



# Deviations: Covenant

Elissa Malcohn



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**Elissa Malcohn**

**Second Edition**



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*To Mary C. Russell*

### *Acknowledgements*

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My acting on that good advice did not occur for almost 20 years. But the story remained with me, waiting for me to again take it in hand when I had the chance.

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Addendum to the Second Edition

Thanks to Alan Petrillo for correcting me on a firearm detail. I've incorporated that change in this edition.

Jeffrey A. Carver's article, " *Psst! Wanna Buy a Free Ebook?*" (*The Bulletin of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America*, Dec. 2008-Jan. 2009) provided me with the how-to advice and the inspiration to create this second edition as a free download.

"What is so beguiling about a specialist predator is the idea of an intimacy with the Beast! For if, originally, there was one particular Beast, would we not want to fascinate him as he fascinated us? Would we not want to charm him, as the angels charmed the lions in Daniel's cell?"

~ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*

## CHAPTER 1

TripStone closed her eyes and squatted by a rotting log beneath a canopy teeming with noisy nests. The young calling for food above her melded into a single, insistent voice, a command from the forest itself.

She thought of home, remembered why she was here.

Today was Meat Day and her family table was bare of flesh. It was her turn to dress in heavy canvas and leggings and shoulder her rifle.

She opened her eyes, bent her body to follow the outlines of the dead trunk, and barely breathed. Blue mountains ringed the Basc-Crossroads hunting grounds, but her gaze was elsewhere, closer to the ground, seeking sustenance.

Light from the rising sun glinted off red hair drawn back in her tightly fixed ritual kerchief woven with ancient Masari and Yata pictograms. TripStone's pelt, grown in the manner of young Masari women, trailed neatly in sideburns to her chin, rounding her mouth in graceful scimitar shapes. It blanketed her neck, warming it in the cold, woody air. Her shoulders, dusted under her vest in red fuzz, ached with waiting.

~ ~ ~

Before dawn she had drawn her purification bath in silence. She had laved herself slowly in water laced with fragrant herbs. Heady, floral scent rose in waves of steam from her tub, obscuring the odors of spiced grains and juice drifting in from the breakfast shared by her parents and brother in the next room. TripStone's dining chair, removed from the table, sat empty beside her family's shrine of ancestral keepsakes.

On any other day her mouth would have watered. If it had today, she told no one.

She dressed alone. She lifted her rifle off iron hooks hammered into dark-grained wood. Conversation in the next room became a steady buzz as she polished and inspected her barrel and firing mechanism

until satisfied. Like her kerchief, her gun bore both Masari and Yata markings too old for her to understand. The ancient Masari looked more like bird tracks, the Yata like lizard trails. One was angular and succinct, the other a graceful meandering.

Pretty, both of them.

When she was ready, TripStone slung her rifle across her back. Her boot heels thudded on polished wood as she stepped into the family den. Her relatives ceased their talk and stood, then bowed as one in reverent silence. TripStone bowed back, turned, and strode from their cottage, swallowing hard.

She joined other hunters gathered at the edge of Crossroads. Some still conversed beneath tent flaps with census takers who waited to count the dead. Others, like her, gazed sadly toward the hunting grounds. In Basc, on the other side of the woods, scores of diminutive Yata prepared themselves for sacrifice. TripStone tried to imagine their secret rites, if they held any at all. Perhaps they simply bent to kiss those whom they loved and turned away from their huts, leaving their fate to the gods.

~ ~ ~

The sun beat down. TripStone's eyes grazed the yellow grass around pasty flounces of mushroom. She prayed for eye contact. She prayed that she be recognized before she killed. She did not question, sure that the gods would send her a good catch. In time.

Woody decay wafted up to her nostrils. She listened to termites munching the fallen trunk, a beetle scrabbling in the crevices. Seen from the corner of her eye, it raced across brittle bark and vanished. Leaves fluttered as the breeze picked up, sounding like a gentle rain. Her nostrils flared, her lips drawn back as scent reached her, and

with it her familiar dilemma of whether to laugh or weep.

She followed her nose, spied distant movement.

A male Yata engaged in his own hunt. His polished bone knife glinted at her from within the foliage and disappeared. He was small in the distance, but measured against the shrubs he was robust, roughly three-fourths TripStone's height. Blue-black hair fell in a heavy braid down his bronzetoned back.

Sunlight dappled his pectorals in golden blossoms as he straightened and surveyed the forest. TripStone was sure she could see his brows knit in concentration. She was too far, she knew, to really see his face. But she was sure. He was aware of something.

He turned then. Over the tangle of bushes and tree limbs wavy in the day's growing heat, their eyes met. His bare chest glistened with sweat.

Without averting his gaze he sheathed his knife in one of the pouches at his waist. He walked toward TripStone, hands loose and nervous by his side, the leathery pads of his feet stepping over pebbles and brambles. He did not flinch. As he gazed upon TripStone and studied her features, his hands relaxed, their wavering stilled.

He bestowed a sad smile on the hunter. She returned it.

When they were less than a stone's throw apart, the Yata squatted and removed his belt of pouches. His knife was sheathed against the ground. His genitals mounded slightly under his loincloth, shifting a bit as he spread his provisions on the dirt before him.

Still crouched, TripStone relaxed as the Yata quietly removed parchment from the belt. Before him he placed a bone vessel of ink,

after breaking the wax seal that had mated bowl to cover ever since he had come of age. He removed a quill from a carefully stitched pocket.

TripStone bit her lip to keep from trembling. Her family would receive the highest honor a Yata could give a Masari: his blessing. A tear rolled unbidden down her cheek and raised tiny dust particles as it hit the dirt.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Yata saw TripStone's lip quiver as he wrote. He looked up from his task, and this time his smile was a proud and welcoming one. He waited for TripStone to uncurl her thick legs from behind the rotted trunk and shielded his eyes against the sun as she stood. His gaze measured her towering height, boot to kerchief. Her skin was ivory, creamy in relation to his. Her neck glistened red like a brush fire.

She hastened to a low branch and broke off a thick stem with a spadeshaped leaf large enough to shield her prey from the heat. She held the foliage over him as she slipped her rifle off and placed it on the ground between them: an honor bestowed for an honor.

She watched as the Yata continued to write. His strokes whispered on the parchment, his script fluid and unhurried. Even when he paused to dip his quill, the line he continued appeared to have never been broken. He never looked at the gun.

Like the other hunters, TripStone had read modern Yata since she was a child.

*My name is Ulik. My village is Basc, in the valley of Basc-Crossroads. I have been out hunting rabbit.*

*I have a companion, Zai, and two sons. Abri, my firstborn, has been*

*in the world for six seasons. He knows the Yata alphabet and almost all of his numbers. Evit has been in the world for two seasons. Zai thinks he will walk very soon.*

*I am thankful there were no rabbits for me to kill today, so that I come to you with only my own blood.*

*May our Covenant preserve you.* The last line was written in Masari.

The Yata lifted his belt and placed it on the parchment edge to anchor paper to soil while the ink dried.

TripStone squatted to be head to head with him as he stood. "Ulik," she said softly, closing her eyes and bending further, bowing her head. She looked back up and pointed to herself. "TripStone."

"TripStone." A gentle tenor.

"Thank you."

Ulik nodded and waited for TripStone to stand. She could see the top of his head, his night-colored hair dropping its plumb-line of braid. They bowed to each other.

Leaving his provisions behind, the Yata turned his back on the hunter and walked away. He looked upon an arched gateway shimmering in sun and shadow, raising mist. Yata scripture told of such a portal sent by the gods. If a Masari hunter were a skilled shooter, one might step effortlessly into the next existence.

The gateway floated ever closer. The calls of hatchlings above him transformed into chimes resounding from the world to come, summoning him. He was not afraid.

TripStone dropped to her knees and lifted her rifle, seeing only Ulik. As he moved in mid-stride, she fired a single bullet through his heart and watched him plummet forward into the grass.

She pocketed the parchment in her vest and spilled the remaining ink from its vessel onto the ground. She replaced the vessel and the other provisions in their pouches, then placed the Yata's belt in a satchel woven with Masari and Yata hair and lined with a stretched Yata stomach. She slung the filled satchel over her shoulder.

She reached the dead man and spent a moment in silent meditation. Then she carefully plugged the entry and exit holes left by her bullet with bone and resin, draped him over her shoulder, and followed the paths back to home and family.

On this Meat Day she was not the first Masari to return with prey, but neither was she the last. The other successful hunters were already back in their cottages, preparing the bodies. TripStone stood numbly as the census takers recorded her catch. When quota was met they would blow their horns to call the remaining hunters back to Crossroads.

She did not acknowledge the small crowd of villagers gathered to watch their providers, fixing her and the others with looks of gratitude and fear. Their hands remained clean, their guilt not her guilt.

Once home TripStone would gut and clean her catch, saving Ulik's entrails and organs for future use. She would drain his blood into receptacles reserved for medicinal or sacramental need. His braid would be cut and also saved. Whatever meat remained from the family feast would be salt-cured and delivered to the needy Masari of Crossroads.

On her Day of Atonement, three sunrises after Meat Day, she would

transfer Ulik's provisions into a different satchel, one of cloth. She would carry it into the woodlands. There she would snare rabbits, her bare hands wielding Yata sinew. She would break their necks cleanly and carry them into Basc. She would present them and the satchel, with great respect, to Ulik's widow. She would recount Ulik's death, speaking in Yata. She would prostrate herself, naked and unarmed on a dirt floor, trusting her life to the Covenant.

She would join in a high keening of Yata grief. As one the village would rock back and forth in an outpouring of mourning, and TripStone would rock with them.

## **CHAPTER 2**

Zai's breathing turned quick and shallow under the small hands on her chest. She tried to still herself. Evit was too young to understand. He would think only that his mother was sick. Abri would become frightened if he awoke to find Zai trembling. He would know why she shook.

Ulik might simply be detained in the woods overnight, but the chance of that happening was slim. Zai had waited at the edge of Basc and heard the horns blow from across the hunting grounds. The villagers who returned, empty-handed or with their own harvest of small game, had rejoined their families quickly and unceremoniously. One after another, clusters of kin groups repaired to their huts.

Zai continued to wait with the others keeping vigil, maintaining her stoicism as tradition dictated. One grieved in the Soala, not in the open. One particularly did not grieve for a deity--and if Ulik had passed into the next world, he now possessed powers greater than those of his own life. She should rejoice.

How did one rejoice when one's heart was ripped open?

Back in her communal hut, Zai took a deep, shuddering breath and held it. She slowly exhaled and rolled to a sitting position, cradling Evi against her breast. She lowered him next to Abri on the dirt floor and watched the sleeping boys snuggle, drawn to each other's body heat.

She padded past another Yata woman and lit a small oil lamp from a larger sentinel light at the door. Cold dew knifed the soles of her feet. She almost dropped the lamp as she stumbled.

She straightened and walked toward the Soala, its adobe stained black with ink. It was a silhouette, an abyss in the distance. She walked hard to the hut-of-need, her heels knocking against the dirt path. Soon she ran, heedless of neither the dark nor the scalding oil that jumped and splattered her hand with pain. Her wick threatened to gut its flame, but Zai knew this route, even in the predawn, even running. Even possessed by the demons inside her, who knew her footsteps as well as she.

Clammy with sweat, she stopped at the entrance to the Soala and pinched her wick. Light from inside breached the black walls and formed a yellow halo around the hut, blinding Zai as she crossed the threshold. She didn't need to see.

Someone grasped her body. Someone else took the lamp from her bruised hand and placed it on a table under one of many flaming sconces. Zai heard her brother Ila howling from a distant bench, his voice barely recognizeable. He screamed epithets and obscenities with almost womanly timbre.

Zai shrieked back. Her brother paused, answered. They screamed together. Demon tales--tales of Masari hunters and their families

gutted and trussed and left to beasts. Tales that birthed worse fates.

Zai's demons consumed her. She strained to throw herself toward Ila, to crush his flesh in her hands and mouth and knead and pull him into pieces like dough. Invisible hands held her back. Her legs bucked until she was lifted off the floor, until her shrieks threatened to burst from the top of her skull. Her mouth filled with her own black hair. She convulsed, tried to swallow it, gagged. An unseen stranger brushed it back.

Strands yanked out by their roots dangled from contorted fingers. Someone's hands clamped down on her wrists to stop her from ripping her own skin to shreds.

Eventually the hands on her ceased to be iron and once again became flesh. The people around her, distorted into demon lovers with boiling eyes and bestial claws, shrank once more into mere Yata crumpled in grief.

Zai had been here before: the stranger caretaking the lamenting, her hands possessed of Yata calm. She had gazed into twisted faces and called demons out into the vanquishing light. She had been the friend who stepped back, out of the way, to lend her simple presence as the bereaved stood empty and cleansed, concentric waves of spent energy rippling around the walls.

She had also been here before as one possessed.

Now she stood alone, shaking in the light as her demons rose and faded away. Her brother, at the opposite end of the hut, held his arms out for balance as he swayed under the force of his heartbeat. They beheld each other, disheveled and exhausted, but alive. The backs of Zai's hands, dun with madness, returned to their rich, bronze hue in the Soala's calm heat. Shoulders hunched and eyes closed, she

hugged herself, feeling her ribs.

Back in her hut the slightest cry from either of her sons would rouse the others from sleep. When her boys came of age, they would lend their power to the Soala and petition its strength when in need. Zai had shown them the hut empty, its sconces flickering, their flames decreased but never snuffed, smoke tendrils venting placidly.

The rages of children spent themselves quickly, like embers. Their fury was of a different kind, malleable through the trials of learning into strengths of will. But then shouts quavered in adolescent throats. Pudgy legs lengthened and sprawled.

The children visited the Soala as witnesses, then, standing off to the side as adults succumbed to madness under its haloed roof. They began to understand what they would take in their hands, when among sweet cakes and wine and the festivals of adulthood they each received a vessel filled with ink and sealed with wax. With their parchment and quill would come the power of choice: how much of their life to share before they passed beyond it.

## **CHAPTER 3**

TripStone bound the gash in her brother's forehead, winding treated Yata skin around a shaved patch where her razor had removed hair clotted with blood. The skin held fast to the wound, turning a translucent orange as enzymes formed symbiont chains of healing. The bandage no longer resembled the flesh sliced from Ulik's inner thigh.

His parchment note hung framed on the wall by the head of TripStone's pallet. When she died her survivors would move it to the family shrine.

"The laceration is *not that deep*, FeatherFly," she chided over her brother's complaints. "And certainly not deep enough, to hear you! It will hurt less if you stop fidgeting."

FeatherFly, already the size of a grown Yata male, was still TripStone's baby brother. He sulked, humiliated first by her dire warnings not to play around the threshers and now by her ministrations.

Reshaped by Masari hands, Ulik's body became at once anonymous and highly intimate. The skin that bound, the marrow that cured, salves drawn from precious fats, no longer belonged to the individual Yata. Still, TripStone gazed upon FeatherFly's sour face and healing forehead and thought of the person. "Just remember," she scolded, "that a Yata gave his life to help save yours, not to encourage your nonsense."

"We don't have a shortage of bandages, you know."

"That's not the point."

FeatherFly shifted with a grimace under his sister's care. His first tufts of crimson chops gleamed in a shaft of sunlight. Natural for a boy his age to do something stupid. TripStone had been stupid once.

~ ~ ~

After she had eaten her first kill, when she was barely of age, TripStone tried to live without Yata. She had excused herself from the table on Meat Day. She had eaten all the grain her stomach could hold, feasting instead on fruits and small game. She had deadened her sense of taste with strong herbs and spices and scalded her tongue with teas and ciders.

She had told her body, over and over, that it did not need Yata meat or tinctures and poultices made of Yata blood and bone. She eschewed all but cloth bags and simple, ineffective cures for sickness and injury. Like the other young adults who acted as she had, TripStone was branded a *yatanii*, a recklessness with a conscience.

Friends died. Her own bones softened. She began to lose teeth, and those that remained lost their veneer and discolored. Her smallest cuts quickly became infected and her infections spread.

Masari children who refused Yata meat were sedated and nursed back to health when they reached this stage of illness. The young adults who had come of age--particularly those who had killed and felt the Covenant's most intimate dicta--took counsel from clergy sent by the Chamber, but the final decision was theirs alone.

Every adult Masari held the secret desire that among them a *yatanii* would overcome all the odds and live. That the Masari body would change and evolve into an entity independent of the food chain that engendered the Covenant's sacred guilt.

Choking on her sobs, TripStone had asked at last for the meat. Her father NightShout had taken his rifle out into the woodlands and plunged into the hunt. He had not waited to be recognized by a Yata, but pursued his prey with practiced stealth as in the days before the Covenant. He had shot a young adult female between the eyes and left torn brains to waste, then tied his satchel of Yata hair and stomach around the head of his catch as it drained.

Later he pled extraordinary circumstances and repented, carrying the dead woman's belt and pouches--as anonymous as the catch--to the edge of Basc. He left them there and fled, praying to the gods to strike him down. To show his face to the Yata would be to condemn

his family. He could not even let them know that one of their own had saved his daughter's life. He could not tell them that TripStone had almost died by her own faith in her ability to break free of the death grip on both their peoples.

Since that day he hardly ever left the house, his shoulders permanently stooped. TripStone and her mother hunted for him, impatient for FeatherFly to come of age and help shoulder the burden.

~ ~ ~

Now TripStone gazed upon FeatherFly's face as he lay on his pallet, drifting off to sleep. She tucked his blanket around his shoulders. He curled on his side, hands fisted under his chin. The bandage at his forehead had already lost its Yata qualities and looked more like Masari skin. It was a tool now, a healing agent, far removed from the legs that had walked gracefully away from her, holding Ulik's delicate body upright and dignified.

TripStone gazed at the window in her brother's room, into sunlight alive with dust motes, until she could see nothing else. Sitting in a wooden chair that would leave a Yata's legs dangling off the ground. TripStone never felt so small.

