TelZodo staggered behind the wagon’s gearing and fell back against a wood wall. Putrefaction overwhelmed the smell of vomit in his kerchief as he crossed one arm over the other to steady his shaking. Several slippery attempts later, his hammer stayed where he had cocked it. Tears streamed from his eyes as he squeezed the trigger.

His shoulder stung from the recoil. TelZodo blinked at nothing but white.

Yucof’s praise reached his ears through a roar of blood. “You killed mud. But not

bad.”

“I’m blind.”

“It’ll pass.”

“I’m a lousy shot.”

The reply froze him. “Accuracy wasn’t the lesson here.”

A clammy touch guided him into the cart. TelZodo replaced the revolver in its holster with a wrist that felt broken. He sank beside his bedroll and heard a chamber pot thump next to his head.

He burped and managed to whisper, “That thing could have been me.”

Yucof’s answer swirled out of reach. “That thing would have been my daughter if it weren’t for Crossroads.”

Minutes later the chains lengthened again and the wheels began to turn. Later still, the echoes of TelZodo’s retching faded away but left his sweat rank. Death still clung to his windpipe as he loosened his grip on the pot and drifted into numbness that only pretended to be sleep.

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By midafternoon he had scrubbed his skin red and dragged a scratchy comb through his hair and pelt until his entire body burned. The smell still refused to lift, worming through sweet medicinal salve that slicked him head to toe. The bugs avoided him, but he couldn’t blink away the memory of flies.

Yucof crouched on the opposite side of their sleeping quarters and rubbed himself down. Scar tissue puckered the small man’s torso where chunks of flesh had been removed. Old wounds.

TelZodo guessed, “The Games?”

“The black market.” He refilled his water bladder before replacing the lid on their rain barrel. “That was more dangerous than the Games. Legitimate trade is more dangerous still.”

Cloth stuck to TelZodo as he pulled his trousers on. He tried to straighten them over spiky fur that the salve had matted and spent a moment envying Yucof's hairless skin. Ridiculous, to feel jealous of the wrinkled hide before him, crisscrossed with injuries.

The old man shrugged into his shirt and began lacing up the front. "Does Shabra still talk to you?"

TelZodo's fingers paused by his breech ties. "No. How much did my parents tell you?"

"They'll have told me enough if we live to see Promontory. Shabra's compound still stands, though it's been gutted for market stalls. You can tour it if you want, but there's very little left to see." Yucof ducked through a doorway cut into the wood.

TelZodo hurried to finish dressing as canvas and burlap shifted in the next compartment. The Cliff's east wall began to dim by the time he strapped into his harness.

In less than an hour he stopped at stone fortifications outside broad steps leading to the summit. Yata guards stood sentinel at a woven iron gate, their rifles unslung. They nodded at Yucof, then turned to TelZodo with a questioning look.

The trader said, "Get out your papers."

TelZodo unbound the leather pouch at his belt. Little vegetation grew on the rocks despite the central valley's humidity. This checkpoint seemed only a few years old. Beyond the gate, lines of supply carts flanked a short gravel road.

Yucof opened a knotted bag and counted out coin. Even he was being scrutinized, his own well-worn papers inspected. First his manifest, then his certificate of non-dependence.

"I asked you a question, beanstalk."

TelZodo's muscles jumped. He looked away from Yucof and back down at the guard, who held his papers in one hand and cradled a firearm in the other.

"Two days," he stammered. "We've been in Alvav two days."

“Come to work on the Messenger?”

“No.”

“Too bad. We could use more tall ones. You’re headed to Skedge, then.”

TelZodo shook his head. “Promontory.”

“Why are you taking the long way?”

TelZodo watched the other inspection, studying the relaxed tilt of Yucof’s shoulders. He tried to eavesdrop on inquiries about cargo. “I’m helping him with his route, to pay for my passage.”

“Yucof needs very little help.”

The other conversation held the monotony of routine, interrupted by the trader’s occasional gestures in his direction. “I know.”

TelZodo’s interrogator returned his papers at a nod from the other soldier. Another pair cranked the gate open. It hung like a giant cleaver as TelZodo pulled the wagon underneath, following directions to an empty patch by a rock wall. His clothes smeared against him as he unharnessed, then creased further as he strapped a burlap sack of dried food onto his back for the first of several climbs. Yucof was already halfway to the steps, stooped beneath a satchel of mail.

More guards checked them at the top, as though their documentation had mutated from the higher altitude. By the time TelZodo transported his last load, his fingers ached from grasping handholds, the scored rock slippery from late afternoon drizzle. Oiled canvas flapped in the wind above networks of railings as he staggered onto the summit.

He grasped rope threaded through posts cemented into granite. Chisels rang near marble facades, keeping time with the same work songs he’d heard at spring planting.

He’d grown up thinking they’d originated in Basc. Now he wasn’t sure.

He followed Yucof into the nearest compound, nothing but a large, open shelter

populated with makeshift stalls. They spread blankets and opened burlap mouths, covered raised wood boards with fringe, and laid out dry goods.

Another mixed-blood merchant nodded in their direction. Two more continued to labor outside. Everyone else was Yata.

Sometimes the rain let up, amplifying the echoes of haggling and gossip. Produce and weavings passed from hand to hand, coloring the air. Someone uncorked a bottle of goldberry brandy brought up from the Marsh as marble cups rattled in mid-play. A new squall forced more workers inside, dripping and boisterous and already drunk on steam power prospects.

TelZodo laid out another row of salted rabbit and one of preserves. A jar slipped from his hand as he gasped for breath. He corralled it before it rolled beneath a boot.

Yucof leaned close enough to cut through the din. “For someone who hates crowds, you’re doing very well.”

“Maybe I should go outside before I break something.”

It was a poor excuse, but that didn’t matter.

“I showed you where she lived.” Yucof didn’t look at him, concentrating instead on managing the traffic of outstretched hands. He dipped into his bag to make change. “Just keep a firm hold on the ropes and don’t get blown over the edge.”

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*SHABRA: I’ll tell you what I believe, Ghost. I believe the Covenant is a failure. Our citizens have culture. Your gods have nothing but your empty worship.*

*GHOST: Without your slaves, your culture collapses, Shabra. Without your prisoners, you’d have hungry Masari from Rudder on your doorstep. And they don’t worship you worth a damn.*

*SHABRA: Worthless. A dead god is still dead.*

*GHOST: Yes, but our living gods have freedom.*

*SHABRA: Do they? They don't have the skills to survive without you. Our servants are an industry. The only things your Yata have are prayer books, for what little good those do them.*

*GHOST: Are you arguing for your scribe's benefit, or for mine? Ever since the Games, your line of questioning has turned into propaganda.*

*SHABRA: Your people have made a religion of propaganda. And all your fervor at my breakfast table will not save you, your wife, or your unborn child. Not here and not in Crossroads. Ever.*

Bodasa's careful script had ended there. The next morning TelZodo's father had found the scribe on his plate, her remains artfully arranged in marinated strips.

TelZodo ran his fingertips down discolored walls as rain water spilled rivulets from his clothes onto the floor. Murals had hung on these walls. Shabra's table had stood behind him, with its tongs and candelabra. Bodasa and then her replacement had made their recordings here, their nibs scratching somewhere between the guarded door and the terrace. Now that terrace was soaked and the door was gone, along with the wall that had separated this room from what had been Shabra's office.

Somewhere in this cavernous shell his parents had lain clasped with him gestating between them. Deep in the compound, his mother had taught Bodasa the perfect language for silent slaves. Try as he might, his lips drawn back and his breaths sharp, TelZodo could find no trace of their scent. Too much had been opened to the air, too much destroyed. The Cliff's culture had been reduced to a few stray traces of graffiti in these ruins, illegibly faint on sanded-down walls.

TelZodo listened to his footsteps echo. He ventured into the wind and clutched the ropes by broken marble, watching sheets of rain drench the clearing. Dusk advanced on mortared towers and barricades. The shrunken arena of the Games sat a safe distance from slow wagons trundling down flooded roadways.

That brutal entertainment rarely happened now. Rudder's advanced weaning and its tight residency restrictions had made its citizenry into a pampered elite. They fed off Alvav's dead and lived off the sweat of factory workers laboring in the arid lands.

He wondered if the Masari of annexed Promontory realized they were slaves.

He ducked back inside, wrung out his hair, and brushed off the rain. He could nap here; Yucof would know where to find him. For all its gruesome history, Shabra's compound stood empty of phantoms, presenting TelZodo with only wet stone.

He stretched out on her bare floor and tried to imagine a string of carts puffing down tracks, through mountains and over bridges. The structure around him would become a trading post. There'd be a depot and a boarding house, a marble-walled tavern. Yata-controlled trade.

He pillowed his head on his arm and half-curled into a ball.

Shabra was dead. Around him, the Cliff labored toward rebirth.

## CHAPTER 13

She seemed to come from nowhere, a sudden apparition in the clearing. She stood away from the road, keeping a respectful distance from the cart. “Hello!”

Her friendly call sailed on a strong, clear voice. She wove a path in the mud, finding more solid ground.

Yucof growled, “Keep moving.” The trader lengthened his stride, challenging TelZodo to quicken his pace.

“Who is she?”

“Vermin.”

TelZodo stared at him, his brow pinched. “She’s a *person*, Yucof.”

“She’d be a person in Crossroads. She’s vermin here. Keep moving.”

“I haven’t seen you before.” High, smoky Masari overtones suggested someone not much older than a girl. “I know Yucof, though. Is he teaching you to be a trader?”

TelZodo opened his mouth to speak when his guide barked, “Don’t answer her.”

He hissed, “Why not?”

“Because if you do, I’ll have to decide which of you to shoot. *Not one word.*” Yucof scowled at TelZodo before scanning the horizon, hand by his holster.

Their visitor kept up with the cart, traveling parallel to the road. Brown-spattered cloth knotted about her hips and unraveled halfway to her knees. Her bare breasts swayed as she dodged the slurries, edging closer.

She smiled at TelZodo. Bronze cheeks sported dimples by tawny chops. Her thin fingers grazed pectoral fur to where it ended and teased a nipple erect, then scratched idly at insect bites.

For a dangerous predator hybrid, she looked half-eaten, herself. TelZodo forced

his attention elsewhere and listened to gears and wheels spinning behind him.

“I’m Alu,” she offered, in a voice as curious as it was open. Sludge squished between her toes. “What’s your name?”

TelZodo glanced at Yucof, who shook his head.

“Yucof doesn’t like me.” She huffed beside the road, her tone apologetic. “I don’t know why. I never hurt him.” Her disappointment bore into the back of TelZodo’s head. “Don’t you like me even a little bit?”

He heard the click of a safety being released.

“You don’t have to do that, Yucof. Look at the boy. He thinks you’re crazy.”

She remained a blur in TelZodo’s peripheral vision. Her scent told him she had recently bathed in the river. Beside him, the trader reeked of heightened alertness.

It made no sense. Half the girls at home were more parasitic than this one. TelZodo turned his head again to the side and looked upon a thatch of frizzed hair above bright blue eyes. Alu smiled at him again, her chest beginning to heave. Her furry calves bulged with muscle.

She had a Masari build and Yata skin tone, like him.

“Look, whoever you are.” She held out her cupped hand, jingling coin in a narrow palm. “I can pay for my food. I know there’s no meat in the cart, but I don’t need any right now. Okay?” She nodded at the trader, frowning. “Even when I’m hungry I don’t go after Yucof. I could, you know. I don’t know why he hates me.”

TelZodo mouthed, *I don’t know why, either.*

She grinned with obvious relief.

He could stop his brisk walking and rest his legs. He could slip out of his harness and they could talk. What was the harm?

Yucof’s barrel poked him in the ribs when his pace began to slow.

He drew himself up and roared back, “What’s the matter with you?”

Alu’s gaze darted to the side, but Yucof was quick to follow her signal. TelZodo winced at the report, then at the slap of flesh falling against the mud.

Yucof muttered, “Her associate.” He pointed to a second figure racing out of firing range, then whirled on the decoy.

Alu’s eyes began to pool. She backed away, barely audible. “Hey.”

As the hammer cocked again, TelZodo shouted at her, “Go into Crossroads!”

She shook her head, defiant and sad. “I live here.”

The blast from Yucof’s gun sent her sprawling, yelling in pain as blood pumped down her thigh.

“Her friend will come back for her.” Weariness ringed the trader’s voice, his barrel once again nudging TelZodo’s ribs. “Or he’ll leave her to die and find someone else, but we’ve just bought some time. Now *move*.”

Alu’s agony followed them as they hurried on. TelZodo gritted his teeth, tempted to grab the revolver brushing his hip. “How could my father be friends with someone as ugly as you?”

“They work in twos and threes this far away from the settlements,” Yucof answered, unperturbed. “Any more than that and they start fighting each other.” The gun slipped back into its holster as he continued to scan the horizon. “The most desperate launch armed attacks, but most operate through theft. Alu was after your papers. If she couldn’t get those, she’d have found a way to forge them for her friends.”

“She hardly looked literate.”

“She’s literate where it counts. I’m well-known in this valley, but you’re not. We lose good people when someone manages to sneak into the Marsh.”

They traveled without speaking, down a tedious straightaway on flat terrain. Hours later, the walled city seemed just as distant as before and the birds sounded just as raucous.



TelZodo said, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're right, I am ugly. Your father knows that."

"She looked like a child."

"Alu? She was a child."

TelZodo's scalp itched. "You told me she was vermin."

"She was that, too."

Other traders passed them as traffic thickened. TelZodo squinted at a waystation sitting in the middle of nowhere. Routes converged on a broad apron of gravel where wagons clustered together with their shutters down, like a marketplace that never opened for business.

Yucof said, "Most of the predators plan their ambush closer to the Marsh. We travel in a caravan from here. It's safer that way."

TelZodo's head buzzed as he trudged on. He pulled cargo in the company of a small, weathered man, Yata except for frizzed orange hair half-unbound. Rumpled traveling clothes.

Humidity resolved into the heavy scent of hunched shoulders. A thin tracery of grief wove around acrid gunpowder residue.

"The biggest danger in the central valley is sentimentality." The trader could have been explaining a point of currency exchange. "I'm older than your father, and Yata-dependent hybrids have been born here for as long as I can remember. Not as many as we have now, because the prison restricted contact between their parents."

Yucof's gaze turned inward. He shook his head as though engaged in a long-running, silent debate with himself. "Those contacts increased after the Marsh became a free city. That means that the children who eat Yata are either killed inside the walls or dumped outside them. The hardier ones grow to young adulthood before they die."

TelZodo tried to blink away the image of Alu's narrow palms held before her as

though to ward off demons. Her soft, brief entreaty echoed in his head. “You’ve got good aim, Yucof,” he grumbled. “Why didn’t you kill her if you feel that way? Why not just destroy all of them?”

“Because I’m as sentimental as I am ugly.” He pointed toward the waystation. “We’ll set up camp, head out for the Marsh in the morning. If her father’s here, I’m going to tell him where I left her.”

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Flames crackled in a large stone hearth at the camp’s far end. Low clouds darkened the sky from the color of slate to starless pitch above lamps and firelight. From the pointed ridge, the transient trading community would look like a constellation on the ground, nothing but flickers and indistinct shadows.

TelZodo tried to puzzle out what shape the lights might make. A ring of broken balconies. Gated fortifications. Baubles scattered across a marketplace. Every pattern he summoned rearranged itself into the sparkly outline of an anguished girl sprawled and bleeding in the mud.

He walked through a stew’s aromatic haze, papers in hand, his thumb tracing repeatedly the embossment of Bless’s red seal. Neat bilingual script and wax. Her declaration of TelZodo’s limited appetite translated into his personhood in the central valley. Without that parchment, he’d have been denied access altogether or shot if he tried to sneak past the border. The trait that made him unbearably special in Crossroads led to his being merely tolerated here.

A tall woman approached him, oddly luminescent as her pale, furless skin caught and held the light. For a moment TelZodo thought she was a Masari shaved clean, until her dark, plaited hair and lithe build told him otherwise.

“You’re new here.” She reached for his parchment, fumbling open the pouch at her own belt.

“I trust you,” he blurted.

She shoved her legitimacy before his nose. “Don’t be stupid.”

“They checked us when we entered camp. How many more times do we have to wave these things around?”

“As often as necessary. Now look at me.”

He turned toward the menace in her voice.

“When we’re under attack, you need to tell immediately who belongs here and who doesn’t. I might want to shoot you, but you don’t fall into that category. Neither do I.” Her long finger jabbed her pedigree. “So take a good look at me and *read* my certification.”

Traders passed to either side of them, their voices low with reports of sightings. Murmurs floated around campfires about children in exile. Among them, parents of killers cocked their ears to the news, some more intently than others, as they cleaned and inspected their weapons. Others slipped into and out of each other’s wagons to barter merchandise, renew friendships, and rekindle more.

The woman seething before TelZodo waited, her shoulders thrown back and her gaze narrowed as he committed her profile to memory. First text, then flesh.

Her name was Smoke. He followed her to a wagon and a still-steaming pit, where she lifted her teakettle off its low tripod. A minty cloud trailed in her wake as they climbed inside.

The wagon’s innards fluttered as they brushed past fabric dropped from beams overhead. Competing scents of dyes and oils filled the darkness, then leapt into color when she lit the lamps.

To their left, golden fish breached turquoise waterways and swam through undulations of cloth. To the right hung the portrait of a Yata warrior cradling a massive, disembodied Masari head. Red clots stained cracked leather armor between two sets of open eyes. At the level of the victor’s heart, a blank, upward stare met its match in downcast grief.

Smoke gestured toward the portrait. “That one’s ready for delivery.”

The expressions, both dead and living, conveyed an unsettling intimacy. “You made them look like lovers.”

“They were.”

Painted serpents coiled around chair legs and entwined about the seat. TelZodo

hesitated above a silent hiss.

“Don’t worry. It’s not real.” Smoke reached behind stretched fabric and emerged holding two white cups. She dropped one on a sedge-colored table, the illusion of grasses bending in flickering light.

The cup felt real enough, bleached and featureless. Polished smooth, with rounded edges. “This is bone.”

“Yes.”

TelZodo turned it over in his hands, his stomach souring. “Yata, Masari, or mixed?”

“I don’t know. It could have belonged to a farm animal.” Smoke sat opposite him and poured delicate green liquid. “I bought it from a sculptor in Rudder.” She sipped. “I’ve heard about the bone art in Crossroads. I should go there some day.”

“Covenant scrimshaw. It’s a dead art.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

The tea warmed the bone in his hands until the cup seemed a living thing. Crossroads had once been filled with fetishes and implements. Carvings of Yata rib, vertebra, clavicle, and more had hung on the walls, while Masari skeletons slowly decomposed in fallow fields.

Even this far from home, TelZodo could picture his father’s *yatanii* list, penned when Ghost had barely come of age, detailing everything Yata that he had tried to relinquish.

He touched the rim to his lips, averting his head from the portrait. His throat filled with mint. “Most of the relics are in Skedge, anyway. Sold for Yata meat a long time ago.”

Smoke mused, “I’ll have to visit Skedge, then.”

“Why are they so important to you?”

She rose from the table and disappeared behind a curtain bordered in tree frogs. Parchment rustled, out of sight.

Compared to her surroundings, Smoke was a colorless apparition. Was that why she had taken to paints? TelZodo waited, gazing upon layers of paradise overlapping carnage until she returned with a rolled-up sketch. He moved their cups aside as she spread it out, over the painted sedge.

Her reply pricked the back of his neck. "I imagine this is important to you."

A girl laughed up at him, a child executed in colored inks. Still flat-chested but with the same shy smile, her dimples unmistakable. Any less ruddy and her face would have blended with the bark of the tree she'd climbed.

Smoke added, softly, "I heard."

From its subject's appearance, the drawing was several years old. "How did you know Alu?"

"I carried messages between her and her father until it got too dangerous." She reached for her tea, her gaze thoughtful. "We both had Masari mothers and Yata fathers. We were both born in Rudder. My mother couldn't keep me because Rudder didn't allow hybrids of any kind then. She left me at the gate when the Marsh was still a prison. The guards let my father have me only because he promised to kill me at the first sign of Yata-dependence."

TelZodo looked up. "Would he have?"

"Without hesitation, and mercifully." Smoke laid her fingertips on the image as though comforting a sister. "I was eight when Alu was born. She didn't know what being a prisoner was like. She'd never been crushed in a safe room, because the gas bombs weren't used during the Games any more. I envied her. I teased her, told her how lucky she was that she didn't have to get sick from the gas the way I did. Then she got sick in a different way. She was driven out of the Marsh, and my father explained to me why she had to learn to hunt Yata down."

TelZodo caressed ink. "I don't know if she'll live."

Smoke nodded. "She probably won't." She shrugged. "I've got drawings of a lot of dead kids. I'm interested in the Covenant bones because they're another way

of remembering people.” She lifted his hand and began rolling the parchment up.

He leaned toward vanishing leaves. “How much-”

“It’s not for sale.” The table’s painted sedge reappeared. “Alu would have died going after someone else if you hadn’t come along. Yucof did the right thing.”

TelZodo clutched the bone cup of lukewarm tea. “Is her father here?”

“No.” Smoke’s moist eyes flashed with anger. “Lucky for him.”

Her arm looked like bone except for a slight flush of pink. TelZodo laid his hand on Smoke’s wrist. His coppery skin would help color hers, his plum-colored pelt warming her pale chill. They could comfort each other.

She slid her wrist free. “Give my regards to Yucof and tell him I’m glad his daughter is living in Crossroads.”

Her smile stung as she guided him back outside.

CHAPTER 14

The traders kept watch in shifts. TelZodo listened to their murmured conversations from inside Yucof's cart, his own vigil having ended and his skin still itching from its latest coat of repellent salve. In time he slept, the scant hours taking only a moment to pass. He awoke surprised at the wetness tracked on his filthy sleeve, where he'd rested his head.

The voices increased in number and became louder. TelZodo looked toward the sound of Yucof lacing his breeches.

"Good. You're up." The small man greeted him with a strained grin. An opened curtain admitted dim light from a ruddy dawn. "There's plenty of food to go around. I want you to eat as much as you can. Once we leave here, we're not stopping until we're inside the Marsh."

TelZodo tried to brush his sticky clothes into place. "I'd better wash up."

"No time."

"I stink."

"We all do. That's why breakfast is spiced." Yucof ducked out of the cart.

TelZodo ran nervous fingers through plum-colored knots and slipped outside. He relieved himself at the camp's western end and turned back as drizzle washed his wastes away. The traders stood under awnings as they ate, balancing tin cups and plates and discussing defensive strategies with their mouths full. Fat raindrops beat on tarp.

"Good weather for traveling," a woman said.

"Not if they're hungry enough," another answered.

A man added, "Or lonely enough."

TelZodo wanted to throw the food away, but he knew it would do no good. The predators were after stronger stuff. More than three-quarters of the people here were kin to the hybrids. They knew these children, these products of misplaced

hope, conceived after the prison gates flew open. The parents of hybrids were convicts and warriors who'd risked death all their lives. What was the risk of bearing a Yata-dependent child compared to that?

What was the risk of letting those children live, and then letting them suffer?

A broad avenue led toward the woods. Long ago, a narrow trail skirted streams and rounded lakes on its way to the walled city. Then the trail became roads, and then the roads widened, cutting the forest into a maze with the Marsh at its tangled center.

Yucof had already locked up the cart, cleaned and greased its chains, and was watching as his colleagues lined up three abreast. TelZodo listened to wet leather slipping through buckles and hurried toward his harness.

The trader nodded. "Ready?"

"No."

"It's good you realize that."

The rain fell harder as they pulled out of the waystation, the packed gravel ahead forming a long bridge over mud.

~~~

"I must have dreamt it." TelZodo accepted a liquor bladder from a slender, coppersy hand and raised it to his lips. Fire sluiced down his gullet, making him woozy. "I don't remember being outside these walls."

But the rips in his clothing had happened somewhere. Cuts on his arms had crusted over. His side smarted with leftover heat from gunpowder burns. Nobody told him that nightmares could last past sleep, when one was awake and sprawled on comfortable cushions, breathing perfumed air.

"It's all right. You don't have to remember."

Warm lips covered his. He caressed her tongue, his own half-numb, and smiled as fingers slid beneath his loosened breeches. A naked creature held him in her arms, her pelt combed into tight red ringlets against skin the color of cork. They



hadn't even gone to a private room yet, but TelZodo wasn't the only one being pleased in the parlor of a brothel raised on stilts. Others moved in his peripheral vision. The rhythmic slap of water beneath them was a giant, moist push toward orgasm.

He giggled at the thought. This could be the Meethouse, only floating.

Agony bubbled toward the surface. He tried to push it down.

“Shh.”

He focused on her dark eyes and followed tomato-colored curls down to a narrow line of pectoral fur. In a moment her nipple was in his mouth. He turned away, letting it ride his cheek.

He blinked at a blurred form. His guide rested on cushions farther down, stiff-backed and stoic. “Yucof needs you more than I do.”

“We have a special woman for him.” She guided his head back. “TelZodo, I'm trying to help you. If you won't let me distract you, then tell me what happened.”

He forced a laugh. “I'm told it's nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Then you won't shock me. I've heard it all before.”

He remained limp as she petted him, until her touch turned more annoying than stimulating and she slid her palm back to his waist. Soon he slouched against her side, his arm around her as she brushed his oily mane from his forehead.

“I expected the shooting,” he murmured against her shoulder. “How could we avoid shooting when we all had our fingers on the trigger?”

His revolver had two bullets left. He hadn't remembered squeezing the others off. Trees grunted, didn't they? He must have hit trees. “We were moving all the time. We kept watching the canopy. We changed position, took turns on the inside and on the outside and up front, watching for trip wires. I expected that.”

He fell silent, aching for stupor as she massaged his chest and then his stomach. She could have been a mind reader, passing him the bladder for another swig. It only brought the faces into sharper relief. Pudgy and tear-streaked, beseeching.

Heartbroken. Rushing the caravan and cut down.

He choked, "They want so much to come home."

"I know, sweetheart." She brushed tears from his chops. "They can't."

"Crossroads wouldn't treat them like this."

"Their families aren't in Crossroads."

"Their families abandoned them!" He struggled against her. "And they're suffering just as badly. Do you think I don't see that?"

She whispered, "That's why we're here."

"I know. I used to give comfort like this, too." He up-ended the bladder and swallowed more mouthfuls. The faces remained, adults now, their gazes hard and averted from entreaties. Ears deaf to hopeless, empty bellies. Each side had reassured its own members as the caravan pushed on and on and on, toward the high walls and clanging gates of a prison designed to keep its progeny out.

*They shot each other's children.*

He wanted to bury his face in her fur and wail.

Instead, he whispered, "What is your name?"

"Dragonfly."

"Not your work name," he muttered. "Your real name."

"That *is* my real name." She smoothed more of his hair back. "Some ladies here use work names. Yucof's does."

TelZodo sighed as he traced his fingertip along her neck fur, down a narrow line to her shoulder where her rich Masari pelt met her Yata skin. Dragonfly sighed as he cupped and kneaded her breast. She sank into the cushions, parting her legs.

Maybe he could derive some pleasure from hers, but that seemed unlikely. He was too numb, too bereft.

“Seeing HeadWind used to make me angry,” he told her, keeping his voice low. “She could never support herself in Crossroads because she’s far too slow. She would be dead by now if Yucof didn’t find ways to keep getting Yata meat to her. She would have died instantly if she’d been left here. I’d heard her mother tried to starve her, so what’s the point?”

Dragonfly guided his hand. “Is HeadWind happy?”

TelZodo nodded. “Blissfully. Stupidly. I don’t think she knows how to be any other way.”

“Then that’s the point.”

He pressed unfeeling lips against hers and let her undress him. Some of the traders buried themselves in sex. Others, like him, sought only warm flesh, a good listener, and haphazard stabs at pleasure.

He was sucking the salt from her breast when she whispered above his head, voice tight, “It’s about time, Bubbles.”

TelZodo looked up to see a tall hybrid, slightly flustered, sweep into the parlor toward Yucof. Her bronze skin tended toward pale. A thin, auburn pelt revealed a square build behind her open leather vest. Her hunting breeches had been tailored to be tantalizingly snug.

Yucof gazed up at her, looking lost and cradling his brandy.

She helped him to his feet. “I was detained. I’m so sorry, Masari-head.”

Even drunk, TelZodo could read genuine concern in her amber eyes. His numbness increased as his stoic mentor wrapped short arms around the whore and sobbed into her ample chest.

## CHAPTER 15

Half the night had passed before the frog chorus ended and the Marsh no longer sounded like a massive, perpetual belch. Instead, TelZodo listened to the parlor's distant gaiety, its bawdy songs riding muffled endearments. He breathed in the aroma of sex above the musty bog, and confirmed with a touch that the mattress beside him had grown cold.

He hoped Dragonfly had flitted to a more receptive customer.

His bare feet hugged wood planks as he left his pallet. The water below had been ice when his parents lived here-when he was here, swelling Piri's womb. Rocks had warmed the cabins, leaving small, melted pools. Winter had been a slow time for the prisoners then, a bucolic icebox before the deadly chaos of the Games.

TelZodo reapplied salve and dressed in mysteriously clean and mended clothing. He stared back at the cold mattress before finding and lighting his lantern, puzzling over the Marsh's amenities.

The Caterpillar must have set by now, but the sky was too overcast to tell. The boardwalks would be slippery. Reluctantly, TelZodo pulled his boots on before he strolled outside onto a broad boardwalk flanked by walls of sedge.

*His palm glided over a hard hill, its skin stretched taut. Evit's first wife lay on her side, enormous with her first child. TelZodo, still a child, asked, "How soon?"*

*She grumbled, "Not soon enough."*

She had not given birth for another four days. The girl had her mother's eyes and her father's slouch. Now she was the same age as many of Alvav's desperate creatures of the mud.

TelZodo's dual bloods thrummed. He held his lantern up, following the network of chained wood threading above the water like trceries of veins. Like Evit's descriptions of passageways pulled out from beneath dead flesh, repeating his early anatomy lessons. The words alone had made TelZodo queasy.

*“Hey, little brother. No puking on my shirt, okay?”*

Even as a young man, Evit’s voice had been squeaky. Despite being older and more mature, the Yata was the little one, still pudgy like a boy.

Had Evit’s need of a father driven him to Ghost? Or had Zai’s son been born with a love of body parts that TelZodo should have inherited instead?

They’d shared everything but the lab. Evit had spent so much time at the Grange that sometimes TelZodo had forgotten they came from different families.

*“We’re not blood-kin, you dimwit. Of course we can be co-husbands!”*

Evit would have ruffled TelZodo’s hair if he’d been tall enough. The Yata’s voice had deepened further by the time of TelZodo’s sexual maturity. Evit had two wives then, his firstborn toddling around his hut like an animated doll. Little people.

Little and older, most of them. Wiser. The Masari of Crossroads had once called the Yata of Basc their gods, but TelZodo hadn’t needed the Covenant to inspire adoration. Evit was not a real older brother but he could have been, guiding TelZodo into the secrets of adulthood. First up the hill and to the public Meethouse, leaving their childish games behind in favor of more pungent fare.

*His open shirt flapped around him in the chill of early spring. Long-limbed, strong-boned, he ran his fingers through plum-colored pectoral fur still thick from winter. TelZodo’s mane dropped its violet curls past chops risen from copper-colored cheeks.*

*Climbing beside him in double-time, Evit pointed to the golden glow at the summit and panted, “Ready?”*

*TelZodo couldn’t slow down. Of course he was ready. Half the excitement came from his parents not knowing where he was, but the other half came from the heady dusk that blued everything. And from the groans and laughter up ahead, and open arms, and nakedness. TelZodo’s new body was fresh and clean and simmering with wants.*

He already knew that he had real older half-brothers and half-sisters, all of them full-blood Yata like Evit and all of them left behind in the canyon. He’d

wondered briefly if sex in the Meethouse was anything like sex in Destiny Farm's pens. Then, under the guidance of knowledgeable hands fondling and teaching him, he'd stopped wondering altogether.

Though only nine years old, he was ready to be a co-husband in Basc, where chronological age did not define when a man or a woman came of age. Their bodies told them. The Meethouse was their proving ground.

His new assertions drove a wedge between his parents. Ghost's and Piri's fingers had flown against each other's arms and tapped out arguments, his storm-colored and her brown eyes blazing. Their tall child, with his chops already fully grown in and his voice dropped, wanted to live where he was valued as an adult. TelZodo didn't qualify in Crossroads, but he qualified in Evit's household.

Ghost couldn't possibly understand. He was a slow-growing Masari. TelZodo's father had glowered at Evit for weeks after the Meethouse incident, but Evit had done nothing wrong. Piri herself had gone to the breeding pen at nine. She kept close watch on TelZodo, a new toughness in her gait, the top of her head already below his shoulders.

The silent, hidden tapping between TelZodo's parents had dragged from autumn into winter that year. His boots had cut repeated tracks in snow, his impatient breath puffing before him. The farmhouse was worse, claustrophobic for all its spaciousness.

He had tamed his nausea enough to assist with the birth of his young cousin WingLeaf. He was old enough to father a child now. WingLeaf could have been his baby.

*He snarled at Piri under his breath, out of earshot of the adults cooing at the newborn in the next room. "Nobody can keep me here if I'm a citizen of Basc. I can become one, you know."*

*He didn't have to tell her. She knew. He watched her fingers flex as she thought.*

*Her reply on his arm was pensive. Think of who will lead you. You are under HigherBrook's protection here. You would serve Zai and Gria in Basc.*

*He laughed. "I'll be Zai's son-in-law! She'd welcome me. Evit and I have always been best friends." His tongue loosened before he could stop it. "Evit takes after*

*Dad more than I do. It would be a fair trade.”*

*He cringed at the hurt in his mother’s eyes.*

*Her touch caressed him as she answered, We are not trading children.*

*“I know,” he said quickly, cursing himself. “I’m sorry.”*

But it was true. He hated the lab and Evit loved it. That short Yata was the son Ghost never had. Heir to his love of science and all the blessings that came with it.

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The Marsh echoed with the songs of night birds. TelZodo awoke with a start, his cheek pillowed on the boardwalk, his clean clothes dripping with mist. Dewdrops on his fur bore dozens of tiny reflections of the lantern still glowing on the wood.

How many of the Marsh’s mix-children were sterile? Were they the ones working in the brothel? He could stay here and be of use, plying his skills. What better way for the traders to forget all those hungry faces they’d helped bring into the world?

HigherBrook’s protection. He should have told his parents about all the old Governor’s trips to the Meethouse after Kova’s death, sinking his sorrows into Yata arms. TelZodo could have described what their leader’s hairy rump looked like sticking in the air. He could have told about their mutual surprise and attempts to conceal shock when their eyes met. What had that dumb Masari expected?

Fertile, non-dependent offspring. And that’s what he’d gotten.

TelZodo had expected his own fertility, standing stiff-backed and proud with his shoulders squared and swearing fealty to Zai and Gria at a quiet ceremony in the visitor’s hut. He’d bedded Evit’s wives-now his wives, too-while his best friend rushed off to Crossroads to dismember corpses.

The women had loved him, but they hadn’t borne him any offspring. He was a man yet not a man, a boy yet not a boy. He was and was not a Masari, was and

was not a Yata. He was nothing and he was still loved. Gods and demons working together could not have devised a more exquisite torture.

The Yata all around him screamed their grief in the Soala for loved ones lost. The young TelZodo screamed his grief for loved ones never brought into being.

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Chilled dew conspired with memory. This could be winter instead of late spring. TelZodo felt encased in ice even as buzzing insects filled the predawn. He moved his lantern closer to the boardwalk's edge and watched water striders on their pilgrimage toward food.

Vibrations traveled through the boards before he heard the boots. With great effort he turned his head and focused his eyes until he could make out the tall form, heavy bags slung to either side of her and her lantern held to the side.

Smoke carried her own, smaller wood board. Large parchment rolls angled up from the bag strapped across her shoulders. TelZodo prepared to stand and get out of her way.

She knelt beside him instead. "That light carries. I got curious when it didn't move."

Her strange features were even worse in the dimness. TelZodo couldn't tell if she looked like a tall Yata without coloring or like a Masari who'd lost all her pelt from Yata deprivation. Hybrids were strange enough, but Smoke was an oddity among even them.

He winced at her bruised cheek and black eye, the price she'd paid for transporting her art across the valley. Images, memories, and tributes.

The predators hadn't gone after those. They'd gone after her.

He tilted his head as she unstrapped her bag. "What's all that?"

"I'm here to capture the sunrise."

His head dropped back toward the water. "Most everything captured is killed."



“Not the way I do it.” Her alto turned sharp as she unloaded dyes. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

He watched a spider rush to wrap its next meal. “I got tired of whoring and I’m used to a hard bed.”

Smoke clamped a sheet of parchment to the board and positioned it on her lap. She dipped bristles into a small pot. An outline emerged beneath her fingers, a footbridge arcing over the river toward Rudder’s cottages. They lined the shore and built layers of wood and stone toward the foothills. Threads of brightening dawn wove through the overcast. Golden light spilled over the edge of gentle mountains and into the central valley, accentuated under her ministrations.

The bridge was nowhere to be seen, or the cottages, or the river separating Rudder from Alvav. TelZodo squinted toward the Marsh’s high stone wall. “Is that what’s on the other side?”

Smoke nodded and spilled a stone bowl of muddied water past the boardwalk edge, then refilled it with previously collected rain. Her blanched, furless hand flew across the painting.

TelZodo looked from the emerging landscape to her intense gaze and down to the love bites on her neck. “Was he any good?”

Without facing him, she replied, “They both were.”

They could have been talking about the properties of clouds.

He smirked, “I can give you better.”

“No, you can’t.” She moistened her fingers and smudged pink lines across the sky. “They’re old friends. I barely know you. And, believe me, you’re not what I expected.”

Hot iron could have punctured his chest. He tried to shrug it off and lay on his back, watching an arrow of ducks overhead. Dark, noisy blots. “I’m not what anyone expected. Including me.”

“Your parents helped liberate this prison.” The distractedness in her voice sounded forced. “Your father was the first full-blood Masari to live here in

generations. Our pharmacy still has formulas for his curatives because no one's been able to improve on them in sixteen years."

Bristle scratched. Sharp jabs on parchment.

TelZodo yawned. "I've heard it all before."

"You haven't heard it from me. I was four years old when they were here. I learned to touch-talk from my uncle, who learned it from Piri herself. I listened to stories told by the warriors Ghost patched back together."

Her recreated dawn was still dark enough for a few bright stars to show, but the real sky had lightened. TelZodo snuffed his lantern and watched a pink flush climb her naked neck. He began to laugh. "And you like me anyway."

"I hardly know you."

"That can change." He wasn't sure he wanted it to. "But whom do you want? My father, or me?"

She bent to the side and killed the light from her lamp. The birds were more raucous now, filling the air with quacks and honks. Loud splashes punctuated their discourse as TelZodo waited for an answer.

Instead, Smoke swirled the color from her brushes and shook them out. Her landscape looked flatter in natural light, as though all the lanterns in her tiny houses had also been extinguished. "You've got a gift," she said, mixing a color like light honey. "You're wasting it."

"I've got a gift and I can't pass it on!" he snapped. His neck fur bristled into a purple ruff. "You saw that much in my damned papers."

A fly blundered into her painted mountainside. She plucked it out and tossed it into the water. "That's not what I mean."

"Then what *do* you mean?"

"I don't know yet." She paused and squinted at him.

No flush at her neck, this time. Just a clinical stare. TelZodo tried not to squirm

under her scrutiny.

Most times he liked it when people looked at him, his breeches slung by his hips, its laces just loose enough to invite inquiry. A shirt half-untied. Any tang of musk turned his movements sinuous, like those of a wild thing. Cultivating his role as an instrument of pleasure had gotten him plenty of attention in Crossroads, making him feel less broken on his return from Basc. What did it matter where his citizenship lay?

He stared back. Two could play this game. Did Smoke's nakedness extend from her neck all the way to her crotch? Were her abdomen and her breasts furless as well, her body a vast splash of milk? Did her nipples show any color at all?

How many more love bites were fading from the skin beneath her clothes?

She returned to her work without a word. TelZodo looked beyond her emerging tableau and watched the city walls lighten. They still blocked his view of the river and Rudder's shore, shadowing a grove that hid even more from view. She was painting from memory.

If he could draw, he would have sketched an adobe hut with low arches that forced him to bend almost double when he passed beneath them. Joyful noises had filled Evit's house. TelZodo hadn't minded looking after other people's children, even though by Basc law they were considered his own. He was their *dobresso*, their non-blood father. Paternity shouldn't have mattered.

It mattered. He didn't belong there. He didn't belong here, either.

The sky was still dark to the north. It was raining in Crossroads.

"How long does Yucof stay in the Marsh?"

She answered around the brush in her mouth. "A few days. Why?"

"How dangerous is the road into Rudder?"

"The Masari guard that one." Smoke took hold of the brush and added a distant flock to the sky. Fish leapt from the river in tiny bright streaks. Her painting held no predators, no guns. No surprises. Smoke's lip curled. "They always have. It was their line of first attack during the Games. They kill undocumented hybrids,

so take good care of those papers you hate.”

She pointed to the painted bridge. “Two crossings were built since your parents were here. The closest one to us lies beyond the main road leading from the east gate. Look for the gas cannons.”

He tried to peer past trees and mortar. “I thought you said the gas wasn’t used any more.”

“It isn’t. The cannons are a reminder of how things used to be.” She shook her head and shuddered. “You don’t know what it was like inside a safe room.”

He growled, “I *was* inside a safe room.” So what if it was before he was born? Perhaps he should blame the gas for all his body’s empty promises. But if that were true, the Marsh would be far less populated than this. “You’re right, though. I don’t remember it.”

Her eyes met his briefly, then shifted away. She glanced to her left. “Rain’s coming.”

“I know.”

“Rudder’s expensive if you have nothing to trade.”

“I have something to trade.”

She shot him a sharp look as she put her paints away. “Hybrids aren’t the novelty in Rudder that they are in Crossroads, TelZodo.”

It didn’t matter. He’d need enough only for food and a place to sleep before he made the hard climb toward Promontory. “You underestimate me.”

He smiled at her snort of disgust.

He was an adult in both Basc and Crossroads now. He could travel on his own. Yucof would have no choice but to let him go.

The old trader was probably still sleeping off his hangover and his sorrow. He had wares to sell, friends to see, and prison memories to relive. He had Bubbles, the paltry echo of his dead wife, and he had a timetable for getting Yata meat to

his happy, dim-witted, and all but helpless daughter. *I'd only slow him down.*

Ghost could have walked through the prison gates at any time, leaving his pregnant wife behind. Instead, he'd risked all their lives in a single, daring escape during the Games. Now anyone could leave and stroll down a protected boulevard into Rudder, the seat of the region's power.

But only if they didn't enter it hungry.

TelZodo followed Smoke down the boardwalk and back to the cabins, her wet paint facing the sunrise and her bruised face swallowing the light.

## CHAPTER 16

### Promontory

The hands in TripStone's still felt fleshy despite the thin wrists to which they were attached. Before her, DamBuster was a body of contradictions. His face dripped wrinkled jowls beneath hollow cheeks. The outline of ribs on his barrel chest showed through his pale shirt. Below that, his stomach refused to shrink, making him look like a man enjoying a perpetual feast.

He breathed as though struggling for air. He might be, but at least TripStone had gotten him to stop squirming. His touch remained clammy, but his back muscles didn't jump quite so much.

She clasped harder and hissed, "Just a few more days."

"He's not built like you!" DevilChaser spluttered from the next room. The doctor combed through his mate's cabinets, plucking bottles off the shelves and shoving them back. He glared at the array. "Damn it, TripStone, this is his kitchen. I don't know where he keeps anything."

Sweat streamed down DamBuster's face, plastering thick gray curls to his forehead. He mumbled, eyes tight shut.

TripStone leaned toward him and listened. "He says he's fine."

Glass clashed, loud enough to break. "He's damaging himself and you know it."

"Do you want him playing Death or not?" TripStone retorted hotly. "Because if he touches one bite of either Yata or Sustainer Masari in the next six days, he's automatically in the bout. It's a weighted lottery. If he abstains, he has a chance of not being called. He can recover from deprivation, but not from a lost game."

"And his chances of losing increase if his name comes up and he can't eat Yata to clear his head!"

TripStone wanted to release the apothecary's hands and slam her palms against the table. Her own dizziness threatened to overwhelm her, not from hunger but

from nerves. “I was able to teach BrushBurn how to fast longer,” she said to DamBuster, gentling her voice. “Let me teach you.”

His smile became a grimace. “I’m trying, dear.”

“Try harder.”

His fingers slipped against hers. They should meditate more. They should pray more. Maybe they could accomplish something if they had more time, but Promontory was out of time. BrushBurn should be here but he was busy in the lab, trying to make sense of the chemistry DamBuster was teaching him, in case...

In case the kindly man before her, the one struggling against starvation, had to be shot.

TripStone massaged DamBuster’s palms. “Can you feel this?”

“Pinpricks.” He called gamely toward the kitchen. “You know where the shovels are.”

DevilChaser yelled back, “That’s not funny!”

“I made him promise me.” DamBuster pitched his voice low, answering TripStone’s confusion. “If I lose the game, he’s got to bury my garden. It would exhaust him and he’d be able to sleep, because he’s not doing it now.”

DevilChaser gave the bottles in the kitchen a final shove and strode into the dining room, shirttails flying behind him. His long fingers rounded DamBuster’s shoulders, finding pressure points. The doctor split into two people, his hands firm and gentle in their healing while his eyes fixed TripStone with a look of calm fury.

She faced him and whispered, “You both saved my life more than once. I’m trying to save his.”

DamBuster offered a pained chortle. “Should have run off to Crossroads while we had the chance. Now I can’t leave town.”

“I have a fantasy, sweetheart.” DevilChaser’s lean features softened as he turned

his attention to his husband. His thin voice remained tight with tension, giving his worries away. “We petition the Marsh to let us into Alvav. If we can make it through the central valley, we can get to Crossroads. The predators wouldn’t be interested in us.”

“Except as competitors.” TripStone’s hands massaged, too. Her thumbs pressed the apothecary’s palms. “You’d be vastly outnumbered. And even if you wanted to take that chance, how do you propose to get into Alvav in the first place? You can’t get there through Rudder or Skedge, and all of Promontory’s external trade routes are patrolled. They don’t want you hungering for more than the merchandise.”

DamBuster leaned back as DevilChaser kneaded him. The larger man’s watery eyes looked through TripStone and for a moment she wondered if she had spoken the truth. If only the restrictions were lies and they could simply cross over into that other world.

She looked upon a great, grizzled fish suffocating on land as he choked on river dreams. Her faith in his willpower and her persistence were nothing but sand, burying him.

The doctor worked his fingers beneath limp neck fur and up into thick curls. He leaned forward. “There’s got to be something in the kitchen that can help you.”

“Nothing.” DamBuster sucked in his breath and shivered with a new cramp. “Nothing helps me when it gets this far.”

*Ghost could endure for days after these symptoms started to manifest!* TripStone gritted her teeth. Making comparisons wouldn’t help anybody. Ghost had honed his willpower from an early age, just as she had, while this man had grown up on a steady diet of Farm meat.

So had DevilChaser. So had BrushBurn, and many others. But their constitutions held onto those nutrients longer. The Yata became a part of them more readily, holding them together.

She said, voice clipped, “You’d have to learn to hunt in Crossroads. Ghost gets a special dispensation because he’s their hero. You’re not.”

Her massaging faltered for a moment as she heard her own sarcasm. Since when



had she become bitter about Ghost? Or did her feelings extend to Crossroads? She wasn't sure.

She shook her head and blinked. Hadn't she dealt with enough demons?

Above her, DevilChaser murmured, "Don't tell me you're getting sick, too."

"No." She looked down at her sunburnt arms and faded, graying pelt, and tried to laugh. "You know, if I ever did get back to Crossroads I wouldn't know what to do. They were starving when I left. Promontory owned them, maybe not outright but it did. It was going to own Basc. I was a dead person leaving a dead village that was struggling to come back to life." She gazed around the tidy room, its large table and occupants reflected in old, glass-fronted cabinets. "I can't tell you how much I hated this city when I arrived. Now Promontory's dying, and I can't think of any other place I'd rather be."

*But is it home?*

She muttered, "Home is soft, and now Ghost's crazy son is headed here."

Then she spotted DevilChaser's raised eyebrows and a flush climbed her neck. Her weak heart was still strong enough to possess her tongue. "Forget I said that."

The doctor answered, "Far be it for me to do your job for you." Bitterness edged his voice, too, masking fear.

DamBuster groaned between them and licked dry lips. He could drain the cistern and they'd still be cracking. He whispered, "Distract me. How long ago did TelZodo leave that soft home of yours?"

Her shoulders jumped, but she saw the apothecary's eyes twinkling behind their pain. "Seven days. I got the news two days ago."

TripStone tried to remember the tiny, furry bundle squirming in her arms the night before Ghost and Piri had departed Skedge. Still dazed and exhausted from the battle for Destiny Farm, she had spent only a few hours with the infant at a time when nothing seemed real.

She focused on DamBuster's clammy palms and resumed her massaging. "From

what Ghost told me, it'll be a miracle if the boy survives the trip. I guess that's why he's traveling with Yucof."

DevilChaser said, "TelZodo is hardier than you think."

She looked up at the doctor.

His attention was focused on DamBuster's spine. "You saw him only one night, TripStone. We had him here from the day he was born until the day I took him and his parents across the salt pan. Let me tell you, the kid travels well." He bent further down until his bald pate faced her. "I didn't hear a peep from him during any of SandTail's visits here. One cry and we'd have nobody to fret about now."

"He was sedated," TripStone pointed out.

The bald head wagged side to side. "I swear to you he could sense danger. Even that young. Maybe it's because he almost died in the womb."

DamBuster slumped forward, a little less haggard under DevilChaser's ministrations. "Ghost sends us the happy news about him. It balances out the lab reports."

TripStone smirked. "You'll have to share the happy news with me some time. I get the complaints."

DevilChaser quipped, "I'd *love* to see the complaints."

"No, you wouldn't."

"Yes, I would." The doctor grew serious. "Especially since he's coming here."

TripStone's shoulders itched. She murmured, "Ghost also got into trouble at that age. I shouldn't be surprised."

Ghost had been an animated skeleton then, worrying his own parents with his fasting. He'd been jaunty and confident before his euphoria had twisted into illness.

*Imagine a day when no one has to hunt any more.* His fantasies had been his true power of seduction. He hadn't needed to do anything else. *You wouldn't have to*

*kill anyone, Stone. The Covenant would be meaningless because we wouldn't need it. We could just let each other live.*

She sucked in her breath as her stomach reeled.

DevilChaser hurried to her side. "I heard that."

"I'm fine!" She protested through a throat closing up. "Your husband needs you more than I do. It's nothing."

The baby's eyes had been the color of Piri's, but his bones were long. He'd fixed TripStone with a curious gaze. Wasn't that what babies did?

Her brother FeatherFly hadn't. But she'd been only a girl, then. And Ghost had been that strange older boy at the Grange, a lanky youth named SunDog before he had changed his identity and gone into self-imposed exile.

Ghost had given her a curious stare, too. TelZodo must have inherited it from him.

What other of his father's traits did he possess?

Fire lanced her chest. Her massaging turned into absent-minded petting. She squinted at DamBuster through her discomfort. "Maybe I should lie down."

If she laid down, she wouldn't be able to stop DamBuster from breaking his fast because DevilChaser would let him do it, pitting good health against the whim of the cards. "Why in hell would that boy want to come here?"

DevilChaser said, pointedly, "He was *born* here."

"You don't see me aching to go back to Crossroads."

Her breath was ragged. She was just aching.

The doctor kneaded her shoulders. "There's a clean pallet in the guest room. I'll be in to check on you later, but you'd better rest."

She let him lead her to the old birthing room, which had been emptied of equipment and medicines after the hospital was built. TripStone stretched out on

a mattress that seemed to hold her pinned.

These were the walls TelZodo had seen when his eyes opened. He and his parents had hidden out in this room. They'd lived here, struggling to survive in secret.

She had lived halfway across town at the tavern, drowning in bottles of goldberry brandy when she wasn't lying in the arms of the man she had tried to destroy. Now BrushBurn helped DamBuster with his research, sending communiqués to Crossroads that repeated litanies of dashed hopes.

*I haven't hunted in years, Ghost.* TripStone blinked at an empty work counter, trying to imagine him bent over its beakers night after night. *But not through any research of yours. The gods gave us a game instead.*

No, not the gods. Rudder had given them the game. She still had to kill to stay alive.

The men's voices reached her, muffled, one shushing the other. Chair legs scraped on the wooden floor. TripStone nodded to herself at the sound of footfalls passing outside, followed by a door opening and shutting.

She was too tired, too discouraged, and too hurting to try to stop DevilChaser from taking his sweetheart to the Lodge.

In a few minutes the door to the house opened again, and then the one to the guest room. TripStone tried to smile as BrushBurn knelt beside her. She wrinkled her nose and curled back her lip, trying to puzzle out the chemicals on her husband's clothes.

She rasped, "Lie down beside me."

She sank into BrushBurn's embrace, pillowing her head on his chest. Her eyes closed as he combed his fingers through her hair, following gray kinks down to her shoulders. Fingers thicker and shorter than Ghost's. They explored her differently, more graceful and assured in their meandering. Her mouth found his and held on tight.

She drummed onto his cheek, *Help me.*

He reached beneath her shirt and held her. Tension sang through him as much as through her, but the whole city was on edge. When DamBuster returned home from his meal, he and DevilChaser would break out the Death decks to practice their strategies. At least one of them would have to play for his life in six days.

TripStone broke from BrushBurn long enough to whisper, “Thank you for being a level five.” She flushed again. Who was she to make comparisons? Who was she to pass judgment?

What next? Should she pray for parity? For enough Masari to die so that the Death bouts could stop? If DamBuster lost his match, would he then have committed a noble act? It was all so twisted.

BrushBurn peered at her. “What’s funny?”

She giggled against his chops. “Nothing. It’s awful.”

What better way to show Ghost’s crazy son his birthplace than to show him how sane he was in comparison to Promontory?

## CHAPTER 17

### Alvav

Half a forest had been razed so that Masari sentries could slap the mud with their boots, hauling a new generation of StormClouds on their backs. In the other half sharpshooters blended into trees and honed their target practice on unlucky and hungry hybrids.

TelZodo stopped walking as he heard the loud report and waited for its echo to fade. Otherwise the road into Rudder remained quiet, its silence interrupted by whirring from the occasional trader's cart and calls to halt from the more frequent checkpoints. Men and women in pressed green tunics scrutinized his papers, then smiled and waved him on.

He countered, "Let me see yours."

Without hesitation they had all unbuttoned their vest pockets and proffered thick cards. Level ten *yatanii*. Level twelve. Nineteen hybrid kills. Three tours of Promontory. Passes to the Milkweed's private suites, where they broke their long fasts accompanied by exotic helpers. Concert tickets. Death cards carried as good luck tokens.

The guardhouses were cramped, all hard angles, but the sentries were well-versed in improvisation. On the road to Rudder, TelZodo learned that he was neither a god nor a toy as he so often had been in Crossroads. Neither was he a simple, sexual being as the Basc Yata had treated him. Here he was a diversion, an entertaining son of celebrities, able to offer a different set of body parts to people who were better known for their dietary than their sexual prowess, and who were better known still for their marksmanship.

Yucof had been generous with lessons on Rudder's coinage on the day he lost his able assistant. TelZodo wondered if the old man was glad to see him go. *You probably figured I'd come back to you if they cheated me out of my money.*

No. The trader wouldn't have been that insulting.

TelZodo wasn't comforting anyone here, just helping them pass the time. A

breeze cooled him on the open road as clouds massed overhead. He strolled, his certificates secured in his belt pouch and his satchel hugging his back. His revolver, its old-style workmanship cleaned and shined, brushed rhythmically against his hip.

He could have stepped off a precipice for all the freedom blowing through his veins. Stepped off a cliff and hovered in mid-air, with only the winds to direct him. To his right Promontory's far peaks pressed a jagged silhouette against the sky, losing their hard edges as the rain closed in. Distant sheets fell, black against gray.

The checkpoint at the river smelled of fish. Old, rancid overtones. TelZodo waited at a raised drawbridge, debating for a moment whether to hitch a ride with the convoy of barges passing through.

Maybe he would have if he hadn't heard all the tales of his parents' escape from the Marsh until his eardrums were ready to burst. Or if the sight of those boats didn't remind him of his mother's suffering through labor in a stifling cargo hold. He'd already ridden in one of those things. It didn't matter that he hadn't been conscious of it at the time. He could just as well have been, from all the stories he'd been told.

The city across the river gleamed gold even beneath the overcast. Rudder vibrated with a strange, bucolic wealth, as though trying to decide if it were opulent or folksy. The odd juxtaposition made it look like a fun place to visit, secure enough not to take itself too seriously. There was plenty of money to throw around when one wasn't hungry for one's neighbors.

Denim-clad anglers, Yata and Masari, reeled in their catches on both banks. A closer look showed the Yata keeping closer to the road and its armed protectors. TelZodo looked away from them when he heard a high-pitched whistle, then spotted a steam-powered winch easing the truss back down. The lowered bridge revealed another guardhouse, the final checkpoint into Rudder.

His shirt flapped around him as he walked across. A north wind played with his hair.

The official at Rudder's gate seemed uninterested in playing with more. He pursed his lips over TelZodo's voucher and stamped a cartoonish pictogram beneath Bless's seal.

TelZodo studied the scrawny frame, wrinkled and wind-burned between flyaway swatches of pelt. The old man hardly looked fit for a tussle, but an accomplished *yatanii* could be deceiving. “You hide your strength well.”

The guard narrowed his eyes above a knowing smile. Fit, after all.

TelZodo slipped his papers back into their pouch. “Let me see-” He blinked at sudden identification proffered on a palm. A quick check showed the other hand already poised by a sidearm. “Yours.”

He listened to a soft chuckle as he read. The skeletal guard in the ill-fitting tunic was a decorated veteran of the battle for Destiny Farm. He’d been part of Rudder’s detachment, accompanying HigherBrook’s forces from Crossroads on their mission to assist Gria’s army. The weather-beaten level nine was younger than he looked.

TelZodo passed the card back. “I’m glad you stayed alive, SnailBud.”

“You, too.”

Figuring out how others recognized him had begun as a game whose novelty quickly wore off. People who had never met TelZodo’s parents knew of them. A Destiny Farm escapee traveling with a scientist attempting the impossible didn’t pass unnoticed. Piri had taught touch-speech across the region and Ghost had been a rare Masari living in a Yata prison. Even in a land well-populated with hybrids, TelZodo cut a figure that was far from anonymous.

He glared at the mountains. *Gods help me if I walk into a land full of babysitters.*

Murderous babysitters.

He began to laugh, then spotted SnailBud’s bemused expression and asked, “What can you tell me that I don’t already know?”

“Probably not much.”

“I must have heard the stories a thousand times. I’m beginning to wonder if I’m on a quest to find all my diaper changers.”

The guard chortled. “Not me.” SnailBud squinted, counting on his fingers. “I



met Gria briefly-”

“I know Gria. She’s stranger than I am.”

“Worked closely with BubbleCreek and Yucof.”

TelZodo leaned his shoulder against the guardhouse. “I just came from Yucof. He told me all about BubbleCreek.”

SnailBud thought for a moment before breaking into a grin. “And I almost made TripStone throw up.”

TelZodo lurched away from the wood panels before he could stop himself.

“She was in the Milkweed with BrushBurn,” the guard continued, relishing TelZodo’s surprise. He relaxed against the wall. “Nobody took fasting and breaking to an art the way we did. Crossroads was ashamed of its *yatanii* and Promontory couldn’t be bothered. Even the rest of Rudder thought we were oddballs then.” He gave TelZodo a conspiratorial wink. “We were.”

“What did you do? Over-stuff her?”

“No! You don’t understand.” SnailBud’s eyes gleamed with mirth. “She’d never been here before, and I was breaking. Gods, I was starved for Yata. I was ready to strangle people.” He looked not far from breaking now. “The Deliverance Inn and the Lodge use private rooms, but the Milkweed still doesn’t. Oh, what a show.”

“Wait a minute.” TelZodo tried to picture it. “You’re telling me the Milkweed is like the Meethouse, except the Masari are eating Yata while they’re screwing out in the open?”

“*Gorging* on it, son.”

TelZodo fell back against the guardhouse and stared blankly at a line of pretty cottages as his satchel rode his spine.

“To a very appreciative and noisy audience, I might add.” SnailBud began to wheeze. “Bubbles sat TripStone up on the counter to get a better view. I had no idea who TripStone was. None of us knew she was on a mission to destroy

Destiny Farm, we just thought she was one of BrushBurn's fine ladies. I went completely out of control when I broke, like everybody else. But out of the corner of my eye I could see this stranger clutching her stomach and turning green when BubbleCreek turned her head around, forcing her to look." His stomach rippled with laughter. "The Covenant never prepared her for *that*."

TelZodo shook his head and squelched a burp. "My parents never told me that story."

"They probably don't know. I'll bet TripStone never mentioned it. She was pretty proper, then."

TelZodo took a long look at the giggling guard and tried to laugh his own nausea away. "I didn't think there was anything new to tell," he gasped. "I owe you one."

"Stop at the Milkweed on your way to Promontory. It's quieter now, but you might get lucky."

TelZodo opened his mouth to protest, then thought better of it. How could he explain that he'd never stepped inside the Deliverance Inn? He was half Yata.

*"I know you understand. You have to!" Bloodied hands trailed torn strips of flesh. "I won't hurt you! Tell him I love him. Tell him I'm sorry!"*

*TelZodo didn't know the father. He couldn't look at the son, and then he did. Tears streamed into the wide open mouth of a child.*

*"I'm sorry!"*

*Shots rang out. TelZodo could hardly hear the cries, there was so much noise. He caught a glimpse of wheels rolling over a body as the caravan pushed on.*

*He choked on terror. "Oh gods..."*

*The filthy gun rose. He didn't remember squeezing the trigger.*

TelZodo's revolver burned against his pants. Three days earlier he'd shot people who were half Yata.

“Even if you don’t catch a show, it’s worth a visit for the paintings alone,” SnailBud continued. “It’s always been fancy, but something new gets added every time it’s restored.”

TelZodo nodded. “Maybe I will.”

“If you see TripStone when you get to Promontory, tell her I said hello.” SnailBud grinned. “If she doesn’t remember me, remind her of how we met.”

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Rudder

The show had crested and was trailing off by the time TelZodo pushed open the Milkweed’s broad double doors. Their smooth wood bore the likeness of the very boardwalk he’d slept on, painted amidst a riot of water plants. Stepping inside felt like falling into the bog.

Close to a dozen Masari were clustered around a seated figure hidden behind their bent backs. Tea glasses clinked around sated groans and exhausted laughter. In a minute the small crowd parted. Someone fetched a washcloth and brought it to the naked, pregnant woman sprawled on a chair.

No. Not pregnant.

TelZodo stood dumbly in the foyer and stared at her rounded belly. Brine trickled down her abdominal fur and ducked between her thighs. She wrapped her ankles around the chair legs and arched her neck over its backrest, gulping air. Without looking she took the cloth, but didn’t do anything more with it.

A loud burp echoed off the walls and somebody whooped. Somebody else tucked himself back into his breeches and laced them up. Everybody glistened except for the bartender, who dropped a large plate of plain-looking, marinated cubes on a scale and waited for its needle to quiver to a halt.

The woman turned half-lidded eyes toward the entrance and gave TelZodo a tired smile. Her voice was thin, as though her body had no room left for air. “Come here.”

He held back.

“I won’t try to eat you. I’m full up.”

Her skin glowed between lines of matted pelt. TelZodo took uncertain steps and lowered himself into the first available seat. He coughed and squeaked, “What level are you?”

She heaved under the weight of her stomach. “I’ll know soon.” She turned away from him and glared at the bar.

A Masari male sauntered over to TelZodo’s table, wiping his mouth. He smelled tangy, but not from brine. “You’re new here.”

He nodded. “I’m just passing through. SnailBud sent me.”

“You eat?”

The question rattled him. “Am I dependent, you mean? No.”

The stuffed woman spat. “Fucker. I’m jealous.”

“Eleven,” the bartender said, lifting the plate. He hinged open a barrel behind the counter and scraped the remains back inside.

“*Still?*” The woman covered her mouth and *urped* again, looking sour.

“You’ve moved closer to twelve.”

She ignored him. Sympathetic well-wishers tried to make her more comfortable. She rewarded them with muttered curses.

“She’ll sleep it off.” The Masari at TelZodo’s elbow pointed to a chalk board above the bar with names and numbers writ small. “You combine frequency and volume to figure the level. She’s low on frequency, but her volume hasn’t changed in years.”

TelZodo followed the man’s hand. The slate was almost lost inside a border of colored chalk depicting feathery ferns. Jewel-colored insects decorated subtle shadings of green, changing almost imperceptibly as the chalk gave way to more permanent oils.

He could still be inside the Marsh for all the murals around him. Twisting vines and preening flocks vanished behind curtains of sedge. Painted tree frogs clung to a lintel, newer renditions beside their older, retouched cousins. “What level are you?”

“Eight.” The man laughed. “If this were pre-Expansion I’d be a hero. I was six years old when the first level eight was announced. You’d think we had just done the impossible.” He cocked his head to one side and mused, “I guess we did, but it wasn’t good enough.”

Even the floor was painted. TelZodo looked up from crustaceans in a knothole. “What did annexing Promontory have to do with it?”

“Everything!” His finger made circles on the table top. “Annexing Promontory forced us to improve our weaning because of all the patrols we had to send over there until we could stabilize the place. Better brine. More rigorous fasting. Alternative treatments for deprivation. So many people were getting sick that we started looking like Crossroads bumpkins.” He raised his eyebrows at ruffled fur. “I’ve just insulted you, haven’t I?”

TelZodo said, tightly, “Yes, but go on.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I like Crossroads. If it weren’t for you people, we’d have a lot more undesirables to deal with.”

Heat pricked TelZodo’s ears. He couldn’t tell if the other man was a boor or just an idiot. “You’re telling me that Crossroads makes a convenient cesspool for you, is that it?”

The Masari raised his hands. “Your word, not mine. Face it, kid, while you dreamers were busy trying to end Yata dependence, we were improving ways to manage it. Guess who was more successful.”

“Why don’t we ask your ‘undesirables’ to guess?”

“They’re not ours any more.” He patted TelZodo’s hand and stood. “Buy you a drink.”

TelZodo rose on stiff legs. “Is that your consolation or your apology?” His fingers brushed his revolver.

The man's gaze shifted.

The others in the inn quieted. With a start TelZodo realized how his posture had changed. Even the naked woman stopped complaining.

The man's voice dropped. "Whichever you would like it to be."

TelZodo took one deep breath, two. He flexed his fingers and waited for his shoulders to unkink. The faces around him reflected patience and caution. He wondered if their respect stemmed more from his weapon or from his powers of abstinence.

He sounded more confident than he felt. "Ale and a night's lodging. Apology accepted."

He strode past the *yatanii*, toward the bar.

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An outcry woke him in the night. TelZodo bolted upright on a pallet lined with real sedge and listened while his heart thumped. He replayed the sound in his head, then realized that the yell had been his.

The body beside him must have been imaginary, but he couldn't remember if she'd been Alu or Dragonfly or Smoke. Maybe she was CatBird weeping as she reabsorbed her baby. Maybe she was the glutton two rooms down digesting her Yata. Maybe she was a Yata finally carrying his child. Maybe she was Bless, finally succumbing to her own fertility. Or BarrowBow, brought back to life.

He lit his lantern, struggling for breath. The other faces had been even more disturbing. TelZodo raised the wick and blinked as a glow brightened his room and chased the specters away.

His laugh burbled up. "I'm lost."

He blushed, as though someone had heard him.

He breathed in the aromatics from his bath and wondered if traces of bodily fluids were in the paint. How could the Milkweed's walls ever be completely clean?

The Marsh was a heady place in the spring, with frog eggs frothing in pools and insect deposits filling the undersides of leaves. Full-bellied croaks and songs carried in the night. Geese straddled feathery bottoms.

The murals around him writhed as if they were alive, too. It must be the flame flickering. That, or a trick of the ale.

He lifted his lamp and padded to the far wall, smiling as he found Smoke's signature pictogram among the others. Had she only painted the place, or had she come in for a show? Did she see her father in those anonymous chunks crammed down Masari throats?

Did she help with the fast-breaking, gathering more love bites in the process?

TelZodo glided to a tub grown cold. He knelt by clawed black feet and plunged his face into bathwater. After a few good shivers he raised his head and wrung out wet strands, then lifted wilted leaves from his chops before patting them dry.

Thanks to the boor still guzzling below and the patronage of Rudder's sentries, his satchel contained enough provisions to fuel him for the climb and descent into Promontory. He'd take the switchbacks slowly, refusing rides. If he traveled during the rains, he might not even need to stop at the water stations.

The hike would either drench him clean or burn layers of him away. TelZodo's limbs melted into the pallet as he lay back down. He dropped off to sleep before he could decide which alternative he preferred.

## **PART 3**

### **CHAPTER 18**

#### **Promontory**

The dwellings in the Marsh had been raised on stilts. Those in Promontory were built on tailings.

TelZodo could tell only that everything was gray as he peered south from the high pass. Tailings, wood frames, smokestacks, cobblestones. Dark clouds extended fuzzy fingers down into the canyon and teased its black slit, as though the weather itself had turned obscene.

Hadn't it?

Rain stung his face no matter which way he turned his head. Water sluiced down the streets below in dozens of tiny torrents. The mountains themselves looked shored up and buttressed and probably were. They'd collapsed before.

"Hop in."

A runner stopped beside him and threw back a useless hood. Her sopping hair lay flat against her scalp. He shook his head.

"Don't be stupid."

He faced forward again. "I'm sightseeing."

She snorted. "Pick a different season next time."

He had taken two days to make the climb, broiled on the first, soaked on the second, and steering clear of the snakes. A little shower wasn't going to drive him inside a wagon.

TelZodo watched her pull away. Her cart disappeared as it descended toward the switchback. She probably thought he didn't trust her, but he'd been too tired to disabuse her of the notion. How could he explain this self-punishment when he



couldn't figure it out for himself?

He *was* sightseeing. This ogre of a city had haunted his childhood. He stared down at its twisted roads, mesmerized, as though the whole infrastructure were about to rear up and snatch him with its slag-encrusted claws.

Unless the slopes ate it up first.

He smirked. That wouldn't be good, either. If the slopes fell to mudslides, they'd take him down with them.

Tiny figures slogged below, wrapped in slickers. They almost swam, backing away from passing transports that sent up walls of water. If the city was an ogre it was drowning, though the shapeless people inside it didn't seem to mind. They accommodated the weather, but moved as though it didn't matter at all.

To his right the salt lake churned into whitecaps. More wagons crossed the long bridge, rolling to and from Skedge. Low clouds had almost erased the mesa completely, making the runners look like spirits passing into and out of oblivion.

One cart reached land and pulled off onto a side road, headed toward a complex of buildings. TelZodo squinted, tracing the line of structures until he spotted the corner of a low roof. Foothills blocked his view of the rest but he could almost look through them, overlaying memorized maps and drawings.

He looked away and blinked, numb to itchy clothes sticking to the skin puckering around his fur. When he could feel his fingers again he forced himself to turn back.

The house where he had been born still stood. Why shouldn't it?

His wet pelt sprang to full alertness. *I stayed alive, you bastards!*

He wanted to scream his defiance across the city. He wanted his echo clogging the smokestacks and filling the mine shafts, blasting the quarries and riding the canyon's swollen rapids. He wanted to watch it shatter the ruins of Destiny Farm into dust.

The ogre wasn't drowning. It stayed hidden within that distant slit, coddling TelZodo's nightmares, its open-mouthed grin the color of mud.

His hair pulled with the weight of water, plastered around his pack. TelZodo adjusted the straps of his satchel and grimaced. Even his oiled leather wrap was overwhelmed. Every step dragged his shirt and breeches against him, rubbing him raw.

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The clouds lumbered south like a pissing herd and left behind a sapphire-colored sky. Promontory steamed as heat climbed. The steam evaporated in time for the shift change, when Yata and Masari stopped in their tracks and stretched out their arms like vestigial wings.

Then they smoothed their coveralls back down and went about their business.

TelZodo looked up at balustrades newly hung with wash and waited for the rubber to leave his legs. He sat on a rock worn down to a smooth, dark plane and wondered how many others had eroded it after they'd battled gravity on their descent.

The main trade road had dropped him into the center of town. He closed his eyes for a moment and listened to shouted greetings that invoked the elements in unkind terms. Promontory's colorful language made up for its monochromatic streetscape.

TelZodo shook his hair out again and made another inspection of the shrinking wet spots on his shirt. Several passers-by stared at him before turning their attention elsewhere. A small brown lizard scampered around his boot.

His little welcoming committee. It made him smile.

The dried mutton inside his pack wasn't so dry any more. TelZodo downed what he could and drained his water bladder. He would refill it with stronger stuff at the tavern. He'd have to find the place, but first he waited for the meat to recharge his muscles.

His head lolled. He'd fall asleep if he weren't careful, draped on a black rock in full sun and waking up cooked.

Don't even need a pit to put me in.

He barked a nervous laugh and watched more workers go by, trying to connect them with Masari who'd once thought nothing of dining on farmed Yata. They'd have eaten his mother without a second thought. Munched on his lost brothers and sisters.

He slung his satchel back over his shoulders and grunted to his feet. The first person he asked pointed him to a broad, low structure on a street corner. The tavern's chaotic pattern of wood boards told him it had been restored many times.

The stairs were just as bad, with hastily-hammered planks and a gaping hole that needed tending. A faint whiff of urine reached TelZodo as he stepped inside.

His quick assessment began to calm the buzzing in his nerves. Tired men leaned against the bar, murmuring gossip. One opened his pants to deposit a steady stream into a piss bucket hanging on a hook. Other buckets maintained their silence beneath the lip of a ring-stained counter and several were missing entirely.

He idly wondered where the Masari women went to pee, and women like the old, fat hybrid who slouched over her drink at the far end. Her thick legs dangled above the floor. She must have literally climbed onto her stool.

A smattering of patrons sat at rough-hewn tables surprisingly empty of glasses and played cards while rattling stones in a cup. Odd, pretty pieces tumbled onto the wood. Stranger still was the green tunic who surveyed the quiet room with his arms folded, standing straight-backed and alert in front of a padlocked door. The soldier from Rudder turned flat attention to TelZodo and watched him as though inserting a new number into a well-worn equation.

Watch away.

TelZodo slipped through dull yellow smoke. He dug coin from his pocket, wiped it dry with a shirttail, and placed it on the counter. His satchel dropped to the floor. "Ale."

His fellow hybrid wrinkled her nose at him. He flashed her an engaging smile.

The odor in the room changed, became more interesting. A mug touched his fingers. He leaned back for a long swig and felt his spine return to life. Nothing

left to do but put it to good use. Too bad his pants were still wet from the rain.

That was all right. They could get wetter.

He slid his long body off the stool and made a slow circuit about the room. He moved more easily now that a little alcohol had dulled the pain of blistered feet. The soldier certainly gave him a full dose of attention. Not a happy man, that one.

TelZodo gazed back into hard charcoal eyes, wondering what might make the guard happy. Then the charcoal shifted and TelZodo's spine said *Go for your gun*.

He would have if his arms weren't pinned.

“Are you sure you want what I've got, mix-boy?”

The perfume of stale beer enveloped him as muscles held him fast. A meaty palm slammed against his windpipe. Another grabbed him between his legs and squeezed.

The low voice behind him was sober enough to be dangerous. TelZodo's mouth filled with saliva. The agony in his crotch helped distract him from his needy lungs as he mulled over an answer he was physically unable to give. Across from their *pas de deux* the green tunic glared, a mixture of irritation and boredom. TelZodo would be amused if he weren't hurting so much.

From farther behind him a smoky voice, oddly high, said, “Let the kid go.”

“This the way you run your factory, Aggie?”

“He's not one of mine.”

The man released him with a slap on the rump and returned to his beer and his bucket. The card players, still intent on their game, bristled as though resenting the interruption of something extremely important. They looked like they were practicing for some kind of tournament.

TelZodo finished coughing and turned toward his own drink, only to find his satchel shoved back into his arms. The fat hybrid had jumped off her stool. Her

pudgy hand grabbed his with enough pressure to make his fingers throb. In a minute she had dragged him from the tavern and was pulling him down a sun-baked street with more brute strength than he thought her squat body could possess. He'd overtake her if he could walk better.

She snarled up at him, "Do you act this way in Crossroads?"

He stared at her, then laughed. "Yes, actually."

His cheek smarted from the slap. He didn't think she could reach that high.

"There's a hybrid whorehouse called the Ratchet, where they'll pay good money to hurt you. Do you want me to take you there?"

He thought about it for a moment, then stopped when she looked ready to hit him again. "Not right now."

"Good, because I was enjoying a peaceful ale after a lousy day before you started wasting my time." She pulled harder, jerking him toward an adjoining street and another short flight of steps. Silver curls bounced. "I'm AgatePool. I sheltered you and your mother in Skedge. Trust me, TelZodo, this is the last time I'm cleaning up your shit."

He stumbled after her, trying not to trip over cobblestones. Her name clicked into place in his memory, part of the heroic jigsaw puzzle his parents had constructed and reconstructed until he could assemble it by himself in his sleep. She was a many-sided, versatile piece, painted a strong, opaque shade. Small but easy to find as it peeked out from under the pile.

He asked, "How'd you know it was me?"

"*Please.*" AgatePool pulled him up the stairs. "You look the same now as you did then, except you're bigger and cockier and you smell worse."

He grinned. "And you love me."

"Shut up." She butted the door open with her shoulder. "It's a small house. Don't bump your head."

~~~

*He stood in the granary at Liberty Farm, which looked just like the one at the Grange only with smaller doors. But he hadn't grown tall yet, so all the doors were big. They looked big to Evit, too, but probably not to Abri, who'd just had a growth spurt and was already a grownup Yata.*

*TelZodo hurried after the older boy, who pointed out the mice. He and Abri sat in a hay-cushioned corner and waited for the cats to arrive.*

*TelZodo didn't understand what Abri showed him. Why were the cats being gentle before they killed the mice? And if they were so gentle, then why were the mice trembling?*

*He watched as one and then another furry paw came down. Soft touches. Caresses, really. He wanted to ask Abri what was going on, but knew he had to stay quiet and watch.*

*Were the cats being apologetic? Was this what Atonement had been like during the Covenant, when all of the Masari felt sorry? Did the Yata tremble then?*

*Then Abri was gone and TelZodo was tall, alone in the granary. The cats had stopped their circling and peered down at him from high rafters. Mice came at him from everywhere, darting out from under the hay and through holes in the walls he swore he had patched.*

*Dozens raced toward him. Hundreds. They covered his boots, spreading out like a furry gray pool, their pink feet and tails tucked in. They tried to tell him something, but all he could hear was squeaking, over and over. Urgent cries for help.*

*His eyes sprang open as the squeaks followed him into wakefulness. He scanned the floor for rodents and found only burnished pine. His boots were off, his blistered feet bandaged.*

*He shifted position and heard squeaking again.*

*His head began to clear. TelZodo reached up and laid his palm on Yata leather whose color matched the back of his hand. Sliding his thumb pad across the grain brought the sound back.*

*"Good. You're up." AgatePool emerged from the kitchen with a tray of snake*

meat and tea. “How are your feet?”

Stiffness made sitting difficult. TelZodo stretched out his legs and flexed his toes. “Ow.”

She set the tray down. “They’ll heal. I’d give you clean clothes to wear, but nothing here would fit you.”

He rubbed the skins again and listened. “I’d heard something about a monstrous couch. This must be it.”

“It belonged to SandTail.”

“The man who would have killed me.”

AgatePool nodded. Sadness welled in her eyes, so fleeting he almost missed it. She pulled up a straight-backed chair, turning businesslike. “Every time I sit on it I remember the Yata who died to make me comfortable.”

TelZodo lifted the tiny teapot and poured. He tried to smile. “Thanks for the room.”

“I’m afraid I can’t extend the welcome.” Dried rattler dropped onto a plate. “I’m going to have people coming in here all day for last-minute training. They’re my first priority.”

He squinted at bones on the wall, as though Covenant relics had followed him from home. “Don’t they train at the factories?”

“Not for Death. The bout is tomorrow.”

The tea halted halfway to his mouth. “The card games in the tavern.”

“Yes. You picked a hell of a day to try to turn tricks.”

TelZodo touched the mug to his lips, then reconsidered. He lowered the tea, glancing about the study.

She followed his troubled gaze. “Chamber pot’s in the bedroom. Take a crate from the storeroom if you need to raise it.”

His muscles relaxed as he left the couch behind, leaving only his feet to burn. TelZodo hobbled to and through a kitchen sized for Basc. He stayed there for a moment, held by a distant memory of domesticity.

She'd been right about the pot. He'd knock it over if he weren't careful. He found a crate, then realized that the rain-soaked mutton he'd eaten would keep him busy for a while. Might as well survey the room from his elevated station.

A shirt hung on a hook by the bed, oddly sewn together. Except that it wasn't. Parts of it had been cut away instead. What remained was finely made with rugged cloth. It was clearly a keepsake, not meant to be worn.

Light streaming in from a window touched a coverlet on the low pallet beneath. That small piece of handiwork, ochre-colored and fringed, seemed too heavy for the warm weather, but a larger blanket would have been better suited for winter. Fancy, but impractical. A strong weave backed luxuriant fabric that was more bunched than folded, making the bed look unmade.

TelZodo stared at the curiosity until it resolved itself. The fabric became many strips of pelt joined together. The fringe was hair.