## **CHAPTER 4**

Zai gutted fish, sorting flesh, bones, blood, and entrails into glazed pots. Her son Abri wielded a small, blunt knife. He poked his play-fish into bloody masses under his brother's watchful eyes. Evit reached for the knife, whining when Abri held it out of reach. Zai passed a handful of guts to the smaller child to quiet him down, smiling at his fascination as mucus dripped between his fingers.

*Ata, for whom the Yata are named, was born in the cold time. Before Ata we were primitive and dumb as the beasts. We were the Dirt People.*

The story came to Zai unbidden. She tried to push it away, listening to the whisper of her knife as she scraped scales, dropping them into yet another pot.

*In the cold time we hunted in packs because game was much larger than it is now. The hours after a beast died were the most dangerous, for if Masari were tracking us they would wait for us to relax our vigilance before making their own kills. This was the balance: we fed off the beasts and the Masari fed off us.*

Soon she would tell that history to Abri. She watched his pudgy fingers try to strip the scales of his play-fish, its body slipping from his grasp. Evit studiously rubbed blood into floor dust, rolling it into balls.

Did fish grieve?

Had Ulik seen the gateway, had he been welcomed into the next world? He should be here, bouncing Evit on his lap, making a mess with the bloody fish. He should be mending the nets and laughing with his family.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Mommy?"

Her eyes opened. Abri stopped his play, beseeching her with openfaced candor. Evit fixed her with a serious stare.

Zai leaned toward them and kissed their messy faces.

Abri asked, "Is Daddy gone?"

She nodded, trying not to cry. "Without him the Masari would die."

Abri pouted. "Why can't they just die?"

Not a demon voice, that one. Just an innocent boy asking an innocent question.

Zai stroked her children's tiny heads, nestling her palm against their fuzzy scalps. "Because, my sweetheart, if they die, then we die that much faster."

*When Ata lost his companion to a Masari hunter he became mad with grief, climbing to the high mountain caves, away from the world. He swaddled himself in furs, belting them tightly with hides. His many-layered boots were large enough to be Masari feet. The winds howled about him as he dug into snow-filled crevasses, lifting himself to the summit.*

*After days and nights of clinging to ice, rock, and snow, Ata knew the wind so well, and the gusts trying to pull him from the cliff face, that he shook with fright when he stepped inside the first cave and was met with stillness, and silence.*

Abri asked, "Why would we die faster?"

Zai whispered, "Because we're part of each other, in a way you can't understand yet."

*Ata built a fire inside the cave and the cave walls came to life with pictures of animals and hunters—short, black-haired Dirt People side by side with tall, red-haired Masari, hunting animals together. In the beginning, Masari did not kill Dirt People. But then the large*

*beasts dwindled and disappeared, and the Masari changed.*

*As Ata progressed from cave to cave he grew to love the Masari, and to pity them. The Masari who had killed Ata's beloved could eat no other flesh and survive. We became the strong, killed and yet worshipped by the weak. We became their gods on earth.*

How could she explain the Covenant to children so young? Without it, killing would be indiscriminate--the Masari hunting the Yata to extinction, then dying themselves.

The Covenant arose from Ata's discovery in the mountain caves that Masari and Dirt People had been allies, might even have had a common ancestor. Under the dictates of the Covenant, Masari abstained from Yata flesh until Meat Day, beyond which a Masari family began to sicken. They then became supplicants, seeking mercy. Seeking forgiveness. A Yata who died on Meat Day became a powerful being.

Powerful being or not, Zai still wanted Ulik back. Her demons whispered. When she finished with gutting the fish she would go again to the Soala. If Ulik had blessed his hunter, a Masari would be at the visitor's hut in two days. She needed to be ready.

In Ata's day there had been no Soala, nothing to absorb his demons from him. In time his pity for the Masari and his pity for himself met and blended one into the other. The Masari were victims in their need, and Ata was a victim as well. In time, in his madness, he believed himself to be a Masari.

Even the shortest adult Masari had outstripped the tallest adult Dirt People. But outside appearances did not sway the truly possessed, who ascribed Divine cause to contradictions. Ata had descended from the caves in a daze. Encountering his own kind, he saw people

who looked smaller and alien, but his three daughters loomed large in his eyes. He rushed them away from his kin-group, into seclusion.

He worked red silts and clays into his hair and theirs. He painted their skin with infinite care, using the same tints he had found in the caves. He spared his young daughters the pain of tattoos, but pricked his own skin with sharp bone and applied dyes to his cheeks and neck, shoulders and chest, emulating the Masari pelt. When his girls came of age he would teach them how to hunt, blind to the fact that they would be hunting their own kind.

At first they tracked small game as their kinsmen did. Ata's eldest daughter learned to cut her own bow and quarrels. They tracked Masari in secret, watching the killing of their kind, learning the nuances of the hunt. They wept at the sight of a starving Masari--the skin turned sallow, the fur dulled and shedding. They shook to see the ruddy splendor of a majestic body turned to a twitching mass unable to remain upright, whose large bones cracked and splintered, the muscles around them burned away.

As an act of mercy they became killers themselves. No notion of sacrifice existed before the Covenant, for how could they sacrifice themselves when they believed themselves to be Masari rather than Dirt People? Ata became convinced that his companion's death had resulted from starvation, not that she had gone to feed others.

*We are called Yata to remind ourselves of his sin. To remind ourselves that we are not, cannot, can never be Masari. To remind ourselves that we are the strong ones--the ones capable of infinite mercy.*

Zai still wanted Ulik, who would never return. She still wanted his hunter dead.



# CHAPTER 5



TripStone stood naked before her mirror and luxuriated.

She had been up since predawn, cooking and serving breakfast, feeding goats, filling troughs. Thanks to FeatherFly's infirmity she also had to run the thresher at the communal Crossroads farm and inspect its grain. Caring for her brother excused her from other chores.

Her mother ShadowGrass tended to NightShout, who chewed listlessly on the gristle from Ulik's shoulder, forcing himself to swallow. TripStone's father was almost a *yatanii* himself now, eating Yata flesh under duress. Each bite brought with it a fresh wash of guilt that seemed capable of killing him.

It was possible to be a living sacrifice. TripStone had seen it. She had felt it every time she squeezed the trigger. Her own near-death had resulted in her father's sacrilege, his living hell.

She drove the thought from her mind, running her bristle brush seductively against her pelt. She smoothed her anterior neck fuzz upwards, drawing brush from clavicle to chin, following her strokes to each end of her jawbone. From there she brushed down along the sides of her neck and out to her shoulders until loose wisps of fur curled up against well-developed biceps.

NightShout had taught her how to shoot, making stuffed decoys for her out of straw and burlap. TripStone had shot small game from the

time she could heft a rifle and bear the brunt of its recoil. She had pilfered dishes to skeet-shoot at an early age. Her father had been firm, withholding her ritual kerchief from her until she had proven her skill and marksmanship.

Now he couldn't touch a gun, haunted instead by the quick, careless shot to save her life, the spattered brains of a Yata woman not much older than TripStone herself had been. No blessing had marked that day, only savagery borne of desperation as TripStone lay dying by her own foolishness.

With short strokes she brushed her pectoral fur, easing the bristles between her breasts and along a narrow crimson swatch to her navel. She slid the brush over her belly, stopping short of where her red line spread into a pubic triangle.

She replaced the bristle brush on her bureau and lifted a softer, more stylish hairbrush. She piled her thick, fiery mass into a bun and fixed it in place with combs at the crown of her head. Finally she fingered her smallest brush, with its curved bone handle made riotous by a fanciful scrimshander, her great grandfather, perhaps. She did not remember. She smoothed her sideburns and the trimmed crescents on her cheeks. The crescents accentuated the plumcolored lips she had glossed with Yata oil to protect them from the wind.

Songbirds and blossoms and mythical beasts spiraled around the small handle, stippled in purple and blue, yellow and orange. Twirl the brush as she might, following its designs end to end, TripStone's gaze always returned somehow to the place where she began--an optical trick; she did not remember retracing the length of the bone. It was a slim, dainty thing made of a section of Yata rib.

*My name is Ulik. I have been out hunting rabbit....*

TripStone closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

Her vanity before the mirror was meaningless. Her very life was a joke of the gods.

~ ~ ~

"I should throw it all out!" she had raged at her mother once. "I don't need the brushes and the pins and the fortune dice. I'm playing with people's *bones*! Some of those people even talked to us."

"As it should be."

ShadowGrass sat beside her firstborn on a pallet festooned with inscribed Yata parts. She smiled at her daughter. TripStone, squat in build and abrasive when riled, lived up to her name. "And they are still talking to you, generations later. These squiggles--" She took the brush from the young woman, turning it. "Those are Yata stories. Each plant and animal has a different meaning."

ShadowGrass's pelt ran from her neck in red rivers down her arms. She raised TripStone to her feet and walked her around the bedroom, matching pictograms to patterns. The three-dimensional bone carvings surrounding them changed with the shifting light. A tale told in the morning held a different meaning against the backdrop of dusk.

TripStone squinted at whorls and miniatures. "But what good are they if I don't know how to read them?"

"There are people who can, who have written books on the old tongues and numerologies. The better scrimshanders can read them." ShadowGrass circled her arm around her daughter's broad shoulders and gestured about the room. "Think of our house as the

small wing of a vast library. Many of the stories here are ancient history."

"Ancient Yata history."

"Yes."

TripStone frowned. "What about Masari history?"

She heard the futility in her mother's voice. "Our history is written in our own bones."

And in the lessons, and the sermons, and the Covenant. Sometimes, now, TripStone heard the echoes of Yata bones against her own. The brushing mesmerized her, left her open to the voices that came sometimes in whispers, sometimes more clearly.

If she was lucky, Zai would accept her and talk to her. TripStone would bring Zai's words to the scribes at the Rotunda, who would transfer the stories into books. Scrimshanders would immortalize Ulik in bones set aside for keepsakes.

But what about *TripStone's* words? What about her father's words?

To be a *yatanii* was to try to break the bonds of enslavement. TripStone had seen it in her father's face and in his agonized mouthing of Yata flesh, on the verge of spitting it out. Cursing himself for his weakness. Wanting to die.

Ninety-six percent of all adolescent *yatanii* compiled lists of Yata parts and their uses within the household. TripStone had been no different. Her list hugged its secret corner, scrolled and tucked inside a drawstring pouch at the back of her bottom drawer.

She eased it out, unrolled the stiff paper, and weighted it on her desktop with inscribed bones. She smiled at her younger, less stylized penmanship as she read down the list. A brief inspection of her room and her memory revealed two omitted items: an elixir for dysentery, and a bag beaded with pisiform bones of the Yata hand. She added those.

Forty percent of *yatanii* died before they reached full adulthood. Of the sixty percent that survived and were rehabilitated, at least half retained their lists.

A fellow *yatanii*, unable to break the food chain by starving, lived beyond the town's borders. Ghost--not his birth name but the one he had chosen--worked in secret, confessing only to select survivors like TripStone that he kept Yata parts in bottles rather than shrines, subjecting them to surgical instruments and chemicals. In his laboratory he sought a cure for the Masari's dependence on Yata.

Such experiments were horrible desecrations, punishable by death.

TripStone had joined a small band of accomplices. They kept Ghost's activities and location secret from the community and snuck Yata flesh to him when he could no longer function without it.

She hadn't the stomach to bring him anything more. She told him she didn't know how he could stand his work. He told her he didn't know how she could hunt.

*This is my story, she thought. These are Masari stories. The ones we are not allowed to tell.*

TripStone dressed, closed the door softly behind her, and walked to FeatherFly's room.

For once, their bantering was a welcome distraction and a source of relief. It meant he was healing quickly. TripStone would have one less guilt to shoulder when she left for Basc. Guilt collected like pebbles, bright, smooth curios. The sacred ones among them were preserved especially well. Collect enough and they weighed upon one's chest, and then one died by pressing.

## CHAPTER 6

Zai's brother Ila, her closest living relative, draped white linen about her shoulders, securing it around her waist with a belt of rainbow-colored gems. She hugged and kissed her sons and left them in his care. She stepped from her communal home into bright sunshine and walked, sandaled, toward the visitor's hut, a nondescript, whitewashed shelter in the center of Basc.

What its multiple rooms lacked in appearance they made up for in location. The hunters had to walk past the villagers, past their children. *Be strong*, the parents would say. *Without you, these creatures will crumble into dust.*

Better to be a god than a victim. So they said.

Zai glanced at her neighbors crowding the sidelines as she took her slow procession down the main road. They were controlled now, their shoulders thrown back and heads held high, bestowing on her a gaze of quiet triumph. The wailing would come later.

~ ~ ~

TripStone slipped her tightly-scrolled list back inside its black pouch. She packed it in a plain bag made of plant parts only. Ulik's provisions dragged the satchel toward her waist--his knife, his quill,

the empty inkwell, a small net, dried and salted fish, a pig bladder that had held water, an amulet for a successful hunt or for protection, TripStone wasn't sure. She shivered in a simple, thin tunic.

The others were asleep, but NightShout's gaze followed her as she prepared for her journey. Had he been up all night?

"Sometimes you wonder why they don't just pick up the gun you put down and kill you at close range," her father muttered as she washed her face.

She padded softly to him and knelt. She took his hand in hers and wanted to tell him about Ghost. But no, he would be horrified. When TripStone looked into NightShout's pained eyes and smoothed his uneven, graying pelt, she wondered if her father would be dead by the time she returned.

Morsels of Ulik's forearm sat like lead in her stomach. She prayed that his spirit would be with her as she made her way into the woods and beyond, to Basc. His tender voice seemed to reassure her as she stumbled from the house.

~ ~ ~

She was covered in dust and blood by the time she reached the village. Rabbit carcasses, cleaned and dressed, hung about TripStone's neck and waist, as many as she could carry. They were still not enough. After the Yata sinew had served its purpose, she flung the pieces away from her.

Packing her list had been bad enough. What was she trying to accomplish? She didn't know.

Barefoot, hair unbound, she followed the dirt path to the visitor's hut.

Several hunters had passed here before her. Their larger footprints dominated graceful Yata tracks. The villagers lining the streets gazed up at her, but seemed taller than she.

Had she any right to request help from Ulik's spirit here? Hadn't he already done enough? Hadn't she?

They could descend on her *en masse*. Certainly she was outnumbered. She was unarmed. Their retribution could be swift. Instead they watched her, maintaining their distance, exuding an air of respect. Children whispered and pointed, asking questions and receiving hushed answers.

Attendants opened doors of thick, plain wood for her and she stepped inside. Sunlight filtered down through vents in the thatched roof. She sank to her knees, eyes cast down. The doors shut securely, obliterating the low murmur of Basc.

Ahead, seated on a simple, padded chair, a white-robed figure watched her, maintaining silence.

TripStone removed the rabbits and set them on the ground. She lay the satchel by her side, pulled her tunic up over her head, and dropped it behind her. She knelt and lowered her forehead to the ground, her arms along her sides, palms up.

Dust streaked her tufted back. The exertions of the hunt wafted to Zai, who sniffed carefully, learning the other's scent.

*And if we ever said no—would you raid our villages, destroy everything?*

"Sit up," Zai said, her voice tight.

The hunter's breasts had not been suckled even though she was of childbearing age. Tears streamed from a hairy face.

The formality of recitation cracked and the hunter choked on her words. Who had Ulik been to her, this woman who searched only for prey, for sustenance, who did not know what it meant to have and lose a mate?

He had gone to his death peacefully, exchanged the traditional greeting, given his killer the parchment. He had turned from the hunter TripStone, an odd name even for a Masari, and walked toward the gateway without looking back. The hunter had thanked him. She had fired cleanly.

TripStone fell silent and shuddered, the fur on her face wet, hands limp in her lap. She had learned Yata well, with almost no trace of an accent.

"One summer night," Zai said, hesitating, "Ulik had gone down to the riverbed and picked up a handful of night bloomers. Neither of us had come of age yet. He was a friend from a neighboring hut." Despite herself, she smiled. "I never knew he liked me."

"We're like that, too," TripStone answered, softly. "Shy, like that."

"He told no one he was leaving. He took no lamp. He thought the glowworms would be enough."

Zai had TripStone's full attention. She spoke slowly, knowing the hunter would commit her words to memory. "He carried a small knife so as not to be snared in the vines, but he was covered in scrapes from the brambles, and in insect bites. That he could have gotten lost was the real danger."

Abri already showed signs of his father's bullheadedness. Who would tell his stories? Would he be remembered to a Masari hunter? Would Evi? Once the boys were on their own, Zai would again forage in the woods during the hunt. This one, the woman crying and naked before her, could be her own executioner.

Yet here they were, Covenant-bound, undergoing the formalities face to face.

"He was covered in mud by the time he reached my hut, just before dawn. He tickled my nose with the purple flowers before they started to close. I must have screamed. By the time everyone else in the hut had jumped up and come to their senses, we were breathless with laughter. And then--"

Zai's voice quickened. The stories poured forth. The more she told of Ulik, the more she guaranteed his immortality: written into books, carved into his bones, and hung from Masari walls. This hunter had eaten his body. Now she must absorb his soul.

TripStone's muscles relaxed as she let the words enter and fill her, her belly distending as though digesting the memories themselves. She swam in the currents of Yata lore, her own life erased under the onslaught. The mnemonics she learned as a child guided Zai's words into orderly patterns, imprinting them inside TripStone's skull.

Her *yatanii* list remained hidden, her father's sufferings and her own still untold.

Zai finally fell silent. Both women were spent. TripStone shivered on the floor. Zai rose from her seat and walked regally past the hunter, picked up the soiled tunic, and dropped it into TripStone's lap. She gathered up the satchel with Ulik's effects. "We are done here."

Numb, TripStone pulled on her tunic and swayed to her feet as the doors opened. Zai disappeared into the crowd. An attendant entered and gathered the rabbits.

What had she expected? Whenever she had her Day of Atonement, the Yata stories had filled TripStone almost to bursting.