The knowledge dared him to react, but he didn't know what to do. He couldn't gloat. He couldn't cringe. His stomach gurgled as though it were the only part of him capable of feeling.

Finally he wheezed, "Hello, SandTail."

He wondered where AgatePool's arms and legs went, how she held it against her at night. He looked toward the bedroom door but couldn't see past the kitchen.

His bowels loosened, absolving him of discomfort. He'd have to ask her where one buried their wastes in the desert.



## CHAPTER 19

Death spawned a holiday.

Shopkeepers hung simple signs in their windows. Factory gates gleamed beneath locked chains, their smokestacks cold. Closer to the canyon, the mines remained silent beside empty quarries, suspended in time as the sun rose.

The arid lands shone with beacons. From the pinnacles of Skedge to the cresting salt lake, shooting through the Clutter's tangled streets and into Promontory's heart, the lanterns of almost a dozen gaming parlors flared to life. Spectators crowded balconies above neat rows of card tables. Unfamiliar faces in pressed green tunics spilled in from Rudder to keep order. They mingled with the too-familiar faces of friends and colleagues who would be spared or lost before sundown.

TripStone's knees buckled, but she wasn't alone. Everyone's heart raced. Everyone around her gasped for breath as they waited for the guard to finish unlocking the tavern's back door, but no one cheered when the padlock finally came free of its hasp. If anything, they choked more. And they weren't even the ones chosen to play.

She slumped against BrushBurn and whispered, "Don't let me go."

She breathed more easily as he tightened his hold. It didn't matter how much her chest hurt. Given a chance, she would fight her way to the bar, grab a bottle of goldberry brandy, and beg the gods to take her. However the cards went, DamBuster deserved better than that.

She rasped, "They should close this place down. Everything else is shut."

"I know." His lips brushed her hair. "This is hard enough as it is. They're not going to outlaw the Death drunks."

Some days TripStone understood those players least of all. Other days she wanted to be one of them. More drinking buddies than mortal opponents, those Yata and Masari contestants grabbed booze by the neck before taking their seats. Their games quickly degenerated, often loudly. Strategies lost all meaning.

Marble cups shook, spilling quartz and beryl “bones” onto the floor to be kicked away amidst shouts of pointless glee. Some players became so blind they couldn’t see the cards any more, relying on a sober tunic to tell them when the bout was over. Sometimes the winner dozed, drooling on the table while an appointed proxy executed the loser.

TripStone looked away from the counter and focused her attention on the back room. What was a holiday without suicidal clowns to entertain the grieving?

The throng advanced slowly. The players were already seated in the gaming room, admitted through its rear entrance after walking through an empty and untainted killing yard.

The morning had been spent making every accommodation possible. Game monitors working for both Yata and Masari interests inspected the decks and secured agreement on table heights. Chairs were cushioned for maximum comfort or left bare to provide minimum distraction. Closest kin shared pre-game embraces before being led upstairs and offered the best views.

Most took them. DevilChaser always had. Others hung farther back, unable to look and unable to leave.

The bar’s stifling heat and smoky darkness gave way to blinding light. All of the game room’s windows were open. Sunshine streamed inside, but the ceiling’s filigreed lamps still blazed. The absence of shadows made the arena two-dimensional, as though the parlor itself had turned into a picture on a card.

The monitors huddled over their assigned players, reviewing the rules a final time in case fear had obliterated memory. More rarely they assisted with entreaties to the gods. In the far corner one popped a cork and TripStone suppressed a giggle, praying not to be sick.

The drunk table was diagonally across from DamBuster’s. The apothecary looked hearty now, dressed in loose clothing and freshly washed. His mop of gray curls was still wet, chops neatly combed and trimmed. He talked with his opponent, their hands gesturing beside parallel decks. They could have been discussing the weather over a light lunch.

BrushBurn murmured, “Do you recognize the Yata?”

TripStone shook her head. “Not really. I think I’ve seen him in the Clutter.”

“DamBuster seems to know him.”

TripStone shrugged. The Death bouts could create intimacy where none existed before. Each pair of players became an isolated universe in a crowded room, nothing but raw body language and scent and skill, all of it slaved to luck. FlitNettle had treated her games like business transactions, to the point where TripStone couldn’t tell at first whether her ward had won or lost her final match.

DustClaw had surprised her most of all. He had viewed all Yata as potential livestock until Jirado massacred the hunters in the canyon. TripStone expected his ingrained hatred of Yata to grow after that, but instead he’d treated all of his opponents with a lighthearted familiarity. He’d opened his heart to them during play, as though they were kin. He’d cracked jokes about how lonely he was. After his death, the woman who defeated him had conveyed his confessions to TripStone with an air of respect and confusion.

The confessions had provided no new information, any more than the courier’s final, tender embrace. He’d kissed TripStone’s cheek before walking proudly to his execution.

TripStone looked again at DamBuster, whose attention was still on the Yata. She couldn’t find DevilChaser. He stood somewhere above, hidden from view by the wall of bodies ahead of her as she climbed to the Masari side of the balcony.

~~~

TelZodo had never seen a city so empty.

Nobody stopped him. Nobody touched him. He listened to the sounds of his footfalls, sucking on dagger root to ease the pain of his blisters. Salves perfected by his father squished between his toes.

AgatePool had relented in the end, setting him up in her storeroom on a dusty pallet with an old, battered pot nearby. He slept when his innards weren’t assailing him. His guts sounded as though they were tearing themselves apart. More than once he’d half-expected to awaken and find his torso bisected by a puckered scar identical to his mother’s. Before his diarrhea returned, TelZodo had sworn he smelled old blood.

Muffled voices had reached him through that churning, interrupted by rattling cups and cards slapping on a table. Nervous laughter followed terse instructions. Now AgatePool was off at a real parlor observing real games, but he didn't know which one.

He tongued the dagger root aside and popped a crystal into his mouth. It restored minerals to his system, but he wasn't ready for solid food. The old hybrid had given him snake jerky and a hunk of bread for his satchel and sent him out into the dry morning, snapping at him not to be stupid.

He followed her directions to TripStone's house, which was as empty as the rest of town. He didn't know if she was watching a game or playing one.

If the old hunter played and lost and died, he didn't want to know. Someone else would have to tell Ghost.

Stay alive, wherever you are. I want to know what made him love you so much that he couldn't talk about you.

He laughed and quickly stopped. His stomach still hurt. Almost everybody in Promontory would have been ready to kill him once. Now he was back and nobody showed up to try. He had the place to himself, weaving up and down its sooty streets. They widened as he approached the canyon.

Cold sweat beaded on his forehead, forcing him to turn back. *Another time, maybe.*

In contrast the Clutter's tiny roads made him smile. Its row houses were also empty, their Yata occupants filling the parlors as well.

He was exiting the ghetto when a single gunshot ripped the silence. TelZodo clutched a filigreed iron gate, his bones shaking with echoes that had no right to last so long. He'd have soiled his pants, but he had nothing left to give.

There will be more. He wondered if the sound carried over from the parlors in Skedge.

Even if it did, it was probably less sharp on the outskirts. He could sit by the lake and listen to the water, and puzzle out the wooden tracks laid along the shore. He could go to the hospital and ask them for something to calm his nerves.

But first he had to let go of the gate.

~~~

Opening formalities had been late getting underway. They droned across the room, to people too preoccupied to listen to them. Rudder's representative explained the weighted *yatanii* lottery and its recent adjustments. A black-robed judge from Skedge climbed onto a burnished platform to certify the selection process for Yata, who were scored on their productivity and their civility.

TripStone winced at the small man's quiet boast that the mesa had done away with its unemployed and its prisoners. "The Cliff was proud of that, too," she hissed.

BrushBurn murmured, "Skedge is different."

Was it? How different were the mesa's workers from the Cliff's slaves before that settlement had collapsed? The Marsh had been freed, but it still survived through the sacrifices of its warrior class. The arid lands used the lotteries.

Her husband's calm resignation chilled her. "Everybody culls."

A woman from Promontory's Chamber gave a benediction, speaking in admirably stoic tones as a distant report sounded from a parlor across town. One of her colleagues would be playing. The gods, or at least a well-shuffled deck, had placed him and his opponent at the table beside the drunks.

The player from the Chamber was an accomplished *yatanii*. He must have been a random draw. Of the twenty-eight people seated below, three Masari and three Yata had been chosen solely by chance and scattered throughout the room.

TripStone wondered if the man paired with DamBuster was one of them. Someone who, despite his value to his people, still had to perform for the dead.

She could have been chosen for this match. BrushBurn could have been chosen. For more than a year they had been condemned to play every bout as punishment for harboring Jirado. In the end the conquerors from Rudder had spared them that pressure, not out of compassion but as the result of a rigorous statistical analysis.

*I would die if I played it now.*

TripStone looked out across the room with a sense of placid certainty. Her stamina already began to drain away, even with this light physical exertion. BrushBurn held her against him, supporting her weight. Built to accommodate spectators, the balcony felt surprisingly roomy.

She simply could no longer sit at a card table and hold all the combined values in her head, following their transformations over the better part of a day. Part of her had never wanted to win in the first place after what she had done. Over the years, as the ache beneath her breastbone spread, the forgetfulness she once craved finally caught up with her and she stopped practicing the game altogether.

Lantern light reflected at the front of the balcony, caught in a dome-shaped sheen of sweat. Tall, thin, and bald, DevilChaser looked isolated despite the people around him. TripStone pointed, clinging to BrushBurn as they wove through the crowd.

The doctor turned and blinked unseeing eyes at them. His long fingers wrapped around the railing.

He shook his head when BrushBurn eased an arm across his back. “No. Thank you.” He licked his lips. “Even if he never looks up here, I’ve got to be strong for him.”

Below them the monitors took their places as Rudder’s official stepped onto the platform. Attendants raised wicks. Flames flickered in a breeze from fully-opened windows. Deep, expelled breaths rose toward the ceiling.

*Begin.*

The official’s lips moved but TripStone couldn’t hear him. Twenty-eight hands grabbed marble cups, shook them until her brain rattled, and spilled their bones onto the tables.

~~~

The nervous giggles began less than an hour into play. Yata and Masari leaned forward on their separate ends of the balconies to hear better.

BrushBurn nodded to himself. “I know that one.”

A vulgar song lifted from the far corner table. Quietly at first, as though one of the drunks was daring the other to join in. The low, baritone rumble told TripStone that the Masari had started it.

Only a few of the other players paused for a moment before they resumed the business of staying alive. The song grew louder, its saltier lyrics drawn out in the Yata’s clear, high tenor.

“They’re on their third bottle and they can still harmonize.” DevilChaser’s pasty face reflected a mixture of amazement and nausea. He laughed a little. “Do you know that the one thing I want to do right now is go downstairs and ask DamBuster if he knows it? He was a regular at the bar next door when he was young. I bet he knew all of them. It’s funny, we discussed everything else.” He stared over the railing at his husband’s table. “I wish I knew what they were talking about.”

The apothecary and his opponent gestured above the cards in a way that had little to do with their arrangement.

BrushBurn pursed his lips. “MudAdder?”

“Do you think?” DevilChaser swallowed. “Why do I even ask? He always talks about MudAdder when he plays. It’s the first thing he tells me when he wins.” His knuckles whitened around the railing as he whispered, “Dear gods, sweetheart, please win.”

Then he straightened, shaking the tension from his shoulders as the drunks launched into their fifth stanza. Beside them the Chamber member looked deaf, focusing on his cards. A silent game, that one.

TripStone thought for a moment. She murmured to BrushBurn, “I heard you sing that song with SandTail, once.”

BrushBurn watched an inebriated embrace across the room. “SandTail didn’t sing much in the bars.”

“Not in the bars. I heard it when I tracked you smuggling Destiny.”

It wasn't a reproach, nor was it taken as one. BrushBurn nodded. "Alvav has good echoes."

"He slept last night," DevilChaser said. "I don't know how. I could have worked at the hospital but I didn't want to leave him. I lit a lamp and read reports until my eyes were swimming."

"DamBuster's a good player," TripStone said, softly.

DevilChaser pointed at the Yata. "But what about him?"

A chair scraped, two. Several people on the balconies began their dazed march toward the stairs.

DevilChaser whispered, "That was fast."

TripStone shook her head. "One of them must have drawn the Death card."

They watched the players and their monitors join four Yata and two Masari before the ten repaired to a private room. No amount of peering could tell TripStone who'd won. Everybody already looked lifeless.

Even the drunks stopped and sniffed the air, then turned and watched. The Yata called an official over and sent him to fetch another bottle. DevilChaser shook his hands free of the railing and rubbed circulation back into them.

He asked TripStone, "How are you feeling?"

"Awful," she said. "You?"

He laid his head against her chest and listened. "About as bad as you."

DamBuster and his opponent resumed play. They didn't pause when four of the ten people left the private room and passed through the rear exit, or flinch when the first shot rang out in the killing yard.

~~~

The rails by the lake shore stretched back toward the canyon rim. TelZodo looked away from them, toward the empty Skedge Bridge, and then toward the



ravaged mountains farther north. Somewhere nearby lay the trading route his parents had taken to get here.

It was a road now, but back then it had been a half-hidden trail. He owed his life to the black marketers who had blazed it so that his father could run across the mountain and through the night.

He wiggled his toes inside their boots. *And you think your feet hurt.*

TelZodo's gaze followed jagged rock. Black peaks hid the pass. The switchbacks must still be narrow and the grade just as steep. Illicit or legitimate, that avenue was still perilous.

Now Rudder's soldiers patrolled it, ready to arrest any Masari trying to sneak into Alvav. Those who had failed the attempt or who didn't even try were off in the parlors.

The gaming rooms called to each other as the day progressed. A muffled gunshot from afar answered a closer, sharper report. Sometimes they seemed insistent. Sometimes TelZodo waited through a long pause, listening only to the lake as he crouched by the bridge.

His muscles didn't jump any more. He eavesdropped on a dialogue that cracked and echoed around him and tried not to think of bodies falling. He couldn't hear those, or the butcher knives, or the mourners.

He bent closer to the water and breathed in its astringency. Part of him wanted to stay here forever, huddled next to the rock. The rest of him straightened as another shot rang out, from Skedge this time. It was refuted by a nearby cock crow, a harsh scold telling him to wake up.

He decided against climbing the hospital's stone steps. He could tell it still had people inside, patients and a few attendees, but both its laboratory and its morgue would fill with corpses soon. He'd only be in the way.

The house where he'd been born had chicken coops out back and an herb garden beside a shed. The house itself looked weather-beaten. If TelZodo didn't know any better he would call it abandoned, but then so was most of Promontory.

Awnings left askew by the garden fence made the place look dilapidated. Some

of the herbs were wilting now that the sun was high. An air of forgetfulness permeated the crops, as though chores had been hurried or left undone.

The first frame leg slid smoothly into place before TelZodo realized he had lifted an awning. He'd done it at the Grange without a second thought, and the plants here didn't look all that different. The rows formed predictable patterns, but by this time even non-farmers could tell which seedlings preferred full to partial sun and which were getting burned and parched even after the previous day's storm.

He cast a glance about the yard. The rain barrels would be full. He'd tend the garden before looking in on the chickens. They sounded content.

Appetizing.

First things first. He shrugged off his pack and found the snake meat. It felt good going down.

~~~

No one had a name for the numbness that descended on the parlors. It always occurred in midafternoon, give or take an hour, no matter the weather or the season. Sometimes more than half the tables below had emptied by that time. During other bouts almost all the players still remained, evenly matched in skill, their Death cards buried at the bottoms of their decks.

TripStone tried not to doze against BrushBurn's chest. The tunics on patrol were more relaxed, their shoulders rounded and their hands in their pockets instead of beside their firearms. So far, six tables had lost their occupants. Their chairs were tucked beneath and all their adjustments removed. The decks were gone, retired to the practice rounds.

The singing had stopped shortly after midday. The drunks had moved their chairs next to each other and sat, the larger man's arm around the smaller man's shoulders. They just turned the cards over and told each other stories, sometimes in Masari and sometimes in Yata, erupting with laughter or wiping tears away with a sleeve. Pour a shot, down a shot, turn a card, talk. Bottles and "bones" littered the floor by their feet.

BrushBurn blinked watery eyes and said, "Twins."

DevilChaser sounded far away. “Do you think?”

“Look at them. It doesn’t matter who sees Death first. They’re going to want to go together.”

TripStone said, “I wonder if they knew each other before today.”

“It doesn’t matter. They know each other now.”

Down below, DamBuster laid a constellation card beside the quartz bone representing the Cliff. He half-covered the Yata’s revolver card.

DevilChaser leaned over the railing and squinted. “That’s the Dove at sundown. He’s changing the season.”

BrushBurn frowned. “Risky.”

“Not if the armor card is still in his opponent’s deck.”

“But if the Yata’s holding the crate card, it would mean contraband in that arrangement. He might. I’ve been counting.”

The doctor glared at BrushBurn. “So have I.”

It’s not a crucial play. TripStone opened her mouth to speak, then shut it. The longer the game went on, the more critical every play became. Forcing one’s opponent to draw from a dwindling deck could prove more important than even the major battles, and the table beneath her was covered in upturned cards.

She lifted her head at the sound of a spluttered curse. At first she thought it came from the drunk table. Then she saw the Chamber official slam his laminated parchment down on the wood. The Yata opposite him looked faint with relief.

The official regained his composure as a tunic stepped up.

“He’s angry with himself,” BrushBurn observed, “not with the deck.”

The Yata rose on shaky legs as several people turned to leave the balconies. The woman who had earlier delivered the benediction eased the soldier from Rudder aside and took her colleague’s arm. Her spine was straight, her shoulders thrown

back, her head high. She looked terrible.

The loser exchanged brief words with the winner. The Yata nodded in sober agreement as they crossed to the private room to make final arrangements. More tunics bent to the still-warm chairs and started cleaning detritus away.

Seven tables finished. The area of play was half empty.

A few minutes after the sound of gunshot faded, the drunks looked down at their table in perplexed silence. They stared at each other as the tunics arrived.

DevilChaser whispered, “Twins,” as the players shared a long, tender kiss on the lips before they were led away. The winner would sign a consent form for his own execution. It didn’t matter that he was too incapacitated to spell out his name.

TripStone listened to glass clink as a soldier picked bottles off the floor. She followed the trajectory of a slow roll. Another soldier removed the stained cards and took the bones being handed up, then tidied the table with a washcloth.

One shot reverberated off the walls. Then another.

Eight.

CHAPTER 20

The herb garden was like a little corner of the Grange. Its seedlings looked healthier now. Their leaves glistened with droplets and the imported soil around them had turned dark and rich and wet.

It had been the wrong time of day for watering. Early in the morning would have been better, but TelZodo could do nothing about that. The desert grabbed his sweat and held it out of reach. Several rows of plants already stood with their leaves sucked dry.

Nourishing the soil had been a slow and patient undertaking. The surprisingly dusty drip irrigation pipes in the shed had obviously been tried and then forsaken. They were made of metal. Even under the awnings, the sun's passage would have eventually exposed and heated them, burning them against the ground.

Nothing to do in this furnace but tend the herbs one at a time, giving the water a chance to soak in, out of the sun's reach. TelZodo picked familiar-looking pests off the undersides of leaves and left the unfamiliar ones in place. They looked like they knew how to defend themselves, and he was challenging his body enough for one day.

His arms still ached from erecting the awnings. They were elegant but complicated, spanning the fenced-in beds and elevated on poles inserted into shafts. Sixteen cranks changed the shaft angles, all independently. Sixteen white ribbons fluttered above TelZodo, shading him as he lay on paths beside the plants and got to know them.

A tinkerer had set up this garden. Piles of rejected methods lay in the shed. Putting up the awnings had been slow and labor-intensive, but their narrowness had made them lightweight. TelZodo hadn't needed any help as long as he wore gloves, careful not to burn his hands on the metal.

He stood, brushed dirt off his breeches, and admired his handiwork. The heat made him muzzy-headed. It rose in waves from the chainlinks, scorching TelZodo's shirt and warming his shoulder blades as he leaned back and surrendered his weight to the fence. He closed his eyes and listened to cloth snap

overhead...

...in the days when his mother ran under the Farm's awnings from corner to corner, a little girl clawing the steel, calling to the birds to lift her up and over the barriers and fly her away...

He sucked in his breath as his hands clenched.

Steady.

He opened his eyes and looked around. What could the seedlings do to him? He offered them a nervous smile. If anything, the fluttering above him masked the sounds of gunshot. He wasn't in the presence of a massive slaughterhouse but of many small ones, all of them far removed from him.

His satchel sat beside the gate. TelZodo stumbled to it and fished out the bread. When had he last eaten? He'd been so intent on watering the plants that he hadn't thought to water himself. If AgatePool were here she'd box his ears.

The gate was the problem. Even unlocked it made him feel trapped when it swung shut. If he propped it open he could sleep in the shade with the smell of loam in his glands. It was better than breaking into the house, even though he'd been born there. It was better than the hospital, where bodies had begun to arrive during his labors.

His satchel was no match for the springs, but he tried it anyway before casting about for a door stop. The bags of tailings piled by the house steps would be heavy enough. Most were still in place to protect against flooding, but a few extras lay off to the side.

His biceps screamed as he lifted one and staggered back to the garden, where his pack lay folded and pushed halfway back to the fence. TelZodo wedged himself behind the satchel and shoved the gate open as far as the springs allowed, then dropped the tailings with a grunt.

There. He could run away from the chainlinks if he had to.

The distant *pop* of another execution rode the air with a sound like crackling tinder. TelZodo stepped back into the garden and looked up at white. He listened to the awnings' great, flapping wings until they drowned out everything else.

He might even grow to like them. The plants did. He stretched out beside a shaded row and let his bones melt into the walkway.

~~~

DevilChaser clung to the railing, bent double and gulping air as DamBuster folded his cards and laid them face-down on the table.

Eleven other contests had ended. Two remained in play. DamBuster and the Yata who had beaten him clasped each other's hands, their fingers interlaced. Thick, tufted knuckles alternated with callused bronze.

They disengaged and stood as the tunics moved in.

*We have to get down there.* TripStone tried to speak but her throat had closed up. BrushBurn's arms were a vise across her chest. They should be around DevilChaser, not her. For a moment she feared the doctor was going to pitch himself off the balcony.

Instead he straightened, staring up at the filigreed lamps and then across the room at a pair of Yata who quietly made their way to the stairs. The winner of the match would return to people who cared about him.

DevilChaser pushed away from the edge and walked past TripStone and BrushBurn. They followed his stiff-legged, wooden gait, his Promontory stoicism.

It was the price of sharing a life. At some point, someone had to say goodbye.

Enough people had left the parlor so that echoes carried of promises to remember DamBuster. His stories, his memories, his work. The ways he loved. The Yata's quiet assurances ripped through TripStone's heart, but they had slammed into DevilChaser's first. The doctor marched in front of her, his straight-backed torso riddled with small jerks, as though a distant magazine were emptying its contents into his chest.

DamBuster looked back at them, a small, contrite smile on his lips. He'd played his cards as well as he could. They just hadn't been good enough. Death remained submerged in both decks as the game's many permutations had woven their net.

Only a few spectators watched them. The two remaining matches resumed as monitors and tunics flanked DamBuster and DevilChaser, TripStone and BrushBurn, the Yata named Sedes and his wife and son and led them on their journey toward the private room.

DamBuster broke the silence, sounding faraway. “Sedes and I have made arrangements. He’s trained in the Covenant Method of killing. I should be fine.”

TripStone caught a whiff of rage from DevilChaser. So had the tunics, whose hands were out of their pockets and dangling by their holsters. In less than a minute the odors resolved, diluting into muted agony. DamBuster’s hand enfolded his husband’s.

“I want some time alone with TripStone, then BrushBurn,” the apothecary continued, “and then DevilChaser. Then I’ll go to the yard.” He turned somber eyes to Sedes. “Wait for me there.”

The Yata nodded. He tilted his head to the side, sending his family out into the untainted, open air. TripStone’s gaze followed their well-practiced restraint.

She turned to Sedes and managed to croak, “Who trained you?”

“Izzik.”

She whispered, “A long time ago.”

The Yata gazed back at her with calm assurance. His mentor had been dead for fourteen years. TripStone wondered when Sedes’s conversation with DamBuster had shifted during the match and become a Remembrance. She had lost track of the cards, letting others do the counting. How much longer had the men played, concentrating more on story, after DamBuster realized the probabilities had turned against him?

She couldn’t see what he was telling DevilChaser. His fingers pressed a steady monologue, hidden in the doctor’s palm. The taller man moved like a marionette whose arm and hand strings had been cut, leaving the rest too taut.

TripStone was thankful she couldn’t see his expression. She turned toward BrushBurn and then looked quickly away, her face crumpling.



They rounded the last table. A monitor opened the door and she followed DamBuster into a room walled in pine and lined with document-filled shelves. A simple desk sat in the center with a string of chairs at the back.

A soldier from Rudder joined them as the door closed. Wordlessly he stepped to the chairs and pulled two of them to the desk, setting them opposite each other. He moved pen and inkwell into place.

DamBuster cleared his throat as he sat. “We don’t have much time.” He took a sheet proffered by the soldier and pushed it across the wood. “I understand if you don’t want to do this.”

TripStone dropped into her chair as she read the form. She blinked vertigo away. “You’ve discussed this with DevilChaser?”

“Yes. He’s in no shape for it.”

She looked into the dry eyes of a man who had fed her Yata without her consent to save her life. Who had given her a slab of Destiny Farm meat as evidence of his people’s crimes.

She lifted the pen and dipped its nib. She choked around the hymns filling her throat as she signed the parchment. “I promise you, DamBuster, you will hear my prayers as I dissect you. May the gods make you a Sustainer.”

A tear splashed onto her name. She blotted it.

He whispered, “I’m going to walk toward the portal, TripStone. Tell me what to expect.”

“I don’t know.” Part of her wanted to laugh. “I’ve always been on the killing end.”

“Then tell me what you saw.”

“Ulik was the last one I took that way.” TripStone cast a worried glance at the soldier, who looked almost patient enough. Words rushed from her. “I knew he saw something, the way his head turned as he walked away from me. I couldn’t see anything, but I wasn’t looking for the afterlife, I was training a bead on him. The gods strung us together, my barrel to his heart. It couldn’t be anything other

than a straight shot.”

DamBuster said, softly, “I have faith in Sedes.”

“He has faith in you.”

The words caught her by surprise. TripStone blinked until the room ceased to blur.

She clutched DamBuster as he lifted her up and crushed her in a bear hug that she’d never feel again. “Be with MudAdder,” she managed to say.

The soldier took the signed parchment and led her to the door. She registered only the slight breeze of BrushBurn’s passage as he stepped inside, taking her place.

DevilChaser sat stiffly at a table. He turned glassy eyes to her. “We’ve been together for thirty years, TripStone. What am I going to do without him?”

He held up his hand before she could attempt an answer she didn’t have. “Did you sign the paper?”

She nodded.

“That’s good.” His shoulders slumped. “Whenever either of us had to play, we always spent the night before as though it were our last. We discussed the same things so many times they became a code. So instead of talking we just—” He tried to smile. “Talked.”

TripStone swallowed. “So do we.”

“He’s signing his lab over to BrushBurn.”

They listened to the soft slap of a card.

TripStone looked toward the newly-cleaned table where DamBuster and Sedes had played. “He’s going to walk toward the portal.”

“I know.” DevilChaser rested his elbows on his thighs, his hands dangling between his knees. “That way I don’t have to watch him get shot in the back and

he doesn't have to see me fall apart.”

The door opened and BrushBurn emerged, his eyes red-rimmed. He stepped up to the table and extended his hand. Both men swayed as he pulled the doctor to his feet.

TripStone looked toward the rear exit. She knew where the preservatives were, arranged meticulously on an outdoor shelf, their contents labeled in the apothecary's efficient hand. Soldiers would lift his body onto a slab and wait for her to complete her ministrations before his delivery to the morgue. He'd wait for her there, taking his place in a neat row of cadavers.

The door to the private room closed after DevilChaser stepped inside.

“BrushBurn.”

He slipped his arm around her. “I'm here.”

TripStone wanted to bury herself in his gravelly voice. Lie crushed beneath the weight of the mountains that pressed on her like a mausoleum. “Whatever happens, stay with DevilChaser. I've got to be in the killing yard when DamBuster dies.”

## CHAPTER 21

The transport rolled slowly over gravel and cobblestones, pulled by a respectful runner. Even the tarp remained quiet, lashed securely to a frame that left the cargo bed open but protected. Down through the center of town and out toward the canyon, the hearse made its rounds.

Most mourners rode for only part of the route, slack-faced Masari sitting beside slack-faced Yata. Sometimes they beheld each other in an attitude of numb sympathy. More often they looked at the covered bodies, inhaling the scent of aromatics and tinctures that kept the flies away.

TripStone gazed at the lump that had once been the man she knew. DevilChaser's icy fingers squeezed her own.

He whispered, "I didn't expect to feel s-so cold."

In the end they had gone to the killing yard together. Somehow the gods had woven a skein of strength around all of them, tying them together in their final embraces. The connection held when DamBuster and Sedes bowed low to each other before the apothecary turned and walked away. TripStone and BrushBurn had flanked DevilChaser as Sedes waited for the retreating form to relax into a dreamy stroll.

Then the Yata had lifted his Reckoning rifle to his shoulder, found his target quickly, and squeezed the trigger.

The rest had been heartbreakingly routine. A soldier re-tallied the chalkboard to read five Yata and eight Masari deaths with two games still in progress. TripStone still didn't know which drunk had self-sacrificed, and it bothered her.

Ridiculous. She had other concerns. In a moment her hands were flying over DamBuster's stripped body as she worked draining and insertion tubes. Her voice fell flat as she intoned prayers that echoed back to her in BrushBurn's scratchy baritone and DevilChaser's choked tenor.

A higher, calmer voice joined them, coming from several paces farther away. TripStone would have looked back at Sedes if she hadn't had to work so quickly.

The transport turned toward the salt lake, swung parallel to the wooden tracks, and began its slow beeline to the morgue. More dead than living filled the cargo bed now. A Yata stayed for the ride back to the Clutter. He left his bench and knelt by his daughter's uncovered head, smoothing her short dark hair back from a dulled brow.

BrushBurn sat to the other side of DevilChaser with his eyes closed. TripStone couldn't tell whether her husband was affording the Yata some privacy or wrestling with his own grief. Probably both.

The sounds of gunshot came much less frequently now, sounding like afterthoughts. The holiday was almost over. Promontory and Skedge would reopen for business in the morning, though the pall over the arid lands would take days to lift. Before BrushBurn resumed DamBuster's work, he would amass and analyze all the parlor data and then consult with Rudder's statisticians.

But that was an eternity away. The transport halted. The Yata disembarked and BrushBurn blinked his eyes open. DevilChaser's fingers remained frozen as travel resumed. Whether or not they thawed, TripStone was prepared to take over his share of the cutting.

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She eased the tarp aside and called forward to the runner, "I'll come to the hospital later. Let us off here and go on ahead."

The harnessed Masari flipped levers as she slowed. Chains *thunked* onto smaller gears before the brakes engaged and TripStone ducked back inside.

DevilChaser lurched up from the bench and sank to his knees, staring at the corpses.

"I can't leave him," he wheezed. "Get me out of here."

TripStone cursed her dizziness as she and BrushBurn hauled the doctor outside. She wasn't the one needing her husband's concern right now, no matter how much blood roared in her head. But she couldn't hide her physical distress from BrushBurn, either. He would smell it on her.

She could tell he pretended not to. Together they held DevilChaser upright for

the short walk home as the hearse clattered behind them and away. If they entered through the rear, they'd have to pass through DamBuster's kitchen and his quaint arrangements screaming from every cubby. If they entered through the front, they'd pass his personal lab and the room where MudAdder had lived.

It didn't matter. The bedroom would be worst of all. The kitchen entrance was closer. TripStone forced one boot in front of the other, meditating on gravel as her lungs threatened to gallop. She ignored BrushBurn's worries pricking the back of her neck.

Her head jerked up, her pelt standing on end when DevilChaser suddenly yelled with grief so sharp it almost knocked her down. The doctor stood rigid between them, howling.

He implored the sky, "Not this! *Oh, gods, not this!* It wasn't like that when we left it!"

His alarm and confusion barely registered in TripStone's nose. There was simply too much agony overwhelming the rest.

The doctor collapsed against BrushBurn, eyes wild, shaking. "I can't look at it. Take it all down. Please take it all down. *Dear gods, help me let him go!*"

TripStone's own harsh whisper surprised her. "Get him inside. I'll deal with this." Her chest might explode, but her husband wouldn't argue the point if he valued his life. She turned toward DamBuster's herb garden as BrushBurn hurried DevilChaser up the stairs.

White awnings fluttered against a bright blue sky, distressingly vibrant and all wrong. They shouldn't be up. The garden had been left to the elements and to the gods to decide the fate of its plants. Everything should have wilted by now. Instead she smelled moist earth, odors of brown and green. *And softness cushioning her below the windbreak's tall pines at the edge of the Grange. The musk of Ghost's caresses...*

TripStone balked. She stumbled up to the gate and stared at the bagged tailings holding it open, then at a dirty traveling pack. She sniffed the air again and knew exactly where to turn, fury building at the base of her spine.

"You little bastard," she hissed. "I'll kill you."

~~~

“TelZodo.”

The menacing tone was familiar, but the voice was too low and smoky to be Shabra’s tickling his brain. Then there was the unpleasant pressure on his lungs and a bony knee bruising his ribs.

TelZodo turned his head to the side and opened his eyes. An old woman leaned over him, her wrinkled face burnt and dry, her expression ugly.

She reached across him and removed his revolver from his belt, smiling at it a little. She pressed its muzzle unceremoniously against his windpipe and pulled the hammer back. One notch.

She couldn’t fire it, yet. He could still fight his way free.

She growled, “You don’t want to take any chances, TelZodo. Not with me.”

Two notches. The muzzle pressed harder.

“Lucky for you, there’s already been more than enough shooting for today, so you’re going to lie there and listen.”

He watched her nostrils twitch and followed the complex dance of emotions in her large, gray eyes. She wasn’t quite as old as he’d first believed. Some of the crimson in her chops and her shoulder-length curls still remained, but TelZodo could tell that they had once been much brighter.

She continued, soft-voiced as he struggled for air, “When I let you go, you’re going to disassemble these awnings. These plants were *supposed* to die. DevilChaser was going to pick and dry what he could and dig the rest under because no one’s left to take care of them any more. Do you understand me?”

The pressure on his windpipe eased. TelZodo managed a small nod.

“Do you know who DevilChaser is?”

*The man who cut my mother open.* TelZodo doubted that his definition would make a favorable impression on her. He nodded again.

“Then you know you owe him your *life*, you degenerate. Do one more thing to hurt him like that and I will send you back to Crossroads in pieces. Do I make myself clear?”

He wasn't sure.

If the plants had to die so that he could live, then they would die. But it made no sense. Killing them was a waste of resources, especially here. Farmed imports to the arid lands cost a fortune. They should just cart everything to Skedge. Didn't Skedge practice its own rudimentary terrace farming?

TelZodo flinched as the knee dug into him again. The old woman rose to her feet, swaying a little but keeping his revolver trained on him.

She snarled, “Move.”

He frowned at the cruel twist in her mouth as he struggled upright. A strange breeze eddied in his direction, part pleasurable and part terrifying.

TelZodo limped to the closest winch, his side smarting, and released and pulled out the first pole. His palms burned. He muttered, “I could do this faster with gloves on,” and jerked his head toward the corner where he had left them. Dirt fell from his hair and trickled down his shirt.

She retrieved the gloves and walked them over, still aiming the gun as he slipped them on. Close up, he could see redness in her eyes and smell exhaustion on her skin. If she shot him now, it would be by accident.

She didn't seem the type to have that kind of accident.

He pointed to the muzzle. “That's my mother's gun.”

She leveled her gaze at him. “This was BrushBurn's gun before it was Piri's. I'm going to return it to him and let him decide what he wants to do with it.”

TelZodo squinted at her as he lifted the pole again. Part of her seemed to look right through him, toward someplace else. Then her nostrils twitched again. For a moment the dance in her eyes turned chaotic and he smelled fear.

Then it was gone.



TelZodo wondered if he'd imagined it. What did she have to be afraid of? She was the one holding the weapon. "Who are you?"

"TripStone."

He turned away from her and started rolling up the awning before she could see his reaction. He could barely figure out what it was, but he didn't care. Let her smell the same hodgepodge on him that he'd smelled on her.

*Threaten me again and I'll see how far you can take it.*

TelZodo tried to keep a smile from bowing his lips. Whatever his father might have done with her, it could have been more.

## CHAPTER 22

Sore and aching, TelZodo figured that the best thing he could do was to just sit and be quiet. Speak only when spoken to. Stay glued to his seat at DevilChaser's dining table until invited to move. Let the situation into his glands and try to puzzle it out.

He'd worked harder at the Grange, but never at gunpoint. He could almost ignore his situation when he was downwind from TripStone and could distract himself by analyzing her scent. He knew she did the same whenever the wind or their positions shifted, as though these were the hunting grounds back at home and they were tracking each other in plain sight.

He wondered if he had fought through his lifelong fears and made the harrowing trek to Promontory only to be walloped by old ladies.

The sun had dipped behind Skedge by the time he'd dropped the last awning onto its pile. TripStone had told him to stay put as she strode to the house, looking more energetic than she smelled. A few minutes later she was out again, ordering him inside.

Unlike her, he smelled just as bad as he looked, his pack hanging off his shoulder as he dragged himself up the stairs. He'd followed TripStone, trailing dirt across the kitchen floor and into the dining room, where he dropped onto a hard wooden chair before she had a chance to push him down.

Now he smelled the grief in the air. A bald man leaned on his elbows and stared down at the table's wood grain as another man with rusted gray curls poured tea. The second man's cup rested beside the revolver.

TripStone laid her palm on the bald man's shoulder and grasped his hand when he reached up to her. Her voice became tender. "I have to go."

He nodded. She released him and left without a look back.

Then he raised his head, his thin gray chops riding sunken cheeks. He blinked puffy eyes at TelZodo. "I just lost my husband. Seeing his garden like that was a shock."

With TripStone gone the room had stopped vibrating. TelZodo could only say, “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” DevilChaser offered a weak smile. His gaze touched on TelZodo’s matted hair and rumpled traveling clothes, then on his dirt-smudged face. “You’ve grown.”

A mug dropped onto the table beside him. TelZodo smelled wormwood as BrushBurn poured. He sipped, wondering if the bitter brew calming his stomach was supposed to taste as bad as it did. Was it like the garden, meant to be unpleasant?

“You didn’t know DamBuster. He helped me deliver you.” DevilChaser laughed a little and rubbed his eyes. “Everybody in this house helped me deliver you.”

TelZodo whispered, “I’ve heard.” The wormwood lent an edge to the air of quiet scrutiny around him. “Thank you for...everything.”

The doctor waved it off.

BrushBurn took the revolver into his lap and emptied its chambers, slipping the bullets into his pocket. Soft clicks. He tucked the gun into his belt and clasped his hands beside his tea with a long sigh.

TelZodo tried not to squirm. Should he offer to do something? What could he do that wasn’t wrong? This wasn’t like home, where the hunting grounds remained open all the time. Death and grief permeated everything there, too, but in much smaller doses and as a constant infusion. It wasn’t this massive strain that brought a whole region to its knees. How should he respond?

His chest itched. He should bathe. Pick his tracked dirt off the floor. But did the men want him this way? He couldn’t just prepare a bath in someone else’s home, drawing water from the cistern and stoking a fire, or could he? DevilChaser and BrushBurn didn’t seem to care, but they were hard to read. So much else got in the way.

DevilChaser said, “Looks like he took good care of your gun, at least.”

BrushBurn nodded as he slipped the revolver from his belt. More clicks. “Not too heavy on the oil.” He turned it over in his hands. “Cylinder screw’s tight.”

TelZodo stammered, “Yucof’s a good teacher.”

“You’re a good student.” He glanced at the doctor, then back at TelZodo. “Tub’s down the hallway and you know where the cistern is. I’ll sweep up.”

~~~

TripStone returned to the house in mid-morning. TelZodo listened to her low alto as she stood outside, her words to BrushBurn indistinct.

His gravelly reply didn’t sound winded at all. DevilChaser must be the only person turning the garden, his shovel making sharp slices into the dirt, a slow and steady rhythm punctuated by rests. The doctor was pacing himself.

TelZodo had almost fallen asleep in his bathwater. His scrubbed clothes had dried overnight and hung by the fire’s ashes. The nightshirt he swam in must have been DamBuster’s.

He didn’t know how long the men had been up or whether they had gone to bed at all. Snatches of words and the reassuring tone in TripStone’s voice told him she had spent the night at the hospital, working for as long as she could before sleeping in one of its beds.

She must have bathed there, washing off other people’s remains.

I should get dressed.

TelZodo grasped a counter edge and hauled himself up from his pallet. The room was smaller than he’d imagined. It must have seemed smaller still with five people in it-his father by his mother’s side and MudAdder holding her across the chest, while DamBuster sterilized what he could and DevilChaser reached inside before wielding the knife.

Six people.

Bright light streamed through the windows as the rooster bragged outside. If the bald man knew what was good for him, he’d be wearing a hat right now.

The kitchen door opened as TelZodo laced up his breeches. He listened to tea being poured, a plate set on the table. Chair legs scraped against the floor. One

chair.

He peered into and down the hallway, his shirt in his hand.

TripStone looked up from her meal, her eyes wary. Then she studiously ignored him and bent back to the food.

For an instant he pictured himself sauntering into the dining room, barefoot and shirtless. It was a pleasant fantasy and completely inappropriate to the day. TelZodo ducked back inside his room and finished dressing.

His stomach growled. He still had snake meat and a crusty heel of bread in his pack.

No tea, though.

That was as good a reason as any to get him to the table.

She looked up again, offering a noncommittal nod as TelZodo retrieved a plate and mug from the kitchen and set out the last bits of AgatePool's food. He sat opposite TripStone and grasped the teapot.

How did one say good morning to someone who'd been cutting bodies apart all night?

TelZodo suppressed a smile. Same way he'd spent years saying good morning to his parents. By ignoring the strong aromatics from their soap and looking away from wrinkled cuticles as they'd reached for seconds.

TripStone swallowed a bite of squash and washed it down. "You and I got off to a bad start yesterday."

TelZodo looked at her half-hidden scowl and realized it was as close to an apology as he was going to get. He shrugged.

Then he pointed to her plate. "From the Grange?"

"From Rudder. Crossroads isn't the only place with a farm."

Her tone rankled him. He softened a hard crust in his mouth, letting the bitter

wormwood tame the rye. He listened to the sounds of digging outside and said, “What happens to the chickens now?”

She fixed him with a quizzical stare.

“He’s turning over the garden,” TelZodo pressed. “So what happens to the chickens?”

For a moment he wondered if she’d understood the question.

TripStone leaned back in her chair, her lined face drawn. She cradled her mug in her hands. “Do you still bury your dead in the Grange, or does Ghost take everyone to the lab now?”

He couldn’t smell past her aromatics, could only read the warning in her voice. “Some still get buried, or parts of them. After they’ve been studied.”

She nodded and sipped. “We don’t have a Grange here. Or a Liberty Farm, or a Marsh, or any of Rudder’s crop networks. DevilChaser is burying DamBuster the only way he can.” The corners of her lips ticced into a smirk. “The chickens get to live.”

“I see.” TelZodo leaned over his plate. The snake was stringy between his teeth, but thoroughly de-boned. He swallowed, thankful that he wouldn’t have to spit anything out.

She was still evaluating him when he glanced back up. She leaned against the backrest, her thin fingers holding the tea as though she could read it.

“I look like him,” TelZodo challenged, narrowing his eyes at her. “My father.”

TripStone’s gaze traveled, sometimes lingering in a show of dispassionate observation. After a few minutes it transformed into uneasy silence. TelZodo bit down an urge to flinch.

“Yes, at first glance,” she finally answered. “But you have Piri’s eyes and skin coloring. And you might have Ghost’s build and his pelt, but you have more of her fat deposition. Your shoulders are rounder. Your nose is more snub and your forearms are thicker. You have his long torso but proportionally your pectoral breadth is more like hers.” She raised an eyebrow. “Chances are your flesh

around the bone is striated more like a Yata's."

TripStone bent again to her breakfast. TelZodo watched the accelerated pulse at her temple.

He said, "If you send me back in pieces, you'll know for certain."

Still looking down, she replied with her mouth full, "You won't get so lucky."

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The boy sitting across from TripStone seemed pensive as he chewed. Muscles rode the high cheekbones he'd gotten from Ghost.

*Why are you here?*

Was he on a childish quest to find himself, returning to a place he'd never known to begin with? Did he think Promontory could give him more than Crossroads had? Or was he just bored?

From time to time he glanced past her, toward the kitchen window. Then he sprang to his feet and jogged there. TripStone restrained herself from turning around, waiting until he returned to the table with a satisfied look on his face.

She asked, "What was that about?"

"I wanted to make sure DevilChaser was wearing a hat."

"Of *course* he's wearing a hat. They both are."

She should go out there, but BrushBurn would send her right back in. So would DevilChaser. One man worrying about her health was bad enough. She didn't need two, especially now.

TelZodo relaxed into his chair and ventured, "You never visited Crossroads."

She detected smugness and bristled. "Crossroads was doing well enough without me. Promontory needed me more."

*And look what you did to it.*

She almost laughed aloud. *Look what it did to you.*

The stripling across the table wasn't worried about her health. Quite the contrary. He sat half-slouched with his ankle across his knee, a position more like his grandfather's than like Ghost's. How many years was RootWing dead now?

Too many people were dead now. If Ghost's father were still alive, he'd have told TripStone she'd stayed away too long. But his assertion would have been a gentle scold and not this thinly-veiled invitation smelling of lechery.

"What's the matter, TelZodo?" she said, softly, "looking for another pair of legs to get between?"

His neck fur puffed, then settled. "I didn't have to come here for that. But if you're interested, I can oblige you."

"I'm sure you'd be happy to. But you'll have to find something else to lord over your father."

"I'm not inheriting his profession," TelZodo shot back. "Why should I want to inherit his ex-lover?"

Indigestion sizzled into her mouth. She swallowed it back down. "You tell me."

His brown eyes twinkled. "We're getting off to another bad start, aren't we?"

Stiffened shoulders lay behind his forced nonchalance and a flush crept up coppery earlobes. He should use all that long hair to hide his embarrassment instead of letting it drip half-hidden down the backrest.

TripStone smiled at his discomfort. Why bother hiding anything? She started to chortle. Maybe she couldn't hold all the Death strategies in her head any more, but she could find other ways to keep her wits in practice. If she had to think about Crossroads, it might as well be this way, parrying awkward advances rather than memories.

"It could be worse." She grinned and speared another chunk. "Welcome to Promontory."



## CHAPTER 23

The city returned to full throttle by early afternoon. TripStone forced herself to remain seated as TelZodo excused himself with a slight, gentlemanly bow and hurried outside. Soon he was back and bustling, first lighting the hearth in the old birthing room, then carrying scum-laced water from his cold tub out to the tilled and overturned garden. He returned with fresh water from the cistern, hauling a large pot back down the hallway. TripStone closed her eyes and listened to sounds of careful sloshing, then to the kettle being hung.

Ghost's letters had never complained about his son not doing his chores. TelZodo must have thrown himself into his work as readily as he'd thrown himself into other people's beds.

He emerged from the hallway again, avoiding her gaze as he passed the dining table and strode through the kitchen to the yard, his long spine more businesslike than sinuous. The youth bore none of the practiced, near-slovenly appearance that so concerned his father.

*You didn't care about the clothes, Ghost.* Ghost had lived in threadbare scraps during his life as a fugitive. Now Crossroads' hero was a conservative fixture, patriarch of the Grange, still experimenting on corpses when he wasn't whining about his rebellious child. Idealist heretic turned mollycoddle.

*No, that's not fair.*

TripStone looked long at her knuckles, whose tufted skin had turned white around her fork. She laid the utensil down and massaged her hands from palm to fingertip. Soon she'd have to continue her own dissections of bodies that deserved more than old claws stumbling across sinews.

She was cutting root vegetables when TelZodo returned with BrushBurn. They supported DevilChaser between them.

The doctor's face was red from the sun, or from crying, or both. The skin on his arms had burned between his pelt lines, making his hands look uncharacteristically pale where he had worn DamBuster's gloves. After his exertions he was little more than a walking rag.

Two straw hats drifted to the floor along with a new, tracked layer of dirt a moment before the screaming returned, right on schedule. The sound began as a high, distant keening, almost indistinguishable from the factory whistles. But factories didn't have wheels.

TelZodo's head whipped around, then back as BrushBurn spoke and they continued toward the tub. TripStone didn't hear her husband's explanation, but however he described the folly outside didn't matter. She resumed her chopping as the noise intensified.

Eventually the Iron Messenger's intermittent shrieks would cease, its forward boiler extinguished and its aft boiler lit, becoming the engine for the long crawl back to the canyon rim. Back and forth, once a day, carrying a predominantly Yata crew of engineers scribbling modifications on notepads.

"There's our Soala," she murmured to the cutting board, splitting a tuber. "We've kept our Promontory stoicism by inventing something that screams for us." Maybe that alone would be worth the expense. She could hear the contraption's huffing now, beneath its wails. Breathless metal bereavement.

She scraped the vegetables with snake meat and juices into a kettle and knelt by the kitchen hearth. The stew should be enough to refresh the doctor. As terrible as he looked, DevilChaser would probably resume his duties come evening, joining her at the hospital. BrushBurn's raw statistics from the Death bout would be waiting for him at the Lodge.

That left TelZodo.

TripStone secured the kettle in place and twisted around to snatch up the hats. She pulled the straw into her lap and the room spun.

She cursed aloud as her cheek dented one of the crowns. Nothing to do but wait until her head cleared and her heartbeat became distinct from the bellows advancing on their tracks.

*Easy, Stone. You've had a rough two days.*

She smiled into the weave as the warning spoke to her in Ghost's voice. From a time when he was young and pockmarked and bowlegged, a sickly *yatanii* as tough as she was. Rebelling by putting his life on the line, when the promise of

freedom from Yata dependence was headier even than sex.

After an eternity the huffing slowed, then stopped. The lake shore sighed to a halt, leaving only the boulder in TripStone's chest to goad her on as she climbed back to the cutting board.

~~~

"I'll write to your mother to let her know you're here." BrushBurn led the way, ambling in the dusk as smokestacks belched orange in the distance. TelZodo wrinkled his nose and decided that Basc stank even worse when the wind died.

The old man continued, "I'll leave room in case you want to add anything."

TelZodo shot him a sideways glance. "Did you write to your mother after you came here?"

"No. SandTail did. I was too much of a mess."

TelZodo mulled that over. "I suppose that means you're giving me the opportunity to not be a mess."

The old man paused, then smiled. "You could say that."

The cobblestones could be teetering beneath TelZodo's feet, bending to the side as though he walked inside a broken reflection. If he wasn't careful he'd lose his balance and fall against the man whose letters his mother had saved and secreted away for years.

Of all the stories his parents had told him, the ones about BrushBurn made the least sense. Ghost seemed to pity him, in a begrudging way. Piri always wrote to the former meat trader in the privacy of her office. Then she emerged from her room looking dazed, as if her soul had just been laid bare.

We share the Farm, her fingers told TelZodo's shoulder, when he was old enough to ask her what it meant. *I can't begin to explain.*

"But I'm half Yata!" he protested.

She'd cupped his cheek, his flesh separating her fingers from his fully-intact

tongue, and drummed, *You were never a Farm Yata.*

He'd heard only snatches from the old ones in Crossroads, and what they told him was conflicting. BrushBurn helped destroy Crossroads. BrushBurn helped save Crossroads. He'd had his way with women but he'd kept them from starving. He was noble, despicable, ruthless, tender, compassionate, dispassionate, and sick. He'd robbed Crossroads of one of its best hunters and almost killed her, and then he married her. Then he'd betrayed her with a murderous Yata woman and brought about the fall of Promontory.

The stories from Basc were stranger still. Evit's mother Zai still wanted to kill BrushBurn, but Gria viewed him as some kind of living martyr, one of the gods' many perversities.

Now TelZodo walked beside this cipher, a robust but tired old man with his hands in his pockets, who half-slouched as he studied the evening haze. Hours earlier they had both knelt beside a darkening tub, scrubbing and massaging and bringing a heartbroken doctor back to life.

Gooseflesh interrupted plum-colored pelt. "I don't understand any of this."

BrushBurn said, "Neither do I." His broad palm encircled TelZodo's shoulder. "Are you sure you want to come into the Lodge? You know what it's used for."

The affectionate touch unnerved him. He shrugged it away. "I know."

"You've always avoided the Deliverance."

Was there anything his parents *didn't* document? "I've been inside the Milkweed now," TelZodo answered through gritted teeth. "The feast was over but I still saw plenty."

They turned a corner and the road broadened. Lamps shone in the windows of structures placed farther apart, bright islands in a growing abyss. When the lights vanished altogether they'd be at the clearing. Beyond the clearing lay the canyon.

BrushBurn pointed. "That's the Lodge." His finger moved from a broad, low silhouette to a tall dome whose interior lighting sparkled through coffered windows. "That's-

“The Warehouse,” TelZodo said. “My father’s gas bombs helped Gria’s army breach the place. I must have heard about it a million times. And about the headless bodies they found.”

Suddenly he was drowning in the dry desert night. TelZodo tried to shake his head clear, working numb lips. “Hanging s-smoked on h-hooks.”

Strong arms came around and held him tight as his legs turned to rubber.

“I’ve got you.” BrushBurn’s gravelly voice buzzed against his ear. “You’re safe.”

TelZodo choked, “Oh, gods.”

“You’re safe.”

“I could have been one of them.”

“You’re not, TelZodo. You weren’t.”

“I have-” He began to shake. “S-seven brothers and s-sisters.”

The arms clutched him tighter. The gravel became a moan. “I know that, too.”

TelZodo whispered, “What happened to them?”

“I don’t know. I left the Farm long before they were born.”

TelZodo’s skin crawled as the embrace became cloying. He pushed against BrushBurn and the hug dropped instantly away. The man knew how to let go. TelZodo tried not to shuffle as they resumed their walk toward the low building. “So, what do you do with all the numbers?”

“It’s complicated.” They had passed through some kind of invisible barrier, still unsteady but recovering. BrushBurn’s hands wove the air as though sculpting a torso. “Each parlor submits its tally of Masari and Yata dead along with individual springweights, both before and after processing. The Yata go immediately into the barrels. The Masari are divided into different Sustainer grades and volume yields. Non-Sustainers go immediately to the lab. My job is to maintain those tallies and trends and coordinate them with *yatanii* weaning levels from the Lodge. I fold those figures into the census for Promontory and

Skedge and deduce the best matching scenarios for consumer and consumed. Then I travel to Rudder and present my findings and recommendations to its Chamber.”

TelZodo looked away from well-practiced recitation. “What does Rudder do with the information?”

“Plan the next bout.” BrushBurn sighed. “The Chamber also reevaluates our labor rotation, along with any knowledge gaps in the Warehouse.” He pointed toward the dome. “Everything I’ve told you, and all the rest of the procedural details, are over in the library. I update them periodically.”

“We have nothing like this at home.”

“Your people use other systems.” He shrugged. “Haphazard ones, but they seem to work. You’re still independent and your resources are different from ours. After I speak to Rudder, I’ll get back to work in DamBuster’s lab.”

BrushBurn glanced around, and for a moment the old man looked lost. He opened his mouth, shut it.

TelZodo asked, “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.” Maybe he could learn about all those locked-up letters.

BrushBurn frowned. “I was going to say this used to be such a fat and happy place. I probably would have if I hadn’t met your mother. Promontory’s happiness came at a terrible cost.” He angled his head. “You can learn about that in the Warehouse, too.”

TelZodo barked a high laugh. “You’re assuming I can go in there.”

“You’re brave enough to step into the Lodge.” Broad hands opened its great wooden doors. “The Yata in the Warehouse are alive now, and they’re just as troubled by the past as we are.”

~~~

The Lodge had taken the Milkweed's chaos and translated it into order.

No painted frogs stared down from the walls. No shrimps curled up in *trompe l'oeils* on the floor. TelZodo found no trees, no vines, no sedge. No colored, fanciful chalks illustrated the slate. No one hollered naked outside the private rooms.

No one was hollering naked inside them, either. And, from what the columns of numbers lining the walls seemed to say, no one would for at least a little while longer. He might even be able to spend the night here.

Only a handful of Masari sat among mostly empty tables, hardwoods burnished to a high sheen. Two were already dealing from practice Death decks, hunched beneath lanterns hanging from polished brass fixtures. The décor's simplicity lent the Lodge an air of understated opulence. There wasn't a piss bucket in sight.

TelZodo wandered about the lounge. Maybe the place looked fancy because it was just clean.

An attendant ducked behind a long counter and hauled up a thick package of oiled tent canvas folded and secured with leather ties. BrushBurn took it to a round table and then returned for a half-dozen bound volumes. They looked weighty enough to have come from the Rotunda. He spread his materials on his roomy work surface: books, graphs, stack of blank parchment. He pulled the sheaf of tallies from the canvas envelope and weighted them down with a pretty blue-gray but broken geode, then covered the scant remains of the table's wood surface with a blotter and added two pens and then two inkwells sporting black around one rim and red around the other. He visited the counter again and returned with a small teapot and mug, which he also placed on the blotter. TelZodo smelled fennel.

"You can pull up a chair while I transfer the figures."

TelZodo almost didn't hear the soft invitation.

"It's all right. This is the hardest part, before I start calculating. I could use the conversation."

TelZodo edged toward the table, whose matrices formed an arcane shorthand

that hurt his eyes. Similar numbers covered the back of his mother's neck, hidden beneath her thick, straw-colored hair.

Grid lines separated everything into neat compartments. TelZodo thought they'd been drawn with a straight-edge until he watched BrushBurn heft the black pen and begin to ink the first matrix freehand. "I'd think calculating would be the hard part."

"It's only numbers then. Not names." BrushBurn's head remained bent. "Not faces. Hand me that top tally sheet."

TelZodo lifted the broken geode. He still held it, turning it over in his hands after BrushBurn had taken the parchment. "What kind of stone is this?"

"Tourmaline. In smoky quartz." The boxes began to fill. Flawless block penmanship. "It belonged to my cousin."

Cracks spidered beneath TelZodo's fingertips. "I'm sorry it's broken."

"Don't be. She threw it." Twinkling steel blue eyes looked up, then back down. "Not at me. Though there were times when I thought she might." The nib scratched. "Do you have a place to stay?"

TelZodo replaced the geode. "I don't know."

"You have a place to stay."

TelZodo opened his mouth, shut it.

BrushBurn looked up again. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

TelZodo looked away, toward the chalked wall, and tried not to fidget. He was a child again, gawking at Evit's first wife and trying to conceive of his little playmate as an adult, a man, still high-voiced and spiky-haired but someone who had crossed over suddenly, standing at the other edge of a great divide.



Across from him BrushBurn curled his lips back and inhaled a lungful, then nodded and breathed it out. “You’re worried about TripStone. Don’t be.”

“Why not?”

“She won’t hurt you.”

The words were out before he could stop them. “That’s not what I’m worried about.” Even in her absence the room began to vibrate. TelZodo blinked beneath too-bright lamps.

How could he explain what he couldn’t understand? He’d taken lovers twice his age, three times his age, and never felt so young and inexperienced as this. He’d played the role of demon in Crossroads, baiting people who’d wanted to be baited, drawing them out. He’d let them draw him out. Bless certainly had, subsisting on his cruel rejoinders as much as he’d sought hers. They’d built a grudging friendship on it, she the fertile virgin and he the sterile whore.

But that was Crossroads. She’d laugh to see him now, gawking at a wrinkled leathery woman and then sitting tongue-tied before TripStone’s husband. Who’d gotten his gun back.

TelZodo started to giggle, then forced himself to stop. “I antagonize people.”

BrushBurn added a final figure, then set his black pen down on the blotter and picked up the red one. Crimson climbed the nib. “So does she.”

TelZodo blurted, “She almost married my father.”

The nib scratched. “Mm hm.”

The man sitting across the table was a wall. TelZodo curled his own lips back and smelled only unforced calm. “What if she has regrets?”

Red numbers bloomed on the page. “Of course she has regrets. Does Ghost?”

TelZodo thought for a moment, then screwed up his face. “I don’t think so. Not like that.”

BrushBurn took one sip of tea and moved parchment aside. “Hand me the

second tally sheet.”

The geode warmed against TelZodo’s hand. Dry parchment passed from his fingers. “Doesn’t that bother you?”

“She’s dying, TelZodo. *That* bothers me, but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Except offer me to her.”

He almost dropped the rock as soon as he’d spoken. TelZodo eased the geode back down, wanting to cut his tongue out. “I’m sorry. I told you I antagonize people.”

Black ink flowed smoothly, unhurried. “I’m not in the business of selling people. Not any more. Don’t worry, I’m not trying to buy your services with room and board.”

It was a blunt statement of fact that made TelZodo’s ears burn. He watched BrushBurn inscribe another line of numbers. Which variable was he? Which grade of meat? What yield?

What worth?

He twitched, startled by the rattle of Death bones on a table top. “Does TripStone know?”

“That I’m inviting you to stay with us? Yes. We’ve discussed it.”

TelZodo wasn’t sure that was the question he was asking, but he couldn’t think of a better one. He studied the bent head. “What if I do something stupid?”

“What if you do?”

“I’ve hurt enough people already. I don’t want to hurt you, too.”

BrushBurn shook his head. “You won’t.”

“What makes you so sure?”

The nib scratched again. The bent head offered a tiny smile. “Sixteen years of inventory.”

## CHAPTER 24

TripStone's fingers brushed the side of her pallet. They pressed against nonexistent bone, rounding its polished surfaces, reading.

The scrimshaw patterns told her nothing beyond their shapes. With her eyes closed, she saw none of the colors or the sight lines that tied hymns to stories and multiplied their meanings. Instead the stippling left blunt impressions on her skin, their dry Covenant recitations a tactile monotone.

She couldn't even sing her faith into fruition any more. Her voice fell flat or it cracked with age whenever she fell to the work of dismemberment, even of Yata and Masari who had embraced that part of her dead religion. How could she rejoice bringing the Covenant to Promontory when in doing so she had helped destroy Promontory?

*That's all right. You once hated the Covenant, too.*

"I had *resented* it," she protested, mumbling against straw to a voice that could be anyone's. "I never hated it."

The sensation of stippled bone vanished. TripStone opened her eyes and waited for the dark grays around her to resolve into shapes. If she tried hard enough and moved carefully enough, she could negotiate DamBuster's office without having to light her lamp.

It was BrushBurn's office now. He should rearrange it to his tastes. Then she'd feel more comfortable sleeping there.

She pulled clothes on over her scrubbed body in the predawn. She padded into the hallway and opened DevilChaser's office door a crack, listening to his deep snores. He was probably in the same position as when she had covered him with a light blanket.

The hospital's night runner took her to an equally dark house, where she spent a moment counting lit windows up and down the street as the transport rolled away. One fewer worker was breakfasting before the shift change. Oversleeping or dead. TripStone yawned and pulled herself to her door.

She stepped inside, nostrils flared. The Grange reached her in one breath and Destiny Farm in the next. The canyon smell could have come from Piri's inherited traits as much as from BrushBurn. TripStone slipped off her boots and wraps and walked barefoot past her husband, to the kitchen.

She tracked the sound of breathing to the hearth, where TelZodo slept beneath the kitchen's open window. FlitNettle's pallet had been there until the time of her death. The remnants of Farm scent could have been hers.

Then the shadowed body stirred on the pallet and smelled of Ghost. The boy was probably on his stomach with his arms against his chest, his chin on a fist and long toes hooked over the pallet's edge.

TripStone smiled at the soft rustling coming from behind. She relaxed into BrushBurn's arms and drummed, *Your toes are long, too. I hadn't realized.*

He nuzzled her ear as her neck arched.

She caressed BrushBurn's palm. *He's bringing out the worst in me.*

*I know,* he answered at her cheek. *It's mutual.*

Her neck arched more. She opened her mouth and tasted the fennel on his tongue. Her belly began to liquefy as her husband's hands traveled.

She wriggled as he lifted her. TripStone breathed deeply as her own musk entered her nose, her fingers joining BrushBurn's at her breech ties as he backed away from the kitchen.

*Pleasant dreams, whelp.*

She caught her breath, weightless and then heavy against BrushBurn's thumb. Leather sang, slipping from its eyelets as he lowered her to their bed.

~~~

"CatBird?" TripStone stared across the kitchen table at her guest. "I haven't heard from her in years." She tried to picture HigherBrook's letters. "Or about her."

TelZodo picked at the food on his plate. “She didn’t want to talk about what happened when she was here. Or about Izzik.”

“Then what makes you think I’m going to tell you? I was shocked just seeing her with a leg gone when she arrived.” TripStone leaned back and sipped. “Seeing me caught her by surprise, too. She didn’t recognize me.”

BrushBurn prepared more tea near the hearth. He squinted in mid-morning light. “They both trained a lot of good people. Izzik taught the Covenant Method to a surprising number of Yata before he died. DamBuster was lucky to have been killed by one of them.”

The pallet by the window was surprisingly tidy, its mattress smoothed down and its covers tucked in. TripStone kept glancing at it. TelZodo must have inherited his neatness from Piri. Or was he just trying to make a good impression?

He met her gaze when she looked back. “I work in beds, TripStone. I like to keep my office clean. You don’t see my father messing up his lab.” He called over to BrushBurn, “Did Izzik die in a Death bout?”

“You heard my wife. CatBird will tell you if she wants you to know.”

“CatBird doesn’t want to remember.”

“That’s understandable.”

TripStone scowled across the table. “For someone who claims to be her friend, you have a stunning disregard for her privacy.”

TelZodo smirked back at her. “What about *your* privacy? I heard you this morning. I thought I’d awakened in the Meethouse.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

He glanced past her, wrinkling his snub nose. “I’d think about changing your sheets.”

“You’re not getting them that easily.”

BrushBurn carried the teapot to the table. A renewed blast of fennel filled the

room.

TripStone looked up at her husband, whose raised eyebrow made her want to laugh out loud. She settled for patting his hand as he sat and wondered how she'd been reduced to sophomoric bickering with a man-child.

She downed a bite of scrambled egg from one of the chickens that had so concerned the boy, then swirled fresh tea in her mouth and swallowed. "By the time I was your age I had killed my first Yata, TelZodo. Don't even try to embarrass me until you've taken a life."

The youth's grin vanished, his dark eyes suddenly hooded. "I have." His fork thrummed against earthenware. "But it was only half-Yata. Does that count?"

~~~

Seeing the great hunter bolt upright was less of a victory than TelZodo had expected. He turned toward BrushBurn's quiet attentiveness. "You don't seem surprised. I don't know if I should be glad of that or not."

TripStone narrowed her eyes at him, sampling the air. "You're not lying."

"Why would I lie?"

"He traveled through Alvav," BrushBurn said, looking thoughtful. "He traveled with Yucof."

"Maybe that's what it takes to get your respect," TelZodo snarled at her, his chest beginning to burn. "Or is my guilt not consecrated enough for you? Do you think I don't know what the hunt at home does to people? Do you know how often I've tried to help them fuck it away?" He stabbed at his food. "Well, I wasn't *hunting*, TripStone, I was protecting cargo." No, not cargo. Traders. "And I was killing children."

His head swam. His fork clattered on the plate as he stood. "You'll excuse me."

TripStone's hushed voice followed him away from the table, sounding pained. "I'm sorry."

"Tell that to the hybrids."

The light touch on his arm sparked white-hot rage. He whirled on her, heaving. Hungry. The matching, wavering spark in her eyes only infuriated him more.

Was this what his father had lacked in their relationship? If Ghost had been a killer instead of a scientist, would he have had a different wife and a different child? Different, accounted-for siblings? Viable grandchildren? Who'd left whom?

TripStone should get down on her knees and thank the gods her husband was sitting just a few feet away.

*So should I.*

TelZodo wheezed, "BrushBurn."

"I'm here." The gravel sounded like bedrock.

"I think I can step into the Warehouse now."

TripStone blinked, steadying herself. She whispered, "It's an integrated facility. Take your certificate of non-dependence. The guard will want to inspect it."

TelZodo nodded, trying to keep his voice level. "Thank you."

He trudged past her and out of the kitchen, pausing at the rumpled marital bed and stains left by two people who loved each other.

*Why am I this way? He tried not to race toward the door. Why is she?*

His father's narratives had devoted dozens of pages to the hunters' sacred guilt under the Covenant. They'd been outcasts and revered at the same time, and Ghost had loved this particular one. But Ghost's answers to Shabra's incessant questions had painted TripStone as a comrade first. She'd been rebellious with him, a *yatanii* who had almost died for her principles before becoming a member of his underground network of supporters and accessory to his crimes.

Salted through Shabra's interrogation were pauses and requests for clarification, and questions Ghost had artfully refused to answer. TelZodo could almost hear his father's guardedness rising off the parchment, bowing to a power that TripStone had over him even as Piri sat by his side, pregnant and silent, carrying

their troubled son.

~~~

I should be updating my Death manual, but I keep putting it off to come back here.

After TripStone's husky alto, the voice TelZodo assigned to the words in FlitNettle's diary sounded clear tones in his head. He read the date scrawled across the top of the page. She'd been nineteen years old when she penned the entry.

No one will read this. I should be productive. I'm being defiant. Again. I don't know whether to laugh or cry at this point. I've been told I'm lazy so often that I hear it in my sleep. Even Jirado scolds me in my nightmares as she's trying to stab me to death.

It's ridiculous. And it is all wrong. Backwards. I'm sure of it now.

Almost no one came to this section in the lower stacks. Even TripStone's volume of Covenant scripture drew more readers, its pages dog-eared and its leather cover scuffed. Yata fingerprints, mostly, but Masari had also availed themselves of the teachings.

They told TelZodo only that TripStone was an excellent copyist. Her more popular weaning instructions proved even drier, offering no clues about their author. Her ward's writings differed considerably.

The Masari who came here, who fought the Yata of Skedge and who started Destiny Farm, had far fewer resources than we have now. But they wrote their history. Not just instructional manuals, but what it felt like to be starving.

FlitNettle's nib had pressed deeply into the parchment, an uneven penmanship that sometimes trailed off the page. TelZodo wondered about the source of her distractedness, whether the wheels of her own thoughts or external interruptions had made her pen stray.

SandTail knew the worth of those old journals. Everyone who possessed and read them did, and now everyone who reads them here in the Warehouse does. Where are they? How many stacks above me? They're all centrally located while

I'm stuck in this basement. I have seen the Farm fall. I've seen my family killed. I've seen our hunters massacred and Promontory annexed, and so has everyone around me.

And no one is writing about what it's done to them and to their families. They're all busy documenting their skills before they lose their lives in a Death bout. Facts and figures. I listen in the tavern when their tongues are all loosened, and they're just pissing their stories away.

I pray to the gods to give me the skills to catch it all. But the only person who can catch it all is TripStone, and she's too busy fighting to stay alive. Almost nobody talks to us. Jirado's been dead for more than seven years and our neighbors still shun us. And we're the only people who would really listen to them.

At least Crossroads holds remembrances of its dead, but even there everything is second-and third-and fourth-hand. What would BrushBurn say about me if I died? That I have a temper and I try to be tough. And even when my flesh is gone he'll try to protect my memory by tailoring it to his image of me. And TripStone would agree with him, because she always has, and she'll remember me as a good shot.

And that's why I keep this diary. To set the record straight.

Humongous waste of time and resources. So people say.

I say otherwise.

TelZodo bent his head toward the sheets. He inhaled remnants of tears and sweat and gunpowder. This was the girl who threw pretty rocks, but now he knew when she had done it, and why.

The old maps of the Warehouse had labeled this reading level as the Destiny repository, rooms piled floor to ceiling with the huge, fat burlap bags that had poisoned his mother. The woman writing in her diary had been a girl then, standing outside the breeding pens and reading her lessons to all those helplessly fucking Farm Yata.

For a wild moment he wanted to rip the pages out. They couldn't write *their* stories, could they? They never had a chance to learn how.

Not until his mother had escaped. As far as TelZodo knew, Piri was the only Farm Yata who'd survived. And her stories were limited to the letters in BrushBurn's lockbox. The rest of her writings dealt with body parts and animalcules.

Skedge is brainwashed, too. FlitNettle's pen skewed across the page. The canyon hunts are over. They should be down there, looking for signs of their people. But, no, it's too expensive. Everyone here is in debt. They're more interested in maintaining the factories. And if a Yata is called in the lottery and doesn't show up for the bout, the game is forfeit and the penalty is death, so what Yata would want to risk that if they're planning to return here?

I don't know. I'm curious. Aren't they?

Somebody tell me I'm not crazy. Somebody tell me I'm more than a hospital assistant and a Death instructor. I don't care, really. Why should I be any less alone now than I was on the Farm? So I might as well put this thing away and update my idiotic manual.

Less than five years later she was dead. TelZodo whispered, "You weren't crazy."

He flipped to the end of the volume, saw that it continued elsewhere and found its sequel. After a futile search for a cloth, he pulled his shirt from his breeches and wiped off the dust.

FlitNettle's final entry was composed solely of pictures. Crude line drawings, stylized shapes, nothing he could remotely call "art." Yet their patterns were compelling, as though she were speaking in code.

TelZodo flipped a page back and saw more of the same. Repeated images, new images, no two groupings of them alike. They weren't esoteric like the Covenant pictograms on the Rotunda's doors, and they were far inferior to Smoke's skilled realism.

But they were FlitNettle's and they were saying something. He just couldn't figure out what. They continued as TelZodo turned the pages, going backward in time. The drawn entries weren't dated, but they must have gone back for weeks.

When he found FlitNettle's final text entry he realized what the pictures were.

Just as before, she had scrawled the date of her entry at the top of the page. The rest of her brief record was only another date.

He blinked at it. *That was two summers ago.*

It must have been a Death bout. He must have been looking at the pictures used on the cards, only jumbled together and with their borders removed. No wonder he couldn't figure out what they were.

She must have been drafting what would be the final revisions to her manual, working them out in her diary. Either that, or FlitNettle had been distracted enough to confuse the volumes.

TelZodo stood and stretched, caught off-guard by the length of his shadow. He debated whether to light a lamp, then decided to shelve the diary for later and return to the upper stacks, before it got too dark and he started imagining bodies superimposed on the books.

He climbed the curved staircase, pausing at a platform before the walls began to taper. The lanterns were brighter here and the walkways more numerous. TelZodo faced one of the dome's narrow windows and listened to dozens of nibs scratching behind him.

Facts and figures.

"I'm glad you decided to come here instead of going to the Ratchet."

TelZodo looked down. AgatePool's shoulders were level with his waist, where she wrinkled her nose at the dirty shirttail she held in her hand.

He eased it away from her and grumbled, "They should have cleaning cloths. So, does anyone come here from the Ratchet? Or are they all too busy getting laid?"

AgatePool pointed to a glassed-in cabinet. "Prostitution section's over there."

"Gods forbid someone should die without passing on their sexual techniques, is that it?"

She nodded. "That's it."

“Does anyone write about what really happens to them?”

The old hybrid squinted up at him, looking sour. He turned back toward the window.

If any of them could have taken the time, their stories would be buried in the lower stacks if the Warehouse stored them at all. Not up here, with the important works detailing how hard to pinch, how deep to thrust, how much pain and pleasure to show.

TelZodo shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ve been reading FlitNettle’s diary. Did you know her?”

“Of course I knew her,” AgatePool said. “She was BrushBurn’s cousin.”

“Did you read what she wrote?”

“No. It’s personal information. Her being dead doesn’t make it any less private.”

“It’s in the public stacks now.”

“That’s BrushBurn’s doing.” She stared out the window right along with him. “You’ll have to ask him what he was thinking.” Her pudgy finger pointed beyond the glass. Striated walls lay below and beyond it, fading beneath a low sun. “Have you been to the overlook?”

TelZodo laughed to hide a flopping stomach. “Don’t rush me, Aggie. I’ve just worked up the nerve to come in *here*.”

Her reflected eyebrows lifted. “Then I suggest you climb one more level and circle a third of the way left, to the Farm stacks. When you’re ready.”

He looked down at her silver curls and watched her face working. “What were you doing before you found me here?”

“Me?” She seemed pulled from a reverie. “Updating factory protocols. Why?”

“Would you write about your life with SandTail?”

For a moment he thought she was going to strike him again. He looked away as

she struggled toward composure.

AgatePool's answer was acid against his back. "No."

He listened to her quick footfalls recede.

She'd kept her lover's torn shirt. She'd woven his pelt and hair into a blanket and sat on his disgusting couch.

TelZodo stared after echoes. The old hybrid had told stories about her life with SandTail without writing down a single word.

He whispered toward the scrabbling, industrious nibs, "That's not good enough."

CHAPTER 25

Hello, Stone.

TripStone laid her palm on crisp, unfolded parchment as the courier departed and whispered, “Hello, Ghost.”

Mail recipients trickled out of the Lodge, passing her table without a glance. Others stayed behind to read, a mug of tea and a modest meal at their elbows. Moans began to crest behind the locked door of a private room as a level six *yatanii* broke her fast.

I wanted to write to you immediately after we received BrushBurn’s letter. You don’t know what it means to us to know that TelZodo is safe with you. We learned only two days ago that he had left Yucof’s employ.

I don’t know why he did. Do you? Yucof had only praise for his work.

“You don’t know?”

TripStone laid the letter down and rubbed her eyes. She should ask Ghost when he last visited Alvav. Didn’t he keep up with events any more, or was he living in beakers now? Was Piri?

I hope he’s not being too difficult.

She smiled and murmured, “No more than you.”

She glanced to her left, across the room. BrushBurn’s curls looked back at her as he bent over his own parchment. The Lodge’s big books were back behind the counter, leaving a spread of freshly-inked graphs and matrices on the table, laid end to end and weighted down at their corners.

TripStone watched her husband consult first one sheet and then another, his sight lines changing vector, backtracking, consolidating. Overlaying different meanings on the same numbers viewed in different contexts, as esoteric as ancient Yata scripture and Dirt People pictograms.

No wonder he took days to puzzle everything out before carting his sheaf of

calculations to Rudder. After each summit he returned home, wrung out from debates whose details made TripStone's eyes glaze over as he repeated them to her.

I haven't thought about the Dirt People in years.

She could see the pictograms again, surrounding her in riotous colors as she walked beside HigherBrook, passing through the inward-leading chambers of The Honorable One's hut for the first time. The new, young leader of Crossroads had negotiated the drawings' tangled messages on the walls, floor, and ceiling as he bent under the great tome of Yata narratives lashed to his back.

The narratives had been HigherBrook's offering to Basc, carried out of the Rotunda, out of their dying village and through a burnt-out wasteland...

TripStone blinked the image away, stifling a moan. She lifted Ghost's letter again.

Stone, I miss his acerbity. I miss his trouble. The Grange is empty without him. I'm beginning to realize what I put my own parents through when I went into exile, and they had four other children of their own to contend with.

Don't misunderstand me. I'd do it all over again. But maybe with a little less single-mindedness.

TripStone's fingertips brushed against the ink and stayed. After all these years, his handwriting was still as sloppy as ever. She shook her head at the words. "You needed that single-mindedness, Ghost. Any less and you wouldn't have left home." Her touch rounded a wayward blot. "Then I'd still be calling you SunDog."

She rested her hand on her cheek and squinted. How did her chops get wet?

Patrons looked up as the level six *yatanii* roared her need. Across the room, BrushBurn screwed wadded cloth into his ears and bent back to his papers. TripStone scowled at the balcony as her empty stomach twitched, clean and pure and needing nothing. No tea, no snake, no Yata.

She felt no deprivation euphoria, either, only an unremarkable emptiness. A gift of peace from the gods, for as long as it lasted before her cravings returned.

She would fight them when they did, edging her weaning further and employing all her tricks and meditations for as long as her health permitted. But in the end, whether sent by the gods or by demons, the cravings would always win.