The keening had already begun as she dragged herself from the hut. As usual, her own wails had nothing to do with the person she had killed. Bedraggled, passed from hand to hand to hand, TripStone could not tell where one villager ended and another began. She staggered blindly, howling with the others, forgetting in her agony that her list remained in the satchel that Zai carried back to her communal hut.

~ ~ ~

*Yata are poison. If I believe with all my heart that I will not die, then I will live.*

It was a careful, child's scrawl. Zai did not know much Masari, but she knew enough to fill in most of the blanks.

*If I die, then so be it.*

*I make this pledge in the name of everything holy. I will disdain all Yata meat. I will not wear Yata skin. I will not drink Yata blood, or touch Yata bone and sinew From this day forward I am yatarii. I am strong. I am blessed. When I am free of all Yata pollution I will be perfect and without sin.*

*These are the ways in which my household is soiled....*

Zai read down the list, puzzling out the words. Cookware, clothing,

medicinals, glues, fetishes. She set the list down and looked around. Few artifacts hung about the hut. Yes, she used animal products, but no creature was so ubiquitous.

Zai knew about the bones and the carvings that kept her people's memories alive. The rest of what she read alarmed her. Most alarming of all was the utter rejection shown by these *yatanii*.

Poison! As though her people were the aggressors!

*Is it not enough that we die for you? That you kill and eat our mothers, our fathers, our sisters, brothers, mates, children? That our body parts brush your hair, spear your food, glue your wood? And, after all that, you dare to spit us out!*

Zai tore her robe from her and dressed in hunting clothes. She grabbed Ulik's knife, the closest she could get to touching him now. She would cut open every Masari belly until he was freed.

## CHAPTER 7

TripStone's boots rang on cobblestones. Under her arm she carried a bag too small to be suspected as carrying Yata meat. Outside the ritual feasts, the dried and salted rolls of jerky made from narrow strips were contraband. TripStone had secreted away as much as she dared.

Ghost would not want the full measure to which he would be entitled were he still living in town. Even this small token would make him sullen-- not so different from her father--and in the end he would thank her through clenched teeth.

The sharp tang of industry slowly faded to loam's heady smell as the

cobblestones dwindled. TripStone's boots clumped on hard-packed dirt. Soon they sank gently and she forded her way through thick undergrowth before the foothills steepened. A hidden, precipitous trail took her higher until early morning light gleamed golden off cairns that pointed the way, disguised as natural rock formations. Birds screeched, squabbling over territory.

No, not territory. They were trying to drive off the hawks.

TripStone rested for a few minutes, watching their drama unfold overhead. She didn't know which she admired more, the predator or its prey, who found strength in numbers. She had once spotted a hawk standing in a clearing, methodically plucking the feathers from its kill before stabbing its beak into flesh. The hawk had fixed TripStone with an imperious glare and held its position. Proud and guiltless.

The envy she felt then surged anew. It almost masked the nausea that welled in the pit of her stomach when she realized she'd left her list with Zai. More than anything, TripStone wanted to explain how she had not wished to kill Ulik. How there were, among her people, brave and desperate individuals trying to break the cycle of consumption.

Later. She would have to return to Basc inside the protection of a Covenant ritual.

Ghost's cabin blended into the woods, draped in fronds and bark. TripStone spied other footprints in the soft ground, along with bent grasses and cracked twigs. Ghost had other visitors and they were not hunters, else they wouldn't have left so many clues. Farmers, then, or artisans. Likely artisans if they were bringing him body parts.

The day's advancing heat made her shoulders itch. Or did the heat come from her worries?

She heard voices as she approached the cabin door. She knocked once, then twice, then once again, letting Ghost know it was safe to respond. The voices fell silent. Ghost opened the door a crack, saw TripStone, and smiled.

He frowned when she pushed the bag into his arms. "Damned addiction."

"Is that what it is, then?" She stepped into a room bereft of scrimshawed bones. Instead, a rare Masari weaving softened the far wall. "You've discovered something?"

He waved her off. "No, no. I'm *hoping* it's an addiction and not something irreversible." The last time she was here, he'd called their dependency a plague.

Ghost's face was pale and pockmarked but he looked no more and no less poorly than in past visits. His pelt was thin and darkened to a shade of plum. He hobbled, bowlegged, gesturing as he spoke, directing TripStone to the benches where his other guests sat. Rough, dull linen hung off his tall, skeletal frame.

She recognized the carpenter WindTamer, a man older than her father but one who moved with a youth's vitality. WindTamer had been a *yatanii* once, recovered many seasons now from his own ordeal of fasting. His business recovered less quickly. He ate Yata to keep up his strength in the service of Masari liberation, but refused to use bone inlays in his carvings.

Now his eyes crinkled above the heavy chops at his jowl, and his open vest revealed a thick brush of ruddy fur. TripStone bent down to embrace him, rubbing her cheek against his.

The girl next to him was a stranger--and still *yatanii* from what TripStone could see. The hunter bent to touch cheeks in greeting and caught a whiff of decay. "May you find freedom from the Covenant and live," she said, solemnly.

"And you." The high-pitched reply was thin from fatigue. "I'm BrokenThread."

"TripStone." She sat next to the child.

"She was born RiverRun," WindTamer said. He squeezed the girl's shoulder affectionately. "How long has it been, Thread?"

"Almost a year." BrokenThread looked TripStone up and down. "I changed my name when I became *yatanii*."

"That's becoming more and more common," Ghost called. He stored the jerky in his cabinet, where it would last through severe rationing. "I didn't start the trend, but a lot more are doing it than when I was her age. Thread-- tell Stone how many broken bones you've suffered."

The girl's grin was gap-toothed but triumphant. "None!"

"In almost a year?" TripStone's eyes widened. "In half that time I was close to death."

BrokenThread was obviously sick. TripStone spotted bits of fur fallen onto the bench; the girl's remaining coat clung to her in orangey patches. Sharp cheekbones threatened to break through her skin, rimmed under deepset, dark eyes lost in shadow. Slowly, she was balding.

Now the girl giggled at TripStone's amazement. The hunter asked, "Has Ghost been giving you anything?"

More giggles. "No--he's been taking it away!"

"Drawing blood," WindTamer added. He held up his arm, where a neat cut crusted over with a new scab. "Mine, too."

TripStone peered in Ghost's direction. He had passed from the anteroom into his laboratory, holding aside the tapestry that hid the back room. She shuddered. Out of the corner of her eye she saw WindTamer's brow tic up.

She sighed, facing him. "I know. I take bodies apart for a living. Why should I be squeamish about experiments?"

"Brainwashing is brainwashing," Ghost called from the lab. He hobbled back to the anteroom. "Pardon my manners. I needed to check on some animalcules."

"You should look at them, you know," WindTamer added. "Tiny things, swimming in our fluids. Completely invisible without the help of Ghost's lenses."

"He's shown me the drawings." TripStone shuddered again.

BrokenThread touched her excitedly. "Oh, but you must watch them *move!*"

"Careful, my dear," the old man chided. "We don't want to make her ill."

"Especially after she's brought me my corruption." Ghost rubbed cheeks with TripStone, then sat opposite the three. "Thank you, Stone, for that accursed meat."

"His name was Ulik," she said, numbly. "He was very--serene. His

widow--"

Ghost raised his hand. "Stop. I'm sure you can repeat the stories in your sleep."

"Yata are still forbidden here," WindTamer said. "Except, of course, for Ghost's work."

It was true. The tapestry spanning the entrance to the lab showed a Masari farmer at his plow and others harvesting corn. Its borders recreated the revels of a harvest dance. Ghost's furniture, made entirely of wood under WindTamer's humming lathes, contained no Yata bone. Save for the lab, nothing here weighed on TripStone's conscience.

She felt almost lighthearted without the constant Yata reminders, but she had to tell her news. "When I visited Zai--"

"Ah-ah!" Ghost wagged his finger.

TripStone blurted, "I accidentally left my list there."

Heat flushed her face; she cast her eyes down at her boots. The others exchanged glances.

WindTamer asked, "And?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I need to go back there."

"Oh," Ghost mused, "would I love to have a blood sample from a *living* Yata."

"You might get one from a dead Masari," WindTamer murmured.

TripStone straightened, frowning at him. "Why? Wouldn't they

embrace a world where they're not hunted any more?"

"I'm sure some would." The old man locked his fingers behind red tresses shot with silver and leaned back. His bright blue eyes traced whorls in the roof. "But we are in a deep spiritual debt to them. We treat them as gods; that way they can justify participating in their own deaths." He sighed, deep and gravelly. "Without us they are ordinary. Immaterial."

Part of TripStone reeled with his heresy; the unspoken rolled so easily off his tongue. Another part looked at BrokenThread and at Ghost's stooped profile, thankful for the sanctuary of this no-Yata zone, this place of irreverence. Ghost was up again, cutting chunks from a wheel of cheese stamped with the family name of another recovered *yatanii*.

BrokenThread looked particularly galvanized, as though she were already liberated from enslavement. TripStone had once felt that way, too. Then had come searing pain, nausea, fever.

At first the pain itself had been sacred. TripStone had never felt so alive as when on the brink, ready to die for her convictions. Only when her ecstasy wore off did she quake with fear and grief, begging for meat, cursing foully her weakness.

The child next to TripStone swung her legs back and forth, still grinning. Her feet didn't reach the floor. TripStone watched BrokenThread for a moment, pondering. "How old are you?"

"Underage," the girl said, plainly.

"And a runaway." Ghost dragged a low table between his bench and the others and set the cheese out on a maroon, earthenware plate. Water in a matching pitcher came from a swiftly-running stream near

the cabin. "Otherwise, her parents could force her to eat Yata, at her age."

TripStone stared at him, then at the girl. "They must be frantic."

"They won't be when I help save them." BrokenThread reached for a piece of cheese, resolute.

"It's no use asking where she's staying," WindTamer warned. "Ghost won't tell me."

TripStone needed only a brief examination of the room. Loose down escaped from a bedroll, errant crumbs in the home of her fastidious friend. "That's because she's staying here."

Ghost shrugged. He ran his fingers absently through his bruise-colored hair. "If the authorities find me, I am already dead. They can't kill me twice." He smiled at the child. "And Thread is a quick study. I've been teaching her how to handle the lenses."

"But she's hardly--"

"It's okay," BrokenThread insisted. "I stand on a box when I need to. And when I feel too sick, Ghost carries me to bed."

"And when I'm too sick to carry her to bed, we both crawl." Ghost's grin was as infectious as his protégé's.

TripStone shook her head, fingering the cheese. She didn't know who BrokenThread's parents were. *Yatanii* were rarely mentioned in public. Their families, like her own, stayed isolated.

She hadn't heard anything about runaways. But if she did--what then?

Dismayed, she looked around the room. WindTamer nibbled

serenely, savoring every bite, his eyes closed. A few crumbs settled into his chops. He showed the contentment and satiety of one whose Meat Day was still recent.

TripStone glanced from him to Ghost, who struggled not to bolt his food down. He was hungry for Yata. He refilled his cup and gulped but no amount of water would relieve his persistent emptiness. All the cheese in the world would not fill him up. Soon he'd have need of the jerky she'd brought.

BrokenThread focused intently on her food. The muscles in her face relaxed as she meditated. Her legs stopped swinging and dropped like plumb lines toward the floor. Watching the child transcend need, TripStone bit into her own cheese and felt her stomach knot.

Her own parents would wonder where she was if she didn't leave soon. FeatherFly was well enough to resume his shooting lessons with her.

TripStone stood. BrokenThread slipped from her reverie as the muscles in her face jumped. The child winced and closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. WindTamer rubbed her back and TripStone followed suit.

Ghost asked, "Would you like to lie down?" The girl nodded. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Let me. I have my full strength." TripStone gently lifted the child and whispered, "I'm sorry, I should have stayed seated until we were done with our meal. I didn't mean to distract you."

BrokenThread gave TripStone's arm a reassuring squeeze that felt surprisingly strong. Ghost unrolled a straw mat and then the bedroll in a corner of the anteroom.

When the girl was tucked in and resting, WindTamer took TripStone by the arm. "I'll walk you home. Maybe I can talk your father into regaining his strength."

"Does he know you were *yatanii* once?" WindTamer and NightShout had spoken at seed exchanges and harvest festivals, but had not spent much time in each other's company beyond social gatherings.

WindTamer shook his head. "No, but he will."

Ghost handed TripStone her empty bag. She hugged him hard and rubbed her cheek against his. "Be careful."

"Nonsense, why change now?" Beneath his joviality his face was pained. When WindTamer locked him in a strong embrace, Ghost said, "Remember--a spleen, if you can find it."

"As soon as I can." The old man pursed his lips. "No one in Crossroads seems to have one any more. If I can find someone in Rudder-- maybe."

Ghost nodded. "I have other experiments to run in the meantime."

BrokenThread was already asleep, her ragged breath slowing toward calm. Her cheeks looked more sunken than ever.

How would Zai react if she saw this child fighting so hard to change both their peoples?

WindTamer guided the hunter outside. TripStone wanted to snuggle against him, protected from the ache that threatened to engulf her. Instead, she studied the sky between trees, searching for the hawk.

Nothing circled above her. Only cicadas buzzed in the day's

increasing heat amidst dwindling shadows.

## CHAPTER 8

Zai's footfalls whispered in the dusty dirt roads of Basc, her black braid riding her spine. Tall trees bowed high above a network of huts, canopies interlaced.

Ulik's knife radiated her body heat back to her. Part of him seemed still alive in its warm haft and blade, nestled in her tunic. In another pocket, TripStone's parchment stung like burning coal. Zai's hips swiveled as she hurried past the Soala to her brother Ila's hut. Four males, nine females, twenty-eight children--their household had gotten big enough to split from one unit into two. Her own hut was tiny in comparison, with only three women left other than herself, and no men. Her sons knew only a handful of playmates, all of them from nearby households.

*And they have a dead father, and an absentee mother.*

She pushed the thought away and hurried on.

Explosive laughter and screams of glee echoed between huts. Halfnaked youths pursued a rattling, misshapen gourd careening over gnarled tree roots. Older girls with bound breasts wrestled in the grass. Others tended younger children closer to shelter. Someone pounded on a makeshift drum. Zai heard on the wind the sighs and giggles of young love from a distant, makeshift tent.

Her chest ached with longing. She pushed that away, too. Rage was easier.

Shafts of sunlight breached massing clouds. Thatch and adobe

glowed around her. Ila's hut was no less tumultuous than the others. A barefoot boy chased chickens in the dirt. Zai couldn't help but smile, before she pictured him grown into a young man kneeling before a Masari, taking pity. Believing himself to be a living god, the adult that Zai imagined unsheathed pen and inkwell and proffered his note, as befitted a holy sacrifice.

*They dare to call us poison. After all that we have done, all that we have been for them.*

Ila had lain with eight of the nine women in his household and fathered children with six of those. Or so, he claimed. Living with three cohusbands made paternity hard to tell.

"Ulik is the first, but he will not be the last," he had counseled Zai in his authoritative, older-brother voice. "And he should not be the only."

How could she explain to him that she'd had eyes only for the father of her children? That lying with anyone else meant nothing to her, would do nothing but produce more meat for the Masari?

And yet, she would dare to show no one else the blasphemy in her pocket. Maybe once he saw it for himself, Ila would understand her stubbornness.

Kana, one of the younger wives, sat cross-legged on a soft mound by the door, mending coarse linen the children had dyed haphazardly with berry juice. Her dark hair was cropped short, making her flat face appear flatter. Freckles covered her cheeks and encircled her arms. She drew her needle through and stopped, grinning as she glanced up into Zai's shadow. She tossed her work into a grass basket and reached up, pulling Zai to sit down beside her. "Most of the others are away, building our new hut and gathering supplies. They left Lani and me stuck with the housework this time. I am so glad to see you!

Here, give me a hand."

Zai reached for the basket when several children screamed her name and jostled each other to see who could hug her the hardest. One of the older daughters squeezed Zai's shoulder affectionately and herded them away. The girl's breasts were bare and slick. She'd been wetnursing.

Kana yelled toward the open door. "Lani! Zai is here!"

The sounds of sweeping stopped and Lani peeked out the door, grinning. "What kept you away so long? Stay for dinner, Zai. Everyone should be back by then." Her natty hair glistened with sweat. She bent down and fingered Zai's tunic. "Or are you off on a hunt? There's no need. We have plenty of food."

"We have food, thanks," Zai stammered. "The Masari brought many rabbits."

"Then why--"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Kana nodded, peering into Zai's face. She jerked her head in the direction of the Soala. Zai shook her head.

"There are still demons to be set free," Kana whispered.

*That's because there are new demons now* Zai pursed her lips. Lani's hand gentled the top of her head. Looking up, Zai spotted a belly rounded with what would be Lani's fourth child in two years. *Meat. All of us nothing but rotting meat.* She looked back at Kana. "I just need to grieve in my own way."

"There are dangers in that."

"The Soala can't help me."

The wives exchanged glances. Already the children knew something was amiss, confining their play beyond an invisible barrier surrounding the women.

Zai reached up absently to caress Lani's belly, then let her fingers trail as the woman turned slowly and disappeared inside the hut. The sound of sweeping resumed.

Kana laid her hand on Zai's arm. "Let me take you there anyway."

The spirit in Ulik's knife burned brightly, warming Zai's hip. He comforted her, but she wanted more than comfort. She dared not tell sweetfaced Kana how much more.

Instead, she plucked linen from the basket between them and began to mend. "If Ila is not too tired to take me when he comes home, then I will permit that."

~ ~ ~

Ila was far from grief as he and the others descended on the hut, singing. One of the other men whooped with laughter. A woman trilled. Even from a distance, Zai could see they were covered with dust, rivulets of sweat trailing down tired arms, bared torsos turned golden with light from a low sun.

Ila had lopped off his braid since the night of Ulik's death, when he held Zai in the Soala. Now he sported a thick black beard instead. Zai noted wryly that his knees were scraped, more likely due to playful tussling than to any accident while erecting the hut.

He spotted her and trotted over. He raised her off the ground and then off her feet. "Zai! How is my tadpole?"