~~~

*She was one of four skinny rebels flanking their bowlegged yatanii leader, following SunDog as he hobbled down Crossroads' cobblestone streets. Most townspeople turned away from them, embarrassed. A few were brave enough to glare at her.*

*TripStone glared back. I've moved beyond you, she wanted to shout at them. I'm free of the gods.*

*White spots flashed before her, as though trying to form a portal to the afterlife. TripStone swayed from vertigo, then recovered her balance. An equally shaky yatanii touched her arm. Their camaraderie would hold them both up.*

*They paraded across the marketplace and down the long road into the Grange. Past fields of grain and legumes, past squash beginning to fatten and tomatoes red as lust. It made TripStone swagger. Why should she eat anything at all?*

*She still reeled from her first Yata kill two Meat Days earlier. The more recent hunt had offered a reprieve, her father shooting prey this time, but her heart had still shredded as she listened to his prayers and his butchery. She had looked down at her plate during their sacramental feast and refused to touch the consecrated flesh.*

*She had come of age. She was a hunter now and could refuse Yata. Her parents couldn't stop her.*

*The Yata absent from her body had left her lightheaded for days. Her skin itched, but she refused to scratch because hunters mastered restraint. Her willpower was her rifle now. She took mental aim at her symptoms as they arose, the aches in her joints and the tearing in her muscles, and blew them away with a single shot.*

*SunDog's analgesic creams still helped.*

*"With our bodies and our fortitude, we will change the world." His irresistible*



*voice helped even more.*

*SunDog's ribs had always been sharp beneath his skin, whether he'd been eating or not. Being a yatani had only made the skinny boy skinnier. Even after recovering from a fast that almost killed him, he still abstained from Yata whenever he felt well enough to push his body to its limit.*

*His reedy voice shivered the air by the windbreak as the group of them crouched naked on the grass, their hands on each other, massaging. "This pain will pass."*

*The youth to TripStone's right asked, "And then what?"*

*A woman laughed and said, "New pains."*

*"She's right," SunDog said. "I won't lie to you. And when the pains get bad enough, we'll eat Yata again. But we're already beginning to change."*

*The certainty sent delicious chills through TripStone. She'd seen it. She'd felt it. Spikes of energy surged through her infirmity like veins of fat. They marbled her, strengthened her.*

*"SunDog." She dipped her bony fingers into the milky tin and took hold of his ankle, spreading cream across the sole of his foot as another follower brought relief to her spine. "What does it mean when I can hear every single bird in the forest?"*

*He looked away from jutting scapulae and studied her. "What else do you hear?"*

*"I hear the grass." Her fingers clutched between his toes as her grin spread. "The clouds. The trees pulling water from the ground. I hear everyone's heartbeat here." Her palms moved to his calf. "It's extraordinary."*

*"It's euphoria." He looked around. "Does anyone else feel this?"*

*Heads shook.*

*He looked back at her. "It's a trick, Stone. You should break your fast on the next Meat Day."*

*The words wrenched her. She frowned at him. "I thought you liked me."*

*"Stone, I've known you longer than anyone else here. I adore you." The statement sounded distressingly condescending. "But you're at your limit now. Fast for too much longer and you'll get too sick."*

*She took his other foot into her lap and made her face into a mask. The man behind her was applying salve around her ribs now. She could breathe easier.*

*"I know that look, Stone." SunDog's voice became tight. "You saw how I almost died a year ago. You begged me to eat, remember?"*

*She didn't look up. Her palm caressed his heel.*

*"I've experienced that euphoria. You have to fight it."*

*TripStone filled her lungs with contentment and said nothing. If she closed her eyes she could still see where everyone's hands were. She and the others were islands of summer heat, rising like dew into the pines. They floated over the mountains and higher, looking down on the dark specs of immaterial divinities.*

*On the next Meat Day she shot a frightened-looking Yata woman who peed as she walked toward the afterlife. I killed a girl, not a god. How could she possibly eat this person?*

*SunDog was a farmer, not a hunter. He couldn't grasp a hunter's strength. He wasn't the one who walked barefoot into Basc three days later, groveling during Atonement and digesting stories about the dead woman's childhood, her favorite games and her innocent dreams. That Yata had died during her first Reckoning, two days after she had come of age and belted her pouch of pen and ink and parchment around her narrow waist. She'd written her blessing to TripStone with a shaky hand and tears in her eyes.*

*TripStone didn't hug her because hunters exercised restraint. Neither did she spare the Yata whom the Covenant had bound her to kill.*

*But nothing would make her take a bite of that terrified flesh.*

*Her resolve alone made her stronger. Lightning crackled in her veins as she walked. Past the next Meat Day, leaving her portion of Yata behind. Past the*

*Meat Day after that.*

*She laughed at SunDog's growing alarm and chided him in the street, "Do I look sick yet?"*

*He shook his head. "You don't look well."*

*"Neither do you."*

*She visited him alone at the windbreak, swinging by the farm house first. SunDog's parents treated her as one of their own, now more than ever. They knew how much she loved him. She could see the calm desperation in their eyes.*

*Instead of followers, SunDog was surrounded by wooden boxes. They held curiosities. Strange-smelling herbs, oddly-cut mounds. Discolorations.*

*At first TripStone thought they were his usual experiments. The old carpenter WindTamer gave SunDog boxes like that all the time. She'd watched him concoct oddities out of plants and insects ever since she was a little girl. This time her approach caught him by surprise and he hurried to shut the lids.*

*She reached past him. "Why so secretive?"*

*He held her back. "They don't like to be disturbed."*

*She gave him a crooked smile. "They're dead, SunDog."*

*"Yes." He coughed. "They're dead." His palm went to her waist, beneath her shirt, and he frowned. "You're wasting away. This isn't good, Stone."*

*"I'm fine.\_" Heat eddied from his fingertips toward her lower back. She snuggled closer.\_*

*"Your bones will start breaking if you don't eat."*

*"I'm too light to bend them." She caressed his ribs, returning the gesture. "The itching's gone. The pain's gone."*

*"I know."*

*"You were dying at this point. I'm not."*

*He eased her away and moved the boxes farther out of reach. “Stone-”*

*“SunDog, what we’re doing is working.”*

*He shook his head. “Not this way.”*

*”Prove me wrong.”*

*She grinned at the flash in his storm-colored eyes. He couldn’t be angry at her for long. Not now. Not when she had him.*

*She grasped his hand and brought her lips to his ear as everything buzzed. “You were a sample size of one. I’ve already outlasted you. I’ve already disproved your hypothesis and now I have one of my own. Prove me wrong.”*

*“Stone-”*

*She turned his troubled gaze to her and tasted his lips. Her fingers twined through his plum-colored hair as she moved his hand. They sank to the mulch.*

*She whispered, breathless, “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to do this.”*

*He shook his head. “You don’t have to starve yourself to do it.”*

*“That’s not why I’m starving myself, SunDog. I believe in you.” She held his palm against her breast and almost moaned aloud when he squeezed. “Believe in me.”*

*She kissed him again before he could protest and heard his breathing change as his other arm came around her. His tongue was sustenance in her mouth.*

*He came up for air and barked a laugh. “Your chest isn’t flat any more.”*

*“Neither are your pants.”*

*“I know. We have to stop.”*

*She released him and fumbled in her shirt pocket, then found his hand again and watched his eyes widen.*

*He rolled away and stared at the sheath she’d given him, then at her. “Where did*

*you get this?”*

*“The farm house.” She giggled. “From your father.”*

*SunDog glanced at the boxes and whispered, barely audible, “He knows.”*

*“That I love you? He’s known that for a long time.”*

*He opened his mouth to reply, then shut it.*

*It didn’t matter what the boxes held. It didn’t matter that SunDog wouldn’t show them to her. What mattered was the increasing pressure on his breeches and the want in his eyes as TripStone turned him back around.*

*As she reached for his breech ties, he gasped, “I’ve never done this with anyone before.”*

*“Neither have I.” Her fingers teased his abdominal fur. “We get naked here all the time, SunDog.”*

*“Not like this.”*

*“No,” she agreed. “Not like this.”*

*She freed him from his pants. Her breathing grew heavy as he pulsed in her hand. She pulled off his shirt and kissed his ribs, her fingers following his as he fitted the sheath. His touch as he undressed her was agonizingly light, as though he feared she would crumble.*

*“Get on top of me,” he told her. “Your bones are softening. I’m afraid I’ll crush you.”*

*Her own strength surprised her as she pulled. “Believe in me.”*

*He held himself above her with his knees and elbows in the mulch. TripStone arched her neck as SunDog took her breast in his mouth. His fingers explored her, sliding as she raised her hips to him, her knees trembling until his hand slipped away and he grasped her buttocks to hold her weight.*

*She groaned, “Now.” She clutched him as he lifted her, his arms across her*

*back. His own limbs quivered, but she couldn't tell whether from excitement or from deprivation.*

*Or from restraint.*

*With a lusty yell she hauled herself up and sank her teeth into his shoulder. She rode his echo as he drove into her, shattering the gods.*

~~~

The Lodge's private room began to quiet as the appetites within it neared satiety. TripStone looked from the balcony to BrushBurn, whose ears were still wadded, then turned back to the parchment.

Piri and I were greatly saddened to hear of DamBuster's death. I owe him and DevilChaser more than I can ever repay. I don't think we'd still be alive if it weren't for them.

I know these days must be extremely hard on you.

Tell me how you are, Stone. Whatever you need to tell me, tell me.

"You're still afraid of crushing me, Ghost."

TripStone shrugged. She could tell him that. He wouldn't believe her.

She could tell him that his son practically lived in the Warehouse now, spending days combing through its stacks and returning frustrated to the house. Even the Farm section, with its preserved, glassed-in meat hook still attached to the library's granite wall, had left TelZodo with more questions than answers. Most of those texts were either Destiny factory records from Skedge or accountings of Warehouse inventories, along with the history of the Farm's founding.

What had the kid expected? Destiny Farm was destroyed. Nothing but ruins down there now. They had been a grisly reminder to TripStone and to Promontory's other hunters who ranged farther into the canyon, tracking Yata. Until Jirado had tracked and killed them.

At least the Warehouse excursions were keeping the young man out of TripStone's hair and out of her nose. She raised Ghost's letter to her face and

sniffed, curling her lips back.

She could still smell the Grange. And a weathered, mellowed musk whose overtones made her think more of Ghost's father RootWing than of SunDog.

PART 4

CHAPTER 26

BrushBurn departed for Rudder in the morning. TelZodo lay on his pallet in the kitchen and listened to the practiced movements of a man who wondered if he'd see his wife alive again.

Sigh-filled caresses in the predawn. Slow plumbs on old straw.

They weren't being quiet in the next room on purpose. They were ancient rivers thick with silt, merging at a common mouth. They had filled and emptied each other for eons.

TelZodo didn't want them to hear him, either. They deserved this time undisturbed.

He couldn't help but respond, his hand between his legs, stroking in time with their rhythm. One minute he made love to her, to him, to both of them. The next minute he was a voyeur sucking their sex out of the air and riding their gasps as his back arched and his cheeks clenched. He gripped himself harder, maintaining friction as his cock wept. Until the silt loosened and the rivers coursed and TelZodo grabbed the rag at his side, answering BrushBurn's shout with his own strangled cry.

He gazed down into his tea as they breakfasted. No one spoke, leaving only the comforting sounds of earthenware on wood, soft *pings* of metal on ceramic. Infusions of fennel.

His muscles jumped as BrushBurn stood and stepped toward the storeroom, walking between the hearth and TelZodo's pallet, past the water barrel. The old man returned several minutes later with fine but plain linens draped over his arm and a second traveling bag. The first bag sat by the door, bulging with papers.

TripStone leaned back in her chair and listened. "The runner's early."

"The runner can wait." BrushBurn crouched by the open bag, folding his clothes. "TelZodo, I'll be back in a few days. Do you have any questions for me before I

go?”

What questions *didn't* he have?

TelZodo teased out the one he felt he could ask. “Just about the Warehouse, that the librarian couldn't answer.” He waited until BrushBurn looked up and blurted, “I finished reading FlitNettle's diary. I still can't figure out what she was doing at the end of it.”

BrushBurn snapped the bag shut. “That's understandable. You haven't played the game.”

“I've read her Death manuals. None of her strategies look like that.”

“You're right.” He stood, slinging the strap over his shoulder. His eyes gleamed with sad admiration. “She was being very subtle, TelZodo. She didn't devise any obvious combinations because she knew we'd be watching her every minute of the bout. All those drawings were calculations of every possible way that she could lose, regardless of the scenario.”

TelZodo couldn't move. He mouthed, *Why?*

TripStone answered, softly, “She was alone.”

BrushBurn bent down and kissed her on the lips. He murmured, “Stay alive, TripStone.”

She smiled up at him. “You, too, BrushBurn.”

“Me, too.”

Their exchange seemed engraved in the air, as old as their passion. TelZodo stared after BrushBurn as the old man ambled past the marital bed, hauled up his papers, and walked out the door.

~~~

TripStone listened to the chains lengthening outside, then to wheels clattering away. She pushed herself up from the table, reaching for her plate.

“Let me.” TelZodo’s movements jerked as he snapped out of his reverie. They smoothed out as he cleared everything away, busying himself. Wiping down, stacking.

She sank back down and asked, “Do you want to talk?”

He didn’t look at her. “About what?”

“Anything.” She watched quiet efficiency. “FlitNettle. BrushBurn. Alvav. Your father.”

He replaced the teapot. A smirk climbed his lips. “You missed a few spots.”

“I missed more than a few spots.” His pallet was already tucked away, drum tight. “Let’s start with your trip here.”

Utensils glided under tapered bronze fingers. TelZodo answered with forced smoothness, “Let’s start with yours.”

“Fine.” She drummed on the table top as her neck prickled. “I left Crossroads in the rain with a man I hated, pulling my people’s sold-off heritage behind me. I fucked him five times outside Rudder, destroyed our cart and almost killed us outside Promontory, and entered this city a stinking drunk. Your turn.”

He pursed his lips and nodded to himself. “That’s pretty good.” Arms folded, inspecting cabinets. “I was taught to murder by an old ex-convict, shot three desperate children before they shot me, killed at least two, and couldn’t get it up for a kind, painted lady who helped me remember everything. And SnailBud sends you his regards and hopes you haven’t thrown up lately.”

“The next time you see him, tell him I’m glad he’s still alive.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told him, too.”

“What level is he now?”

“Nine.”

“Good memory.” TripStone studied TelZodo, breathing hard. He still stared at the cabinets, his pelt on end, but so was hers. “My father taught me how to kill.”

“My father never killed.”

“Yes, he did. Sick animals.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“Really.”

His eyes blazed. “Really.”

TripStone pursed her lips. “Do you?”

TelZodo looked at her. “What?”

Blood rushed to her head. “Do you count?”

He appraised her as he neared the table, plum neck fur still rising. He leaned over the wood and brought his head level with hers. “You have six beads of sweat on your forehead,” TelZodo said, evenly, “and a third forming on your upper lip.” His lungs filled, emptied. “And I estimate at least 30 in each armpit and 20 between your breasts. Shall I extrapolate further?”

TripStone’s shoulders twitched as he leaned in closer, taunting. Tempting. Her answer turned husky. “Numbers don’t suit you. You don’t have the exactitude for them.”

“Try me.”

She snapped, “How many times have you tried to sire a child?”

He shot back, “How many times have you blocked one from forming?”

“I’ve lost count.”

He nodded, slowly backing away. “Numbers don’t suit you either, then.” He dropped into his chair and blinked at her. “You’re shaking.”

“Am I?” TripStone examined her forearm and smoothed her fur down. It sprang back up. “I thought it was just you.”

The smirk returned. His glare bore into her. “For a long time I thought it was just

me.”

They sat opposite each other. TripStone relaxed her gaze, rocking beneath her pulse. It bound her to her seat, forcing restraint. At least she was only spent, not dizzy.

She leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, let her shoulders droop, and listened for movement. None came. When she viewed TelZodo again, he was looking away, toward the window. The abyss in his brown-eyed profile almost drove her from her chair.

Instead, she whispered, “This was a good start.”

“Was it?”

TripStone had to admit to herself that she wasn’t really sure.

## CHAPTER 27

*Hey, Tel.*

*I'm glad you got through to Promontory. Now write me something scathing. I'm getting too soft.*

*There's someone here asking about you. Her name is Smoke and she's discussing trade with my father when she's not drawing everything in sight. He's commissioned her to paint the mountains before they all turn brown.*

*What did you do to her, Tel? Rub her fur off and suck all her color out? She's almost as odd as you are, but nowhere near as glum. You'll have to try harder.*

*I hear it's pretty barren over there, so I've enclosed a present. A mascot for the brothel I'm sure you're building. Just don't tell me where you stuck it, but let me know how you're doing.*

TelZodo smiled down at Bless's signature, made deliberately officious beside the pulpy smear of a squashed thrip. He had to concentrate to discern how much of the letter's stink came from the bug and how much from her. "I miss you, too, you frigid wreck."

He sighed and folded the parchment, pressing it flatter. The smear expanded between his thumb and forefinger.

There. She could impress her seal on it now.

He didn't know how long he had sat in the Warehouse, at the Farm stacks, staring at the hook. He wanted to break the glass around it and grasp its metal, letting its tip slice into his finger. Meld the Yata half of his blood with that of all the others who'd hung on it.

What was the use? That wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know. He'd finally abandoned his attempt to wrest answers from the ghoulish thing and broken the wax seal on Bless's missive instead. And mulled over the fact that more than a thousand headless bodies in this massive building had been reduced to the tiny corpse of a thrip.

The hook, number 726, had supported necks sporting any of a variety of numbers copied into butcher inventories. But they'd had no other identifiers, nothing to tell who came from whom. The inventory numbers had been stamped on the meat along with the Destiny Farm brand. The meat had been smoked and preserved or taken down quickly and hacked into fresh cuts.

The books in the Farm stacks were stunningly clinical in their descriptions. TripStone's treatises on Covenant butchery and its accompanying hymns had been dry, but the Farm manuals were numbing despite their similarities in slicing and drainage techniques. After a while the pulverized bug seemed more indicative of something that had once been alive. A tiny brain with a tiny purpose.

TelZodo closed the books and sat pressed to his chair by the weight of over a thousand unexpressed dreams.

~~~

TripStone dozed with the smell of gore in her nostrils. She awoke with a start at the sounds of quiet cleaning and the taste of astringent plumes in the air.

"She's up." A young voice, one of DevilChaser's medical students. TripStone spluttered a quiet curse.

"Yep," DevilChaser said. "She's up. Help her get that apron off before it congeals completely."

"I'm tired," TripStone growled. "Not crippled." They'd already removed her gloves while she slept. She scowled around the morgue at neat, anonymous stacks and turned toward the student, who had turned away. He bent over a low dissection table with his back to her, wiping it down.

No, not young. Small. Yata.

She called to the jacketed back, "You should not have let him do this."

DevilChaser said, "I'd have fired him if he tried to stop me. And he needs to work here as much as I do. I've started him on Masari so that he has less of a shock when he cuts, and I'm preparing Yata until I stop seeing DamBuster on the slab." The doctor aimed a sharp voice at his assistant. "You heard me, Sedes.

Help her get it off.”

“*Sedes?*” TripStone stared into the face of DamBuster’s executioner as he glided to her side. She stood on shaky legs, holding onto a table as he loosened the leather straps at her spine. “You’re both insane.”

“You of all people should understand this.” DevilChaser came around and untied the straps at her neck. “You atoned before the families of your prey, didn’t you? Yata and Masari still atone to each other and work together up north. Well, *Sedes* has atoned to me and he’s asked to be my assistant, and I’ve told him more stories about DamBuster than he can stomach.”

Sedes murmured at her lower back, “He hasn’t told me nearly enough.”

They slid the bloody apron from her. TripStone staggered away from them, searching tables and shelves as oiled canvas splashed into a basin.

The doctor followed her movements. “Everything’s done, TripStone. Everyone’s been made ready. Go home and get your rest.”

She croaked, “Surgeries?”

“Everything’s sewn up that needs sewing up. Go home.”

She started to laugh as tears streamed from her eyes. “Sanctifications?”

“Those, too.” He came around and held her. “Lean on me and let’s go.”

TripStone’s heart felt ready to burst. She wanted it to, flinging her emotions out of her chest and against the clean walls, where she could see them. Dozens of them, each one different and clamped tight.

They all needed to be freed. Maybe then, she’d be able to tell what they were.

~~~

Her pallet was too big. TripStone rolled onto her stomach and buried her nose in the remnants of BrushBurn’s scent. She’d loosened her shirt and breeches but kept them on, dropping her boots by the door and letting her foot wraps unravel by the edge of the bed.

Her young guest must still be at the Warehouse. Good. She was too exhausted to tangle with him.

SunDog's palm rested on her stomach, probing its hollows. When had she undressed?

*"I'm still here," TripStone purred. "I haven't melted away."*

*They lay in SunDog's room in the Grange farm house, driven inside by the rain. The bowlegged boy had finally stopped sneezing. He rested quietly beside her, catching his breath.*

*She cradled his reddened cheeks. "I'm healthier than you are."*

*He shook his head. "Your parents have excused you from the hunt, Stone. That means you're getting sicker."*

*"It means they don't want the Yata to see how thin I am. I look sacrilegious now."*

*SunDog rubbed his chops, looking irritated. TripStone screwed up her face at him before she realized he wasn't irritated at her. She eased his hands away, spying the first signs of a rash spreading across the rest of his body.*

*He became terse. "I have the good sense to know when to break my fast, Stone. I'm eating Yata tomorrow."*

*TripStone looked toward the streaked window, past shelves holding wooden puzzle toys and nature poems scrawled on parchment. The strange boxes were nowhere to be found.*

*She said, "Let me feed you instead."*

*He laughed and showed her a puckered scar on his upper arm. "I've already tried it. This wasn't a farming accident."*

*She guided his hand. "That's not what I meant."*

*"I seriously question your scientific method." SunDog gathered her into his arms. "But I adore your fervor."*



*“I’m not joking!” TripStone forced her voice down to a whisper. Ghost’s parents knew and approved of their furtive trysts, but she still didn’t want to advertise them. The walls were thin in this house of extended kinship. “Why couldn’t we feed each other like this? You said it yourself, you’d try anything.” She gazed past his shoulder. “Where are the bo-”*

*SunDog’s mouth closed on hers, strangely hot. His hand glided between her legs, reducing her to small gasps as his fingers found their targets. If she hadn’t been melting away before, she was now.*

*His broad lips left hers, his breath labored. “Promise me you won’t mention those and I will lick you silly.”*

*“It’s not the sex, SunDog.” Oh, but it was that, too. “You have to believe in it.”*

*“Promise me, and I’ll believe as best I can.”*

*Her fingers combed through his curls. “I promise.”*

*“Then I believe.”*

*His tongue traveled. It caressed her nipples, teased her navel. His arms came under her legs.*

*“Drink,” she wheezed, barely able to hold still. “Deeper. Live off me.”*

*She would flood his soul if it would make him a believer. They could melt inside each other, their hearts one, their sex one. TripStone shuddered and poured faith faith faith, growing numb around SunDog’s tongue and teeth, panting for breath until he looked up worried from between her legs.*

*“I’m fine,” she hissed. “Come here.”*

*His pallet tilted as she rolled onto her side, but that couldn’t be. She clutched SunDog’s waist as he slid beside her again. She tasted his lips as she grasped his cock, jolting with power.*

*He said, “You can barely hold yourself upright.”*

*She answered, low in her throat, “You will sustain me.”*

*He could flood her soul, too. TripStone drank, and drank again, trying to suck his body dry of doubt.*

*The next day she almost pummeled him with her fists when they hugged at the windbreak and she could smell the Yata on his breath. Afterward he disappeared for days at a time, clutching her long and hard on his return and smelling of the mountains.*

~~~

TelZodo lingered just outside the house as drops spattered his shirt. He stepped inside and eased the door shut behind him. The drizzle stopped and started again as the rainy season faded away.

Despite her leathery complexion, the sleeping body on the marital bed looked disturbingly pale. TelZodo listened to even breaths, then curled his lips back and tasted the air.

Preservatives. Aromatics to cover them. An unremarkable bouquet. He slipped off his boots and carried them into the kitchen.

He should invite Smoke here to fill these maddeningly empty walls. Didn't these people believe in decorations? But what did one paint in a place like Promontory?

Mudslides, smelters, and worn faces. TelZodo hadn't needed to see his shrinking and lengthening shadow to tell the time. He needed only to listen to the shift changes.

He unlaced and pulled off his shirt, hung it on a hook to dry, and refilled his water skin from the barrel in the back. Drawers by the storeroom shelves held pen and ink, parchment.

TelZodo brought them to the table. He took a swig of water and sat, arranging. Rearranging. He unstoppered the vial and dipped his nib.

He held the pen over a sheet and let drops of black blood splat. He watched the slow pull of gravity, each pregnant bead filling until it fell. Some hit the parchment devastated, their innards flung into messy spikes as though blasted away by gunshot. Others held their shape with a soft plop and remained

deceptively intact until the sheet absorbed them, pulling them slowly apart, like CatBird's many unborn children.

TelZodo couldn't find the words. He sat motionless, letting the ink die.

No wonder AgatePool couldn't write about SandTail. FlitNettle had poured her life upon the page and now she was gone.

He wiped the pen down and sealed the vial, left his messy work out to dry, and put the rest away. Nothing left to do but pace in the kitchen after sitting all day, first at the library and now here. TelZodo's muscles jumped as he crossed from one blank wall to another, turning half-formed thoughts in his brain. Ideas wilting on the vine.

Not wilting. Caged.

Everyone was caged. TelZodo's bare feet slapped on wood. His pectoral fur frizzed from an outpouring of heat. His curls bounced halfway down his back. He should grab hold of the ruined sheet, run it to the Warehouse, punch his fist through that infernal glass, and jam his dead ink on Hook 726.

And then what?

"Go ahead."

TelZodo swung toward TripStone's voice. She stood at the kitchen entrance, leaning against the post, looking ruffled.

He growled, "Go ahead *what?*"

She pointed to fists he hadn't realized he'd made. "We have plenty of wall space, TelZodo. Punch anywhere. It's only plaster."

Bitter laughter burbled up. "And break these delicate hands that have performed such valuable services?" He pointed to the parchment. "That create such masterpieces?"

"Yes," she said, flatly. "Then you don't have to whine about wasting them because they're so pretty."

He looked from her to the ink blots and back. “I heard you used to be pretty. Why’d you waste it?”

“So I’d be ready for you when you came here looking for ugliness.” TripStone pushed herself off the door frame. “You’re not even close to it.” She paused by the table, gazing down at the parchment. “I heard you pacing. You sounded like your father.”

TelZodo studied her loosened shirt. “You liked *his* hands.”

TripStone regarded him with eyebrows raised. “Yes, I did.”

“I read his narratives.”

“So did I.”

“He talked about your being a hunter and a *yatanii*,” TelZodo pressed. “But he didn’t talk about why you liked his hands, and yet he almost married you.”

She bristled. “Are you afraid he’s mastered some technique that you don’t know, TelZodo? Afraid he’s bested you in your own realm of expertise, since he’s beaten you at everything else you care about?”

His fists sprang open. One lunge across the table, one well-placed tug, and that half-wrapped shirt would be off her. He whispered, “Or maybe *your* hands almost trapped *him*.”

She was on him in a second. Claws wrapped in TelZodo’s pectoral fur, pulling.

“Let me tell you something, you stupid maggot. Your father knew better than to marry me.” Her gray eyes shone almost black. Her nostrils flared, pulling in his scent. “And it had nothing to do with *his* hands, or *my* hands, or any *sick* little fantasies that you entertain whenever you feel like a worthless wretch. Got that?”

Her breasts heaved. TelZodo eased cloth aside and rested his palm against her waist, caressing scar tissue. “What comes next in *your* fantasies?”

TripStone’s breath caught. She laughed, low in her throat. “You’d do that. That’s what you want from me. A conquest that means nothing.” She patted his chest

and eased herself away. Her bony finger waved toward the parchment. “Which formless blot would that adventure be?”

TelZodo snapped, “The one I break on Hook 726.”

She turned back toward him, her temper faded, looking thoughtful. Squinting. “Really.”

“Really.” The word sounded hollow in his mouth, but what else could he say?

TripStone nodded to herself. She tied her shirt more securely, her gaze faraway. She sat at the kitchen table and lifted the sheet, mulling over its dried ink, then turned it over and studied the other side as though consulting its blankness.

TelZodo took a tentative step toward her. This time she seemed genuinely preoccupied, rather than pretending to ignore him. “What is it?”

She said, “Get me that pen and ink.”

“That’s not meant to be stationery.”

“Of course not. Who’d read it?” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You heard me.”

He felt suddenly small. “What are you going to write?”

“A list,” she said. “My memory isn’t as good as it used to be. I need to put things down or I might leave out something crucial.”

She leaned her elbows on the table and looked at the blank sheet again, her face framed by graying crimson curls.

TelZodo could almost see her thoughts forming inside. He ventured, “Is this what BrushBurn calls your inventory?”

TripStone smiled a little. “Mm hm.” Her nail traced an edge. “Are you going to get me what I asked for?”

All the fight seemed to have left her. It unnerved him. TelZodo returned to the storeroom and retrieved the writing materials.

When he set them on the table she said, “Go prepare us some tea. Use the dagger

root.”

TelZodo frowned. “That’s an analgesic.”

“Yes. You’ll find it on the medicinal shelves.” She uncapped the ink. “It’s also a restorative, especially during sleep. Don’t worry about me, TelZodo, I’m not hurting yet.”

He reached down and laid his hand on her chops.

“Start preparing the tea,” she warned, sharply, “or I will break this nib on your wrist.”

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*If you exist, you will give me as much strength as I need. I don’t ask for any more than that.*

TripStone didn’t know which gods she prayed to. They could be Promontory’s children killed during the frontier wars. They could be the Yata she’d taken as a young hunter aiming her Covenant-era, single-shot rifle. They could be the Destiny Farm dead.

Or they could be the rejected, desperate predator hybrids of Alvav, who’d turned the young man by the hearth into a murderer he’d never expected to become.

The tea would take time to prepare. TelZodo would have to chop the yellow roots fine after separating their hearts from tough outer casings. Then he’d have to make separate infusions of both, coordinate their brewing times, and finally strain one into the other. Making the tea became almost as much a soporific as drinking it.

TripStone looked up from her list and smiled to see him peering at the instructions coiled around the bottle. She returned to her writing before he could glance back at her.

*Tents.*

*Cooking tripod. Kettle. Tin cups.*

*Dried meat. Mineral crystals.*

She turned the sheet over and examined the blots, considering.

Then she nodded to herself and turned the sheet back. *Extra parchment.*

She could still feel where he had touched her waist. She still smelled the sweat on his chest where her knuckles had pressed his skin.

He might never know how much she'd practiced her hunter's restraint. TripStone laughed aloud.

TelZodo's quizzical tone floated back to her. "TripStone, what is this about?"

"That's not your concern." She forced herself to keep her head down. "You'll find out later."

"Why not now?"

She barked, "Fix the damned tea and don't ask questions."

She could smell his nervousness as he chopped. Part of him had to know what she was planning. He just couldn't reach it yet. The less he knew for certain, the better the tea could do its job.

*Bedrolls.*

*StormClouds.*

TripStone reconsidered, then drew a line through the last item. She wouldn't need the larger rifle's range if they had to defend themselves. She'd do just as well with the more lightweight Reckoning, in case the whipbacks had expanded their habitat.

*Reckonings.*

*Extra water bladders.*

*Purification salts.*

DevilChaser would have her head if he knew what she was doing. But the

hospital wouldn't need her for a while, and she wasn't about to tell him. As for BrushBurn—

TripStone tried to remember his parting scent in her lungs. Would he have tried to stop her if he were here? Would he take TelZodo down into the canyon, himself?

She didn't know. Her husband maintained his own inventory reserves, including those hidden in his own lockbox of a brain.

The drizzle had stopped outside. The salt lake level had already begun to fall, so the same had to be happening to the river. The dry season, its beginnings mild and crisp, began to take hold. Soon enough they'd turn toward summer and the desert heat would climb under a relentlessly clear sky.

All things considered, she and Ghost's son couldn't be descending into hell in better weather.



## CHAPTER 28

“TelZodo.”

His rise to wakefulness was like breaking the surface of a lake, a last moment of murkiness before clarity. TripStone’s face hovered above his own when he opened his eyes. Lamp light creased her features in shadow.

TelZodo smiled at her neutral expression. He eased his palm against the back of her neck, surprised by the silkiness of her fur beneath hair bound into a short club.

She eased his hand off her and returned it to his chest, then turned away.

His fingers moved to the light weave at his waist. “You covered me last night.”

“You looked chilly.”

He grinned. “Really.”

“Really.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t another reason?”

“We’re having a hearty breakfast this morning,” she said, rummaging in a cabinet. “And then you and I are taking a long walk. Wear your traveling clothes.”

TelZodo yawned and stretched, letting the cover drop as he stood and padded in the half-dark to the chamber pot. Beyond his own fresh stream he smelled worked leather and smoked provisions, a trace of cleaning oil. “Where are we going?”

TripStone said, “Hook 726.”

He blinked at the privacy curtain, confused. A last drop *plinked*. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Yes, you do. This isn’t about your father, TelZodo, it’s about your mother.”

He returned to the kitchen, rubbing gooseflesh.

TripStone still faced away from him. She sliced meats and vegetables onto plates. The food became indistinct chunks beneath her blade, their odors indecipherable. TelZodo wrinkled his nose and sniffed, sniffed again.

TripStone's voice turned unusually gentle. "You're awake now. You can raise the wick." She didn't turn around. "It's mutton from Rudder, carrots and turnips from the Grange." Steel scraped earthenware. "I hunted the Farm Yata, TelZodo, but I never touched their meat while they were penned and drugged. I thank the gods I never had to."

TelZodo reached for the lamp on the table and the room brightened. He looked upon heavy leather breeches and a vest so stained and worn they flowed around TripStone's limbs. "You tracked them in that."

"Yes." She turned and handed him a plate, looking him up and down. She said, flatly, "I see you're still in your hunting outfit as well."

He met her gray gaze as a flush crept up his ears.

She settled herself at the table. "Your clothes are by the pack you'll use, out in the front room. Get dressed."

TelZodo took hold of a second lamp and followed her pointing thumb. He passed a cold marital bed. If TripStone had slept at all, it hadn't been for long. Against the opposite wall he found two worn bags side by side, each one accompanied by a slender Reckoning.

Fear warred with fury. "Why the guns?"

Her sharp reply cut the air. "Self defense only."

"I've already experienced 'self defense.'"

"I don't expect to encounter *people*, TelZodo, but I won't enter the canyon unarmed."

He gathered his clothes, tracing his fingers along the leather beside them. "This pack has seen a lot of blood."

“Yes. It was FlitNettle’s.” Utensils scraped. “Your satchel was designed for light travel, TelZodo. You had Yucof’s cart for storage. This trip is different.” Tiredness edged irritation. “Get dressed and come eat.”

He pulled his pants and shirt on, studying the bulges in the bags. He hefted TripStone’s and looked toward the kitchen, shaking his head.

~~~

TripStone listened to thumps and clattering coming from the front room and glanced at TelZodo’s still-untouched food. She shoved her empty plate aside, pushed herself to her feet, and followed the noise.

At least he wore clothes now, over a too-familiar pelt pattern girding his slender, too-familiar torso. He had emptied both their packs and spread their provisions on the floor, looking sour as he separated supplies into piles. He frowned at the piles and rearranged them again.

She scowled at the discards. “Those are one-person tents.”

“Yes,” TelZodo answered through gritted teeth. “They’re also very sturdy and have heavy frames. I’m carrying ours.”

“One tent.”

“One tent. Don’t argue with me.”

TripStone raised her eyebrows at his industriousness before she noticed the jerkiness in his movements as he stood. She sampled terror in the air. “Are you afraid of killing or of being killed?”

“I don’t know what I’m afraid of.” TelZodo’s long arm swept over a scattered array. “You’ve packed enough for a full-scale expedition, TripStone. What are *you* afraid of?”

She said, voice tight, “I believe in being prepared.”

He whirled on her. “For *what*? “

“You tell me.”

“You tell *me*, TripStone. You’re the one who planned this trip.”

“Maybe, TelZodo, but this is why you came to Promontory.”

He muttered, “You picked a convenient time to take me to the Farm, with your husband off in Rudder.”

“The weather doesn’t care about my domestic arrangements.” Her neck fur flared. “If you’re that concerned, you can go alone. I’ll give you a map.”

He stood over her, close enough to taste. “*Oh* no. You’re not getting out of this. You need to go down there, too.”

She looked up into flashing brown eyes, then down at decreased provisions. The pile beside FlitNettle’s old pack dwarfed the one next to her own. She asked, softly, “Afraid I’ll drop dead before I can help you face your demons?”

“Something like that.” He crouched and began loading the bags. “From the weight of your pack, you seemed set on it.” TelZodo leaned back on his heels and sighed, his face working. “My mother told me about that terrain, TripStone, and you’re in no shape for it. Not any more. I *should* go alone.”

She crouched behind him and started binding his hair for the journey. “TelZodo, I’m going to die no matter where I am.”

He nodded as she tugged. “And you’re afraid you’re going to die before I can help you face *your* demons.”

She quirked a smile. “Something like that.” She smoothed curls down, plaited, wrapped. “Ghost never grew his hair this long.”

TelZodo’s voice became small. “The girls like it.”

“Yes, I’m sure they think it’s quite virile.”

“No, you don’t understand.” A nervous laugh burbled up. “I mean the little girls who play at the Grange. I’m like a big doll to them.”

TripStone’s fingers hesitated as the words sank in, oddly tender. “We don’t have many children in Promontory.”

“There aren’t that many in Crossroads, but the Masari are still having them.” His shoulders twitched. “We’ve got Yata kids all over the place.”

She resumed binding. “What about hybrids?”

TelZodo snorted. “Not as many as you might think, though HigherBrook’s gone on a one-man breeding mission.”

“He’s seeing a day when the Masari die out.” For a moment it sounded like a lie. Unreal or delusional, as though she had confused one kind of mortality with another. TripStone shook it off. “He believes there are Masari traits worth saving.”

TelZodo whispered, “So do I.”

“I know.” She paused. “I’m sorry you can’t-”

“Don’t.”