"And do you call your children gnats?" It was an old exchange between them. She pecked him on the cheek, then rubbed her own where his beard had scratched it. He eased her down and waited while she was passed from hug to hug.

Kana drew him aside. Before she could speak he swept her up in an embrace, pressing her gently but firmly against the adobe wall. She softened in his hands, then determinedly pushed him far enough away to whisper into his ear. He glanced back at Zai.

His sister met his gaze over another man's shoulders. She wriggled free and excused herself.

Ila waved to the others and took Zai by the hand, guiding her toward the Soala. She pressed her lips shut and squeezed his hand, hard.

The black hut-of-need swallowed what little sun remained in the darkening twilight and glowed with its own internal torches. A man silently wiped blood from the floor as they entered, his arms badly scratched. Zai could see the bruises on his face when he looked up.

She knelt beside him and massaged his shoulders. Ila took the rag and continued to clean. Before either of them could speak, the man said, softly, "I am here for you."

Zai's breath caught in her throat. "Thank you." She kneaded the knots in his back. "My demons are of the quiet kind. I need only my brother with me. We are here for you as well."

"My demons are spent." He looked up at the smoky ceiling. "For now."

Zai gave his shoulders a last squeeze and let him go, startled to recognize Watu in a setting such as this. She waited for him to stumble from the hut before she whispered, "I am too used to seeing him with a flask in his hand and laughter on his lips."

Ila nodded. "Several Masari have come to Watu for atonement." He raised his eyebrow. "I've heard that several trade with him as well."

Zai stared at him.

"It's difficult, to be sure," her brother said, "but not forbidden. *Now*." He drew her to him and looked her up and down, fixing his gaze on the pull of her tunic where Ulik's knife rested. "Tell me what is happening."

Zai plucked the list from her pocket without a word. She thrust it at Ila and turned away.

He squinted as he read. Zai walked slowly around the hut, stopping to peer at each flame, her hands pulling at her braid. She jumped when he suddenly laughed.

"Your huntress was a stupid girl once, tadpole."

She whirled on him. "How can you make light of such--*filth*?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Don't you see? She came to seek your forgiveness for *this*, too." He waved the list. "They are a cursed people, Zai, forever in our debt. We control whether they live or die. They are afflicted with their killing. You must expect them to hate us sometimes." He touched her knife pocket. "What do you plan to do, hunt them down, yourself?"

Her teeth gritted. "And why not?"

"Because we have coexisted peacefully with them for eons." He gestured around the hut. "Because we are their gods, living and dead."

"And what kind of a god is Watu, trading with his worshippers?"

Ila shrugged. "A generous one, I would say. Zai--" He held her around the waist, walking her around the room amidst flickering shadows. "Go to your children. You'll find someone. You'll grow your family. It is easier that way. Come join us. You know Rato's had his eye on you since he first saw you."

She shook herself free. "I can't live like that."

"You would rather live like our parents." He sighed. "One mate, one or two children, and before you know it everyone is gone. If you want to talk about hate--" He hugged himself. The parchment crinkled in his hands. "Sometimes I hated our parents for closing themselves off from others. I swore I would never do that to my own children--or to myself." He looked intently at Zai. "Or to you."

"I'm fine the way I am, Ila."

"Those are your demons talking." He held out the parchment. "They're what's making you see this foolishness as something more sinister than it is."

"It's blasphemy!"

"It's foolishness."

Ila strode to the nearest torch and raised TripStone's list to a filigreed scone. Fire licked and blackened a corner, gained strength, spread.

Zai charged Ila, yelling and grabbing the parchment. She dropped it to the dirt floor and slapped out the flames. "I will not let you destroy this evidence! If one of them can turn against us like this, what makes you think others won't follow?"

"To what end, tadpole? They need us to survive."

"They didn't, once."

"Yes, when the world was first created," Ila said, tiredly. "Much time has passed since then." He held his hand out to her. "Come. Let's go back. Dinner's waiting."

"I should get back to my children, you said it yourself. Before it gets too much darker."

"We'll give you a lamp."

Zai carefully re-folded what remained of the list and slipped it back into her pocket. She enfolded Ila in a sisterly hug. He would go home to a thriving brood, a never-ending supply of caresses, noises so thick and constant it was almost impossible to think. The model Yata household. Amassing mates and children, fertile to bursting, replacing the dead by burying oneself among the living.

She would return to three quiet women, a mother and two daughters, who kept close watch on her sons. They shared a peaceful place, bothering no one and wanting no charity. All of them had looked down upon a Masari sobbing, prostrate, and naked on the ground, who offered small game and begged forgiveness in the visitor's hut.

*Easy to beg forgiveness when you have a belly full of Yata.*

"If I leave now I will not need the lamp," she told Ila. "Thank you."

He caught her arm as she turned to leave. "Zai--there are better ways to live."

"There are blind ways to live," she hissed. "Let me go, Ila."

She knew he watched her as she hurried away, down dirt roads she had memorized in the dark. When she arrived home she found Abri sitting and staring. Evit lay curled up by his side.

"Daddy!"

"Not Daddy." Zai lifted Abri and hugged him tightly. "See? It's Mommy."

"What did you catch?"

"Nothing today." She ran her fingers through his hair. "I just wore my hunting clothes because I wanted to."

Evit stirred and cried out. Zai knelt and gathered him to her, one arm around each boy.

"When do I get to hunt?"

"Not until you're older, Abri." Ever since he had learned to talk, he'd asked her the same question at least once a day. "Not until you come of age. Then there will be plenty of things to learn."

The others murmured amongst themselves at the other end of the hut. They and Zai had long ago dispensed with the pretense of inviting each other to dine. Perhaps, for what she needed to do, the boys should be left with Ila's household after all.

What could Watu possibly trade with the Masari? They had their own

brewers. Whatever the Yata needed came to Basc through the Masari's tithes, so why trade at all? Watu could be killed by one of his customers outside the protective village border. It all seemed unnatural. *Unless he is finding a way to get forbidden things from them. Guns.*

Her heart beat faster. Yes, she would have to leave the children in safekeeping.

## CHAPTER 9

FeatherFly gripped the smooth, gray metal empty of intricate engravings and peered through the viewfinder of his training rifle. When he proved himself a worthy hunter, a local artisan would etch Masari and Yata prayer ideograms into a larger barrel.

The rifle pointed at a straw torso that jumped in its crosshairs in time with the boy's heartbeat. He held his breath, squeezed the trigger gently, and slumped with an exasperated sigh as his bullet sliced through the neck.

The crack of gunpowder sent crows leaping in a black cloud from the treetops. TripStone waited for their raucous complaints to die down before she bent toward her brother. "You're getting better," she said. "Learning takes time, and you haven't been able to practice your shooting for a while."

"MossDancer hit the heart spot *twice* this week," the boy growled. "And I'm a season older than he is! It's not fair."

She squeezed his shoulder. Sweat made his skin slick where his pelt had not yet developed. Soon he'd be taller than an adult male Yata, though most of his skin was still so hairless and smooth he could be

mistaken for one at a distance except for his bushy, fire-colored hair.

And yet, he was still a baby in many ways. The first time TripStone knelt before a Yata she learned how quickly their young matured, how wise they became. Yata children had awed her with their stories of the dead, too richly detailed to have come from such tiny mouths.

Strong-limbed Masari babies toddled earlier than Yata, but they babbled. Sometimes, she told herself, FeatherFly still did. "You're more excitable than MossDancer. It makes a difference."

FeatherFly reloaded. He turned to the next dummy, pulled the bolt with disdain, and shoved it forward.

TripStone looked skyward. "For example." She watched her brother aim. "Take your time. Yata are not rabbits. They won't run away."

"Some do."

"Most don't."

The crows quieted and settled back on the same high branches as before. TripStone smiled to herself. For all their protests, she had never seen the birds flee in response to gunshot. Their alarm was nothing but an act. Each species provided the other with an audience.

FeatherFly squeezed the trigger. The birds launched again. Both boy and branches recoiled. His bullet grazed the spine line and TripStone grimaced.

Anything other than an instant, painless kill was a desecration. A Yata walked slowly, placidly away, a steady but dwindling target. When killed properly, he or she was never aware of passing suddenly into

the next world.

TripStone waited for the child's splutter of curses to die down. "That's why you practice on straw," she said, tiredly. "This is a serious responsibility. Stop thinking of MossDancer. You're not competing with him."

FeatherFly reloaded, giving the gun a vicious jerk. "I'm sorry for not being so *serious*."

She wanted to box his ears.

Men's voices grew louder behind them. WindTamer's was gravelly and intense, NightShout's thin and subdued. TripStone turned from her brother. Her father looked haggard as before, slouching as he walked toward the practice ground, his chops and pelt dun-colored and streaked with gray, his clothes plain and ill-fitting. WindTamer accentuated his words, beating his fist into his palm to make a point. TripStone listened more closely as they advanced.

"... put me out of my misery," NightShout was saying.

"There is a *reason* for our dependence, whatever that reason is," WindTamer insisted, "just as there is a reason for us to fight it, each in our own way."

"You're assuming the world is a logical place." TripStone's father shook his head. "It is not. It's brutal."

FeatherFly made a face at his sister, who scowled back at him. The boy turned to the last dummy standing and took aim.

The men were close behind them now. "Double-check your position," NightShout said, flatly. "You're overcompensating."

FeatherFly stood his ground.

His father walked up beside him and laid a large, gnarled hand on the barrel. He took the rifle away without a word and in one fluid motion lifted, aimed, and fired. The bullet punctured the heart spot cleanly. NightShout dropped the gun listlessly to the ground, turned with his lips tight shut, and walked away.

TripStone saw the look of surprise in WindTamer's eyes. "He's still a master hunter," she said, softly. "I grew up hearing his marksmanship was perfect--except for his one kill to save me."

FeatherFly's gaze traveled from TripStone to WindTamer and then to his father's receding form. He shook his head and shrugged, looking sour.

WindTamer touched TripStone's shoulder. "I'd better get back to him."

Her fingertips brushed his as he left. She turned to deal with FeatherFly, but her brother was already re-stuffing and binding the targets and standing them back up. Before nightfall they would both comb the area for shells and spent bullets to be melted down and recast. She sighed. She'd been rebellious at his age, but had she ever been so insensitive?

*Maybe if you'd been more sensitive, your father wouldn't be the way he is now*

The crows peered curiously at them from overhead. When FeatherFly returned, he pointed toward the house, toward their father. "*That's* why I have to be better than MossDancer." Breathing hard, his face set in a mask, he snatched his training rifle from the dirt.

## CHAPTER 10

Zai checked and rechecked a woven satchel of clothing, toys, tools. When she was satisfied, she laced it up with strips of chewed goatskin. She turned the bundle this way and that, inspected her mending, then lashed her cooking pot to the outside and hauled the pack across her shoulders, securing it into place.

A double-sling of leather hung loosely against her front. She lifted Abri, and then Evit, fitting their pudgy feet into holes. They clung to her, their faces pillowed on her breasts, and bunched her tunic with tiny fists. Evit fidgeted, wailing. Abri was happier, singing a wordless tune that grew louder as Evit complained.

Zai tried to shush each in turn, to no avail. Her head hurt. Part was due to the screaming and part to her braid, pulled by the weight of the satchel.

She leaned back, squeezing the satchel against her hut's adobe wall. She set her feet wide apart and drew Ulik's knife from her pocket, unsheathed it, and sawed off the braid at the base of her skull. Better for traveling, she told herself. The boys quieted, distracted by the labored movements of her raised arms.

She held the knife out, let the baby touch the flat of the blade, then sheathed and pocketed it again. She plucked her walking stick from its corner and stepped outside, blinking in bright sunlight. Abri explained excitedly to Evit that they were going to see Uncle Ila. Evit, uncomprehending but fascinated, stared into his brother's wide brown eyes.

The combined weight of children and household goods made Zai's knees ache. The soles of her feet wanted to melt into the dirt path.

The Soala was blessedly quiet, flickering in perpetual torchlight even at midday. Its black walls seemed to burn in the harsh sunshine. Overhanging tree branches provided welcome shade.

"Here, let me help you." An adolescent girl, breasts bare and swollen, stepped alongside her. "I can feed the little ones and help you carry your pack."

Zai looked at her with haunted eyes. This perfect stranger, barely of childbearing age, was already producing milk. The people of Zai's own village were strangers to her, as though Basc were a giant hut enclosing the other villagers while she remained outside.

Her parents had escaped that cloying community, one so tightly knit it was hard to keep one's identity, to remember whose children, whose mates were whose. If one wanted to keep track at all.

"I'm fine, thanks," Zai said, forcing a smile. "I don't have far to walk."

"Please." The girl's eyes were bright above dimpled cheeks. She cupped her breasts in her hands. "I'm ready to burst. I have more than enough milk for both your children."

It would be so simple. Pass the boys hand to hand and nipple to nipple until they, too, became lost in the crowd, their reality nothing but one body after another, taking comfort in warm flesh until their time came to be slaughtered.

The girl's eyes pleaded with Zai. No doubt she had howled with the rest of the village during Ulik's Remembrance, what his killer called the Day of Atonement. As though begging forgiveness and carrying his life story away to Crossroads would bring him back. As though grieving for Zai's loss would make this girl a sister—this young creature who would bear child after child with man after man,

besotted with her own fertility.

"You're tired. Let me help you. We'll both feel better."

A trickle of sweat ran into Zai's eyes, stinging. The boys would become part of Ila's household anyway, if Zai did what her heart and soul demanded of her. There was no sense in causing this girl further pain.

Sighing, Zai nodded. The girl lifted her sons from her, cradling them both in strong arms. Their mouths locked immediately onto her nipples. They sucked placidly the rest of the way to Ila's hut, where the girl, smiling contentedly, returned them to their mother and walked away. Abri, old enough to know not to soil his loincloth, half-crawled, half-walked to pee in the grass.

Zai had not bothered to ask the girl's name. The girl had not bothered to tell it.

Another of the wives--she must be new, Zai didn't remember her at all--greeted her with a hearty, welcoming laugh. She gathered Evit in her arms and took him inside. Zai waved to her departing son and shrugged off her pack, removing her water skin and food. She wrapped them in a long cloth that she tied around her tunic.

Her shorn braid, cinched between the pack and her shoulderblade during her journey, fell into the dust. She picked it up and brought it to Abri, folding his fingers around its thick weave as she lifted and carried him to the hut entrance.

There she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly, planting kisses on his head. He looked at her curiously. His small hands tried to catch the tears leaking from her eyes.

"Why are you sad?"

"I have to go on a trip," she whispered, "and I'm going to miss you."

He hugged her around the neck. "I'll miss you, too."

She lowered him to the ground, by the door. "I love you and Evit very, very much. You're going to be with lots of people now, okay? They'll take good care of you while I'm gone."

He nodded, sagely. "Okay."

"Okay." She managed a smile.

Then she kissed him again, quickly, at the sound of approaching footfalls, and ran from the hut as fast as her lightened body could carry her.



# CHAPTER 11



Ghost inhaled deep, shuddering breaths, holding the slab of Yata jerky from TripStone in his hands. He sat on a bench, hunched over the meat, cursing silently.

BrokenThread peered through the lenses with her back to him, standing tiptoe on a wooden box. "Are your extremities numb, yet?"

He nodded, then realized she couldn't see him. "Yes. But you're taking notes on Yata bile, not on my symptoms."

"You *should* take notes on your symptoms." She dipped her quill and scribbled on parchment. "It's getting dark. Once I light the lamp I'll have to put the lenses away, or I'll end up mistaking the moving shadows for creatures."

"My symptoms are not important."

"How do you know? I never had the pinpricks you get."

He turned his head toward the lab and called, "That's because you're a special case, Thread."

"I'm not so special."

He smiled at the pout in her voice. He sighed heavily; he'd better get himself well so he could help keep her alive.

The slab in his hands bore rich striations, lean meat with a dainty

weaving of fat. He was supposed to bless it before he took a bite--to tell stories of Ulik's life, committing details of the man to memory. To ask Ulik's spirit for strength and forgiveness.

*We must all dispense with that nonsense if we are ever to get past needing them.*

He absently raked the dried meat across itchy fingers. BrokenThread was right. He should keep a log of what ailed him before he ingested this. He laid the jerky on the bench and pushed himself to his feet, clenching his teeth against the pain shooting through his legs. He didn't fall far before hitting the wall where his walking stick leaned.

BrokenThread called, "Are you all right?"

"I'm going to my desk."

His stomach complained, making a sound like fabric ripping. A cramp doubled him over. When he blinked, twin tears coursed down his cheeks and nestled in his chops. He gripped the walking stick tightly with both hands but felt no wood, only itch and tingling. He forced himself to straighten.

Plain strips of cloth hung near his head, draped over a hook jutting from the wall. Ghost jerked one hand up, breathing hard. The first strip fell through his fingers before he could catch it. He roared, "Damned disease!" and heard the girl step off the box. "Get back to the lenses, Thread. I can do this."

Cursing, he snagged another strip between pale, insensate fingers. He grunted, using them and his teeth to lash his other hand to his walking stick. Finally, he pushed away from the wall. His desk was a room away, wavering in blurred vision. He made a mental note to practice writing with his eyes closed. If he was going to write his

symptoms down, it would do no good if he couldn't read what he'd written while blind.

It would do no good if he couldn't hold his pen, either, or know when to ease up before he broke the nib. He yelled inarticulately, gnashing his teeth.

BrokenThread's thin face floated before him. "It's getting dark. Let me help you."

"I'll have to dictate to you."

"I know."

The knotted cloth bound his walking stick to a hand unable to grasp anything. His bowels shuddered. Nature, cruel magician, had unleashed its tricks on him again.

Knife-edge pain seared his groin as he lowered himself back onto the bench. His desk was still across the room, but Thread would take his place there. The jerky remained next to him as before, mocking his affliction. He slammed his palm against the seat and prepared to do so again when the girl cautioned, "You don't want to break your hand."

"I wanted a lab assistant, not a nursemaid."