TripStone looked upon puffed neck fur and a suddenly rigid spine. “All right.” She secured the last tresses and backed away. Her thin arm waved toward the castoffs on the floor. “Clean that mess up.”

~~~

In the end they compromised. TripStone fished BrushBurn’s old gun from beside his side of the bed and TelZodo secured it reluctantly to his belt, leaving the second Reckoning behind. He repacked the parchment in his bag, grumbling, while TripStone made up for its weight by removing an extra blanket that was more modest than practical.

They snuffed their lanterns in a hazy dawn as they left streets filling with the latest shift change. Lines of Yata and Masari intersected and then separated, citizens greeting each other with noncommittal nods under Rudder’s watchful patrols.

A green tunic stood at taller attention as TripStone passed him. TelZodo felt the stare at their backs as they crossed the clearing. “He’s still eying your rifle.”

“I know. Almost no one wears a Reckoning outside the Death bouts, and then

they're used mainly in the killing yards. This isn't the gun town it used to be." She adjusted the strap beside her pack. "No one's gone into the canyon in years, TelZodo. I haven't worn these clothes since you were a toddler." She smiled a little. "We look like creatures from another time."

TelZodo pursed his lips. "You with your Yata haul and me with my throat slit."

"Yes. That's why your parents took you back to Crossroads."

He glanced at her profile for signs of sarcasm and found none.

They rested and refreshed themselves at the rim. TelZodo gnawed on dried snake meat and tried not to tremble as he peered over the edge. He pointed toward sparse vegetation away from the main trail. "That's where my mother told me she climbed."

TripStone followed his finger. "That's where WindTamer found her."

TelZodo nodded. "She told me he protected her all the way to my father's cabin. She couldn't understand WindTamer's kindness at first. She didn't know there were Masari like that."

"WindTamer was a dear old man," TripStone said, her voice fallen flat. "I helped bury him after the massacre."

She wrapped her arms around her knees and drew them in to her chest, her hat hanging halfway down her back. TelZodo looked upon a hard, huddled ball. TripStone's gray eyes had darkened again, staring out over the abyss.

He reached out to her. "Hey."

"Don't."

He let her be.

"It's a broad trail, with many switchbacks," TripStone continued. "It levels out two thirds of the way down and runs parallel to the river, beneath a rock overhang. From there it's a shallow descent to a seasonal lake and then the oasis, a straight shot. I don't know how much might have eroded away, so we'll stay close to the wall."

TelZodo swallowed. “Got it.”

She still looked out over the drop. “DevilChaser was right. You’re tougher than I thought.”

He glanced at her pensive profile, looked away. Shrugged.

He helped TripStone secure her pack as they stood, then hefted his own and followed her as she turned toward the trail. Her hands fluttered briefly by her vest, where he couldn’t see them.

TelZodo curled his lips back and inhaled. “Dagger root?”

“Mm hm.”

“You’re in pain.”

“I’m always in pain, TelZodo. You get used to it.”

She descended the trail on half-bended knees. TelZodo followed her example as they twisted first toward the foothills and then toward the salt lake. Walls climbed around them, blotting out smokestacks, the distant mesa, and finally the crown of the Warehouse, which had turned a milky white in the mid-morning sun.

TripStone squinted at the sky. “Are you all right?”

TelZodo caught his breath. “I’m all right.”

“You’re going to hear screaming soon. It’s not your imagination.” She laughed a little, shaking her head. “It’s the Skedge folly’s test run, not the Destiny Farm dead.”

They rounded another switchback and faced a brightening wall of sedimentary rock. TelZodo fought vertigo as he edged across the trail and peered down at a pale green ribbon.

From behind him TripStone said, “A lot of bones down there.”

He nodded. “I’ve heard.”

“That’s a box canyon. We should get down as far as we can before full sun, even with the overhang. Slow but steady, so we don’t cramp up. And keep your head covered.”

He backed away from the river to rejoin her in dwindling shade.

She shot him a critical glance. “Ready?”

“After you.”

TripStone led the way, supporting herself along the rock wall. TelZodo looked up as the keening began from far above. He listened to a chorus of steam as the Iron Messenger pulled away from the rim.



## CHAPTER 29

### The Canyon

Heat bounced, crazed in the narrow gorge. The river had dropped but was still within reach of the trail as TripStone gathered water, dipping her shirt over the edge, her bare breasts flattened against chalk. TelZodo did the same beside her, dry air eddying off his pelt.

He pulled up stained, dripping cloth, settling it around his head and shoulders. He sighed with relief and shivered as he replaced and readjusted his hat, then fished a crystal from his breech pocket and popped it into his mouth.

TripStone pointed. "You're done here, TelZodo. Get back in the shade."

He slurred around the mineral, "I'm not done here."

She muttered a curse and straightened. Even in the box canyon the river water remained icy. Her skin prickled as she squeezed drops into her neck fur before swaddling her head again. She retrieved her own crystal from her open vest, tonguing it into a cheek.

TripStone scowled at TelZodo as he stood and offered her a hand up. She gasped as she fell against his chest. "Nipples cold enough for you?"

"Just right," he said, leading her back to their provisions beneath the overhang. "No wonder you hunters bonded so well."

TripStone shook off a sudden ache. She swallowed mineral-enriched saliva and whispered, "This was the easy part of the hunt."

TelZodo looked around. "Where did you and BrushBurn start finding the bodies?"

"Just ahead."

"We're close to the Farm, then."

She nodded, lifting her pack and then her rifle, leaning against sandstone. She watched TelZodo spit the crystal back into his hand, his face troubled. "I don't think any of your siblings would have been found this far out," she said. "If your eldest brother or sister were still alive, he or she wouldn't have been much older than a child."

"Old enough for the breeding pens." TelZodo pocketed the crystal and barked a laugh. "MudAdder might have even been my stepfather. That's a funny thought. My mother had no idea who got her pregnant when she was here." His hand waved aimlessly. "They weren't individuals in that state." He jerked his shirt-wrapped head toward the oasis. "Let's go."

TripStone slipped her own minerals into her vest and trudged ahead. Vegetation shimmered in the far distance.

The quiet footfalls behind her kept a steady pace. She could feel TelZodo watching her, protecting her. Wasn't she supposed to be protecting him?

Her body had begun cracking into white lines of pain, nothing the crystal could help. TripStone drank more water and fished more dagger root from her vest.

*The demons began in her joints with a slow, almost imperceptible burn. TripStone's swagger began to lose its fluidity. Caresses pricked her like darning needles as her pelt thinned.*

*SunDog's mysterious absences from the Grange grew shorter, and for a while they stopped altogether. He tracked TripStone to her house, where her mother ShadowGrass barred his entrance. His urgent voice reached TripStone from across the threshold. "I want her to eat Yata as much as you do. How can I convince you of that?"*

*She knew her mother hated him, blaming him for her condition. But it wasn't his fault.*

*TripStone clutched her beliefs to her chest. She crouched on the floor in her room, shivering and bent over her yatanii list. She read and re-read it, top to bottom, taking mental aim at all the fetishes and medicines and blasting them away one at a time. Rags hid the scrimshawed bones hanging on her walls and covered the inlaid combs on her dresser. She slept on naked straw, avoiding her pallet with its bits of Yata skeleton worked throughout the frame. Her hair*

*became ratty, her bone-handled brushes untouched.*

*At the windbreak she bit her lip to keep from crying as SunDog took one of WindTamer's plain wooden combs to her snarls and her hair split around the knots.*

*"Don't break your skin," he cautioned, easing his hand against her mouth.  
"You're susceptible to infection now."*

*She kissed his fingers and sank against his bony chest.*

*"TripStone." SunDog's voice shook. "I love you more than you'll ever know. But I can't watch you kill yourself like this."*

*She breathed around aching ribs. "I believe in you, SunDog," she whispered.  
"Believe in me."*

*"TripStone-"*

*"I'll get strong again."*

*"No." His fingers grazed her shoulders, burning. "I will stay here with you, but only if you eat Yata again." His throat half-closed up. "I will marry you, TripStone. I know you want that. My parents want it, too, because they know that then I'll make my home here. We'll live with my family, there's plenty of room. I won't disappear again and I won't leave you, but only if you eat again."*

*She could feel his heartbeat race against her back.*

*She whispered, "You have things you need to do."*

*A sob broke from him. "Not if my work means that you die."*

*"It won't," she insisted. "I won't."*

*"Oh, TripStone..."*

*SunDog sank to the mulch, gulping air. TripStone eased herself beside him, ignoring the boiling in her veins.*

*His voice seemed to come from far away. "I'll just have to keep working. But not*

*here. It's much too dangerous." He turned red-rimmed eyes to her. "I won't contradict you any more."*

*She laid her hand on his chops, her fingers trailing through his fur when he turned his head away.*

*"We'll pretend, all right?" He was barely audible. "We'll pretend you're not dying. We'll pretend you'll get better. But I have to stay away from here or I could die, too."*

*TripStone asked, "Where will you go?"*

*SunDog turned back to her. His storm-colored eyes wavered. "I'll tell you where, when I'm ready to leave," he whispered, "because then you'll have to get yourself well enough to visit me. Or you will never see me again." He shook with unspent rage. "And gods help me, I will end this unholy curse so that no one ever has to be like you."*

~~~

Rusted metal tilted out of the rock up ahead, so twisted it looked like a natural formation. TripStone murmured, "That's all that's left of the main gate."

TelZodo stepped up beside her. "Someone tried to fortify it."

"Zai did. During the battle here." Wood rotted slowly, even in the oasis. "TelZodo, you're going to see bones in there, both Yata and Masari. Whole and in pieces. And you're going to see scorch marks and stains and the gods know what else."

He said, "I know."

She smelled acrid fear in his sweat. Her own stench was perfumed in comparison. "I know how frightened you are."

His eyes narrowed. "Do you?"

"You're ready to draw that revolver."

TelZodo halted, blinking in the light. He shook the tension from his hands.

The top of the gate was long gone, but an elbow joint canted at the sky. TripStone followed TelZodo's gaze as he extrapolated, fixing on a spot of empty air.

He didn't have to tell her that he was seeing the branding on the back of his mother's neck.

Then he strode past her, bristling and fuzzed, unhooking and whipping their tent from his pack as he crossed the threshold.

CHAPTER 30

This is my brothel, Bless. TelZodo clutched bark in a stand of tall cottonwoods and stared out at devastation. Cataracts of rock lay flat around a collapsed farm house dominating his field of vision. Fallen and crumpled fences left chainlink scrapes on sandstone. Farther away lay a pile of red brick rubble, its narrow side wall ridiculously intact.

He rubbed salt from his eyes, thankful that the Iron Messenger's screams didn't travel this far down, or he'd believe they really came from the ruined slaughterhouse. The building looked as though it had exploded open, vomiting its bones upon the landscape.

TelZodo turned back toward the trees and waited for feeling to return to his legs. Eventually his heart left the back of his throat and returned to his chest.

He hovered between nightmare and paradise. The oasis stretched before him inside its protected enclave. Overgrown walkways led to half-rotted cabins built around cisterns and blackened fire pits, a bucolic tableau if he didn't think about what the pits had once held. Leaves whispered in the breeze. Birds twittered. Yellow butterflies the size of his hands floated low over the ground.

Lizards avoided TelZodo's boots as he stepped toward the tent. He'd erected it far back from the ruins, at a meeting place of shade. Inside it, TripStone lay on their bedroll, her chest rising and falling but otherwise motionless. TelZodo counted her breaths, then scrunched up next to her with his long arms around his knees.

He didn't remember stretching out beside her, their dirty shirts piled about their heads, his chops cushioned on her chalky breast. Her lurching heart lulled him to sleep. His dusted back fur pulled against his skin, entwined in callused fingers that were not quite limp.

~~~

He awoke to the aroma of smoky tea. TripStone had set up their tripod outside, avoiding the pits. She sat cross-legged by an extinguished fire, pouring.

TelZodo tried not to gawk. “You look completely rested. I’m still exhausted.”

“After seeing this place, I’m not surprised.” She passed him a cup. “This is a good stimulant. BrushBurn carried it with him on the road when he was trading.”

Canyon walls erased the sun, throwing late afternoon shadows across the cooled oasis. “It’s going to get dark early.”

TripStone nodded. “And cold in a few hours.” She raised tin to him. “We’re still alive, TelZodo.”

He returned the salute and sipped. “What happens now?”

“That’s up to you.”

He tried to smile. “If you’d told me that a few days ago, we’d have been topless together a lot sooner.”

“I’m not *that* rested.” She chortled. “You’re certainly not.”

He squinted at her. “You’re just flirting with me, right?”

“Please.”

TelZodo watched TripStone drink, her eyes half-closed as tea infused her thin, battered body. He followed the lines of dulled pectoral fur and sweat tracks on chalk, unable to tell in the low light where her wrinkles ended and her scars began. “You really are beautiful, you know.”

“You don’t know when to quit.”

“I’m serious.”

The Farm ruins seemed to hang over his shoulder, peering at the steam curling up toward his nose. Dead livestock and dead farmers clung like mist to the canopy, waiting for twilight. For a fleeting moment TelZodo wondered if he and TripStone had brought enough oil for the lanterns, in case he became afraid of the dark.

He blurted, “Did BrushBurn tell you where the ledgers were kept?”

She looked up from her tea. “The livestock ledgers?”

He nodded. “There’s nothing about them in the Warehouse. They must still be down here.”

“They probably are.” She reached for the kettle. “Almost nothing was retrieved from the Farm after the battle. We had too much to contend with, and any recovery here became secondary to the hunts.” Tin filled. “After the hunters were killed and their bodies retrieved, the Farm was abandoned altogether.”

She winced, setting the cup down quickly.

TelZodo touched her arm. “What’s wrong?”

TripStone tried to brush it off. She fumbled the kettle back onto its hook and offered him a weak smile, looking devastated. “That’s the second time that the hunters I’ve known have been massacred.” Tears pooled in her eyes. “I was away from them both times. The first time it happened I was rushing home from Promontory and the second time I was lying in a coma.” She lifted her cup again and sipped. “The ledgers would have been inside the farm house.”

TelZodo frowned at her. “That haphazard pile of wood.”

TripStone nodded. “In the room where they did their accounting. If Flit were alive, she’d know exactly where it was. She knew those books even better than BrushBurn did and she had worked with them much more recently.”

She stared past TelZodo, into darkening foliage. “My guess is, it would have been between the dining hall and the dormitories, at a bend in the layout. If you can still find the bend.”

The tea sat like lead in his stomach. “I’ll find it.”

TripStone said, pointedly, “Everything’s unstable there. Don’t get crushed.”

“I won’t. Someone has to get you back to the rim.” TelZodo rubbed his arms. “It’ll have to wait until daylight.” He struggled to his feet. “You’ll excuse me while I go water a tree.”

She called after him, “TelZodo.”



He turned.

TripStone's melancholy voice floated out of the shadows. "You have nothing to be ashamed of."

For a moment he forgot the pressure on his bladder. He answered softly into the dark, "Neither do you."

~~~

I will be a ghost. Doing ghostly things.

SunDog's face floated before TripStone in a mixture of staged melodrama and forced jollity. He had pretended with her, making a joke of his self-exile. Downplaying the death sentence that would greet him if he returned to Crossroads and dismissing the separation from his family that would last for six years. He told her she would live and grow strong and visit his sacrilegious cabin with its Yata body parts.

She had, but not before screaming his name over and over in her delirium, burning uncontrollably in her bed.

TripStone murmured into her tea, "You raised a good son, Ghost."

That graying scientist could live inside his beakers all he wanted. He'd earned it. So had Piri.

Small twigs cracked under soft footfalls. TelZodo stretched out by the tripod, gazing at a narrow swath of stars between the leaves. "Do you know what's funny?"

He sounded like a little boy. TripStone smiled down at his unlined face. "What?"

"It smells clean here." He blinked at the sky. "This is such a horrible place, but it smells clean now."

She lay down beside him. "It didn't, once."

"No." He shrugged. "I heard Crossroads used to smell clean. And Basc." His hand skimmed the dusk. "Peaceful, fuzzy green hills. It all sounded like a fairy

tale.”

The boulder in TripStone’s chest stirred and began to spread.

“Like that harvest tapestry in my dad’s office,” he said. “That patched-together thing. Did you ever see it?”

She choked, swallowed. “Mm hm.” Deep breaths. “It hung in Ghost’s cabin, hiding his lab.” She paused. “His first lab.”

“There’s a marker there now, where the cabin was.” TelZodo barked a laugh. “At least it’s standing in a forest and not in a brown scar.” His voice held heartbreaking confusion. “I could never imagine what clean air smelled like. I had to come here. To the most terrible place in the world.”

TripStone dug her nails into the soil, trying to steady her lungs. Her heart became a great granite egg pinning her to the ground.

TelZodo laid his hand on her arm. “Something’s wrong.”

“I’ll be all right.” She couldn’t hold back the moan. “Just stop.”

He rolled onto his side, facing her. “Tell me.”

“No, TelZodo.” She fought for breath as her stomach rippled. The concern in his face tore through her. “Let it be.”

“You’re crying.”

“Of course I’m crying,” she gasped. “I grew up in that fairy tale.”

“I know.” His arm slid around her. “A lot of people at home did.”

As simple as that. Her voice turned to poison. “And you fucked their sorrow out of them. Made it all better.”

TelZodo balked. He whispered, hurt, “Sometimes.”

“What a talent you have. Just wipe it all away, the massacre, the shit and blood in the streets, the red-painted faces, the bodies. Everything.” TripStone twisted away, the world quaking beneath her.

“That was a long time ago.”

“That was *yesterday*, TelZodo.”

He tightened his grip. “You’ve been holding this in.”

“Promontory’s a hard place, in case you haven’t noticed. Go back to Crossroads if you want soft.”

He shook his head, his voice worried. “Let it out.”

“Or you’ll do what? Screw it out of me?” TripStone’s fingers shook, fumbling with her breech ties as she hissed, “Then go ahead! Go compete with your father, you stinking whore.”

He pulled her hands away from her pants and held them against her sides.

She struggled against him, could hear her heartbeat exploding inside her skull. “Just take the Reckoning, TelZodo. Don’t kill me like this. Do it with a bullet. Do it with my rifle or do it with BrushBurn’s gun, I don’t care.”

“You’ve never had a chance to grieve.”

His realization sheared through her. “I was busy protecting your blasted Grange!” she yelled. “I was busy saving your father’s farm so he could go back home, and destroying your mother’s hell so she could go with him!”

Her breasts heaved with sobs as she laughed. “I was busy planning to kill my husband, too. Thank the gods I made a lousy job of it.” She tried to push him away. “Stop this, TelZodo. Don’t do this to me.”

His urgent tenor shook the sky. “You have to let this out.”

“Get away from me.”

“No, TripStone. It’s tearing you apart.”

She hissed, “*Get away from me-*”

“Stone-”

“DON’T YOU DARE CALL ME STONE!” She twisted free and slammed her nails into his chest, her eyes wild, her voice deadly. “You’re not Ghost, TelZodo. Don’t you *ever* call me Stone. You have *no right* to say my shortname.”

He flinched, taken aback. “*Sorry.* “

Another laugh burbled up as tears streamed from her eyes. “That’s your response? That’s all you can say to me? *Sorry. Sorry.* You stupid, snot-nosed kid, you sound just like FeatherFly-”

The river leapt out of its gorge and grabbed her. TripStone wheezed, clawing air. Drowning. Stunned, her eyes unfocused. “Oh gods-”

TelZodo’s long arms wrapped around her. “I’ve got you.”

A high whine squeezed her throat. “No-”

“This is your Soala, TripStone. It’s your canyon-of-need. Let go.”

She strained against him.

“*Now, TripStone.*”

A howl erupted from her, so overpowering she felt her bones would shatter. It blasted her heart into shrapnel that whipped through her flesh and left her in pieces.

How could this boy hold her when her body was gone? She was nothing but a scream, echoing, repeating. TripStone flailed in TelZodo’s grasp, bucking.

His palm cradled her soaked chops.

She panted, “Oh gods, it hurts.”

“I know.”

“It hurts. He was so young, TelZodo.” Her teeth chattered. “Stupid kid in a fairy tale.” She rocked back and forth, shoulders shaking. Out of breath. “You never knew your brothers and sisters. I envy you. It’s a terrible thing to say, but I envy you. He was such a pest-”

TelZodo cradled her. TripStone turned and buried her face in his chest, heaving.

“They destroyed my mother,” she choked. “My father died of injuries and grief.” She tried to laugh. “My father didn’t even get a chance to thank your mother for beating him up. Did Piri tell you about that?”

He stroked her hair. “She told me.”

“TelZodo, you said I never came back to Crossroads. I couldn’t do it.” TripStone clung to him. “How could I? It was still that fairy tale when I left it to track BrushBurn and SandTail. The air was clean. The mountains were green and fuzzy.” She moaned against him. “Seven days later it was all gone. Oh, gods, what I walked back into.” She hiccuped. “They blasted my world away. When I left Crossroads again with BrushBurn, I left it for good.”

TripStone slouched against him. TelZodo lowered them to the ground, his hug blanketing her back as her pulse rocked her.

Torrents swept her up again. “Oh help me-”

His voice began to crack. “I’m not letting go of you.”

She was dust. She was chalk. “And then the hunters died here, too.” TripStone writhed in his arms, stuttering. “Just beyond this farm, in the base camp. I was in a hospital bed when SandTail told me. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t grieve for them, either. I was so weak.” Spittle flowed from her. “I wanted to kill Promontory, once. And then I didn’t want to kill it, and I killed it anyway.” Words rushed. “I wanted the Covenant to stop and it stopped and Crossroads’ hunters were gone. And I tried to bring it back and then the hunters here were gone, too, and this city was turned into nothing.”

TripStone wailed against TelZodo’s chest. Her fists slammed against his breastbone. He brushed wet hair back from her forehead.

“I can’t be soft, TelZodo,” she moaned. “I do terrible things when I’m soft.”

He whispered, “They’re not your doing.”

She shook against him. “You don’t know me.”

His palm chilled her brow. “You need water.”

“I need to die, TelZodo.”

He shook his head. “Not like this.”

He propped her up, held her against him. Water dribbled into TripStone’s mouth. It fell into an abyss and splashed into empty space. TelZodo’s palm pressed her neck fur, stroking her throat until she swallowed. Drops spilled into her a second time, a third. Her head lolled.

The world dropped away, leaving her peacefully adrift as the trees closed in. Darkness filled TripStone’s field of vision as TelZodo carried her to their tent and eased her onto their bedroll. A blanket draped over her breasts and her shoulders, warming her as she shivered against the cold. For a moment she was a little girl again and her father’s gentle hands were tucking her in, but that couldn’t be right.

She heard a lantern wick flash to life as she began to lose consciousness, and then the soft scrape of her Reckoning being taken away.

CHAPTER 31

She was afraid to move in the morning. It was better to be swaddled tight, with no danger of an arm or a leg falling off or a torso crumbling away.

Tears still leaked from TripStone's eyes, tracking through numbness. She should be a dried-out husk by now, with no ridiculous bodily needs. She shouldn't have to move at all.

Instead she cursed the stimulant, peeling herself out of the blanket that held her together and listening to her joints crack. She tied her filthy shirt around her and shivered in a dawn that had no right to be so cold.

TelZodo's blanket lay just outside the tent. He sat by a low fire, sipping tea, an almost empty plate of dried snake beside him.

He turned to her from the flames. "How are you?"

"Terrible."

He pointed to a newly-cut walking stick beside the blanket. "That's for you."

TripStone grasped the wood and hauled herself upright. She stood swaying before the tent until she could find her balance. "You haven't slept."

He shook his head. "Someone had to keep watch."

TripStone tried to smile. "I've never cried in my sleep before. I still haven't stopped."

"I know." TelZodo snuffed the fire. He stood and rounded the tripod, slipping his arm around her. "Lean on me. Do you know what's worse?"

She looked up at him, her wet chops pillowed on stained linen.

"Being flanked by your wives when you can't stop crying," he said, "who love you and feel sorry for your infirmity, while your kin and theirs are dying together in the hunting grounds. I think I spent half my time as Evit's co-husband screaming in the Soala." He barked a laugh as they edged into the woods. "I

waited until it was empty because Basc households aren't built for privacy."

A fresh flood poured from TripStone, though she couldn't tell whether in response to his agony or her own. "We're some pair."

TelZodo held her tighter. "You can't be soft, and I can't have children. If I were Yata-dependent it would be different." He shrugged. "If I could help my parents with their work it would be different. Do you need help squatting?"

"No. The stick will hold me up." TripStone squeezed his arm. "Thank you for that." She called to his back as he respectfully turned away, "Does the sex help you at all?"

His voice floated back to her. "It helps others well enough."

"That's not what I asked."

She had finished relieving herself and was almost done lacing up her breeches when he answered, "I don't know."

~~~

"I'm going to go to the farm house. What's left of it," TelZodo said, when they'd settled back by the food. "Will you be all right?"

TripStone nodded, wiping her eyes again. More tears dropped off her chin. She considered strapping a bowl to her face. "I'm all crusted over. Doesn't this ever stop?"

"I haven't figured that out yet." He bent to the packs, rummaging. "I'll take us back to the river when the sun's high. Clean everything off."

"We'll have to gather more water." Dried snake dropped down her throat, slowly knitting her back together. "I'm losing so much fluid I'm starting to wonder if we brought enough purification salts."

TelZodo nodded, pulling out a sheet of parchment. "I'm starting to wonder if we brought enough oil to keep the demons away at night."

TripStone pointed. "What about the campfire?"



“Campfires don’t bother them. Look at all the cook pits.” He fished out pen and ink. “You were telling me about the farm house layout yesterday. Are you able to draw it the way it was?”

She nodded, motioning the supplies over. “What part of it I saw, and that was a long time ago. The day of the battle.”

His eyebrows rose. “You haven’t been back since?”

“No. We only passed it during the hunts.” Black lines skittered across the page. “BrushBurn and I had reached the kitchens first, just off the main entryway. Everything was pulled out, toppled over. The Farm Yata had taken all the metal implements with them. All the knives.”

The nib dipped and hesitated, then continued. “The dining area is here. If there’s any infrastructure left it will be a large hall, with several small rooms off to the side. We found fewer bodies as we got closer to the dormitories.” She gestured over the sketch, catching a tear on her sleeve before it hit the ink. “I don’t know what’s in the smaller rooms. We just ran past them when we heard FlitNettle.”

TelZodo stared at the map, then at her.

TripStone squinted back. “What?”

“You remember all that,” he said. “Where everything is.”

She nodded, continuing the line.

“After only one visit.”

“I was allowed only one visit with the families of my prey during Atonement.” A bend in the structure, a long hallway. Sixteen empty rooms. TripStone dipped the nib again. “The Covenant kept Yata and Masari separated from each other on all but the holiest occasions. During Atonement I listened to as many stories as the survivors could tell me about the people I’d killed. I had to memorize all the details as soon as I heard them and get them right the first time, so that I could tell everything to the scribes.” Perpendicular passageways, more rooms. Flit’s door with its heavy wooden crossbeam shutting her in from the outside. “Every Covenant hunter did that. We carried Basc back to Crossroads, not just dead Yata but living memories.”

She wiped her chin again. Still looking down, she said, “You talked with SnailBud for only a few minutes, but you remembered his *yatanii* level. That’s hardly different from what I’m doing now.”

The voice above her tightened. “It’s one detail.”

She asked, “You say you’ve read all of Flit’s diaries?”

His shadow nodded on the parchment.

“What did she write about her first kill?”

“The Yata was a young girl,” TelZodo said. “She was sick. Dysentery.”

TripStone looked up. “Might have been your sister.”

He flinched, taken aback. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

She’d have to ask about something less potent. “What did Flit like about DustClaw’s shirts?”

TelZodo pursed his lips. “The Yata bone buttons.”

“A lot of people’s shirts have Yata bone buttons,” TripStone said. “What did she like about his?”

TelZodo shrugged. “They were very plain. Featureless. Like he couldn’t decide whether he really wanted to have them or not.”

TripStone smiled at him, wiping her chops. “No wonder you were bored with your parents’ stories. You knew them all after the very first telling.”

“Then explain this to me.” TelZodo’s face twisted, agitated. “You say I have a good memory. BarrowBow told me before she died that I paid attention to things. Then why did I forget the names of almost everyone I’ve fucked before they were even half undressed?”

TripStone grunted a laugh, dragging her sleeve across her eyes. Her voice threatened to crack all over again. “For the same reason I couldn’t picture my baby brother’s face again until last night. Not since I had tried to perform an

Atonement with Jirado.” She moved her hand aside as ink shivered out of the pen. “You were right to take my gun away, TelZodo. Don’t let me get near your belt.”

She blew on the parchment and handed it to him. “You know that the touch speech you use with Piri was based on old hunter mnemonics, don’t you?”

He nodded. “My mother told me.”

“Those are just the sounds,” TripStone said. “The first layer of words. Everything can be folded and compacted. The mnemonics are like knots in a net, except that you can connect the knots to each other and then join the connections. Everything recalls something else.” She reached for her plate. “Unless I’m mistaken, CatBird and I are the only two people left alive who possess that skill. And CatBird has never had to use hers in an actual Atonement.”

TelZodo studied the drawing. “We still have Atonement. Remembrances on both sides.”

“So HigherBrook tells me. Everybody’s wrist cramps up because they’re struggling to write the stories down while they’re still being recited. Refilling the pens. Moving pages around. Shaking their fingers out. What kind of attention is that?” She bit into snake meat. “What kind of continuity?”

~~~

TelZodo clapped splinters from his gloves and lifted another scrap from the rubble. He teetered backwards, angling misshapen, charred timber until he could widen his stance and regain his balance. He thanked the gods for giving him his father’s long legs and his mother’s physical stamina.

I’m looking for continuity.

Unless the ruins were more intact farther down, he could dismantle the house without the need of his hand axe. Before he left the camp site he had considered finding and removing everything else that was sharp.

TripStone had been a master hunter. She could kill with anything. If she were set on doing away with herself, taking her gun away wouldn’t have mattered.

TelZodo flung the wood onto a discard pile and looked back toward the trees. “Tell me I’ve given you something to live for.” His first lesson in mnemonics, if nothing else. TripStone would teach him at the river, when they scrubbed down their clothes and their bodies, braving the cold stream running through the box canyon’s furnace.

If he kept thinking about the river, maybe he could keep from melting away in the heat. His braided hair had frizzed halfway loose beneath his hat and clung in sticky tendrils to his face.

More splintered boards spun away from the house. TelZodo cleared away the last of the entryway’s fallen beams. He gathered together an armful of unearthed bones and set them aside, unable to tell which were Yata and which were Masari.

TripStone would know. And his parents. And Evit.

And what about me? His skeleton was Masari. The Yata part of him resided in his soft tissues. They’d have vanished without a trace long ago if he’d been buried beneath these ruins, an entire part of his identity erased to feed the vultures.

I’m looking for continuity.

He couldn’t even tell the cracked skulls apart. What he thought was a Yata could just as well have been a Masari child.

A groan arose from the house. TelZodo backed away as a wall yawned in. He followed its slow collapse around still-intact support beams and resolved to take extra care in his demolition. A serpent ribboned out from under the wreck at blinding speed, looking perturbed.

He had barely begun disassembling the first kitchen by high sun. It was time to stop.

TripStone was back inside their tent, curled up on the bedroll. She opened her eyes at his approach and croaked, “Bring the river here.”

He smiled down at her. “Get all that extra wood out of my way and you’ve got a deal.”

“Ingrate.”

He helped her on with her hat. “I can carry you.”

“Don’t you dare,” she growled. “I’m not that far gone.”

“Good. You can carry me, then.” He eased her from the tent and lifted her walking stick.

She took it from him. “Have you found anything?”

“I have an audience now.” They hobbled toward the water, their arms around each other. “The Destiny Farm dead. They sit in a pile and look very attentive.” They turned onto a walkway of bare rock. The remains of the main gate shimmered up ahead. “I tell them that they should protect me, now that I’ve rescued them from obscurity.”

“Do they answer you?”

“No. They just keep an eye on me.” TelZodo grinned. “Eye holes.” The small pang he felt as they passed beneath the gate surprised him. “Did your prey talk to you after you took them apart?”

TripStone shook her head.

“Evit tells me my father interrogates everything. Intestines. Spleens. It’s pretty funny for a man who doesn’t believe in the afterlife.”

“I used to hear him muttering behind that harvest tapestry.” TripStone’s fingers twitched against his side. “I used to think it was pretty funny, too, but it still didn’t get me to go back there.”

“His narratives said you couldn’t watch him, even though you dissected Yata for a living.”

“I couldn’t bear to.” Light green water softened the landscape ahead. “What I did was a sacrament under the Covenant, TelZodo. What Ghost did was a desecration.” TripStone sighed. “It was a desecration I believed in, but that didn’t mean I had to look at it.”

He tried to read her profile as they rounded the seasonal lake, heading toward a spot where everything still flowed. “Tell me about that.”

She said, voice low, “Not until after you’ve learned the right way to remember all the details.”

~~~

She watched the way his hands moved as he helped her undress by the river’s edge, his nimble fingers keeping to the cloth. Over the years the desert sun and wind had darkened her skin almost to the same shade as his, as though she’d been walking about in Yata leather without realizing it.

TripStone dropped her shirt and breeches beside her boots and foot wraps. She set about removing her hat as TelZodo slipped out of his pants. He was already barefoot and bare-chested, facing away from her and up toward the rim. Walls striped in sedimentary layers flanked them in black and red and taupe, lines that looked like patina, flashes of quartz.

The rim seemed distant as the sun, but at midday the sun didn’t seem far away. TripStone’s fur felt ready to ignite. “I’m going in.”

He was by her side in an instant. “Not too fast. It’ll be a shock.”

“I’ve done this before, TelZodo. I know what to expect.”

TripStone plunged into the water and screamed in alarm. She remembered biting chills, each hunter chiding the next for complaining about a little cold before the river turned to brown and dried up completely. She’d been ready for that, not for all her bones seizing up and for the gods reaching down into the canyon to throttle her by the neck. The boulder of her heart started freezing into ice.

As if from far away she heard a splash and a yell. The river swirled around them as TelZodo floated her toward shore, his chest against her back. He held her sides, lifting her half out of the water.

He panted by her ear, “Don’t do that again.”

TripStone let herself go limp in his arms. She rested her head on his shoulder as her pectoral fur curled up toward the heat.

His teeth chattered. “Gods, this is *vyakkak* cold.”

She started to laugh.

“You think this is funny.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m laughing.” Her shoulders shook with mirth.  
“You must feel awful.”

“You assume I feel anything at all. I think my balls just jumped into my stomach.”

TripStone tried to squelch her giggling and finally gave up on the attempt. It was better than crying. “I think you just saved my life.”

“Good. Because I think you’ve been saving mine.” They submerged a little more. TelZodo sucked in his breath. “I’m going to take us in, a bit at a time. You’ll tell me if you feel too cold.”

She nodded against his chest. Her body sank against TelZodo’s as his hands left her sides and wrapped around her waist. Small shivers came and went as grime began to lift from her and drift toward the lake.

He said, “Those are bones under my feet, aren’t they?”

TripStone nodded again. She extended a leg past his, letting her foot skim the bottom. “There used to be a lot more. Most everything has probably washed away by now.” Her hands rested over TelZodo’s as the water climbed her chest. “The most recent ones came from Basc Yata and Promontory Masari.” She toed the bottom again. “This is a good place to stop.”

Water came between them as his hands slid away. When TripStone turned around TelZodo’s head was underwater, his braid unbound, his plum-colored hair fanning out. She watched air bubbles break the surface as he scrubbed his face.

With a last shiver she submerged completely. A second layer of skin seemed to slough off her as she rubbed down. She blinked her eyes open and watched TelZodo’s murky form, a slow-moving dream cleaning himself with clouds of silt.

She almost forgot that she couldn't breathe underwater. TripStone surfaced and inhaled air that tasted like fire. She leaned back, arched her neck, and began freeing her hair from its braid.

In a minute his long fingers covered hers, smoothing out knots. She whispered, "TelZodo."

Hands rested on her shoulders.

"I can do this."

TelZodo leaned forward and touched his wet chops to hers, then floated away.

TripStone closed her eyes as he swam to retrieve their clothes. She spilled handfuls of water on her face as he splashed toward a boulder. "I'm going to start you on the early lessons," she said. "The ones I taught FeatherFly when he was little. Even if you catch on quickly, we should take everything through its paces, one layer at a time."

Echoes of scrubbing, of slapping against rock. "I'm ready."

She would have to let her mind compact, drawing her thoughts out one sound at a time. The same sound in different contexts and against different backgrounds, like the stripes running through the canyon wall, geologically young at the top and ancient at the bottom.

Different weather patterns and rates of erosion but the same colors, here neat as BrushBurn's straight-drawn lines, there jumbled and angled like battle scars. Thick like a windbreak. Thin like starvation. A single seed pregnant with a thousand associations, exposing everything.



## CHAPTER 32

The remains of two kitchens lay in a pile, recognizable only as charred firewood. But the brick ovens remained standing. TelZodo had stared at them for a long time. Finally he'd worked up the nerve to approach each of them in turn, lips curled back and nostrils wide.

All he could smell were rodent droppings. They were old, left from the winter. A warm press of bodies, the outermost ones sacrificed to the snakes.

He found another partial skeleton scattered by the threshold to the dining hall. TelZodo squatted, casting about for pieces. He found some long bones, still intact. Probably Masari. He gathered them up, cradling the skull under his arm. He'd get the cracked jawbone on his second trip.

He greeted his growing audience in what had already become a well-worn ritual of careful arrangement. The bones remained anonymous, most of them still indistinct as to subspecies, but TelZodo knew them all. He worked in respectful silence, stepped away, and bowed low to them. Then he turned back toward the farm house, trusting them to guard TripStone's unloaded Reckoning.

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One of the skulls accompanied him back to the tent. TelZodo scraped a small depression into the ground a few feet away from the tripod. He positioned the skull so that it faced outward.

TripStone watched him in the growing dark. "Someone to keep watch?"

TelZodo nodded at her soft voice. "I haven't slept since yesterday afternoon. I'm ready to drop." He angled his head toward bone and shrugged. "We're friends."

"You need food."

"I need everything."

He collapsed beside the tripod, smelling river water and sweat. His own clothes had crisped dry. TelZodo didn't realize he'd closed his eyes until his nose

twitched with the smell of fresh, cooked meat. He startled alert and blinked at the unrecognizable morsel held before his face.

From above TripStone said, “Squirrel. I thought we could use a break from smoked rations.”

He let her slip the food into his mouth and wondered as he chewed how a woman barely able to walk could have snared anything. The question kept him awake after she had placed his plate by his head.

~~~

He awoke the next morning refreshed but confused, unable to recall how or when he had crawled into their tent or when he’d lain against TripStone, their body heat trapped by both blankets. He couldn’t recall when either of them had undressed.

She breathed deeply and easily, her stomach filling against his. Their arms draped about each other’s waists.

Her eyes fluttered open. TelZodo waited for her to finish yawning before he blurted, “Did we do something last night?”

She followed the direction of his gaze. “You must be joking.”

“I don’t remember a thing.”

“We’ll see.”

He looked back up and detected a tiny smile.

“The lessons have that effect sometimes,” she said. “It’s the way they get inside you.”

Something had gotten inside him. Beneath the blankets TripStone’s pelt pattern intersected with his, warming the spaces where his fur had yielded to skin. TelZodo felt other parts of him warming and eased away.

TripStone turned her back to him and reached for her shirt. “Before you go to the farm house today I want you to write down the story of how your father and I

first met. Be patient with the pen and don't stint on the details." She paused in her tying. "Stop if your fingers start to cramp. You'll get back to it later."

TelZodo began to rise from their bedroll and dropped down again as images flooded in. TripStone's young hands weeding at the Grange, then stopping as she followed insect trails. The lanky boy suddenly beside her. The spider meandering across his palms.

"He always liked bugs," TelZodo murmured, a bit dazed. "I remember the shiny ones he showed me when I was little."

TripStone pulled her breeches on and eased out of the tent. TelZodo listened to water hitting the inside of the kettle, then to firewood being gathered from a nearby cache.

By the time he emerged, blinking at visual overlays against the trees, she had set out his breakfast beside a sheaf of parchment.

~~~

TelZodo's audience of Destiny Farm dead grew more slowly and began to level off as he progressed to the dining hall. He spent time hacking crossbeams and trusses apart, waiting for gravity to take hold of a roof already half burned away. It could have shielded him from the sun, but it was just as likely to bury him beneath an unplanned collapse.

Many of the walls still stood, but the rest opened up to the sky. A shell of wood and brick ended where distant rock began, making the house appear to be just another layer set down during a geologic period of time.

Continuity.

The word buzzed at the back of his head like a gnat that refused to leave.

He dragged another fallen truss off a splintered oak table that still looked magnificent, dwarfing the one at the Grange. When he returned he could see clear through to doors hanging off their hinges. Small rooms, their structures mostly intact.

TelZodo removed his gloves and set them down on the ruined table. He spent a

few minutes massaging his fingers and palms, then flexing his wrists.

TripStone's words had tumbled through his head all at once as soon as he'd touched his nib to the first sheet. They were like the Yata children leaping into Yucof's emptying cart whenever the trader came to Basc, piling on top of each other and fighting for supremacy as the wagon creaked back and forth on its hinges.

TelZodo had sat transfixed, his pen bleeding ink onto the parchment as he wrestled with the narrative, trying to untangle its strands.

"Easy." TripStone's smoky alto threaded through the noise. "Be patient with the pen. Focus on a little bit at a time. You'll include the rest later."

TelZodo's fingers had cramped much sooner than he'd expected. He never realized how much harder reconstructing a life was than deconstructing a house.

He pulled his gloves back on and removed the first door. The first side room held bolts of cloth, largely eaten away, their irregular patterns of holes forming a strange complement to the fabric designs. He found rusted needles, clamps, and hoops. Not everything metal had been removed.

He coaxed small drawers open, jiggling them until the warped wood became unstuck. He smiled down at notions arranged in meticulous compartments that resembled the cubbies in Bless's decidedly less domestic desk.

But the accountings would be somewhere else. TelZodo backed out of the sewing room and proceeded to the next, releasing the door from its hinges before it released itself.

At first glance the second room looked sparse, with nothing but a simple table and a couple of chairs whose woven seats had dissolved. But its smells of decay held him transfixed at the threshold. He could be back in AgatePool's house, awakening from an uneasy sleep with his nose pressed against SandTail's couch.

He curled his lips back and breathed in the scent of old Yata leather along with the more subtle smells of skins scraped clean. Like those of the goats back home, smoothed almost to the point of translucence. The lost pungency of dried ink.

His hands shook as he drew off his gloves again. TelZodo searched the room

with his eyes closed and his mouth open, relying on his glands.

Blank walls. A small window, miraculously unbroken. A single drawer set in the table, long and narrow and warped shut. He couldn't budge it open, could only hear several pens rattling inside.

The smells grew stronger. Behind the table stood a tall chest, as long as a bench and as deep as the Warehouse stacks, with a large brass lock weighing down its hasp and no sign of a key.

TelZodo didn't need a key. He was curled inside the chest, suffocating. His hand flew to the revolver on his belt.

His first shot dented the lock, with a ricochet that nicked the wall. He aimed his second shot differently, trying to detach the hasp. By the time he fired his sixth bullet the top of the chest was a mess of splintered wood, but TelZodo could lever it open.

He probably could have lifted the lid before he'd exhausted his ammunition. He wasn't sure. He knew only that he'd had to keep shooting until he couldn't shoot any more. He eased his gloves back on, gulping air, and threw back the top.

"Dear gods." He started to laugh as tears streamed down his chops. "They look just like the great books in the Rotunda."

The differences became apparent when he lifted the first volume and it skewed in his arms, its pages detached from a cracked spine and its insides partly nibbled away.

"You're in here," he called to the pile of bones assembled outside the roofless house. He hurried the ledger to the table, afraid to ease back the leather in case sunlight sizzled the parchment and burned all its numbers away. "Don't let the gods be that cruel."

A thin voice answered him, unintelligible. Stricken.

TelZodo froze. He tried to slow his breathing in order to hear better.

Then he sprinted out of the room and through the dining hall, out past the brick ovens. He jogged away from the wood pile, toward and past the bone pile.

“I’m all right!” he yelled. “Stay where you are, I’ll come get you!”

Claws wrapped around and clutched him as TripStone’s walking stick dropped to the ground. TelZodo held her upright, cradling her head. “It’s broiling out here,” he panted. “Why the hell aren’t you wearing your hat?”

She could only shake her head against his chest. Spittle dropped onto his shirt as she managed to stutter, “Gunshot.”

He held her tighter. “I had to open a lock.”

She stammered, “S-six...”

“That’s because I don’t know when to quit. Lean on me, I’ll take you back.”

She bent her knees to hold her ground and became dead weight in his arms.

“TripStone, there’s no shade here.”

Laughter burbled against him. Her weak voice answered, “I don’t know when to quit, either.”

TelZodo looked helplessly around them. “All right. But keep your head covered.” Still holding her, he snatched her stick from the ground. “Can you stand?” He waited for her nod, then stepped back and whipped off his shirt. He swaddled her head with it, anointed her from his water skin, and grasped her around her waist again.

The look on her face as they passed the skulls guarding her Reckoning made him smile.

~~~

“There must be at least twenty books in here.”

“More.” TripStone peered into the chest. “The Farm goes back a long way. I wouldn’t be surprised if these are only the most recent ledgers.” She tried to think, resting her hand on an already-dried turban. “Did Piri tell you anything about what the numbers mean?”

“She didn’t know,” TelZodo said. “Did BrushBurn tell you?”

“Only a little. The latest entries would have included the Yata captured from Skedge.” She sat on the floor and leaned back, her shoulder beside the split hasp. “That means we probably don’t have to look through the most recent book.”

Inside their covers, the ledgers were as esoteric as BrushBurn’s matrices. Differently-colored inks detailed vectors and placeholders. The inks were less faded than TripStone had feared, but the parchment was less intact than she had hoped. TelZodo pulled out another volume and opened it on the table. He inspected it with light touches, as though it might crumble in his hands.

It might. TripStone frowned. “Look for dates.”

“I think I see dates,” TelZodo said, “but they’re encoded. Everything here is written in some kind of shorthand.”

She cursed. The numbers were crowded on the parchment as tightly as the Yata had been crowded inside the pens. “What about initials? Signatures?”

He eased a page back, shaking his head.

TripStone murmured, “I guess we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

“Wait.”

TelZodo returned to the most recent book. He turned it over and eased its back cover open.

TripStone watched him, perplexed. “Those entries postdate your family.”

“I know,” he said, sounding breathless. “You told me that FlitNettle knew these books even better than BrushBurn did.”

“Yes. She’d memorized the numbers ever since she was a young girl.” TripStone shook her head and squelched a sigh. “When we rescued her from here, she was still a young girl.”

“So, she read the ledgers and she had a knack for understanding them.” A page whispered against his fingers. TelZodo’s fur-dusted shoulders relaxed. “And at

the end, she was old enough to write in them. There she is. I'd recognize that penmanship anywhere." He looked back at TripStone. "My mother was very little when BrushBurn left the Farm. If we keep working back through the books, we should eventually find one that he wrote in."

TripStone flinched at the sound of loud scrapes before she realized TelZodo was moving the table. He motioned her over and rapped the table top from underneath.

"I lied," he said, grinning. "We have shade."

~~~

Nine volumes lay in a face-down stack beneath the table, in reverse chronological order. TripStone paged through the tenth, TelZodo through the eleventh. He re-stacked loose pages and hunched back over the book, trying to ignore the cramp in his side.

He wasn't looking at numbers any more but at shapes. The spacing of digits, tiny flourishes of the pen. Different pressures exerted by the nibs.

TripStone made a curious sound.

He looked at her. "What?"

She said, "HigherBrook used to play this little game in the Rotunda. He prided himself on knowing all the scribes by their handwriting. He covered their signatures whenever he read the ancient narratives and then he checked to see if he'd guessed their identities correctly."

TelZodo nodded, turning a page. "He still does."

"You're kidding. You'd think that after all these years he wouldn't have to check any more."

"Force of habit," TelZodo said. "He probably doesn't."

Her gray eyes turned pensive. "He knows all sorts of tricks to keep your hand from cramping up when you write."

“It’s not my hand that’s cramped right now.” TelZodo glared up at the wood, wishing he had a shorter torso.

“Get out from under the table, then,” TripStone ordered. “Take a walk and stretch your muscles. Take food and drink. You’ve been at this for hours.” She leaned to the side, peering up. “The sun will drop behind the rim soon and it’ll be cooler, but don’t come back here until you’ve unkinked. I’ll keep looking.”

He glared at her. “I’d always imagined you to be taller.”

“And I’d always imagined you’d be more delicate.” TripStone jerked her thumb behind her. “Get out.”

TelZodo set the book down gingerly and squeezed her shoulder, then hauled himself out from beneath the table and gasped as his side protested. He limped around the roofless room with a groan, arching his back.

He wasn’t half as delicate as the books were. They forced him to slow down, exacting as much care and patience as the narrative boiling in his head. He couldn’t fathom why it was so hard. *Girl meets boy, TripStone meets SunDog, they exchange inanities about the bugs.*

But there was also the warmth in his father’s young eyes and SunDog’s budding charisma that fascinated the hunter-to-be. There was the way the wind blew, making the clouds take different shapes. Wasps alighting on weedy flowers and then flying away. Carefree children in a fairy tale.

That’s enough for now. TripStone had spoken in the darkness, her graying head pillowed on his chest. *You’ll write this much down first. Then I’ll tell you about what it meant for me to shoot straw.*

TripStone murmured as he squatted back under the table, “I’ve found BrushBurn.”

TelZodo eased the eleventh book back onto his lap. “And?”

“I haven’t found your mother’s number yet.”

“You know what it is.”

TripStone barked a mirthless laugh. “I didn’t know this place existed until I saw it on Piri’s neck. I identified the branding.” She eased another page aside, turning back to front. “I’d say we’re getting close.”

~~~

BrushBurn had not recorded Piri’s number when she was born.

He had penned others, with similar initial digits in place before the children grew and matured enough to be herded into the breeding pens. At least three other farmers had added elements to Piri’s first branding sequence.

It hadn’t been enough for her to have multiple mates. Her identity had fallen to multiple scribes as well.

TripStone held TelZodo across his shoulders. “I’m here.”

He croaked, “I know.” His finger trembled above the page. “She’s surrounded.” One number in a column, one column among many. Placeholders and encoded cross-references. He leaned against TripStone and blinked back tears. “I can’t even touch it, you know? She’s been touched so many times by so many people. All these numbers on the backs of all those necks.”

He gulped air as TripStone’s callused fingers rested against his chops. “I don’t even know what these mean. My brothers and sisters must be buried in this book, but I don’t know how to find them.”

“BrushBurn can.”

“I know.” His shoulders shook. “TripStone, this is the only voice they’ve ever had.”

With her free arm she removed the turban from her head and patted TelZodo’s cheeks dry with his unwrapped shirt.

She said, “The sun’s gone behind the rim.”

They stretched out on the floor in the shadow of rock. TelZodo couldn’t feel his arms or legs. He might as well be ink soaking into the ground.

The volume on his lap held layers and associations. Lineages. It held hidden continuity that extended past its broken leather bindings and into the other, equally broken books. Beyond the broken chest and through the broken bones, beyond the cut Death decks in Promontory and in Skedge and the brokenhearted hybrids in Alvav. Up into the rounded hills breaking from green into brown and wending through the households broken apart in Basc and Crossroads. All the way into the sanctioned hunting grounds and their gunshot breaking the silence while Masari broke their fasts. The broken wheels of procreation, a slow dying-out as Crossroads' population ground, more and more perceptibly, to a halt.

TelZodo gasped, "How many voices can you hold at one time?"

TripStone's fingers nestled beneath his hat, into his hair. "If you give me a while to meditate, I can recite every story from my first kill onward as clearly as everything Zai told me about Ulik. And I remember everything she told me about Ulik."

He turned red-rimmed eyes to her. "Teach me how." He squinted at the ledger. "I've got to get this to BrushBurn."

Her fingers caressed his brow. "No need." TripStone looked up, into the encroaching dusk. "He'll come here, TelZodo. I left my packing list at home."

## CHAPTER 33

For the first time that she could remember, TripStone loved the desert. She sat wrapped in her blanket and shivered as TelZodo sat wrapped in his blanket and wrote. He sipped his smoky tea, his lantern wick high. A broken Yata rib held down already-dried parchment.

He would be recalling the straw by now, transferring her story to the page. He already knew its most basic elements because his father had told that part to the Cliff's deputy. The part about the girl who cried when she managed to shoot a dummy through its marked heart spot on the back.

*GHOST: A girl was being trained to kill so that we could eat, Shabra. She didn't see her bullet puncture straw, she saw it puncture flesh. When I saw how upset TripStone was, I began fasting.*

*SHABRA: Really. What made you feel her guilt so strongly?*

*GHOST: I wasn't guilty, I was angry. No child should have to go through that kind of pain.*

*SHABRA: You were barely past childhood yourself, Ghost. You almost died for her.*

*GHOST: She almost died for me.*

*SHABRA: Tell me about that.*

*GHOST:*

*SHABRA: I see. There's your sour look again.*

TripStone watched TelZodo's hunched profile, the blanket smoothing his lean lines into the shape of a boulder. Would his father tell him any differently? She didn't know.

To TelZodo, SunDog was just a name. An old Masari name given to a boy who had aged too fast. *Just like you.*

She'd have to convince Ghost to climb out of his beakers and tell his son what had happened between them. She couldn't tell him, herself. She hadn't the right.

*You've protected my name long enough, Ghost. He deserves to know how I broke your heart.*

She said, "Your fingers must be cold."

TelZodo spoke to the parchment. "I'm almost finished."

"You'll never be finished," she said. "It can wait."

His entire body frowned. Reluctantly he moved the ink away from his lantern's heat and capped and sealed the vial. He blew on the parchment, slid it on top of the others, replaced and patted the rib: *Stay*.

TripStone smiled.

His voice floated back to her. "There's something I don't understand."

"Ask."

The boulder straightened. "You said my father made a straw replica to keep on the Grange, so that you could look at it and not feel you had to shoot it. That he wanted you to know there was one that would always be safe."

TripStone nodded. "He called it habituation. A way for me to feel there was something I couldn't kill. To make the rest easier."

"But it was sized like a Masari, not like a Yata." TelZodo paused. He said, softly, "Oh."

TripStone nodded and scrunched further into her blanket. "Oh."

She watched him down the rest of his tea, his body stiff with unasked questions.

~~~

For two nights TelZodo breathed in the ledger's scent as he slept in TripStone's arms. On the first morning he returned to the farm house and fitted the other books back in their chest, then closed the lid as best he could. He knelt by the

pile of bones and laid his hand upon each skull, not knowing why. He still didn't feel comfortable carrying the Reckoning back to the tent. The eye sockets seemed to hold him accountable for his actions.

When he passed the sentinel skull near the tripod he found TripStone sitting in the shade of a cottonwood with parchment and a wood board on her lap. She saw him and held her palm up, motioning for him to stay away. More sheets were piled by her side, held in place by a plain gray rock.

TelZodo squinted at her, confused, and she looked back down. By dinner time she had folded everything into a thick packet that she had tied up with dried squirrel sinew and slipped into her bag.

"It's for you," she explained, "but only under certain conditions." She refused to say more. Then she drilled him in the dark, incessantly, until he fell asleep and dreamt he was cinched in narrative knots. He had to pull each one apart to free himself and there were so many of them.

But they yielded easily. TelZodo had only to tug a little bit. They unraveled with soft pops, each one whispering a lover's forgotten name as it dissolved. By morning he had remembered them all.

He awoke exhausted. The sun had already crested the rim and was approaching zenith. Beside him TripStone looked equally drained, her skin clammy and her blanket half-thrown to the side.

So was TelZodo's. The day's heat was climbing. He must have tossed his covering off in his sleep.

He prepared to snuggle against her when something stopped him. A subdued musk bled through that of the ledger. It wavered just inside the tent, spreading like mist.

Waiting.

TelZodo adjusted TripStone's blanket, frowning as she threw it off again in her sleep. He left his own behind and turned, hunched over and naked, toward the entrance.

BrushBurn moved aside as he emerged blinking into the light. TelZodo

straightened his spine and forced himself to face the man in dusty traveling clothes. When he could find his voice he whispered, "I know what it looks like. It's not what you think."

BrushBurn studied the tent. His nostrils flared, once, before he turned back. "It is what I think. Go prepare us some tea." He unslung his bag and held it under his arm as he ducked inside.

Everything reduced to strands. The bits of wood, the tinder and its sudden flame. The water in the kettle, the kettle on its hook. Leaves swirling and strained. Undecipherable murmurs and the sharp odor of fresh dagger root. Twined whispers of comfort and urgency. TelZodo combed through the threads of a world-turned-tapestry, trying to find his way inside the weave.

"She's resting better now." BrushBurn walked past him. He squatted by the sentinel skull and lifted it, turning it this way and that in his broad hands.

TelZodo swallowed. "I don't know whether that's Yata or Masari."

"Masari." BrushBurn set it back down and sighed. "My kin." He pointed to the rib by TelZodo's tin cup. "That would be your kin."

TelZodo looked down at the bone. "In a matter of speaking."

"It's more than a matter of speaking, when you consider fertility trends and uncertain paternity." BrushBurn smiled a little bit. "I understand you've found your mother."

TelZodo nodded, feeling numb. "Not the others."

"They're there. I'll help you. Once we're back in Promontory." BrushBurn sat opposite him and poured, casting a glance toward the farm house. "We'll wait for shade late in the afternoon before we ascend. You'll carry the ledger after I've wrapped it. I'll come back another time to retrieve the rest." He sipped. "TripStone tells me our kin are keeping her rifle safe from her."

TelZodo blushed.

"Don't worry, son," BrushBurn said. "You did the right thing."

TelZodo gulped down tea and winced at a scorched tongue. He blurted, “What did they say in Rudder?”

“They’re predicting seven years to parity.”

“And what do you think?”

BrushBurn raised his eyebrows. “We’re in agreement for once. The Yata are prospering, the Masari birth rate has dropped, and weaning continues to slowly improve. Unless the death rates change, we’ll be able to do away with the bouts.” He blinked.

TelZodo studied wavering steel blue. “And then what?”

BrushBurn shrugged off his vest and looked suddenly weary. “Rudder puts very little stock in longer-term predictions. My guess is that Promontory has two, maybe three generations of Masari left in it. Then it will be up to the Yata to see what they can sustain.”

They drank in silence.

TelZodo whispered, “I think the same thing is happening to Crossroads.”

“At a bit slower pace, would be my guess.” BrushBurn steepled his fingers before his face. “But I agree with you. Rudder will be the last to fall, but even it isn’t immune.”

TelZodo tried to wrest answers from his cup. “How did this happen?”

The steeple collapsed. BrushBurn poured more tea. “Our ideas concerning parity are flawed. That state isn’t a stable one, TelZodo. Yata multiply faster than Masari as a matter of course, even without Destiny to accelerate the process. Unchecked, they will simply overrun the Masari.”

“Then we shouldn’t be trying to end Masari dependence on Yata,” TelZodo whispered. “I don’t understand. How did we get it so wrong?”

“The concept isn’t wrong. Our balance is.” BrushBurn rested his head on a chalky hand. “I’m going to try to convince your father of that, but I don’t hold out much hope. Rudder dismisses the theory completely. DamBuster and

DevilChaser never fully supported it and neither did HigherBrook. It's a matter of emotions now." He shrugged. "The Yata have been industrializing and they want workers, not birth control. We've gone from being a culture of predators to being a culture of prey."

The former meat trader stood and stretched. He looked out past the stand of trees, toward bare rock. Nearby foliage half-hid the pile of discarded wood. "Come get me if TripStone awakens before I get back. I'm going to take a stroll around my home."

~~~

The Caterpillar began to set behind the rim and then it began to rise again as they gained altitude. TelZodo shuffled on chalk, bent almost double beneath the weight on his spine. BrushBurn had lashed him to the Farm ledger after wrapping it in oiled canvas closed with leather straps. The ledger formed the middle of an unwieldy sandwich, with TelZodo on one side and his and TripStone's packs on the other.

The gravity of what he carried was nothing compared to the treasure in BrushBurn's arms. TripStone dozed on and off against her husband's chest, her arms around his neck, her body blanketed. BrushBurn cradled her against him, her Reckoning strapped to his back.

"We'll take the Iron Messenger to the hospital." The gravelly baritone was almost too soft to hear. "It will be running by the time we reach the trailhead."

TelZodo clutched his lantern in one hand and steadied his load with the other. "I thought that ran only once a day."

"Ten times when I got back. They've added drive wheels and switched to all metal rails. It goes much faster now."

TripStone mumbled something unintelligible against his chest.

BrushBurn answered, "I'll plug up your ears."

"Catch fire anyway."

"No, they've improved the smokestack. It's safe enough for passenger runs." He

turned to TelZodo. “She hates that thing.” His kiss lingered on TripStone’s forehead. “That’s your punishment for getting yourself into this condition.”

TripStone tittered. “I get to ride it before I die. That makes my life complete.” She squinted at TelZodo in the shadows. “You look like HigherBrook carrying that.”

TelZodo squinted back at her, confused.

She tightened her arms around BrushBurn’s neck. “HigherBrook carried one of the Rotunda’s books to The Honorable One as a peace offering after the massacre. It was almost bigger than he was.”

They rounded a steep switchback. TelZodo tried not to grunt. “Did it work?”

“No. The meat I got from BrushBurn did.”

Without hesitating, BrushBurn added, “That ledger is yours, TelZodo. You’re taking it back to Crossroads.”

TelZodo’s heart knocked in his chest. “This is priceless.”

“Yes, it is. You can copy it and send me that if you like.”

TelZodo swallowed around the rock in his throat and whispered, “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. That’s your birthright. And Piri’s.” Steel blue eyes consulted with the stars. “I’m going to write to your mother, giving her permission to show you my letters. She’ll decide whether she wants to share with you what she wrote to me about.”

They climbed in silence, leaving more of the canyon behind and watching the sky broaden. For a while they kept pace with the Caterpillar, until their gains in altitude grew insignificant and the constellation dropped completely behind the rim.

“BrushBurn.”

He touched his chops to TripStone’s. “Yes, dearest.”

“I’m not going to die in the hospital.”

“I know.”

TelZodo watched them, wondering how they could be so sure.

TripStone said, “I’m taking my distribution papers with me.”

BrushBurn nodded. “I expected you would.” He was silent for a long time. “Sweetheart...”

“Mm?”

“Rudder has restricted travel inside its borders to level six and above.”

Boots crunched on chalk. An occasional pebble skittered. A curved void rose from the rim, blocking the stars. Its strangeness unnerved TelZodo until he realized he was looking at the unlit top of the Warehouse dome.

TripStone asked, “What about your meetings?”

“Special dispensation.”

She snorted. “Generous of them.” She repeated, more forcefully, “I’m not going to die in the hospital. Make sure that DevilChaser understands.”

“He will.”

The descending trill of a canyon wren echoed behind them. More of the Warehouse began to show, vaguely backlit in lightening grays. The horizon changed, becoming jagged and more distant.

They turned another switchback and watched a golden bead of reflected sunlight form at the top of Skedge.

TripStone asked, barely a whisper, “You’ll be all right?”

“No.” BrushBurn kissed her forehead again. “Yes, I’ll be all right.”

They continued their slow zigzag. TripStone snuggled against BrushBurn’s chest and dozed off again. He tightened his hold, bending his knees and shifting his

center of gravity. TelZodo focused on the trail and listened to the wren as he carried the Destiny Farm dead on his back.

## CHAPTER 34

### Promontory

A single bookshelf in what was once DamBuster's office held derivations of the formula for Destiny, numerous treatises on different grades of Sustainer Masari, and unbound recommendations for improvements to Promontory's ales.

Opposite the shelves a gray slate wall bore diagrams of chemical bonds chalked in the apothecary's light touch. Beside them, half-hidden in the haze of multiple erasures, lay BrushBurn's attempts at their application and his unanswered questions written in firm block letters, as though pressing the slate harder would force the answers to its surface.

TelZodo wondered if the livestock ledgers, the ones still in the canyon and the one he would copy, would reside in this room or in the Warehouse's Farm section. Or if just the one might end up here.

The original lay on a broad oak table set beside a window facing the mountains. It remained swaddled in canvas and leather, next to freshly-inked parchment. TelZodo dipped his nib, marshaling the memories of BrushBurn's voice and the stories the former trader had told during the ride, in-between interruptions from the Messenger's whistles. He wrote about the Destiny Farm dead on both sides of the pens.

He looked up when the door to the office opened.

BrushBurn stepped inside, looking weary. "She's sleeping. DevilChaser's keeping her here until he's sure she's ready to go with you."

TelZodo nodded. "I should return to Promontory when she comes back. Try to record all those stories FlitNettle said were being pissed away."

Straps whispered through buckles. "No, son. Get your training at home first." BrushBurn sat at the table and unfolded canvas. "You don't want to be with TripStone when she comes back here."

TelZodo screwed up his face. "Why not?"

“Because just her flesh is returning. Her bones will remain in Crossroads.” BrushBurn expelled a long sigh and eased the ledger open. “It’s probably best that I can’t go with you.”

He focused his attention on the numbers. TelZodo forced his stare away from rusted gray curls and bent back to his narrative.

He glanced up from time to time as BrushBurn turned the pages, moving backward and forward through the book and jotting down notes as enigmatic as the rest. The old man negotiated holes in the parchment, tracing alternate routes along the bloodlines. A stained and battered notepad lay open at his side.

BrushBurn’s first wife, Sunrise, was buried in an older book. Perhaps that one would find its home in this office as well. TelZodo wrote of their innocent play beneath Destiny Farm’s awnings, of their baby who never lived long enough to receive a number, and tried to detach the knots of mnemonics from the ones in his stomach.

Outside, the mountains began to lose distinction against the sky. BrushBurn paused in his reading to light a lantern.

Without looking up, TelZodo asked, “Do you ever think about your other children?”

A yellow glow spread across the table, brightening to almost white.

The soft answer dropped from above, tinged with wonder and sadness. “I have no idea how many there might be.”

“Your old sales records are in the Warehouse.” TelZodo gentled his voice. “You recorded the flesh payments. Children probably issued from some of them.”

“I suppose.” Parchment rustled. “It’s something for me to look at again.”

TelZodo looked up into watery eyes. “You kept people from starving.”

BrushBurn nodded. “And you distracted them from grief.” He bent back to the numbers. “That’s what we told ourselves.” He shrugged. “It’s true, but truth’s funny that way. I’m almost done.”

TelZodo whispered, “You’ve found them?”

“Most of them.”

TelZodo gazed at the book, his heart thumping.

BrushBurn waved him back to his papers. “Keep on with your work. I’ll tell you when I’m finished.”

~~~

Piri’s number had pointed the way to seven more.

TelZodo sat beside BrushBurn, whose hands moved from ledger to notepad to new parchment and back again, tracing the routes of discovery.

“Your mother became pregnant very soon after she was brought to the breeding pens.” BrushBurn’s gestures seemed almost too slow, as though they moved underwater. His voice held a note of solemnity that transformed the business accountings into something resembling scripture. “She bore two males in quick succession. They had already gone to the breeding pens by the time the Farm Yata escaped.” His finger moved to the notepad. “Both were taken in the canyon hunts.”

TelZodo whispered, “They were both still alive after I was born.”

BrushBurn nodded. “All of your siblings were still alive when you were born, though most of them didn’t live for long afterward.” He found a placeholder in the ledger, turned pages. “She went for more than a year before giving birth again. It almost got her culled.”

The room took a sickening tilt. “But she would have been-”

“Almost twelve. A typical Farm Yata woman would have produced five children by that time.” BrushBurn pointed. “A female child. Male. Female. All widely spaced by Farm Yata standards. The two girls died from poisoned Destiny.” He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, sighing. “The younger girl had just entered the breeding pen the day before. She was one of many that I carried into the Warehouse when the bodies were brought up.”

TelZodo couldn't move. When he finally did, he looked over at BrushBurn and didn't know which of them fought harder to keep his composure. He croaked, "What about the boy?"

BrushBurn slouched forward and faced him. "Unaccounted for."

"What does that mean?"

BrushBurn offered a tiny smile. "It means we lost track of him after the Farm Yata escaped. Either he wasn't taken in the hunts, or he was mangled so much we couldn't read the branding."

The facts took a moment to register. "He might still be alive."

"It's a remote possibility. But yes." He hooked his fingers beneath another placeholder and eased more pages over. "Your mother told me she tried to fight the drug. I don't know if that was responsible for her low birth rate or if she were physically abnormal. It might be related to your own infertility."

TelZodo unhooked his water bladder from his belt and took several shaky sips.

BrushBurn asked, "Do you need a moment?"

"No. Go on." Columns swam as he followed BrushBurn's finger skimming the page.

"Promontory was experiencing a time of plenty during your mother's last years at the Farm, in part because we were getting Destiny from Basc by then. That saved her life." The finger stopped. "Her last two children before you had been too young for the breeding pens when the Farm fell. One child died during the escape, a young girl. She was five years old." BrushBurn flipped pages in his notepad and slid the matching number before TelZodo. "The escape happened several days before TripStone and I got there. Your sister was too far decayed by then, but parts of her were still intact. Recording her branding number was the only thing I could do."

She would have had a small Yata face and bright eyes clear of the drug. They might have been the same color as TelZodo's. He almost asked if BrushBurn remembered what the girl looked like, but stopped himself before he blurted the question. She'd been dead for days in the company of vultures. She would have

looked horrific.

BrushBurn said, softly, “When I went to the farm house I took the liberty of looking through the bones you collected. Several small Yata skulls were among them. One might have been hers.”

TelZodo nodded. He whispered, “Tell me about the last one.”

“A boy.” BrushBurn found another placeholder. He turned more ragged pages. “Piri escaped from the Farm shortly after she had him. She was part of a group of women being transferred from the nursery back to the breeding pens when she saw a gate left open.”

TelZodo looked down at something that was barely a number at all. “My mother told me about her escape, but I didn’t realize...” He shook his head. “She had to leave him behind.”

“She didn’t leave him behind, TelZodo. He was taken away from her at birth.”

TelZodo huddled over the pages. “What happened to him?”

“He’s also unaccounted for.”

What were the chances of a baby surviving the Farm Yata’s flight to freedom? TelZodo laid his head down on the table and tried to breathe. “Thank you.”

A broad arm eased across his back.

“Don’t do it, BrushBurn,” he choked. “I’ll fall apart.”

Gravel broke. “That’s your birthright, too.” The chair scraped beside his and moved closer. “No man should have to cry alone.”

~~~

TelZodo slept in BrushBurn’s office, awakening to find his travel satchel by his side. The revolver that had passed from BrushBurn to Piri to him, then back to BrushBurn and back to him, perched between its buckles. The Farm ledger, still on the table, was again wrapped in canvas and tied with leather.

He secured the gun on his belt and rummaged through the satchel for his voucher from Bless, to have on hand when he was stopped at the border with Rudder. Two other packets brushed against his knuckles as he searched.

One was a letter from BrushBurn addressed to Piri. The other was TripStone's thick, folded sheaf tied in squirrel sinew. She'd instructed TelZodo not to open it until after he had spoken with his father.

Indistinct voices passed through the hospital walls. TelZodo stepped into the hall and followed them to the next room. He took a deep breath and entered DevilChaser's office.

"I'm not joking," the doctor was saying, the scowl on his face profound. "I'm sending you home in a fully-provisioned cart with my best runner, TripStone. Try anything strenuous and I guarantee you will never see Crossroads." He turned toward the door. "TelZodo! Good, you're here. You're my last defense between my patient and her stupidity."

TripStone relaxed in a cushioned chair, looking deceptively hearty. She raised an eyebrow at DevilChaser. "After I cross the border I won't be your patient any more."

"You're always my patient," he snapped. "I gave my sweetheart strict orders to track you down in the afterlife and make sure you behaved."

TripStone smiled at TelZodo as he pulled up a chair. "My husband and my doctor are ready to hit the tavern after we leave, and DevilChaser's telling me to behave."

"You think that's funny?" TelZodo said. "They're both trusting you with me."

BrushBurn murmured, "Must mean we're already drunk."

TelZodo looked from one to the other and realized he was about to leave another family behind. BrushBurn was right; he had to train in Crossroads. But then he'd come back to Promontory to absorb and transcribe as many stories as he could hold. Some day he might be able to do the same for the predator hybrids in Alvav and even the overconfident Masari in Rudder, before everyone disappeared.

Something permanent had to be left behind. Bones instead of soft tissue. Books instead of drunken soliloquies. Souls instead of manuals.

For the first time the exploding mountains at home began to make sense. Those metal Iron Messenger tracks couldn't be laid down fast enough.

“TelZodo, get your gear and help me finish loading.” DevilChaser was out of his chair and halfway out the door. “We're leaving these two alone for a while.”

## PART 5

### CHAPTER 35

TelZodo stood to the side as doctor and patient cinched each other in a tight hug. Then DevilChaser conferred with his runner while BrushBurn carried TripStone into the wagon.

“I’m glad you came here.” The bald man reappeared by TelZodo’s shoulder. “You’ll let us know how you’re doing.”

TelZodo nodded. The rooster’s zealous assertions built a lump in his throat.

DevilChaser looked off toward the mountains. “She should have a few good days in Crossroads.”

Traffic clattered on the Skedge Bridge as the day began to heat up. “Then what?”

“I treated her enough to let her marshal her energies for that long. But it isn’t sustainable.” The doctor shook his head. “Whatever she’s got left in her will run out fast.”

They waited for BrushBurn to emerge. TelZodo felt the iron clutch of one man and then the other. The sensations lingered as he watched them begin their long walk toward the tavern.

He hurried beneath canvas stretched over hoops and heard chains lengthening. In moments the wheels beneath him began to turn as DevilChaser’s runner pulled away from the hospital and steered onto the broad road leading into town. Another turn placed them on the main trade route. The chains *thunked*, gearing down for a steady ascent.

TripStone lay on a pallet secured to the wagon bed, her pensive eyes turned toward the canvas. “I rode in a cart the last time I went back to Crossroads. I took it as far as Rudder, buried under chains.” She smiled a little. “I feel more pressure on my chest now than I felt then.”

TelZodo reached for fresh dagger root.

She waved it away. “It’s not that kind of pressure.”

Her gaze rounded the transport’s contours. Straps bolted to wooden walls held amenities in place. Water barrel, chamber pot, small bureau, lanterns and oil. “What do you think, TelZodo? Am I in a traveling sick room? Or is DevilChaser trying to outdo BrushBurn’s old trading tent?”

He lay down beside her, the knots of story holding in place. “The curtains aren’t as colorful.”

“Gods, those curtains.” Her smile turned wistful. “And I miss his damned pillows.”

She closed her eyes and drifted toward sleep.

Sometimes TripStone talked in her sleep or TelZodo listened to her in a dream. He wasn’t sure. Sometimes all he heard were well-greased gears and rhythmic footfalls, or bird song in the cool shade of rest stops. Then the birds and the trees dropped away, leaving bare rock and sharper echoes.

He awoke on their second day of travel to find her head pillowed on his chest. His stomach seemed to float as the road leveled off and the wagon picked up speed.

She stirred in his arms. “The pass.”

He nodded.

“We’re near the border. Get my *yatanii* certificate.”

She sat up and stretched. TelZodo crossed to the other side and reached into TripStone’s pack, bypassing the distribution papers. At first glance the documents specifying the fate of her remains seemed too plain, their lettering unremarkable when compared with the florid script on the certificate granting her passage through Rudder.

She pretended to sleep as a border guard entered the wagon. TelZodo scowled as he retrieved his voucher from the pouch at his belt and waited for clearance.

He’d almost missed the polished stock and narrow barrel wedged into a corner

by the bureau when he put the forms away. TelZodo pulled TripStone's pack closer to him for a better look. "Why the Reckoning? You're in no shape to hunt."

"It's a gift."

The finality in her voice halted any further questions.

~~~

TripStone eased canvas back and waited through the switchback turn. At first she thought she saw scrub clearing from her field of vision, but the odors reaching her were more lush. Those broad silhouettes were leaves.

In moments they yielded to distant yellow lights against the dusk. Rudder sparkled below, here patterned in grids, there yawning into shadowy spaces where the farm networks stood. Bright fingers extended into forest tracts ending at foothills.

She asked TelZodo, "Do you hear music?"

He nodded, still facing out the rear of the wagon. "It's coming from the Pavilion."

The Pavilion. The Rotunda. The Warehouse. Only their architecture remained the same. TripStone chuckled.

He turned back to her. "What?"

"When I was your age I thought every place was like Crossroads and Basc. Everybody followed the Covenant. Every region had its own hunting grounds." She shook her head. "I was so ignorant."

"You were kept that way."

"I suppose." She lowered her voice. "Don't fall out the back."

Canvas shushed. "There's nothing more to see until the next turn."

By then they might be below the tops of the Marsh's high walls over in Alvay.

TripStone had looked over TelZodo's shoulder as he followed that city's perimeter. Lanterns encircled a tangle of gleaming spokes and radii. The former prison seemed to waver, much of its light duplicated and reflected in the water. Around it lay waystations and hybrid camps, visible only as dull, glowing islands dotting the meadows or buried in thickets.

Now he scooted to her side as they dipped closer to Rudder. TripStone wondered how many Yata crossed the bridge to go to the Pavilion, dressed in finery and side by side with Masari. How many guards had ended their shift and shucked their green tunics to blend into the crowd? She pointed to the well-lit dome. "Have you ever been inside?"

TelZodo shook his head. "Have you?"

"No, but I've seen drawings."

She wondered how many warriors on both sides of the Games shared strong embraces and raised toasts in the gilded foyer, their tailored jackets and trousers hiding the scars they'd inflicted on each other before they sank into differently-sized velvet seats.

"You say your friend does a brisk business here."

"Smoke?" TelZodo hunched beside her, still watching the lights. "We hardly know each other."

TripStone smiled.

~~~

TelZodo listened to deep, regular breathing beside him, then to a steady chorus of crickets and quiet thumps in the forward compartment as the runner prepared for bed. The Pavilion's concert sounded tinny in the distance.

His nerves thrummed.

He rolled away from TripStone's quiet snores and leaned out the front of the wagon. He called softly, "Do you need help?"

The runner's smooth baritone answered, "That depends."

It was as good an invitation as any.

They quaffed ale in cramped but efficient quarters. Stripped down, the runner was all haunch and leg muscle. TelZodo massaged oil into the man's calves until their knots began to release. He kneaded hamstrings and worked gluteals, gauging his progress by long sighs muffled against the pallet.

A slur rose from beneath. "You're one of the better ones."

"I should hope so." TelZodo edged back and eased an instep between his thumbs. "You're good, too. You must have done more than hospital duty before now."

"Courier." The man stretched his arms past his head. "Work crew on the Cliff."

"Going to build the railway?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

TelZodo lifted an ankle. He rested the callused foot on his shoulder and eased forward, measuring resistance. "Are you from Promontory originally?"

"Rudder." Another long sigh. "I like Promontory better."

He lifted the other foot. "How come?"

The other man chuckled. "Because I chafe in armor and I look lousy in silk."

TelZodo smiled down at him. "And green isn't your color."

"Only when it's crumpled in a corner."

TelZodo glanced at his own clothes thrown to the side. "She's sleeping back there."

Toes wriggled through the fur on his shoulder. "I'd be dead by now if I didn't know how to keep quiet."

TelZodo lowered the leg and returned his attention to the gluteals. Hips lifted under the force of his hands. "Does that mean you don't want to talk?"



“I can talk plenty if you want. After.”

“Good.” His hands slid further as his own groin warmed. “I can listen plenty.”

~~~

Their climb resumed, less steep. TripStone peered out the back of the wagon as she took bites of mutton. Rudder’s marketplace dropped below, a crazy quilt of awnings and crowds milling around carts. Tavern traffic wove around an irritated flock of geese more intent on salvaging fallen grain than in fleeing staggered steps.

She turned away from the foothills. “HigherBrook tells me that Crossroads is like that again. When I left, the only cart still in our marketplace was Promontory’s.”

“There are more Yata vendors in Crossroads.” TelZodo sat against the bureau and looked up from parchment strapped to the wood board on his lap. He set his pen down and shook out his hand.

TripStone smiled at the board, then at him. “Thank the runner for me.”

He waved an ink-filled sheet at her. “For his stories?”

“For that, too.” She settled back on her pallet. “I must have smelled you in my sleep when you got back. I had the most pleasant dream about your father.” She couldn’t tell if the son was hiding his embarrassment or just being discrete as he dipped the nib. “At this pace, we’ll be in Crossroads by late afternoon.”

He nodded, beginning a new line.

~~~

“My gods.”

TelZodo swung toward TripStone’s shocked whisper. “What is it?”

She pulled canvas further from the front and pointed. “The whole forest’s grown back.”

He laid his hand on her arm. “Young trees.”

“I know, but the last time I saw it everything was burned down to the ground.” Laughter bubbled up as she wiped her eyes. “Very little grows that fast in Promontory.” Her hand jerked toward the east. “HigherBrook told me how the buildings were moved, but I never expected this. I can’t tell where anything is anymore, except for my old house.” She flashed TelZodo a worried glance. “That *is* my old house.”

He nodded.

“All of those Yata are gone.”

It took him a moment to realize she was talking about the dummies.

He said, “I don’t remember them at all.”

“Those don’t even look like training yards any more, the grass is so high.” She squinted at the sun angle. “Do you know anything about HigherBrook’s schedule?”

TelZodo didn’t have to ask her what she meant. “He’ll probably be dining with Bless by the time we reach the Hunt Guild road. We can stop there first.”

Rudder’s border guard crossed TelZodo’s field of vision. In a moment the chains lengthened again and the wagon started rolling along a straightaway. Then the runner took a shallow turn and the road dipped.

TelZodo slipped his arm around TripStone’s waist, surprised at how tightly he held her. “Welcome home.”

She squeezed him back, sounding breathless. “You, too.”

## CHAPTER 36

### Crossroads

“You’ve bathed.”

“I always bathe at least once a season. Don’t let it go to your head.” Bless marched past TelZodo, wrinkling her nose. “I see you’ve maintained your usual standards of debauchery.”

He grinned. “I missed you, too.”

She stopped as the runner helped TripStone out of the wagon, then turned back toward TelZodo with eyebrows raised and mouthed, *How did she look before your trip?*

“The same.” TelZodo took Bless’s elbow and eased her forward again. He pointed to the runner. “Ask *him* if you want to know how well I performed.”

TripStone regarded them both with dry amusement. She leaned against a side wall as the hired Masari returned to his compartment.

TelZodo asked, “Where’s HigherBrook?”

“He’ll be here,” Bless said. “The hotter it gets, the slower the Chamber thinks.”

“Good. I want to talk to him about securing dormitory space.” TelZodo smiled down at her. “Your eyebrows are going to disappear beneath that oily hairline in a moment.”

“That’s an unusual request from anyone, let alone from you.”

“Don’t worry. The Rotunda would make a terrible brothel.” He wondered how much higher those brows could rise. “Bless, you’ve heard of TripStone.”

The young woman looked from TelZodo to the wagon, squinting.

He gestured. “TripStone, this is Bless.” He grinned again at the stumbling by his elbow. “Why don’t we go inside? You can both lean on me if you like.”

~~~

TripStone stared back at brick-colored chops shot through with gray and then at puckered lines crisscrossing the governor's face and wondered which of them was more unnerved. She sipped from a dwindling supply of spring tea. "I'm glad you're still alive."

HigherBrook refilled his cup. "It looks worse than it is."

"I can't say the same."

"I know." He again read her distribution papers. "You know that I can't give you to Ghost to dissect. It would kill him."

"I probably shouldn't go to Piri either, then." She studied narrative-imprinted kerchiefs nailed to the walls. "Is Evit dissecting on his own yet?"

"I'll ask."

"Abri is." Bless reached for the honey. She nodded at HigherBrook's surprise. "He's not interested in lab work, he's performing sanctifications on Masari." She turned toward TripStone. "The way you used to perform them on Yata."

"You're kidding," TripStone said. "Who's teaching him?"

"CatBird."

The common room shimmered. TripStone blinked, then looked behind and to the left of HigherBrook, to where her father's and brother's Covenant rifles hung on hooks under glass. The spring tea coursed through her, cleansing her.

"Abri was already praying over dead Masari," TelZodo said. "I'm not surprised he's moved on to dissection."

TripStone heard the moan in his voice. She reached over and squeezed his shoulder.

HigherBrook reviewed the papers again. "This says the runner outside is hired for as long as you'll be here."

TripStone nodded. “He’ll take back the parts of me promised to Promontory.” She leaned against her chair, cradling her cup. “I took an oath with my fellow hunters shortly after we learned about Sustainer Masari. Whatever my grade, I’d be honored to go back there consecrated.”

She closed her eyes and breathed in the tea’s light bouquet. The air wasn’t as clean and the mountains weren’t as pretty, but she had returned at last to sacred ground. For a moment TripStone felt as young as the two hybrids sitting at the dining table that had once belonged to her parents, with its modest bone inlays and the distant echoes of their sweat.

She inhaled scents of sadness and awe before she focused her glands more tightly and read messages of old ink, old friendship. She knew that HigherBrook smiled at her before she opened her eyes and returned the gesture.

“TelZodo needs to speak with you about scribing,” she told him, setting down her cup. Bone and wood supported her as she stood. “Bless, let’s go to your office. You can show me what you’ve done with my old room.”

~~~

“That’s Evit’s cart.” TelZodo pointed to a small wagon parked outside the morgue. Lantern light peeked through its windows and those of the lab in the growing dark. “Wait here. I’ll tell them you’re outside.” He squared his shoulders and burped into his hand.

TripStone set their lamp by her pallet and lay down, leaning on her elbows. She frowned as he burped again. “How often have you been in there?”

“While they were cutting? Never.” His laugh sounded too high. “But it can’t be worse than Alvav. And they can analyze my puke afterward.”

“I thought you said they’d already analyzed everything.”

“They like longitudinal studies.” His fingers curled around a wall strap. “I need air.”

He turned from her and jumped out of the wagon. Even the night had a slight metallic tang but that was Basc, not preservatives or blood. TelZodo looked past the morgue, meditating on a sleepy greenhouse, and tried to fill his nostrils with

the memory of loam.