"Too bad."

A warm, golden light pierced his darkening vision as BrokenThread lit the lamp. He heard her nib scratching and grumbled, "Loss of feeling in fingers and toes. Abdominal cramps."

"Spasmodic or congestive?"

Spasmodic. Blurred and darkened vision, loss of peripheral vision." He sighed. "Foul mood."

"Doesn't count. You're always in a foul mood."

He chuckled, then cut it short. "Hurts when I laugh."

"I'll write that down."

He marveled at her composure as much as he did her willpower. Mature beyond her short years, or was that true of all *yatanii*? Did willingly facing death give one wisdom? He couldn't say that for himself. Then again, he had broken his own Yata fasts. "Thread--"

"Hm?"

"I must start eating. I will tell you what happens there, too."

She nodded. "Good."

With a moan he fell to the meat and sank his teeth into tough, dried fibers, ripping a chunk from the slab. "I feel as though my body is filled with tiny mouths," he whispered as he chewed, "all of them wide open, pulling everything in."

Her nib sounded like a lullaby across the parchment. She asked, "Muscle spasms easing?"

"Mm." He took another bite. "Whole body relaxing."

More writing. "What about eyesight?"

Waves of calm. The very air around him wrapped his limbs in a gentle blanket, massaging. Bringing him back to life. He murmured, "Dunno."

"Open your eyes, then."

Oh, but it felt so good to sit slumped in darkness, chewing, swallowing. *Concentrate*. He blinked against the light. "Less blurry, now. Not completely clear, yet." He rested his chin on the back of his hand still lashed to the stick, wisps of thin beard curled against dry knuckles. "It's almost like being drunk."

It was sacred, beloved food, doorway between life and death. Deliverer from the abyss. Ghost forced himself to think clinically. "Ecstatic tendencies." He shook his head. "Gods, the power they have over us."

She said, determinedly, "We will change that."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"I don't."

He forced a smile. "I told you you're special." He bit down again, tearing viciously into the meat. Energies jolted him and turned his body into an enormous sponge pulling, pulling.

He leaned back, breathing deeply, eyes closed, throat toward the ceiling. His fingers and toes turned hot with blood. He swallowed. "Feeling's returned to extremities. Body flushed with heat." He shuddered. "Oh, gods..."

He heard a pause in the writing, but the buzzing inside him made up for the silence. Suddenly BrokenThread asked, "Meat or sex?"

He twitched. "What?"

"Don't think, just answer."

The word flew from him. "Meat."

"Interesting." The nib scratched again.

"Why?" he asked. "What are you writing?"

Her voice was flat. "Sexual arousal."

Startled, he reached between his legs. He stammered, "I—I apologize. You shouldn't be seeing me like this."

She said gently, firmly, "I'm living with you now, Ghost, and I'm not a baby. Yata meat gives you an erection. It's likely to happen again."

He opened his eyes, stared down at the jerky in his hands, and seethed with helpless rage even as pleasure grabbed hold. His breathing quickened as the meat called.

One more bite. Just one more. Then put it away.

"I hate them," he said.

"You wouldn't if you didn't need them." Her fur was patchy in the shifting light. "It's not their fault."

He shook the slab at her. "I hate *this*." He ripped off another piece and reeled again. He dropped the slab on the bench, turned his back to her to hide his shame, and busied himself with unwrapping the walking stick from his hand. "That's it, Thread. I'm putting the rest of it back in the cupboard."

"Are you sated yet?"

"No, and I'm not going to be."

"Then you'll probably need it again in a few days."

Without a word, Ghost snatched the jerky and staggered toward the lab. It was all he could do to shove the meat away and close the door. A sob escaped his throat as he lay his head on his arms, leaning against the wood.

Earlier in the day WindTamer had told them he was headed toward the town of Rudder in search of a Yata spleen. If he couldn't find one in Rudder, he'd go on to Promontory. A long journey, several days out, several days back. Ghost expressed worry, but the old man was insistent.

By now WindTamer would have chosen a camp site for the night, assembled his tent, and cooked his dinner. Already sated with Yata, he would be eating easily, plain food assuaging simple hunger.

Were it not for the people believing in him, Ghost would have given up his experiments long ago. That knowledge made him almost as ashamed as his erection, spied by a girl too young to be privy to such things.

He smiled wryly to himself. A Yata girl her age would already have a child of her own. Or several children. But then--

He lifted his head from his arms and gazed at the closed cupboard. Would they be so fertile if his people didn't claim so many bodies?

He glanced back at BrokenThread, who had rolled out her pallet and lay stretched upon it, a woolen coverlet drawn over her shoulders. Light drained from the lamp, its wick close to gutted. The room's deep shadows accentuated her bones, making her look even more skeletal than she already was, yet she all but ignored the meat that so easily held him in thrall.

"If there's anything in my life that's sacred," he told her, "it's you."

She grinned tiredly at him. "And our work."

"And our work." He rolled out his pallet in a corner of the lab and hobbled to retrieve his lamp from the desk, stopping to gaze on drying ink. "Thank you for this." He knelt by the girl and brushed his purpled cheek tenderly against hers. "Stay alive."

Her murmur drifted toward sleep. "You, too."

Ghost nodded. He stood and returned to his pallet. His stomach lurched, still insistent, as he lay on soft straw and choked his urges down. In a few days he would again let his flesh win its battle with his soul, but not one minute too soon. He snuffed the lamp, curled beneath his blanket, and stared for what seemed like hours into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 12

TripStone pulled a sack of grain from a mountainous pile in the center of town and added it to its companions. The wheelbarrow was almost full. She motioned to FeatherFly, who sped the barrow as fast as he could to the waiting transport.

Midsummer harvest. The First Thanksgiving Day of the year.

The transport bloated with produce the height and breadth of her family's home. Multitudes of fruits rolled down from uneven pinnacles. Sweet avalanches smacked softly against bolted wooden slats.

The wagon's great wheels formed a universe of cogs and chains, derailleurs and greased gears--a mathematician's miracle trailing up

the sides of the carriage, front to back. Magic, to move such tonnage with the muscles of a single Masari.

TripStone had pulled the transport before, listening to the syncopated clacks behind her as wheels spun smoothly on their axles and a leather harness pressed lightly against her sternum and hips. FeatherFly pushed his wheelbarrow with ease, its gears whirring.

Goats bleated about the market square in pursuit of spilled harvests. A noisy chicken flapped by TripStone's feet and pecked at loose grain. The hunter arched her back, stretching her muscles as she waited for her brother to return. Once again, he was caught up in his circle of friends, gesturing wildly, their voices lost in the hubbub.

Farmers shouted around her, lest their offerings be forgotten. Weavers rushed about with bolts of cloth, coloring the air. A second transport wheeled into position and began to fill. Crossroads hastened to offer its fruits to its sister Yata community as tribute.

TripStone would have to collar FeatherFly again and drag him back to his duties.

Their mother ShadowGrass bustled about, taking inventory, recording the depth of their devotion. Her list and those from their neighbors would be delivered to the Yata alongside the other goods.

TripStone had spent the morning with her household at the Grange, Crossroads' communal farm, pulling plows across the field they'd left fallow the year before. As always, FeatherFly asked why the work could not be left to goats and sheep. He might as well ask about the chickens, too, or the cats. Bedtime stories told of larger beasts who had performed such labors long ago, but that was nonsense.

She caught her brother's eye and motioned him impatiently to her

side. When he passed into earshot, she yelled at him to go back and get his forgotten wheelbarrow.

Gossip and laughter lifted and dipped with the breeze. A faint voice intoned RiverRun. TripStone froze, angling her head to hear better.

FeatherFly said, "Hey," and tugged at her shirt. She shushed him, but the voice was gone. She ached to know the rest. Did the speaker even know that the girl was no longer RiverRun but BrokenThread? Frowning, TripStone reached for another sack of grain and dropped it into the barrow. She peered about, looking for WindTamer, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"What were you listening to?"

"Nothing." She ruffled her brother's ruddy curls. "Just being nosy." She reached for another sack.

NightShout stood by the apothecary, chatting with a cluster of men. His face showed all the right expressions: the mischievous wink and easy grin, all the trademarks of the father she knew before her illness. They didn't fool her. His eyes were still sunken in their sockets. His shoulders still hunched.

But today was a Thanksgiving Day, and he lightened his burden by pouring his family's harvest into the wagons, giving something back to the Yata. Sometimes, on these days, he was genuinely happy--until the wagons rolled away from town, the hubbub died down, and the townsfolk repaired to their silent, somber homes.

He had responded with worry when TripStone voiced her intention to take one of the transports. "Do you think it's wise to return there so soon after your Atonement?" How else could she look for her *yatanii* list? To do so any other way would be to sneak into Basc as an

invader.

Her spirit commanded her, she told him. Her Atonement felt not quite resolved. She still needed to pay personal homage. It made her father worry, but telling him about her list would alarm him more.

The transports stood side by side, great creaking beasts piled as tall as the trees. Laden with so many goods they blocked out the sun rising closer to zenith.

TripStone sweated in the growing heat, dragging her stained sleeve across her cheek crescents. She loosened the ties of her shirt as the skin around her pectoral fur beaded with perspiration. TripStone reached for the water bladder at her side and raised it to her lips, drinking deeply. She would have to refill it, and another, before she began her journey.

## CHAPTER 13

Zai stood before a large, painted rock to the side of the path and gazed down at serpentine ideograms twisting in vibrant colors. She had known about Watu's brewery and tavern but not about his Meethouse. *He is an herbalist*, she reminded herself. *It makes sense.*

The images before her seemed to writhe by themselves. In the distance sat a gaily-painted cluster of joined huts, smoke curling up from their center.

She should have known. Ila procured Destiny from here. She wondered idly whether her brother used the sacred powder at the Meethouse as well as at home, losing himself among strangers.

*No one is a stranger to Ila* . Zai frowned. For all she knew, the wives came here as well, and the co-husbands. She trudged on, suddenly weak-kneed. Steeling herself.

The tang of sex and sweat reached her nostrils before she crossed the transom. Moans and raucous laughter assailed her ears. She stepped into a room dripping with fine cloth, its floor strewn with opulent pillows in purple and gold, bright blues and greens, yellows and reds. A few patrons, still clothed, sat at a long, narrow plank of burnished wood, sipping ale and watching.

At one end a man sprawled, cradling a flask in his hand beside a halfempty bag of the brown powder. His breeches were untied. He raised the flask dreamily to his lips and took a deep draught, moaning as his exposed loins throbbed further up toward the parti-colored ceiling.

A woman sidled up to him, laughing low in her throat, naked and glistening, her nipples already hard. Distracted by the drug, he barely noticed her approach until she straddled him, sliding upon him with a long, loud sigh. Slowly she rocked, front to back, side to side, drawing him in deeper until he pulled her to him, burying his head in her breasts. Zai forced herself to look away as they slipped toward a mass of thrashing limbs on the floor. Cloth ripped.

Ila had offered her Destiny once. "A gift of the gods" he called it. Its aromatic odor alone had caused her innards to clench with pleasure, but she refused to do any more than sniff the pulverized chalk and roots and the gods only knew what else. She and Ulik had loved on their own, when their natural cycles drew them hard against each other. Her brother had been exasperated by their stubbornness.

Now Ulik was gone, while all around her bodies twisted in hallowed acts, in a temple as joyous as the Soala was grim. Zai stepped

gingerly over and around thrusting hips and echoing, ecstatic shouts and groans. No one touched her. She forced her face to remain passive and sat carefully at the table. A woman draped over a neighboring chair glanced in Zai's direction and returned her attention to the revelers. A man fingered his breeches and looked at Zai quizzically. She shook her head.

Ulik's arms encircled her. The memory hit, sudden and devastating. His tender lips brushed her neck, his hands gliding up and down her torso. His ebony eyes looked unabashed and unclouded into her own. She shuddered, catching her breath. More people glanced in her direction. She shook her head again.

Her thighs ached with longing to coil around his narrow hips, her nose filling with his scent. She wanted him, not this mindless convulsion of flesh at her feet, these pillows darkening with fluids.

In her mind's eye Ulik gazed upon her, calm but troubled. She wanted to reach up to the image, run her fingers through his thick black hair, tell him everything would be all right. When his face didn't change, she wanted to push his distress away and wrap herself around it at the same time. She rocked slightly in her chair, warring with herself.

"You're Ila's sister."

The lighthearted voice jolted her from her reverie. She looked up from shadowy patterns in the wood into Watu's smiling face. He stood behind the table, grinding Destiny in a large wooden bowl before the mixture passed to a mortar and pestle in the back room. His face was flushed, his pupils dilated. Behind the bowl his torso was broad, his arms well-muscled, their scratches crusted over.

"Yes." Her voice was hoarse. She coughed.

"What can I get you?"

"I heard--" Her breathing quickened. She glanced around the room, licking her lips. "I'm interested in learning about--trade." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Must we speak here?"

Watu laughed. "It is a bit noisy, isn't it?" As if in reply a woman ululated, raised off her feet and pressed against the far wall. "Come with me. I'll have someone else tend the congregants."

Zai cautiously rounded the table and followed him. He instructed an assistant, dressed in a flowing robe and huge with child, who left one of the great bowls in the back and edged past them toward the front room.

They walked past caches of Destiny and ale in various stages of production, advancing upon a smaller room away from the many corks and casks, bottles, bubbles and bags. Zai studied more of the festive drapery as she stepped inside, but these curtains did not impinge so much on her senses.

Watu closed the thick door behind them, muffling the distant chorus of cries and gasps. He pointed to a cushioned chair. Zai sat, staring at the floor.

Her host pulled another chair close to hers and sat, leaning in. He looked at her intently. "What sort of trade are you interested in?"

The sadness in Ulik's face refused to fade away. She would have to live with it. She cleared her throat and looked up at Watu. "I've heard you trade with the Masari," she said, haltingly. "I am curious."

"Why?"

She buried her face in her hands, breathing deeply. After a minute she felt Watu's hand on her shoulder. Her breath became ragged. "I have demons," she said, thickly.

"I can see that."

His joviality was gone. When Zai faced him again, his pupils were tight pinpricks even in the back room's soft, dim light. His face was wide and rough where Ulik's had been smooth. She studied Watu's thick neck and strong cheekbones. The bruises from his day in the Soala were faded but still visible. His expression was hard.

She asked, "Why do you trade with them?"

He said, plainly, "They have what we need."

*We.*

The colors around her became unbearably vivid. Her voice seemed to come from outside her head. "What do we need?"

Watu fixed her with a mirthless smile and leaned back against the cushions. He murmured, "It's amazing what they will give us for Destiny."

She stared at him.

"Oh, they don't use it for entwining." He steepled his fingers by his chin and gazed at the wall behind her. "They use it as a spice, a rare delicacy that only the very rich can afford. It makes us—even more important to them."

"You—" Bile rose in her throat. Zai gripped the sides of her chair. She closed her eyes until her nausea subsided. As though Yata flesh

alone weren't enough for the Masari. She said through clenched teeth, "I hope you charge them dearly for it."

"That's the only way I do business with Masari."

"What do they give you in return?"

Her gaze bore into him. Watu rose and ambled to a far wall. He ran his hand along rich fabric, turquoise and maroon, rubbing it smoothly between his fingers. Zai repressed a frustrated scream while he distractedly studied the weave.

He frowned, mulling, then turned to look again at Zai. She shifted under his scrutiny of her dust-covered skin, the stark functionality of her hunting tunic. Her dark, hacked-off hair. Again he met her eyes and nodded, almost imperceptibly.

His voice dropped. "What would *you* ask from them in return?"

She began to squirm on the soft cushions and stopped herself. If she guessed wrong, she could be cast from the village and sink her family into shame. Abri and Evit would lose their mother. She would be mourned in the Soala, as good as dead.

She blinked tears from her eyes. *I am as good as dead now.*

If she was wrong, she would try another way, go somewhere else.

She could feel Ulik's hands grasping her shoulders, could see his eyes wide and bright and panicked. She should honor his spirit, uphold the Covenant he adhered to so dearly. *I'm sorry*, she cried at him. *I can't.*

Hands still held her, but they weren't Ulik's. When did she close her

eyes? She blinked them open, face to face with Watu. He knelt before her, waiting patiently for an answer, his large hands warm and dry against her upper arms.

"Guns," she answered, flatly. "Nothing less than guns."

He again studied her closely before rising to his feet. She watched him remove a narrow swath of maroon cloth from the wall.

"This is necessary," he said, as he wound it around her head and tied secure knots. The cloth pressed thickly, lushly, against her eyes. She swallowed hard.

Watu said, "You're afraid."

She nodded.

"So am I." He helped her to her feet. "I will take you to a wagon. I will have to bind your hands as well--as a precaution, in case your curiosity gets the better of you. You are not to know where we are going. Do you understand me?"

She nodded.

"We will be entering a land where demons run free."

He took her arm, guiding her with a firm but gentle touch. They passed into another room, and another. Zai wondered if they walked in circles. At last she felt fresh air on her cheeks and heard gravel clattering underfoot. Soon their pace slowed, then stopped. Watu turned her around and sat her on the edge of a wagon.

His voice was a grave baritone. "Once we leave here, there will be no turning back. Say the word and I will return you to the front room."

Her throat constricted. "My mind is unchanged."

He guided her further into the wagon, easing her arms behind her. Soft rope encircled her wrists, secure knots pulled into place. Here, too, cushions counteracted the hardness of wood. Zai leaned into them and tried not to think. She heard Watu close the gate and check the gears and chains, heard the slip of leather against skin before the wagon shifted slightly.

He pulled her forward, jogging evenly down a smooth path away from Basc. Zai tried to gauge the sun's position by its warmth on her body, but there were too many trees, too much coolness mixing with the heat. Too many turns.

Chains whirled. Wheels spun smoothly on their axles. Feet pounded on dirt. Zai felt like a trussed animal, helpless and blind. She whimpered once, then choked down her fear.

The wagon stopped after what seemed like an eternity. Watu lowered the gate and lifted a water skin to her lips. She drank deeply until he took it away.

"Not too much," he said, "unless you want me to help you urinate, too. We still have a long way to go."

As his hands left her, she blurted, "Does Ila know--about this?"

Watu's voice sent chills through her. "No."

She whispered, "I will say nothing then."

The wagon gate clanged loudly into place. "You would not have the chance to tell him."

## CHAPTER 14

*Windbag, you are a foolish old man.*

WindTamer grunted in the hot sun, hauling his pack down Promontory's dusty main road. Rudder had welcomed him, pulling him into their midst in the throes of Thanksgiving Day preparations. Days later he still smelled like fish, his hands roughened with preservative. His muscles ached from lifting one slippery load after another.

He'd had enough hearty backslaps to last him through the winter, and winter was still a season away. And not one Yata part to show for it, let alone a spleen for Ghost.

Lots of tall tales in the tavern, though, as he raised his mug repeatedly to the sparkling waters outside. To the snot-nosed boys who now had the audacity to sport beards and look like men. When did *that* happen? Time passed too quickly. He should make the trip abroad from Crossroads more often.

Perhaps Rudder would have something for him on his return leg, when he'd finished trying his luck in blasted Promontory. Not fair, to pass from the breezy oasis of Rudder into hardscrabble rock and puny brush whose shade extended only to his boots. Thank the gods he remembered to take his broadbrimmed hat.

Not a friendly place, this town. The heat probably forced everyone indoors, where they kept to themselves. Either that, or the damned mines and quarries broke too many backs. WindTamer rolled his shoulders and flexed his muscles. *Guess I shouldn't complain about the fish.*

Promontory's main road was all but deserted, with a smattering of shuttered cabins. Shopkeepers shook their heads when he asked them about plans for their next Meat Day, as though they didn't even keep their own calendars.

Sweat ran in rivulets from his hairline, stinging his eyes and matting his neck fur. He should turn around before he melted into the dust. WindTamer forced himself to swallow a bite of rabbit. He ate more, chewing listlessly, needing the energy even with his appetite burned away by the heat. At least he could sip Rudder's heavenly water weighing down the bag at his side.

He trudged on, stopping to listen to the descending trills of a canyon wren. He might return empty-handed, but at least he'd get an eyeful at the overlook before he turned back. Something to tell the young ones at home about, before they all shot up tall and grew beards without warning him.

The road dwindled to outcroppings of shale surrounded by brambles. WindTamer didn't care. He'd made it this far on his fool's errand. So what if he'd have to mend rips in his pants when he got home?

He continued on, lifting and shaking his legs, venturing a cautious hand to free himself from the more tenacious, thornier shrubs. More plaintive cries from the wren reached his ears. The rock spread out before him into a solid mass, a natural terrace. The sun baked it to an iridescent gray.

Below that, the ground dropped precipitously into desolation interrupted by pitifully thin swatches of green. A brown ribbon of water trickled in the distance, too far away to hear. More trickles fell from the rock walls sweating and shining with mirrored light.

Past a thorny field, a gritty trailhead and chalky lines edged down the

rock face, steep trails barely large enough for one person to navigate. They zigzagged out of sight, eclipsed by stone before re-emerging further down. A box canyon was rumored to sit beyond the trails, sheer walls concentrating the sun's fire with enough force to blast one's flesh away, leaving nothing but brittle bones.

If the rumors were true, that meant someone had been stupid enough to go there. Someone else, less stupid, had lived to tell the tale. WindTamer shook his head. It all sounded too much like tavern talk. Still, those distant white lines begged for an explanation.

Some animal scabbled in the brush, trying to climb toward the rim. Poor dumb beast, probably looking for food...jerking forward, grabbing hold of vegetation, rock indentations. Pulling up, reaching, dropping back to the ground. Odd movements for an animal.

WindTamer blinked and peered as best he could, holding his hat brim down to shade his eyes further. He cursed the age that blurred his vision, squinting to be sure he wasn't seeing a mirage. That thing flailing in the rocks away from the trail was a *hand*. As WindTamer continued to stare, the brush below him parted to reveal sharp scapulae and sunburned buttocks. Nakedness ravaged by cuts, scrapes, bruises. Large ones, if he could see them from the overlook.

He shrugged the pack from his shoulders without thinking and rummaged through it, slipping food into his vest and pants pockets. The levels in his water bags were still good. Now all he needed to do was grow twenty years younger and he'd have no problem at all.

Live an idiot, die an idiot.

No. Someone was in distress down there. Someone too senseless to use the trail--or too frightened--trying instead to hide in the landscape. And why in blazes hadn't anybody cleared a path to the

trailhead?

Cursing, WindTamer left his lightened pack at the overlook and began his slow fording through the sea of brambles. He no longer had a clear view of the figure down below. He'd have to zigzag down the closest trail. At least the sky was clear in this furnace. The sun's position would tell him where to go.

He wrinkled his nose; he still stank of fish. No matter. By the time he reached the trailhead his pants were stiff with acrid sap. Rodent trails drew haphazard lines across the chalky ground. WindTamer eased himself down narrow steps carved into the rock face. The ground leveled out further down, then dipped sharply again with more steps and handholds.

Clinging to the stone, WindTamer stopped to catch his breath before moving on. His heart pounded. He took another swig of water and waited until he could hear the wrens over the hammering in his chest.

He rounded a corner and saw her--a Yata woman, her unusually light hair shorn cleanly, her body battered by the elements. Even close-up she was still tiny. Her skin cracked and peeled. How long had she been in this inferno?

WindTamer flattened his bulk against the ground and edged off the trail, cursing when his boots loosened a cluster of stones that danced wildly down the canyon wall. The woman froze.

"I won't hurt you," he called. Did she even understand Masari?

She'd have to. His Yata was far too rusty.

He moved closer and reached out to touch her, and scrambled heedless of careening stones when she went alarmingly limp and

began to slide slowly down the rock face.

~ ~ ~

He was old but he still had adrenalin. Somehow it got him back to the rim, the woman lashed to his back, dead weight. His pack had been heavier than this. His vest alone was large enough to hold her to him.

WindTamer climbed the last steps to the trailhead before his legs buckled and sent him crashing to the dusty floor. He took deep breaths, slackjawed, then gently unwrapped the woman from him and checked to see if she still breathed.

Her breaths were shallow. WindTamer propped her spine against his chest and lifted his water bag, spilling a few drops onto chapped and bleeding lips. She began to shake in his arms.

"You need water; you're badly dehydrated. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"My name is WindTamer." He again proffered the water. She lay a quivering hand upon a bag almost too big for her to hold.

"I'll help you." He tipped it toward her lips, saw that she had difficulty swallowing. "Take small sips, my dear. I'll get you home, but first you need water--and food."

Even through his pelt he knew her back was clammy against his torso, her arms covered with goosebumps. When she paused in her drinking, he asked, "What is your name? What village are you from?"

She shook her head. He couldn't see her face.

"I understand if you can't talk right now, so listen. After you've eaten,

I'm going to carry you to my pack. I'll put up my tent. That will give us some shade, and you and I are going to get a good night's sleep." He sighed. "That is, provided I can walk."

He reached into a vest pocket, withdrew two slices of dried rabbit, and gave her one. She turned it over in her hands, but didn't eat. Surprised, WindTamer asked, "You *do* have food like this in your village, don't you?"

She didn't answer and bit carefully into the meat. Even sitting behind her, WindTamer could see her jaws working overly much, her chewing inordinately prolonged. He shifted to get a better look and caught a glimpse of her eyes, dulled from exhaustion and fear.

Suddenly she bent forward and gagged, spitting out the meat. The back of her neck looked inked. WindTamer peered more closely at the design, could swear part of it was a number.

She straightened, coughing, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

He massaged her back. "I'll get you back home. Somehow." She resolutely shook her head, reaching again for the water.

~ ~ ~

The sun descended toward the rim. He'd have to leave the trailhead now or cross brambles in the dark. He stood on legs less shaky than before and lifted her. Light, she was so light, like a child. She continued to tremble as he picked his way back to the overlook.

As soon as WindTamer had finished assembling his tent, she rushed inside and curled into a ball on the ground. She still needed food. WindTamer could see her hip bones, her ribs. How long had she

been in the canyon? Had the brambles ripped her clothing from her?

*I should give her a chunk of my own flesh. Change places for a day.*

She lay insensate, breathing slowly and deeply. Sighing, WindTamer leaned back and grimaced as his muscles screamed. He could sleep through his own Meat Day and not miss a thing, if his pain subsided enough to let him sleep at all.

~ ~ ~

He awoke in the predawn, his joints stiff. His stomach gurgled. He bolted down several strips of rabbit before he made out the dark form within the tent and heard her breathing. His hike into the canyon had not been a dream, unless he was dreaming now. His muscles were certainly wide awake.

She didn't want to go back to her village. Where could he take her?

*No, that's preposterous!*

Then again, Ghost could tend to her wounds. He could take blood samples, examine a living Yata close-up. Whoever this woman was, she needed tremendous care.

They'd have to stay off the roads. There was no such thing as a Yata and a Masari traveling together, willingly or not. It just wasn't done. The temptation to slaughter was too great.

When they reached the woods around Rudder, he would leave her in the wild while he went into town. If she still couldn't eat dried rabbit, then maybe goat's milk would do. Or softened cheese. Or wild berries. WindTamer lay quietly with his eyes closed, planning.

TripStone was fluent in Yata. Perhaps she could communicate with the woman that way.

*Send me out for a spleen and look what I bring you.*

WindTamer shuddered, trying to rattle his brain. If he shook his head hard enough, maybe he would wake back up into his uneventful expedition. But nothing changed when he opened his eyes. He forced himself to a sitting position and began the long, agonizing process of stretching and flexing, bringing his own body back to life.

He could see a sliver of light now. He would have to wake her and they'd have to move, away from curious stares. The wasteland around Promontory was hard travel, but it was certainly better than the canyon.

He shook her shoulder lightly. She opened her eyes and squinted at him, looking confused.

"We need to move."

She nodded, still dazed. Then she yawned, stretching her cracked lips to the point of bleeding again. Against the corner of her mouth her tongue lolled haphazardly, misshapen. Mutilated. She lifted her hand and unceremoniously tucked it back inside.

WindTamer jerked back on his heels, stunned. No wonder she didn't speak. She couldn't. Suddenly he couldn't get enough breath to fill his lungs, managing only an agonized whisper. "Who did this to you?"

She continued to look perplexed, genuinely shocked as he began to cry.

The desecration was almost too much to bear, almost impossible to

believe. As a boy WindTamer had loved the Yata enough to feel Meat Day as a communion between their species, a melding of body and soul. Then he had reeled from his first kill and chose to love them in a different way, by fasting, trying to lift the curse of eternal debt. When that failed, his love had changed again, growing in the fires of heresy. He traded his rifle for woodworking tools and bent to construct furniture that incorporated no bones and that almost no one wanted.

Now he sobbed, unable to stop. The woman raised her hand and laid it on his cheek, his chops heavy with tears. The look in her eyes was uncomprehending. Pitying.

"Oh, you poor, beautiful creature," he choked. "What devils did this? *How* could they do this?" He buried his great head in his hands and shook. "I am an old man--and I have seen too much."

## CHAPTER 15

TripStone brought up the rear, singing with the others in a festive caravan headed toward Basc. The journey song floated to her from the frontmost transport--a lively rhythm fast enough to keep their feet light, yet slow enough to spare the heaps of produce from excessive jostling.

Even so, an occasional tomato or melon tumbled past the wood boards and splatted on the dirt road. Animals ventured from their hiding places in the Masari's wake, scavenging the spills, following sweet scent.

Loud percussion rose from the trio of wagons, some gears synchronized, others syncopated. Soon the woods began their retreat behind outlying huts. The Yata children approached first, with gleeful yells and outstretched hands. The more agile among them

climbed the many wheels and cogs, heedless of grease. Some stood to the side to peer wide-eyed at their tall, woolly visitors.

TripStone shared their joy before her gladness turned bittersweet. Stopped at the border of town, the caravan waited for other villagers to take their leisurely walk across Basc or run headlong, bare feet flying down a network of paths.

She tightened her ritual kerchief around her hair, the first time she'd worn it since Meat Day. Today its reverse side showed, the ancient scripts woven in brighter colors for Thanksgiving Day, when merry reparation eclipsed the somber hunt.

TripStone scanned the multitudes, searching for Zai. For a moment she pushed away thoughts of her *yatanii* list and removed the other list from her pocket--the sanctioned one, the inventory of her wagon's contents minus the few dropped items left for the beasts.

Too many people moved too quickly, gathering the goods into baskets, passing the baskets down undulating lines that broke and reformed as the villagers mingled amongst themselves. She would have to wait for The Honorable One to collect the inventories, when the hubbub quieted into respectful silence before the ritual invocations.

Several children surrounded her, plucking at her vest and breeches, measuring their heights against her knees. A boy leaned back and appraised TripStone, his bronzed face streaked with grease. "You're not so scary." His Yata was clipped. She could hear his tension.

"I don't want to be scary," she answered back. She squatted to let the group explore her cheek crescents and sideburns, and her thick, flame-colored hair.

Another asked, "Why are you so big?"

She smiled. "I'm born that way."

"Why were you born that way?" a girl asked. Her intense study held more than simple curiosity. She'd seen things. "Why were you made to eat us?"

TripStone whispered, "I wish I knew, sweetheart."

"It's the Covenant, stupid." An older boy shouldered his way past the girl. "That's why we're superior. The Covenant says so."

TripStone fielded their barrage of questions and scanned the crowd as best she could from her crouch. The other Masari had dropped to the ground as well, all of them curiosities in an environment of mutual safety, a suspension of grief and fear. Tiny hands pulled on tufts of fur. One Masari who removed his vest grimaced while his shoulders, chest, and back were unceremoniously plucked.

The piles in the wagons ebbed in an outgoing tide of food. Already the last remaining fruits rolled across the wooden bed of the first transport. Emptied wagons became temporary playgrounds until the adults came forward, lifting and carrying their children back to the throng. TripStone stood with her townsfolk, waiting in cleared space between the transports and the Yata.

Shouts and laughter died down to murmurs and occasional reprimands of squirming, still energetic children. Adolescents newly come of age gazed at the visitors with guarded calm. Intermittent bird song broke into the quietude.

Several drums began to beat a regal cadence. A woman emerged from the crowd, silvered hair tumbling loosely to her waist. She

leaned on a staff whose inscriptions mirrored the ones on TripStone's kerchief. Her unadorned white robe was sister to the one Zai had worn at TripStone's Atonement.

The elder took measured steps with sandaled feet until she stood before the trio, the top of her head level with their breastbones. TripStone and her townsfolk knelt as one, their heads bowed.

"You do us reverence," The Honorable One said, softly. "Rise, and I will take your accountings."

The Masari pushed themselves to their feet and offered their lists.

The elder gathered the parchment in papery hands whose frailty belied a voice still strong and clear. She planted her staff in the earth, faced the crowd, and held the lists up to the light. "Witness these gifts," she called.

Together the Yata replied, "They are the gifts of life."

"From nourishment are we born, and to nourishment we return."

The voices thundered. "For we are sustenance, and sustenance is sacred."

The elder's voice rang forcefully above the crowd. "Through these acts we are risen from the dirt and made pure." She lowered her arms and turned toward the trio, staring up at them with hard, obsidian eyes. "As we preserve the Masari, so do the Masari preserve us."

TripStone chanted with the others. "We bear gifts of gratitude and humility that hold our blessings and our life blood."

"Blessed is the Covenant, for it brings us everlasting peace."

"Blessed is the balance," the Masari intoned, "the cycle of life and death and memory immortal."

The elder's voice strengthened further, piercing the air. Her arm rose straight up, pointing her staff toward the sun. "We give thanks as our ancestors did, as our descendants will do for the rest of our days. Let no one among us forget our promises made long ago, forged in fire and ice, by which we have survived to this time."

She lowered her staff and struck it swiftly over each Masari heart. A shiver ran through TripStone as the polished wood resounded against her chest.

"Go now, my children," the old woman said.

The crowd began to disperse. More than a few Yata hid clenched fists.

TripStone remained rooted to her place as the others turned. She blurted, "Honorable One--"

The elder stopped in mid-turn and fixed her with a wary look.

"There is someone I must find," TripStone said, quickly. "There is something I must explain to her."

The elder pursed narrowed lips, frowning as recognition dawned. "You were here not long ago. A Remembrance."

TripStone hung her head. "Atonement. Yes." She whispered, "I seek Zai-Ulik's widow." Behind her she heard leather straps tightening, wagon gates being bolted. She turned and called to the others, "I will catch up with you."

The elder's sharp voice brought her attention back. "Perhaps you can explain, then, why Zai has vanished outside your hunt. Why she delivered her children into her brother's care and fled." Bony hands gripped the staff. "Ila is haunted with fear for her safety."

Eyes wide, TripStone could only shake her head.

The woman spat, "Of course you know why--*ya-ta-nii*." The word was a curse. Several villagers overheard and turned back toward them, lingering.

"I need to explain." TripStone's shoulders hunched, miserable. She took a deep breath, kneading her hands together. "I did not mean to leave my list behind. I can help look for Zai--"

" *You will not*. You have insulted us enough." The old woman raised her staff, pressing its ornamented tip firmly against TripStone's jaw. She craned her neck to keep eye contact and hissed, "My child, I have lived through many years, many deaths and Remembrances, and I have long known about your kind. The gods have ordained the natural way of things. Your misguided folly only makes them harder to endure." She returned the staff to her side. "Now leave, and do not return here until the Covenant requires it." She turned swiftly from TripStone and walked away, striking her staff against the ground.

When TripStone raised her head she found cold glares beyond the retreating white robe. Slowly she backed away, then grasped and donned her harness. She ran as fast as she could, lest the empty, clattering wagon overtake her.



# CHAPTER 16



Zai's untied hands flew to her face when Watu removed her blindfold. Simple daylight knifed into her eyes; tears leaked from their corners. "I've lost track of time. How long have I been in the dark?"