He brushed imaginary bugs off his arms. The only way to stop their incessant crawling was to mount the stairs and open the door.

He never liked the shelves but he'd managed to put up with them. As a boy he had shut his eyes against the odd things in bottles staring down at him, including the odd things that had come from him, and called to his parents when he needed their attention.

Now he edged down the hallway, fighting vertigo. Sticking his tongue out at the bottles helped. They were clean and sealed and neatly labeled. They were free of flies and maggots and the floor beneath him was polished wood. There was no mud anywhere. No bodies gaping open. No bullet holes. Not even bones scattered on desert rock.

He was still ready to shit his pants.

*More to study that way!*

He began to giggle.

Over there to the left was his father's office, with its ragged harvest tapestry on the wall. His mother's office sat next to it, filled with diminutive furniture. He'd played on those floors, delighting in rolling cracked lenses and listening to the shiny noises they made as they shivered to a halt.

TelZodo reached the door to the lab, pushed his way through, and dropped onto a bench before his legs gave out.

*The chickens get to live.*

He laughed again, blinking at pristine counters. Muffled voices traveled through the door at the far end of the room. Men's voices, his father's reedy tenor and Evit's higher-pitched replies. Was his mother conversing with them, drumming on an arm? Or were her gloved hands elsewhere, opening cavities?

He had only one way to know. TelZodo stumbled toward the sounds, gulping air until it stank of preservatives and he stopped to steady his breath, leaning against a cabinet.

Wasn't another bench just inside the morgue? There had to be. If the gods existed, there was. If the gods didn't exist, someone could come pick him up off the floor.

TelZodo pushed through with hands he couldn't feel and crashed onto wood. At first he didn't realize he was sitting hunched over, or how pretty a knothole could be. If he stared at it long enough, he might be able to fly through it and hide inside the seat.

"Hey, little brother!" Evit's surprised, cheery squeak reverberated off the walls and the gods knew what else. The old nickname annoyed TelZodo more than the stench of chemicals retarding decay around him. "Hang on, let me clean up!"

"I've got him." Sounds of scrubbing and drying, an apron sliding off. Breathless joy. The knothole vanished as long arms wrapped around TelZodo.

He gave his father a few aimless pats on the back. "Gods, you stink."

The answer crackled with mirth. "I love you, too, son."

Piri's welcoming hum sounded from across the room. Her hands must be busy.

Ghost asked, "Do you need to go outside?"

"No. Just give me a minute. Then I'll take *you* outside."

He forced himself to look away from Ghost's face and toward high-burning wicks. His mother and Evit stood on steps and bent over different tables. Evit grinned back at him and waved bloody fingers.

*You'll have to try harder than that to make me throw up.* TelZodo burped again.  
*Later.*

Piri turned to smile at him. For a moment her pride made her seem as tall as a Masari. She backed down her stairs, drew off her gloves, and plunged her arms into a basin. TelZodo didn't know if she prepared to greet him or progress to the next cadaver. She was between bodies either way.

TelZodo blinked against wooziness. She'd be prouder still if he didn't faint in her arms. He whispered, "I've seen enough. And there's someone outside

waiting for you.”

He didn't know if TripStone would end up in this room or on a table in Basc. TelZodo swallowed and squeezed his father's hand.

Ghost peered at him. “What is it?”

“I should warn you.” He leaned against his father as they stood. “HigherBrook had trouble looking at TripStone when we first got into Crossroads.”

Ghost hesitated at the door. “She's here?”

“She's here.”

“With BrushBurn?”

TelZodo shook his head as they passed into the lab. “Travel restrictions.”

Ghost muttered a curse. “Does she need treatment?”

Another shake of the head. “DevilChaser gave her everything she needs.”

His father winced. “Everything?”

“Everything.” He tried to keep the sob from his voice. “I don't have to explain that to you, do I?”

Ghost took a deep breath. “No. You don't.”

They entered the hallway. The bottles whizzed past.

~~~

“Hello, Stone.”

TripStone held his face in her hands and looked into watery eyes. “Hello, Ghost.”

Leather-strapped canvas slid briefly along the wagon floor before TelZodo lifted the Farm ledger and stepped down. He shifted position, holding the wrapped book close to his chest. “I'm taking this to Mother.”

His father answered him with a small nod.

TripStone listened to footfalls recede on gravel. She lay back down on the pallet and patted the space next to her, then snuggled into Ghost's arms. "You and Piri raised a good son."

He whispered, "I know." Ghost looked around. "You don't have to sleep in the wagon. We have plenty of room."

TripStone followed his gaze to her Reckoning, where it lingered for a moment and moved on. "The last time I slept in the farm house, your family almost stopped me from leaving with BrushBurn for Promontory."

"But they let you go."

He smelled of his father RootWing. He smelled of SunDog. Her fingers twined through bound hair and thin fur, plum shot with gray. The perfume of chemical burns, some going back decades.

"They almost kept *you* here." TripStone frowned. "I almost kept you here."

Ghost pulled her closer. Strain crept into his voice. "They let me go, too. So did you."

"Your son needs to know what happened between us."

She listened to his breathing turn ragged as he smoothed her leathery cheeks. If only they had more time.

"Ghost, you don't have to protect me any more. He needs to know what I did to you."

"It wasn't just you," Ghost hissed. "We were both involved."

"Still."

"It was the effects of euphoria—"

"It was more than the euphoria. You know that."

Ghost cradled her against him. "Is that what you came all this way to tell me?"

TripStone reined in a sigh and laid her chops against his. She'd given TelZodo her half of the story, which he could unwrap and read for himself if Ghost insisted on keeping silent. Expressing a dying wish would be pointless. And cruel.

She said, "I'll sleep in the farm house."

She looked into weary eyes, opened her mouth to Ghost's, and breathed in the scent of preservatives.

His lips caressed hers, then tracked to her ear.

"I love you more than you'll ever know, Stone," Ghost whispered. "I'll keep loving you after you're gone."

~~~

TelZodo sat on a Masari-sized chair and waited in a Yata-sized room. His second peek inside the morgue had been just as bad as the first, but he'd managed to hang onto the door post long enough to tell his mother where to find him.

She must have seen what he held and the look on his face, judging from the expression on hers. That frightened him more than the two remaining corpses inert on their slabs.

The still-swaddled book on her low desk held thousands of corpses. With unsteady hands, TelZodo tucked the letter from BrushBurn beneath the strap girding the ledger. He wished the old man could have traveled here and bit down the thought. *You'd be tending TripStone, not holding my hand.*

TelZodo looked toward shelves on the wall where he wanted a window to be. His father was tending TripStone instead. Whatever that meant.

He startled at a knock, but it wasn't his mother's sound.

"Tel." Evit cracked the door open and peeked in. The smaller man looked freshly scrubbed. "She's finishing up." His attention fell to the desk. "She's in that book, isn't she?"

TelZodo nodded.

Dark eyes trained back on his. “And the others?”

TelZodo cleared his throat. “Her other children. My brothers and sisters. Yes.”

The Yata stepped inside the room, pulled up and straddled a small chair. “Listen to me, Tel. I’m going to wait outside before I go back to Basc. Piri is writing a note to Ghost in case she needs to go to the Soala. If she does, I’m prepared to take you both there.”

Evit’s still-cherubic face had turned grave and his scrutiny was just as unsettling. TelZodo squeezed the small bronze hand. “Thank you.”

“Hey.” His former co-husband squeezed back. “I don’t know what happened to you and I don’t know if you want to tell me. But whatever it was, you’re still family.” He stood. “Do what you need to do. I’ll be in harness.”

TelZodo stared at the door after Evit left. He moved the small chair back into place. He pulled BrushBurn’s letter out and unbuckled the strap, then laid canvas aside. It covered the rest of the desk.

That left a massive volume of cracked and broken Yata leather sitting in his mother’s office. It could have been her skin. TelZodo closed his eyes.

He opened them at the sound of her soft hum and croaked, “I’m here.”

Piri glided inside. She immediately looked down at the ledger and then at him. She hastened to her desk and dropped into her chair.

Her fingers staccatoed against him, *You were down there.*

He whispered, “Yes.”

A small moan escaped her. She shuddered as he squeezed her shoulders.

“You’ve just come from the morgue, Mother. We don’t have to do this now.”

She turned bleary eyes to him. *Yes, we do.*

TelZodo slipped BrushBurn’s letter into her hands and waited as she fumbled it open. “It explains the placeholders,” he stammered. “What he found, how he

found it. The later volumes have more information. He's going to bring those up to Promontory."

Piri seemed not to have heard him. Her fingers trembled on his arm. *He asks me to show you his letters. I will do that.* They hovered over the worn leather, uncertain.

TelZodo reached across the desk and eased the book open. Even before he turned to his mother's page she leaned back with her mouth open, wheezing. He lifted her out of her chair and held her.

She heaved against him, tapping his cheek. *That's what I saw, TelZodo. All around me. All those numbers. Even the ones who were behind me, taking me. I saw them, too.*

He cradled Piri against him as she wept onto his shirt.

Then she whirled from him and sat down again. BrushBurn's letter shook in her hand. She set it down and leaned over the ledger, looking from one to the other and back. Parchment quaked as her fingers flew over the pages. They progressed, methodical and scientific. They followed vectors and cross-references, time-worn rips and ragged holes up and down the columns.

She retraced BrushBurn's neatly-written steps, rocking back and forth, first slowly, then faster. Her chair creaked. Her fingers drummed on the book, over and over and over, where TelZodo could see them.

*Oh, my babies...*

He marveled that he could still breathe.

She shook off his touch, fighting her way to the final placeholder. TelZodo listened to sounds of strangling.

When he could find his voice again, he whispered, "Evit's waiting outside."

She nodded.

"I can carry you there."

She nodded.

He waited until she closed the ledger.

Piri threw her head back, gasping with unspent howls. TelZodo scooped her out of her chair. She ripped his shirt, her nails digging into his flesh as he rushed her to Evit's cart.

~~~

TripStone smiled at the sounds of small shoes clattering, then at high-pitched hushing and giggles. Adult murmurs followed them. Measured steps led the girls away. Her body sank more deeply into a too-soft mattress, her pillow smelling vaguely of rose.

Ghost's parents had given her his old room the last time she was here, with his wooden puzzle toys and his nature poems scribbled in splotchy ink. They'd hoped the smells and memories would keep her in Crossroads and out of danger.

This was not Ghost's old room but its opposite. It was tidy and dusted and had belonged to a woman. A rag rug in spiraling earth tones covered the floor beside the bed. The dresser top held bone-handled brushes and combs arranged symmetrically around a thick lock of lavender hair.

A short, slightly darker braid adorned a framed narrative beside a sampler stitched with hymns about the afterlife. The narrative testified to the bravery and compassion of a boy who had died young.

VineSong.

This had been SnowMoth's room, preserved from the time when Ghost's older sister had followed her husband and son into the next world.

TripStone listened to the muffled sounds of breakfast, then to people departing to tend their chores. They had greeted her the night before, showing a simple tact and a reticence that was both downplayed and pronounced. Some were Ghost's kin, but others were adopted family composed of stragglers who had moved to the Grange from their own depleted households.

She gasped, startled, as the door opened. Even Ghost would have knocked first.

Especially Ghost.

TripStone pushed herself upright and stared into amber eyes that gazed back, at once unabashedly curious and distracted. The girl rocked slowly on the balls of her feet and sucked on strands of carrot-colored hair. A young woman's proportions filled a dirty dress on a squat body, making TripStone wonder if she was looking at another hybrid.

"HeadWind!" A little girl's authoritative whisper called from the sidelines. Small arms grabbed hold of thick ones and led the odd child away.

By the time TripStone dressed and reached the long farmhouse table, Ghost was the only person remaining. He clasped his fingers beside his tea, looking thoughtful.

TripStone sat, summoned by the empty mug opposite his. She lifted the teapot and poured.

He seemed to awaken from a reverie. "Breakfast?"

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"I won't try to force you to eat."

TripStone returned his gentle smile. "I won't try to force you to do anything, either."

She sipped and sighed and almost said *If we hadn't...*

If she hadn't cried when she shot straw, would he have still fasted? If he hadn't almost died, would she have realized she loved him? If she hadn't loved him, would she have still followed him, ignoring his entreaties to the point of her own death? Would he still have loved her back and gone into exile to save them both? Had she nurtured his work or threatened it?

If none of that had happened and they had married, would it have made any difference at all? Would she have learned about Destiny Farm in time? Would Crossroads and Basc even exist now?

"Stone."

She looked up from her tea.

“You protected me, too.”

She nodded. “I know.”

The door behind her opened. TripStone watched Ghost’s face become a mask as he stood and rounded the table. She turned in her chair as he and TelZodo lifted Piri and eased her down. Evit positioned a box beneath Piri’s feet and grabbed another for himself.

Scratches and bruises covered their exhaustion and extended as far as TripStone could see beneath ripped clothing. Ghost bustled about, setting out mugs and plates, a bowl of thick broth for his wife and strips of mutton for the others.

Expended grief created its own appetite. TripStone reached for the meat to share their sorrow if nothing else. The food claimed their attention, driving everything else away.

Evit stole glances at her, but she was doing the same to him. Beneath the well-fed Yata were remnants of the half-starved toddler in his uncle’s hut who’d stared at TripStone after she’d taken his father away. Now he sat next to Ghost, who over the years must have been more than just a mentor.

TelZodo sat beside Piri and looked particularly observant, as though waiting for time to slow and the clattering to quiet.

His soft voice wove through the descending calm. “I’m moving into the Rotunda.”

His parents and Evit looked at him. TripStone sipped.

He continued, “I’m going to apprentice to HigherBrook.”

Ghost seemed momentarily confused. “You never liked funerals.”

“It’s for more than funerals. It’s-” TelZodo gulped tea. “It’s like painting the green in the mountains before it all goes away.”

“Living narratives.” TripStone pushed to her feet and lifted the teapot. She

refilled Ghost's mug. "Like yours."

His expression turned wary. "Not like mine."

"We'll see."

"That information was extracted from me."

He held tightly to his mug. TripStone laid her hand over his and drummed, *You chose how much you wanted to say.*

She sank back into her chair. Next to her, Piri wore a tiny smile.

Evit pushed spiky hair back from a purpled forehead and grinned. "My cart's here. I'll help you move."

TelZodo's shoulders relaxed. "Thanks, but there's a bigger wagon--"

"Take his cart," TripStone said, more sharply than she intended. She fought irritation, ignoring a shiver of panic, and softened her voice. "I've visited those dormitories. They're tiny. The cart will be fine." Tea dropped down her throat. "I need the wagon for an errand." She glared at concerned faces and growled, "I'm just going to deliver a gift."

TelZodo was the last to politely look away.

CHAPTER 37

Basc

The cluster of adobe huts once teemed with children, many of them conceived at the Meethouse just up the hill. Most of those children had died in the famine following the massacre of Crossroads' hunters. The huts had lain empty until a renegade band of Preservers moved in, including those who had held CatBird prisoner here, ensuring she'd never hunt again.

TripStone grasped the edge of a shiny dissection table and listened to the younger woman in the next room. CatBird's peg-leg tapped on wood as she explained the meanings of old Covenant prayers. A man's voice, deep for a Yata, deeper even than Ulik's had been, answered with an overlay of new interpretations. TripStone held her breath and listened with quiet shock to Abri's responses.

Earlier she had watched Evit's cart clatter toward the Rotunda with TelZodo sprawled over its load. Then, with Ghost's arm around her shoulders and Piri's around her waist, TripStone had toured the laboratory at the Grange. She'd walked between twin passions, warmth spreading across her back as she felt Ghost and Piri finish each other's tapped sentences.

Now she stepped away from murmured consecrations and back into the heart of Evit's lab. At first glance it seemed laid out like its counterpart at the Grange, only without the steps folding into the floor. Piri and Evit needed those steps to reach counters and slabs built at Masari height.

The work spaces here were set closer to the ground. Here, as there, shelves extended floor to ceiling, the most frequently-used tools and supplies taking up the lower boards. Instead of stairs, a pair of nested step stools sat in a corner.

Any similarities between the two labs ended at Evit's anteroom.

TripStone returned to its massive wall hanging and to her dictation stitched in yellow on red. She sank to the floor opposite it and drew her knees up to her chest. She could close her eyes and remember every word, but seeing them all writ large made her feel weightless. She pressed her back against the wall,

relying on gravity to hold her to the ground.

It was only the first page. The consecration room, the latest addition to the hut, held the rest of the stories that Zai had told her about Ulik. A hymn arose in CatBird's gentle singing.

A shadow fell over TripStone. She grasped the callused bronze hand held before her face and suppressed a grunt as Abri helped her to her feet.

He said, "HigherBrook told me what you want."

TripStone let the wall support her as she looked down. Abri was almost a head taller than his father had been. She studied the dark blue Preserver tattoo on his forehead. "Then HigherBrook knows more than I do."

Abri's arm rounded her waist. "The gods have blessed me with this moment, TripStone. And with my task." His tone held more than simple recitation. He glanced up at her, then faced forward again. "I would ask you a question."

"I'll answer it as best I can," she said. "I owe you at least that much."

She waited for Abri to ask her about Ulik's last moments, about her blessing of his flesh as she'd butchered him. She tried to untangle the strands of guilt and resentment from the sacred communion of predator and prey, then wondered if she should abandon the attempt altogether.

Abri's tattoo marked him as a hunter of Masari. TripStone wondered if that circlet testified to his own feelings of guilt. His proud bearing beside her as they stepped through his brother's lab seemed to indicate otherwise.

He said, "Tell me how the Covenant is expressed in Promontory."

She balked by his side. "I didn't expect that."

Neither had Promontory, she reminded herself.

"I know it started when CatBird and Izzik traveled there to teach more merciful ways of killing," Abri continued. "But that was a long time ago. I know that AgatePool's Frontier Peace group has adopted some of the practices, and I know that more and more people are reading the scriptures you've filed in the

Warehouse. But I don't know how the Covenant manifests in everyday life there, or if it does at all."

She stared at him. "How did you find out about all this?"

"Bless's brother Psalm is my co-husband. HigherBrook discusses your letters with Bless, she talks to Psalm, and he talks to me."

TripStone leaned more heavily against him. "I didn't think you'd have heard it from Zai."

"Even my mother uses the Covenant to her advantage sometimes." He added, softly, "It makes good politics."

TripStone tried to think as she listened to CatBird's singing. She had heard the same reverence in the hymns Sedes sang behind her while she preserved DamBuster in the killing field. It might even have resided in the bawdy songs of the Death drunks. She whispered, "I don't know where to begin."

The singing stopped. CatBird clomped past a table of polished Masari bones, her heart-shaped face beaming beneath roseate chops. "We've all got questions, and I'd rather deal with them sitting down. When Bless sent me the message that you were coming, I told Jotha to gather his minions and prepare us a table." She took TripStone's arm. "Promontory gets produce from the Grange, so I doubt you've tasted anything from Liberty Farm."

TripStone stepped up to the bones, which all looked too large for the treatment they were receiving. One even bore signs of rudimentary stippling and cross-hatching. "I haven't," she murmured. "The food Basc produces goes to Skedge."

"Liberty wouldn't have existed without you," CatBird said, resolutely. "You deserve to have a good meal here before you die." She followed TripStone's gaze and lifted the scrimshaw. "New scriptures. We're trying to revive a dying art."

"I didn't think there was anyone left who could do that."

"Crossroads has two old scrimshanders and one's lost his arm. But they have several Yata students now and a mixed-blood who recently arrived from abroad to paint the mountains." CatBird set the clavicle bearing BarrowBow's name

back on its cloth. “Smoke said she just wanted to study the art form, but I can guarantee you it’s more than that.”

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## Crossroads

Evit positioned a misshapen, burlap-covered doll on a polished desk the height of his shoulders and clucked at a new rip in the fabric. “This one needs another patch. She’s leaking straw again.”

TelZodo bent and lifted it to the top of his bureau, where it joined six others. HigherBrook’s old dormitory had been shut up for fifteen years, but it still smelled faintly of honey-scented soap. “TripStone’s right. This place is tiny.” He nodded at the doll. “She’ll be safe up there until I can fix her.”

“You’ve fixed her so many times I can’t tell where anything is any more. She looks like a boy now.” Evit chortled. “I should tell my daughter that. She’ll be horrified.”

“She’ll be amazed I’ve kept them all this long.”

TelZodo smiled at the memory of nimble fingers working a needle that would have left a Masari child’s hands bloodied with pricks. He looked away from the Yata girl’s attempt to restore his missing brothers and sisters to him and swallowed around a lump in his throat. “Ijil could be having her own kids by now.”

“Don’t rush her! I’m not supposed to be that old.” Spiky hair flattened against wool. Evit lifted the blanket from his head and dropped it onto the pallet. He raised his eyebrows at the bed’s narrowness. “You really *are* changing your line of work.”

“I’m diversifying my line of work. Collect the stories out there and write them down in here, where there aren’t any distractions.” TelZodo’s lips quirked. “And where there isn’t room for anything else.”

Scribes’ quarters extended up and down the corridor. They were two-room cells like his, with a cramped dining alcove set to the side of a window-lit parlor that barely fit bed, bureau, and a writing desk with one small, well-padded chair.

More than half of what he and Evit had piled into the cart would have to return to the Grange.

At least the alcove had a slit in the wall for light and a tiny hearth for making tea. Evit poked his head into the path of dust motes. “Where do you cook?”

“Communal kitchen.” TelZodo would jerk his thumb in that direction if his friend were looking. “No waiting.”

“You’re living here alone?”

“HigherBrook did, before he moved into TripStone’s house.”

“That was after the massacre. This place used to have lots of people in it.”

TelZodo shrugged. His family was just down the road if he got lonely. His old room would fill again with everything he couldn’t fit in here.

And he had a village to cram into his head. “I’ll be fine.”

For now the other rooms would hold his narratives as he completed them. Stories about the dead already lined the dome above him. Flesh lay stacked and blessed within the levels below, for eventual transport to the Deliverance Inn. This place still had lots of people in it.

TelZodo bent to his pack and withdrew the thick missive from TripStone. The squirrel sinew around it had shrunk enough to leave a permanent crease in the parchment. In the late afternoon light it looked like steel, daring him to wrestle it open.

But only if his father remained silent. Then the decision was up to him.

He opened a low bureau drawer, the one divided into neat compartments, and gazed down at his housewarming gifts. TelZodo’s nose quivered at the smell of new parchment that formed a high stack between wood slats to the left, its corners squared. A smaller compartment to the right held several vials of ink labeled for study and archival use, alongside extra pens and nibs. Cleaning cloths lay folded near the front.

The center of the drawer held practice sheets that were blemished and rougher

than the others. Some of the sheets had already been written on, the handwriting crude and rushed and the words tumbling against each other on the page. In the upper right the same penmanship, more delicate and refined, instructed, “Read, and let’s discuss.”

TelZodo laughed. “He doesn’t waste any time.”

He tucked TripStone’s letter next to HigherBrook’s directive and closed the drawer.

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Basc

Liberty Farm still smelled green. TripStone reclined at a long dining table in an open-air shed and listened to “Jotha’s minions” screaming as they tackled each other in a fallow field. She’d tried to count the children as they swarmed around CatBird and then as they brought food to the table before she finally gave up. “There must be more than fifty.”

“I have no idea.” CatBird’s prosthesis hung on the back of her chair. She sipped mint tea as Jotha collected rinds to compost. “I was much better at keeping track of their parents.”

“The original orphans.”

CatBird nodded. “The real orphans. Their children call themselves that because of me. I tell them they don’t have to, but they insist.” She leaned back for a kiss as the former Preserver passed behind her. Jotha’s face was disfigured, most of his tattoo scratched away.

CatBird watched him return to the garden. “I’m glad HigherBrook didn’t kill him.”

“He almost did in the far woods,” Abri said. “It would have been legal there.”

TripStone asked, “What about the other men who raped you?”

CatBird reached for more tea. “They’re still Preservers. HigherBrook still wants to kill them, and their other wives as accomplices. He refuses to believe how

many times they've spared his life whenever they see him on the hunts. Usually he ends up eating Yata who die of other causes." She shrugged and smiled. "They're good husbands."

TripStone studied a long row of cottages at the edge of the field. Several children raced each other home, living on a farm run by Yata who'd lost their parents, many of them to CatBird. The younger woman's cottage stood out with its taller doorway and wooden rails. "You've made some astonishing compromises here."

"Forgiveness works both ways. You still married BrushBurn after what he did to you."

TripStone scowled. "He didn't lop my leg off."

"Not your leg," CatBird agreed. "Just Crossroads. He's made amends, and so have my husbands and co-wives. So have I." She sipped. "Besides, HigherBrook didn't inflict those wounds you see on Jotha. I did."

Abri trained his attention on the mountains before turning to TripStone. "Basc learned from Crossroads how to atone. From what you've told me, Yata and Masari are still learning it in the arid lands."

CatBird sighed. "Finally. If Izzik were still alive, he'd be so proud of Sedes." Her fingernails tapped on earthenware. "I should do a Remembrance, but there's no one to atone for Izzik's death. He had always been prepared to die at the hands of a warrior. He didn't expect to step on a snake."

"You came to Promontory to be with him." TripStone looked at tired lines, lostness. "Making yourself able to continue your work after Izzik died was just as heroic as the work itself."

"By getting myself pregnant so that I could eat?" CatBird shook her head. "Reabsorbing whatever I could make with Izzik was bad enough, but relying on kind Yata in the Clutter was worse." She offered a crooked smile. "HigherBrook hates my husbands! How can I dictate anything to him?"

TripStone relaxed into her chair and savored her tea. "I hear you're good friends with his protégé."

"I didn't know he had a protégé."

The fruity summer breeze never felt so good. “He does now.”

~~~

“TripStone.”

The wagon rolled to a halt. TripStone opened her eyes and looked up at Abri. “Go inside and tell your mother and Gria that I’ll be there soon.”

He squeezed her shoulder and rose from his kneel. TripStone closed her eyes again and waited for the vibrations from his departure to still.

Then she reached inside her pallet, fished out the canvas pouch she’d hidden in the straw, and grasped a fresh piece of dagger root. She bit down on the pungent yellow plant and waited for the knives inside her chest to dull.

Afterward, she crawled to her pack and drew leather onto the floor. She secured hunting leggings over her breeches and pulled her vest over her shirt. She slid boots over her foot wraps.

She reached behind her satchel, lifted her Reckoning, and positioned it across her back, tightening the strap as she turned toward the edge.

The runner waited to help her down. TripStone waved him away.

She rounded the wagon and faced an adobe complex with The Honorable One’s hut on one end and an angular suite of offices on the other. The residence that Zai and Gria shared rose between them with its arched entryway and its courtyard of herbs.

It struck TripStone as unexpectedly domestic. If the formalities went according to plan, she would ask them to show it to her.

She swung left, heading toward more austere construction. Abri had explained the layout of offices devoted to commerce and industry, which now dwarfed even the military strategy room. His smile turned wry when he described the printing press out back and mumbled something about propaganda.

At least The Honorable One’s hut at the opposite end had remained the same, its spiraling chambers filled with Dirt People pictograms. The Covenant relics that



had once belonged to TripStone's family still remained in Gria's safekeeping.

Basc's leaders awaited her in the reception hall with its finely-woven rugs, oak-trimmed walls, and skylight. TripStone paused before tall wood doors and formed a mental image based on Abri's descriptions as she translated his paces to match her leg length.

If she concentrated, she could reach Zai and Gria seated behind their burnished table without becoming winded. TripStone spent a moment in meditation, then nodded to the pair of guards dressed in dun tunics. She squared her shoulders as they opened the doors.

Abri stood at attention behind his mother. Whatever he had told Zai was almost enough to let her conceal her reaction. TripStone read dismay in the corners of the commander's eyes.

She had trouble hiding her own upset when she turned toward Gria, who answered her with a silent expression of unforced serenity. Never before had TripStone seen a living person whose body looked so shattered.

She stepped before them, catching her breath. She bowed low before the black-robed, white-haired woman, and forced strength into her voice. "Honorable One."

Gria replied with a barely audible slur, "Welcome back to Basc, TripStone. I've missed you."

TripStone straightened and they beheld each other's frailty. At Gria's nod she turned to the woman in uniform, noting flecks of gray nestled in short, black hair. "Hello, Zai."

"TripStone."

"Thank you for agreeing to see me. I come before you as a petitioner." TripStone loosened the strap across her chest and unslung her Reckoning. It made almost no sound as she lowered it to the table. She took a step back and waited.

Zai's sudden and obvious distress surprised her.

The commander stood and lifted the rifle, her eyes cast down. She seemed to

speak from far away. “I would have rejoiced at this opportunity once.”

“I know.”

“Basc performed an Atonement to Crossroads years ago, for atrocities committed during the massacre.” Zai looked up. “You weren’t here. We named the members of your family. I offer to receive your remembrances.”

TripStone nodded, trying not to sway on her feet. “TelZodo is studying to become a scribe. I request that he witness alongside HigherBrook.”

Zai whispered, “Done.”

TripStone thought for a moment. “I’ll receive you at the Grange for the remembrance. You’ll come back there with me tonight.”

The smaller woman winced. “That soon.”

“That soon.”

Zai blinked back tears. “And where shall I receive you for sacrifice?”

“The old Covenant hunting grounds tomorrow, if it can be arranged. As close as I can find to the spot where I killed Ulik.”

Zai took one deep breath, then another. Her wiry body seemed to snap into place. In a smooth motion she opened the Reckoning’s buttplate and let its magazine drop into her hand. She placed the gun on the table and examined its ammunition with eyebrows raised, then offered TripStone a little smile. “You insult me.”

Bullets clattered onto the wood. Zai pressed her lips into a thin line. She lifted and held a single cartridge before TripStone. “Agreed?”

TripStone observed her steady hand. “Agreed. We’ll face each other.”

“I’ll see the portal through your eyes, then,” Zai said. “Thank you.”

She reloaded the bullet and slid the magazine back into the stock. Closed the buttplate. Her voice scratched. “Is there anything else?”

“One more thing.” TripStone leaned against the table and smiled with faint relief

at both of them. “Show me what you’ve done with the place and give me a comfortable chair to sit in.”

## CHAPTER 38

### Crossroads

Another distant puff spread into the air as more of the mountain was blown away. If TelZodo listened hard enough, he could hear the muffled rumble of dynamite before marketplace bustling eclipsed it. All around him, colorful awnings fluttered in a light breeze against a backdrop of brown rents.

“They’re being destroyed and they can’t talk,” he muttered, gazing past the carts.

“The mountains? They talk all the time.”

Smoke cut a tall, pale profile beside him, her black hair plaited down her spine. Her smooth-skinned fingers flew over parchment strapped to a wood board. More leather looped behind her head and under the braid.

TelZodo glanced at the emerging study in chalk that hung around her neck. “You’re including the vendors?”

“They’re what’s framing the landscape right now. Look through the selection if you want something different.”

He stepped to her cart and a line of open side compartments. Paintings stood on edge on shelves supported by chains. He tilted the depictions one at a time, an eclectic mix of wood boards and wood frames, leather and canvas. A ravaged hillside stood side by side with the same view portrayed in uninterrupted green that must have dated from before he was born.

But it couldn’t have. Smoke wouldn’t have been here. She’d have been a little girl locked up in a prison. He stared back at her.

Her attention was elsewhere. TelZodo watched it switch from the board around her neck to the mountains and back, her brow wrinkling and then smoothing out again. She frowned momentarily at the echo of another rumble, then turned back to the chalk. She nodded as a tavern patron looked over her shoulder, one furred hand pointing and the other cradling ale before he walked away.

More fur touched TelZodo's elbow. He looked down at Bless, then at the scrolls she carried.

She said, "You're needed at the Grange." Beside her, Abri held another set of scriptures. Twin somber expressions.

HigherBrook limped behind them and carried a latched wood box, its writing surface trimmed in soft leather. He rested his palm on Smoke's shoulder as he passed her.

They exchanged glances. Smoke removed her drawing from the board and lifted the straps from her neck. She slipped the wood beneath her arm and strode past TelZodo, reaching into her cart for more parchment before falling in step with the others.

~~~

TripStone smelled only aromatics as Ghost held her in his arms and drew off her vest, as Piri eased off her boots and unwound her foot wraps. They must have spent the day scrubbing the chemicals out of their skin.

Her hunting leggings dropped to the floor and Piri's fingers moved to her breech ties. The linen around TripStone's chest loosened. She closed her eyes and leaned back. Ghost's lips touched hers as more air touched the skin around her waist. She lifted his hand and kissed his tufted knuckles.

Her feet left the ground as he lifted her. The breeches slipped off her hips. Her breast bindings fell.

Warm water climbed her nakedness. Young herbs from the regrown forest floated in her bath, and rarer flowers. TripStone opened her eyes and looked from the sponge traveling her leg to Gria's beatific face, at the tangled veins spidering cheeks and brow, and wondered how many people had braved the far woods to deliver the scents of consecration.

Behind Gria, Abri's intonations sounded like something out of a dream. They created an odd resonance in TripStone's head, patterns not quite right. And yet, they were. Her body adjusted to their strangeness, as though his words were changing her very depths as the water washed her clean.

She was intact and whole even as the boulder inside her grew. She followed the sounds of Abri's blessings, could hear their gentle blades slipping beneath her skin. TripStone listened to the echo of her own dismemberment as Gria's sponge encircled her in an unbroken line.

Behind the quiet scratch of HigherBrook's nib, TelZodo's silent attentiveness filled the room. It cushioned TripStone, moment to moment, forming a fine mist as his father lifted her out of the bath and his mother dried her with a towel and then slipped a plain white tunic over her gray-tufted shoulders.

Ghost held TripStone to his chest and carried her to her pallet in the next room. SunDog lowered her onto the bed. Evit slipped fresh dagger root into her mouth as Bless closed the door and Smoke lifted chalk.

Zai, naked and unarmed, knelt to one side of the straw. Gria unfastened her black robe and stepped out of it, leaving it in Abri's hands. Her battered body knelt opposite Zai.

TripStone felt TelZodo's fingers nestle by her scalp as though they could pick up her thoughts. She smiled up at his dry-eyed grief and hoped he knew how brave he was.

His lips bowed back. He answered her with a small nod and she watched her life knotting into place behind his eyes.

She closed her own again, shunting the dagger root to her cheek. She sank further into her pillow and uttered the first words of a fairy tale.

~~~

"You've captured her."

TelZodo pushed his empty plate away and walked toward the awe in his father's voice. Ghost leaned over Smoke at the head of the farm house table.

"It wasn't difficult." She gestured above the colors. Her thumbnail traced a line, sharpening a bright crimson cheek crescent. "Her eyes didn't change. The scars and wrinkles were just another layer. The burnt skin."

"Still."

Smoke greeted TelZodo, then turned back to his father. "I'm restoring the mountains as they were for HigherBrook. I can restore TripStone for you, especially once I get my permanent dyes from the cart. Consider it my thanks for what you and Piri did in the Marsh."

TelZodo's ears flushed as he beheld the portrait of a young woman. He wasn't sure why, but he was thankful the others were looking at the chalk and not at him.

He coughed into his fist. "I should help HigherBrook and Bless prepare the funeral shed."

Ghost shook his head. "You have time. Her bones won't get here until tomorrow." He squinted toward a window. "She left for Basc only an hour ago. She'll be alive for a little while longer."

TelZodo wondered whether TripStone's pallet was still warm. It had been when he hugged her goodbye, before his father carried her to the wagon. It began to cool as he lifted dagger root drained of its juices off the floor. As he swept up chalk dust and hauled used bathwater to the irrigation reservoir. TelZodo had strained out the herbs and left them in the sun to dry. He carried a small velvet pouch for them in his pocket.

He'd breakfasted at a mostly empty table, its dishes cleared away, the other diners already at their chores. His mother had shut herself up in her office, taking it upon herself to copy out all the Destiny Farm ledger numbers to send back to BrushBurn.

He had nothing left to do but clean and shelve his dish and walk back to the Rotunda. To his small room and its well-lit desk by its freshly-washed window on a long summer's day.

He wondered how far the sound of a single gunshot could travel, or if he would only be imagining it.

~~~

Basc

They could have been girls strolling through the woods together, their arms

around each other. A slow walk, wordless, listening to the leaves of young trees making a sound like rain. Looking up toward the songs of warblers. Toward the calls of hatchlings hidden in fuzzy, feathered nests.

They would have looked like girls to someone standing on the ridge. Both of them small in the distance. Playmates. It was a comforting thought. TripStone leaned in a little more, her arm brushing against the gray barrel of the Reckoning on Zai's back.

The smaller woman shifted her balance and held TripStone more firmly, looking haunted.

The smells of Zai's sons faded as the trail dropped farther behind. Ferns bent around Zai's boots and fanned over TripStone's bare feet. Tufted seeds floated and clung to TripStone's tunic. Tiny thorns hooked into white linen, pulling it back. Releasing.

TripStone scanned the mountains for cataracts of granite, ancient shapes still unchanged and unmined. She found landmarks and triangulated. She turned and pointed, the boulder in her chest magnetized to its distant counterparts.

She whispered, "We're almost there."

The growing heat threatened to make her giddy. It was a curious sensation, the parts above her neck ready to fly away while those below plunged toward bedrock. Her heart seemed already shot to pieces.

She laughed a little. "I feel on the inside the way Gria looks on the outside."

Zai's fingers clutched her side. "You should have eaten something."

TripStone smiled, lightheaded. "I wanted to come to you with only my own blood."

They stepped around seedlings, waxy leaves on narrow stalks. A strong, woody scent.

TripStone's steps faltered. She squinted up at blued, rounded peaks and asked, softly, "Are you sure?"

Zai held still beside her, barely breathing. “I didn’t say anything.”

“I know.” She squeezed Zai’s shoulder and planted her feet farther apart. Straightened her spine. Nodded. “They’re sure. This is where he died.”

Zai released TripStone’s side and held her hand. She whispered, “All right.”

She turned her back. TripStone watched her walk away through descending gauze that softened the light, as though Zai herself were headed toward the portal to the afterlife. The boulder in TripStone’s chest quivered and began to burn. It turned into a red hot lake and lightened to orange, extending long fingers toward her shoulders. Tributaries of molten rock.

Her legs became thick trunks shooting roots into the ground, holding her upright.

Zai turned around. The breeze lifted tears off her bronze cheeks and left them dry. She took a deep breath and unslung the Reckoning. Her clear voice rode the gap between them. “TripStone.”

“Zai.”

“I forgive you.”

TripStone nodded. “I forgive you, too.”

The orange lake glowed yellow. Fire shot up TripStone’s neck and down her arms. The gauze dropped lower, settling about them. Her family’s hands caressed her, cooling her brow. She blinked at the gentle faces of her Yata prey, at the Masari she’d helped to bury.

White needles seared her fingers. The molten lake rose toward her jaw.

Zai lifted the rifle and aimed. She pulled its cocking lever.

TripStone heard the single bullet feed into its breech. She grinned as a haze solidified behind the commander. Ulik’s smile was a proud one, welcoming her. “I see him, Zai.”

“I know,” Zai whispered. “He’s steadying my aim.”

TripStone's arms lost their feeling as the portal widened. "May our covenant preserve you."

The soft reply reached her through blood roar. "May our covenant preserve you, TripStone."

The forest filled with people. They were narratives. They were numbers. They were ink in the soil, in bone, carried away as silt, harvested in an ear of corn. They enfolded TripStone, their touch cool and green as the leaves.

Blue-white flames erupted inside her chest and licked up into her skull. TripStone watched Zai's finger ease against the trigger.

The pain stopped.

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TelZodo

Sometimes I feel as though I never left home. As though I've always been this way, with the blood of children on my hands.

I don't know quite what to do about that.

Then I feel keenly the way in which everything has changed, now that I carry TripStone's life inside me. Four full days of funereal remembrances. Lines of people waiting to enter the shed, stretching into and through the windbreak toward Basc and past the farm house and the fields toward the rest of Crossroads. People who knew her. People who never met her.

I've got parchment all over my bed, parchment on the floor. I will have to change the order of everything because I cannot control how the memories come out. Least of all my own remembrance of her.

I remember everything, but what I feel the most is SkyBee pulling on her father's hand so that she could move closer to TripStone's bones because she thought they were still BarrowBow's. I heard she's done that at every funeral since I went away.

I don't know what to do about that, either. I suppose I can't really do anything.

I've asked Smoke to do a sketch of SkyBee that I can put on these blank walls. And one of HeadWind, in case Yucof doesn't get back with Yata meat for her in time. Smoke agreed to take payment in memory and will tell me more about Alu and what she knows about the other predator children in Alvav. So that I can preserve them somehow.

I asked her if she's ever killed any of them. She said she has.

I've decided not to tell my father about Alvav.

In a strange way it helps me understand why he might not want to tell me everything about TripStone. I've moved her letter to another drawer to keep next to BrushBurn's gun, in case I have to use one or the other of them some day.

I still don't know what is going to happen to Crossroads. All I know for certain is that tonight I need to sleep alone.

And tomorrow I must go to Basc, to hear what CatBird has to tell me.

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