"Long enough."

"I am blind," she whispered.

"That will pass." He guided her out of the wagon. "We are in a clearing. It will be less bright when we reach the woods."

She froze at the sound of distant gunshot. Long ago, hidden in the tall grass, Zai had heard that same crack of thunder under a bright blue sky. A body crashed to the ground amidst the sudden fluttering feathers of mourning doves. She had remained hidden, peeking when she dared at the Masari silhouette approaching and crouching beside the body.

She had not known the sacrificial victim well. She had seen the older woman here and there on the paths, nothing more. Only a slight shift in the wind and Zai's own quick reflexes had let her escape detection.

Every Yata sent into the woods on Basc's day of Reckoning was prepared to die for the Covenant. In theory. If she had been spotted by a Masari hunter, Zai would have been compelled to come forward, remove her pen and parchment and ink, and begin quiet preparations for passing into the next world. To bless the soul who

suffered before that soul shouldered a rifle.

She had tried to imagine what it would be like: to walk away, unburdened, knowing that the Masari behind her was lifting an already-loaded gun and taking careful aim. To see the shimmering portal, hear sweet voices calling to her from the other side. To be guaranteed her own immortality--as memories, as artifacts, as a life force incorporated into other beings. To feel this world suddenly, irrevocably, stop.

Another shot rang out, and another. Zai trembled, unable to move.

Watu's hand cradled her shoulder. "There are no Masari here, just Yata." Blurry darkness danced across her field of vision. His hand? "Come. I'll lead you to a safe place."

Zai let him guide her, surprised at her own docility. The shadows around them gradually increased. Leaves brushed against her arm before coming into focus. She blinked, blinked again.

The path split into multiple arms. "Quarters," Watu explained, pointing. "Supply depots for ammunition, food, medicines. I'll take you to the women's huts."

Zai raised her eyebrows. "Women and men live separately, then?"

He nodded. "You train together, but you live separately." He regarded her curiously. "Is that a problem for you?"

"Not at all. The only man I ever wanted to live with was my husband." The faces of Abri and Evit floated unbidden before her. She shuddered and forced the memories away. "And I had my boys," she whispered.

"There are no children here," Watu said, firmly. Zai nodded.

The gunshots grew more distant as they approached a circle of simple huts. A firepit blackened the center. A gong and mallet stood off to the side. The gong sounded a rich, low tone when Watu struck it. As its echo faded he struck again, closer to the edge, drawing a sharper ring.

A woman, deeply tanned and tall for a Yata, emerged from one of the closer huts. Her hair was as short as Watu's, bearing flecks of silver amidst the black. Zai gazed at a seamed face with high cheekbones, at an angular and well-muscled frame. The woman strode toward them with an easy gait. Her dun-colored tunic and pants seemed made entirely of pockets.

The woman nodded at Watu. She took Zai's hands in both of hers and peered at Zai's face. "I can see you're having some doubts about us." Her deep voice was soft around the edges. "That's good. That's as it should be."

"This is Zai," Watu said.

"Welcome to our camp, Zai. I'm Gria." She saw the sudden worry in Zai's brow. "Yes, *that* Gria. Only here, my herbs and barriers are in demand, and I freely teach the techniques of barrenness to both women and men."

Zai looked up into Gria's warm, confident smile. "You were arrested when I was a child!"

Watu bowed to them both. "I'll leave you to get acquainted. It's time I got back to the Meethouse."

Zai turned to watch him leave and felt the relaxed patience of the

older woman behind her. She was in unfamiliar woods filled with the echoes of artillery, standing in the company of Basc's most notorious criminal of her generation.

Zai struggled to remember how she got here. She could only say, numbly, "I have two sons."

"You've sacrificed much, then," Gria said, softly.

Zai's tears spilled, sudden and hot. Gria held her securely as she sobbed.

"There is no shame in grief, Zai. Just as there is no shame in being here."

Zai's demons congealed into a black mass surrounding her soul. Their screams were indistinct. She knew only that she could no longer tell where one ended and another began. The demon who shunned Ila's orgiastic piety. The demon who abandoned Abri and Evit. The demon who even now clutched TripStone's *yatanii* list, vowing revenge. The demon who hungered for guns, exulting in standing where Zai stood now. In the hands of Yata the guns sang promises, melting away Zai's fright.

Arm around her shoulders, Gria led her into the hut. Zai counted a half-dozen pallets spaced evenly on the floor. Two women checked bloated water skins and packed jerky into pockets. They were as tanned and muscular as Gria. They nodded in Zai's direction, then returned to their preparations.

"I'll show you the well and the tilling field for night soil," Gria said, taking Zai around. "Then we'll all go together to the training ground. We practice in shifts--not just shooting, but other killing methods that the Covenant has banned."

In a small voice Zai asked, "And then what?"

Gria answered, gravely, "Then we wait until we are strong enough to make a difference."

## CHAPTER 17

Loud, urgent pounding jolted Ghost from sleep. The rhythm of the knocks was right, the signal of someone from the underground. No one was here to arrest him. He heard BrokenThread moan, as though the noise had entered her dreams, and rushed to the door as fast as he could find his way in the dark.

He opened it a crack and hissed, "Enough!"

"It's WindTamer. Let us in. Quickly."

*Us?*

Ghost ushered them in, guiding them toward a bench. "Thread's still asleep," he whispered as they sat. "What's so important?"

The girl groaned, "I'm awake."

Ghost sighed. "I'm sorry, Thread--"

"Don't apologize. Light the lamp."

"We couldn't risk daylight," WindTamer said. "Ghost, you have to help this woman. What's happened to her is an abomination." Ghost's back halfid a brightening glow. "Don't lift the lamp," the old man hastened to add, "or you might drop it. Just turn around, slowly."

Ghost saw the amazed look on BrokenThread's face as she

struggled to a sitting position and propped herself against the wall, staring past him. He gave her a questioning look, but she only shook her head.

Then he turned around and his legs buckled. He dropped onto the stool by his desk.

WindTamer's vest was tied around the Yata woman's waist. She swam in it. She wore no other clothing. Her straw-colored hair glowed in the lamp light and she looked pitifully thin.

Even in the dimness Ghost could see that WindTamer's eyes were redrimmed. From lack of sleep, he assumed. "By the gods, WindTamer," he growled. "Kidnapping was not what I had in mind."

WindTamer said, resolutely, "It's not kidnapping." As if to concur, the Yata woman placed her hand on top of his and looked beseechingly at Ghost.

BrokenThread asked, in Yata, "What's your name?" The woman shook her head.

"She can't speak," WindTamer said, weakly. "Her tongue's been mutilated." He waited until the full shock registered on their faces. "I don't know by whom. And whatever village she's come from, she does not want to go back to it."

The woman beside him gave a single, forceful nod.

"You understand Masari," BrokenThread said. The woman nodded again.

Ghost turned up the flame, picked up his lamp, and edged toward the bench. He knelt by the woman, gentling his voice. "Open your mouth,

please." He studied the cracked lips, the tongue lolling to one side. "Forgive me." He gingerly raised the tongue, then motioned for WindTamer to lift and hold the lamp closer.

With an effort Ghost willed his hand not to tremble. *This is a patient*, he reminded himself, *that is all*. Part of him wanted to grovel at her feet. Part wanted to flee the cabin and just run, headlong and directionless.

Finally he said, "These are very old wounds."

WindTamer said, "I've been able to get soft food and drink into her and treat her sunburn somewhat. But she's still weak."

BrokenThread struggled from her pallet and swayed in her nightshirt toward the bench. With a smile she lowered herself next to the woman, who stared at the child's sunken cheeks and patchy fur. The woman laid tentative fingers on the girl's balding scalp.

"I am a *yatanii*," BrokenThread explained. "Do you know what that is?" The woman shook her head. "It means I do not eat Yata, even though I get sick. Even though it's a sacrilege." She noted the confusion in the woman's face. "Though it looks like someone has horribly broken the Covenant already, yes?"

More confusion. The woman squinted at the word, uncomprehending. Ghost said, softly, "You *are* familiar with the Covenant."

The woman shook her head, looking from one stupefied face to another.

Ghost whispered, " *Where* did you find her?"

WindTamer cleared the hoarseness from his throat. "She was

climbing out of the canyon beyond Promontory. She was naked, staying away from the trail."

"You brought her here all the way from Promontory?"

The old man forced a laugh. "It wasn't easy, Ghost. But we managed."

BrokenThread's palm grazed the woman's cheek. "Do you want to stay here, with us?"

Ghost sputtered, "Thread, that's *my* decision." His stomach jolted as the woman nodded. "Whoever you are, you need to realize--" He breathed hard, struggling for words. Even kneeling on the floor, he was head to head with her. "I am a criminal." His hands moved uncertainly. Maybe if he gestured enough, his fingers would tell him what to say. "I--" He took a deep breath. "I have a laboratory in the back room. It has--body parts."

"Yata body parts," BrokenThread added.

The woman was attentive but did not seem particularly alarmed, which frightened Ghost even more. "I am trying to find a way that we can live without having to eat your kind."

The woman offered a sad smile. When she blinked, twin tears escaped her eyes.

Ghost's own eyes began to water. He rubbed them, quickly. What accursed land lay beyond Promontory, that produced such a creature as this? "Sometimes--" He choked, coughed, tried again. "Sometimes--"

He looked away, trying to compose himself. The woman's light touch

on his shoulder only unnerved him more.

"What Ghost is trying to say," WindTamer said, gently, "is that he is trying to eat as little Yata meat as possible, but he must have some to stay healthy enough to do his work. If you stay here, you will see him eating Yata."

BrokenThread added, "When he can no longer resist the urge."

When Ghost found his voice, he looked again into the woman's face. He blurted, "If you stay here, you will see that ugliness. Do you understand?" She nodded. "Given all that, do you still want to stay here, after I do what I can to treat you?"

She nodded again. Ghost shuddered.

BrokenThread grinned at the woman. "Then you and I are now sisters --especially since there's finally someone here who is not bigger than I am."

The delicate Yata fingers still rested on Ghost's shoulder. He placed his hand over them. "I promise you," he whispered, "I will starve to death before I harm you, if it ever comes to that."

This time the woman twitched in shock. The two of them stared at each other until WindTamer said, "Though I'm sure Ghost will take a small sample of your blood from time to time." He frowned. "If you would, my dear --let them see the back of your neck."

Obediently the woman leaned forward. Ghost touched fingertips to the marks. "It's a tattoo." He looked from the woman to WindTamer, then back. "This small section here looks like a number."

"It *is* a number," WindTamer said, softly, "but I don't know what the

rest of it means."

"It looks almost decorative," Ghost mused. He touched the woman's chin. She raised her head to face him. "Is it your name?" She shook her head, firmly. "Do you *have* a name?" Another shake of the head.

"Then I will call you Piri," BrokenThread insisted. At the woman's blank look, she added, "It's the Yata word for 'hope.' Did I say it wrong?"

The woman blinked at the girl, surprised.

BrokenThread gawked back. She finally whispered, "Ghost—I don't think Piri knows any Yata at all."

## CHAPTER 18

"Hold the butt plate against your shoulder." Gria lifted the rifle to demonstrate. "One hand on the stock, the other on the trigger. Use the sighting bead at the end of the barrel." She held it out to Zai. "We've been adjusting the guns as much as we can to fit our bodies and still maintain accuracy, but eventually we'll design and produce our own firearms. For now, this is the best that we can do."

Zai gingerly touched the warm wood, running her fingers along gray metal. The muscles in her arms jumped when Gria let go of the gun.

"Don't worry. It's not loaded." Gria helped Zai raise the stock and hold the barrel level. "Although from now on, you are to treat each of these as though it *is* loaded."

Naked power rested in Zai's hands. How could anyone handle such a thing and not swoon? She listened to small eruptions around her. Gunpowder sparked, lightning propelling lead. "How could Destiny

be so important to the Masari that they would give us these?"

"I don't know. I don't claim to know what *their* demons are like." Gria adjusted Zai's aim, illustrating sight lines. "We tested the weapons to be sure they worked. These are training rifles, not full-sized. They're given to Masari children."

*Children!* Zai shook her head.

She practiced lifting and pulling the bolt action, returning and locking it down. Such an intricate and alien thing. An even larger one had killed Ulik. Another one could have killed her.

Bullets *thunked* into massive straw dummies. Between the explosions, Zai heard wooden shafts whistling through air, slamming into their targets as archers stood in a line and practiced with contraband weapons. Others wielded crossbows. Still others engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

Trim, muscled bodies, all of them. The sight of so many barren women appeared to Zai as though in a dream. There were no exposed breasts here, no swelling bellies. The Destiny exchanged for these rifles--the sacred powder Watu dispensed in the village--was strictly forbidden in the camp. Here the Covenant and its dictates became as dust.

A shot rang out in the distance just as Zai squeezed the trigger. She flushed suddenly with pleasure and felt a tinge of wetness between her legs. The leaves of the surrounding woods never before seemed so green, the birds never so loud.

## CHAPTER 19

TripStone washed and blessed her family's sacrificial table, inspecting the inlay of inscribed Yata bones within the wood. This time the hunt had fallen to ShadowGrass.

TripStone's mother had barely acknowledged the rest of the family when they bowed as one that morning. Instead, she strode silently out the door, grim-faced and pragmatic, resolved that no one in her household would sicken even for a day.

NightShout moved about the house like a wraith, eddies of dread in his wake. FeatherFly, rebellious, practiced his shooting even on this holiest of days, unyielding to TripStone's attempts at discipline.

The inscriptions became meditations in themselves. TripStone studied the more obscure symbols, trying to forget about Zai's disappearance. She couldn't. She kept picturing the small, regal woman intoning story after story.

Soon the table beneath TripStone would hold another body. Soon ShadowGrass would make her own pilgrimage to Basc, to the visitor's hut to absorb the tales of another life, vulnerable in her own wrinkled nakedness.

"The Covenant holds both our peoples in check." The authority of her mother's voice from years ago sparked in TripStone's memory. Weak and grieving after her Yata fast, TripStone had lain helplessly as ShadowGrass nursed her back to health.

Younger and stronger then, ShadowGrass had described to her daughter the pattern of spiritual weights and balances. "The rituals, the responsibilities, all the codified practices are painful, TripStone. They are meant to be." She had wiped the sweat pouring from TripStone's brow and slipped more meat past the teenager's lips. "Without those rules and constraints, we would have destroyed each

other long ago one way or another. And that destructive power is still inside each and every one of us."

TripStone had cried bitterly, trying to understand.

ShadowGrass had wrapped her shivering daughter in a blanket. "This way, *both* our peoples must make sacrifices."

Now TripStone closed her eyes and ran her fingertips along the inscriptions. She had again caused pain through her own stupidity. She should have left her *yatanii* list at home, buried in her desk drawer as it was meant to be. She laid out the sacramental knives and bottles with a heavy sigh.

ShadowGrass turned onto the long walkway to the house, her rifle slung over one shoulder and a Yata corpse over the other. Sweat and grime matted her pelt.

TripStone met her at the door and helped her lay the body out on the table. Together they removed the man's clothing. He'd been shot cleanly through the heart. His face was serene, his forehead unlined despite his more advanced years.

ShadowGrass removed her kerchief and vest. She bent to a metal tub to wash her face and arms and to scrub at her fur and hair. TripStone handed her a white linen cloth and touched her mother lightly on the shoulder, but ShadowGrass's face was a mask.

FeatherFly peeked inside the room and stared openly at the body, as usual.

ShadowGrass wrinkled her nose. "You've been engaged in target practice. I can smell it on you."

The boy shuffled his feet, looking down at the floor.

TripStone stammered, "I tried to stop him, Mother."

" *Tried* to? You're still bigger than he is, and he is not too old for the switch." She turned and looked hard at her son. "FeatherFly, the next time I catch you shooting on Meat Day when you are not the appointed hunter I will whip you to within an inch of your life. Do you understand me?"

He nodded, still staring at his boots.

"This is a day of prayer. Never forget that." ShadowGrass closed her eyes and breathed deeply, then opened them again. "As much as I want to punish you today--and your sister, for her laxity--I am forbidden to do so. I must wait until tomorrow. And I *shall* wait, because this is a day when *we show our respect*." She turned and frowned at TripStone. "Help me remove the clavicle."

TripStone lifted a bone-handled knife. "What was his name?"

"Adzon," her mother said, dully. "Many children. Many, many grandchildren." She lifted her own knife and began to cut. "If he were Masari, he would be my age." She called over her shoulder. "FeatherFly! Go to your father and bring him here for the first consecration."

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The next day, voices filtered in from outside TripStone's room. As she looked up from Covenant texts, she could make out WindTamer's gravelly baritone and her mother answering. She eased the parchment aside and edged toward the locked door.

"I'm sorry," ShadowGrass was explaining. "She cannot see you now. She's having a day of prayer and penance."

"I would be honored if TripStone could pray with me as I eat." WindTamer's voice overflowed with humility and a genuine sadness. "I live alone, as you know. Perhaps her penance can aid me as well."

NightShout's voice was unusually forceful. "Let her go with him, ShadowGrass."

Her mother heaved a long sigh. "She is being disciplined, WindTamer. You will see that she shows the proper reverence."

"You have my word."

Quickly TripStone returned to the texts, her face a mask of concentration. She pretended not to hear the bolt outside being lifted from its hooks, her door being pushed inward. She jolted to attention at her mother's clipped voice.

"TripStone! Take your scrolls with you and consecrate a meal with WindTamer."

She kept her eyes cast downward. "Yes, Mother." She gathered up her parchments, slipping them into a cloth bag. Ghost would not be pleased when she brought the texts into his cabin, but that couldn't be helped—unless WindTamer really did want to share a sacramental meal. But she hadn't had time to prepare meat for transport, and Ghost's supply must be almost gone.

When they were far enough from the house WindTamer said, "Don't worry, I have meat for him."

She whispered, "I was going to go tomorrow. What's so urgent?"

WindTamer said nothing, hurrying TripStone toward the outskirts of town. She half-ran to keep up with his long strides. She studied his face. "Something's happened."

"Yes," he said, drily. "Something's happened."

They passed the cairns and turned down the convoluted, hidden path. WindTamer all but pushed TripStone toward the cabin door. He rapped the wood quickly--once, twice, once again.

TripStone restrained her urge to gasp when Ghost answered. The bags beneath his eyes were purpled, the rest of his face more blanched than usual. She was even more astounded when he demanded, roughly, "Where is it?"

Wordlessly, WindTamer pulled Yata jerky from within his vest and handed it over. Ghost stumbled outside, hurried past them, and disappeared into the brush. There was none of his usual cursing of the meat, none of his restraint--and why was he eating outside in the woods?

WindTamer saw the alarm in TripStone's face and said only, "There is good reason for this." He held the door open for her.

Inside, BrokenThread and Piri faced each other, seated on a bench. Loose nightshirts fell around their delicate frames. Slowly and deliberately, they drummed their fingers on each other's arms. BrokenThread indicated the cheese on a serving table and repeated her drumming pattern, then pointed to TripStone and drummed a new pattern. She pointed to WindTamer.

Piri drummed her fingertips on BrokenThread's arm. The girl nodded and smiled up at WindTamer. "Our touch vocabulary is getting better."

TripStone stared at the Yata woman and muttered, "You've all gone mad."

"There are some who've gone mad," WindTamer said, "that's for damn sure."

TripStone left her bag at the door, knelt before Piri, and addressed her in fluent Yata. "It is very dangerous for you to be here, especially so close to Meat Day." A blank look answered her.

"She doesn't know any Yata," BrokenThread said, plainly. "And she doesn't know anything about the Covenant."

TripStone switched to Masari and asked, "Is this true?" Piri nodded.

"She can't speak, either," BrokenThread added. "And she didn't have a name. We named her Piri."

TripStone looked up at WindTamer. Her voice was as sharp as her mother's. "Tell me everything."

She listened, growing increasingly numb as the old man recounted the events at the canyon. The more agitated WindTamer became in his telling, the more tender Piri's face appeared. The cabin door opened and Ghost staggered inside, haunted. He dropped onto a bench opposite Piri and BrokenThread. TripStone sat next to him and held him across the back as he rested his head on her shoulder.

WindTamer concluded, "Piri and Thread have been inventing a touch language so we can communicate. So far as we can tell, Piri came from somewhere within the box canyon."

Piri nodded and bent forward. TripStone gave Ghost's shoulder a reassuring squeeze before she rose from the bench and stepped up

to Piri for a closer look at the tattoo.

"You see the number," WindTamer said. TripStone nodded. "We don't know what the rest means."

TripStone followed the tattoo with her finger and mused, "I've seen that pattern before." In her mind's eye she pictured a parade of bones, the graceful sweep of ancient Yata script. "It has something to do with reproduction." The scrimshaw gleamed in her memory, gold against white. "Something powerful."

She returned to the door, grabbed her bag, and spilled the parchments onto the floor. "My family keeps Yata Covenant texts as well as Masari. There might be something here." She unrolled and studied one scroll and the next, and the next. "There. A sacred ceremony to increase one's numbers, a holy imbibing as part of the promise to sustain us."

She brought the scroll to Piri and held it up to the tattoo. "It's almost the same, but there's an added shape on her neck." She looked from the tattoo to the parchment and back again. "The imbibing is of something called Destiny. The other shape here means--" She leaned over Piri and looked more closely, confused. "It looks like the symbol for a farm." She stared down at the tattoo. "Destiny Farm."

Underneath TripStone's hand, the skin on Piri's neck turned ice cold.

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Woodsy air turned brisk with the setting sun. TripStone gulped it down, leaning heavily against the foliage camouflaging Ghost's cabin. Mounded dirt nearby buried and masked the stink of her vomit, but her throat still burned from bile.

She cursed the dusk, which squeezed short the time she could spend learning more. Too soon she would have to hurry home and command her body and soul to be calm and contrite, her penance done. ShadowGrass was far too astute for TripStone to do otherwise. One detail out of place and her mother would bombard her with pointed questions.

Leaves fluttered about her as the door opened, shut. WindTamer padded to her side and offered her a mug of sweetened spring water.

She croaked, "Thank you." She filled her mouth, swirled the liquid around her teeth, and spat it out.

"Drink some," the old man urged. "You need fluid."

"It will come right back up if I drink any now." She turned and grasped his arm. "WindTamer, we can't keep this to ourselves. The atrocities are too --" Her stomach roiled. She held herself across the waist and leaned harder into the wall. Her voice thickened. "We've got to tell *someone*."

"And let them come here, looking for proof? They would kill Ghost in an instant, just when we need him most." He leaned beside her, studying tree limbs in darkening silhouette. "And it would be just as bad to parade Piri through the village before she feels ready. If she ever does."

"Then we need to get proof that will not bring the authorities here."

What if Zai had been taken to the farm? What if that was why she disappeared? TripStone suppressed a shudder.

Drumming onto BrokenThread's arm and gesturing to the others, Piri

had told what she could. Thread had translated in a dull monotone. The gods only knew what visions collected behind the child's dark eyes as she interpreted the urgent staccato of the Yata's fingertips.

Within the canyon, teams of Masari spilled glistening brown powder from great burlap bags into Destiny Farm's food and water supply for livestock. *Livestock*. Small, graceful Yata, overcome with urges to mate, crowded and thrashed wildly in breeding pens. Seven times Piri had been brought to the nursery. Seven times she had birthed babies who were then taken away to be nursed and weaned by others until they, too, were old enough to reproduce. Beyond the nursery and the breeding pens lay the processing house, splitting the night with its howls of slaughter.

The moans erupting from Piri's mouth, surgically deformed at birth, sliced through TripStone until she feared her heart would shatter. *From birth*. The realization hammered inside TripStone's brain: Piri herself had been born on the farm. *How long had this been going on? For how many generations?*

Piri and BrokenThread lay collapsed on their pallets inside. Piri had drummed on one arm and then switched to the other when the *yatani*'s pain eclipsed her ability to decipher the messages. BrokenThread's arms, mostly bare where her fur had shed, now softened into dark discolorations, riddled with bruises that would take too long to heal.

The rest of them would have to learn the touch-language, wherever their fur was fine enough for Piri's words to get through. Either that, or expand the patterns beyond touch and into sound, into actual drumming.

TripStone handed her mug back to WindTamer. "I'll be fine. Go check

on Ghost."

"He's shut himself up in the lab. He won't talk to me." He squeezed her shoulder, waiting until she turned to face him. "I'll take you home. We can plan on the way back what we're going to tell your family. I'll return here after daybreak, make sure he's all right, keep an eye on everyone."

She could only nod, force herself away from the wall, and follow WindTamer back inside. They moved quietly, listening to ragged breathing coming from the pallets. Lamplight edged through cracks where Ghost's tapestry spanned the entrance to his lab. TripStone stepped tentatively toward it. WindTamer held her back.

Obligation shrieked in her brain. She must continue FeatherFly's shooting lessons and help care for the crops. In two days ShadowGrass would depart for Basc, for her Atonement, and TripStone would assume her mother's household duties. Then she would help ShadowGrass deliver the stories of Adzon's life to Crossroads' scribes in the Rotunda. In-between, she would attempt to discipline her brother, when she was not tending to her father's despair.

Instead, she wanted to gather together an army and spill over the cliffs of Promontory, down into the canyon. She wanted to best the blistering sun as Piri had done, crawl if she had to through the furnace hiding Destiny Farm from Masari cushioned in their ignorance.

She wanted to line the people responsible against the canyon's sandstone wall, scatter their brains on the wind, and throw open the gates--

--where throngs of naked Yata would stand, confused and frightened,

unsure what to make of her. Or, worse, be unaware of her presence at all, too absorbed in the spell of the drug to notice or care what went on around them, thrusting mindlessly away.

WindTamer squeezed her arm. She forced herself to still her trembling and turned away from the lab. With unfeeling fingers she lifted and almost dropped the bag of parchments. They rushed from the cabin, WindTamer guiding her in a fast trot back past the cairns. Her breathing became labored, though not from their exertion.

WindTamer cautioned, softly, "Save your strength."

She whispered, "I never realized until now the true value of these texts." She clutched the bag to her chest. "The parchments, the bones. The ceremonial knives, the body parts--the constant, damning reminders of who the Yata are." Tears spilled hotly down her cheeks. "That farm takes it all away from them. Everything they've ever had. Everything they've ever been." She rubbed hard at her eyes. "I'm going to look awful when I get home."

WindTamer huffed, catching his breath beside her. "I couldn't think of a better way to show penance."

"I haven't felt this horrible since I broke my fast."

"Tell that to ShadowGrass," he said, mirthlessly. "She'll be pleased."

TripStone's wails rose between the trees while they were still far enough from Crossroads, drowning out the contented trills of night birds.

## CHAPTER 20

Shadows danced across Gria's lean face, heightening her sharp

cheekbones. "What does it mean," she asked, "to be Dirt People?"

Zai studied the faces of other new trainees around her, lit by campfire, and tried to concentrate. Her arm muscles burned. Swathed in protective padding, her shoulder was purpled and rubbed raw by kickbacks from her first day of actual shooting. Her bullets had careened wildly but traveled in the same general direction, spinning toward her target. Now, hunched crosslegged before the fire, all she wanted to do was sleep.

As though from a distance she heard a man's voice say, "To be Dirt People is to be primitive."

"Primitive." Gria's lips curled into a smile. "And what does it mean to be primitive?" The tall woman sat on her heels and raised herself partly off the ground. "The Covenant says we were once primitive and dumb as the beasts, but what exactly does that mean?"

She lifted a green stick and stirred embers in the pit. Burning wood split with a loud crack. "When you hunt, does the rabbit leap into your cook fire? Does the fish jump into your net? No. And when you are not hunting, the tiniest ants will sink their pincers into your flesh and inject you with small, potent toxins to defend themselves. Primitive and dumb, all of them." Her stick struck the ground. "Because that is the natural way of things. The Covenant is not."

A woman spoke up, soft-voiced. "Dirt People were not revered as we are."

"And what good does Masari reverence do you?" The man seated to Zai's right raised his head from arms crossed over his knees, his lips narrowed. "I've lost more than a dozen kinsmen to Masari 'reverence.'"

Zai growled, "You assume they're reverent to begin with." She dug into her tunic and removed a stained and battered parchment ripped and fraying about its folds. "There are those who say we 'pollute' them." She handed him the list to pass around.

The others tried to decipher the words until Gria said, "Give it to me." She leaned forward, holding the parchment closer to the light. "Ah. A young girl's *yatanii* list." She counted the quizzical expressions around her, noting they outweighed the knowing ones. "They are foolish Masari who reject us outright. Many of them die."

Zai said, heatedly, "One of them lived to kill my husband and had the audacity to give me that filth."

"And is likely still suffering." Gria passed the list on. "Would she have killed your husband without the Covenant in place? Probably. And it would have been nothing to her, just as killing our own food is nothing to us. All that we do here is arm ourselves with pincers—with claws, beaks, fangs. Weapons are our own natural tools. Without the Covenant, we'd have developed them long ago."

Half asleep, Zai listened as Gria spun dreams. In one vision a band of Yata lay in wait for a Masari, converging on the hunter *en masse*, armed with whatever they could carry. A crowd can overpower an adversary. The Masari are larger and slower and bear fewer children. They take longer to mature. Reduce their numbers enough and you can shift the balance of power.

"You remember how we are named for Ata," Gria continued, "who grieved so deeply over the loss of his wife that he identified with her killers, believing himself to be a Masari. How he and his daughters murdered their own people because the reality of being prey was too much for them to bear." She drew herself up, her eyes gleaming. "Think where we'd be today if he had turned his grief around and

hunted the hunters instead. That is what we are training to do here."

"Some say we share a common ancestor." A smoky alto voice rose from the other side of the fire. "Do you believe that?"

"I don't dismiss the possibility." Gria waited for murmurs around the fire to fade. "Yes, the cave paintings exist. Yes, they show Dirt People and Masari hunting together, spearing larger beasts that are now extinct, before the Masari started killing us instead. The more important question is: Does that make any difference at all?"

Zai had been surprised to find Covenant texts preserved in this place of demons. Then one of the trainers pointed her toward heretical parchments rebuking the scriptures and mentioned Gria's study group. Now the words around the fire sluiced through her blood like an icy stream, prodding her to wakefulness.

Traveling full circle, TripStone's list came back into Zai's hands. She gazed down at the child's careful penmanship, the items added at the bottom in the adult's more confident, deliberate script.

A phantom hand covered her own with the smooth skin and tapered fingers she remembered. Her battered shoulder buzzed with warm relief, as though the healing touch of the dead were real. Zai closed her eyes and clutched the list more tightly. She quickly folded and pocketed it before she damaged the writing further. *Forgiving her will not bring you back.*

She opened her eyes and tried to pay attention. Ulik's spirit settled about her, holding her in place. Her memories were playing tricks on her again, making his face hover and bestow a calm, sad appraisal before her own. If his spirit truly existed, what would he think of Gria's teachings? Did the Covenant have a hold on him, still, after death?

"Take this thought back to your huts with you." Gria hefted earth and began to snuff the flames. "Consider that we are Dirt People. That we have always been and always will be Dirt People as well as Yata. And that nothing has changed in the history of our kind except for our complicity."

## CHAPTER 21

Zai's brother Ila wound his way through a hut raucous with giggling children and cooing parents. Several little ones flung pudgy arms around his legs. In the distance he watched Abri and Evit tumble among their cousins. Did sadness still hide behind their laughing faces, or only his own? He squatted to enfold several children in one arm, while his other cradled a large pouch.

Lani walked past him, running her fingers through his hair. "I'll light the lamp."

He leaned over to kiss her rounded belly. When he pivoted back a tiny hand reached from below to give his beard a playful tug.

"Careful," he said, lightly. "You can all climb on me later. Daddy has to put things away now." First he had to revel in a sea of soft kisses, planting his own on tender cheeks. Several children laughed and sprinted away, rubbing the itch from their faces where his beard had tickled them.

Slowly he stood and made his way to the back rooms, draping a cloth over the entranceway. He stepped over and around cushions and soft fabrics toward Lani, who straightened from a low table against the far wall. A soft yellow glow grew outward from the lamp, next to painted serpents shimmering on a large, earthenware pot. Lani eased its heavy lid onto the floor.

A small quantity of Destiny powdered the bottom of the vessel. Its aroma trailed upward. Even this amount still had enough potency to heat Ila's blood. He knelt before the table. A fresh blast rose to his nostrils when he opened the pouch from Watu.

Ila swelled between his legs, twitching hard against the tight cloth of his breeches. Destiny hissed quietly as he held the pouch above the serpents and filled the pot to its rim.

They did not even need to consume it this time. The sheer volume of powder made him tingle. Simply knowing it was there made his muscles clench.

Lani's breath became heavy beside him. The tight nap of her hair glistened with sweat. Her legs parted. Her spine arched. Her hand pressed Ila's inner thigh and squeezed, moved upward, fumbled with his breech ties.

He jumped against her fingers as he slipped his palms beneath her simple dress to warm her belly. He reached up toward globular breasts already moist and weeping colostrum.

"Kana is not yet with child," Lani managed to blurt, "and she is in her fertile time."

"I will have enough for her," Ila whispered, nuzzling her ear, his own moistness spreading. "And if not I, then Rato--"

He sighed as Lani closed around him as he crouched on hands and knees above her back, her womb hanging freely toward the floor. He reached up to cup her breasts. His hips pushed gently, then more insistently. For a while his worries about his sister dwindled, eclipsed by the moment.

His dread returned as he lay spent, waiting for his sweat to dry. He heard the heavy scrape of Lani moving the lid back onto the pot. "I should do that."

Laughter echoed in Lani's voice. "We'd be on the floor again before you had a chance to put the lid back." She returned to the cushions and looked closely at Ila's face. "Did Watu have any news?"

"No." He slid his arm around her. "Several people spotted her heading toward the Meethouse, but Watu said he hasn't seen her."

Memory seared Ila's mind: Abri clutching Zai's sheared braid as he swayed on his feet at the entrance. Those tending Evit had suddenly stopped in their play, passing from merriment into silence. They had all assumed Zai would follow her children into the hut, the reclusive relative granting the household a rare visit.

Instead they found only a large, abandoned pack of household goods. Basic tools. Clothing and playthings for the boys.

Young Teza had searched all around the hut and around their neighbors' huts, frantic. "She was *here*. She handed Evit to me to carry inside. She never mentioned she was going anywhere."

Ila had pounded the dirt paths to Zai's hut, bursting inside only to find it bare of her belongings. Her hutmates had shrugged, could offer him nothing. Zai's whereabouts had not been any concern of theirs.

It was not time for the hunt. She *should* have been safe.

Ila drew a shaky breath as Lani caressed his face, her brow furrowed with concern. He should have been more forceful with Zai, should have dragged her into the household no matter how deeply she scorned their communality. Perhaps, after a time, she would not have

been so miserable. Life in his huts might have even turned pleasant and pleasurable for her.

He whispered, "I asked Watu to tell the congregants, in case any had seen her. He assured me he would." He forced himself to his knees and then to his feet, lacing his breeches back up. Lani stepped into his arms and they held each other.

He had prepared himself on the days of Reckoning—for the death of a loved one, for his own death. Passage to the next realm would have been a certainty. Ascension to sanctity would have been a certainty. Grief would intertwine with the assurance of immortality, of wielding the powers of life from beyond this fleeting existence.

Now he was a cart without direction, all of its cogs out of rhythm, all its wheels askew. Was his younger sister, his tadpole, still alive? Had Zai blundered in the woods? Had a tree fallen and crushed her delicate frame? Had the river currents rushed her away? Had a viper struck, sinking its venom into her? What possessed her to leave her children behind, departing on a journey about which she had told no one? The questions whirled about his head, sucking his strength from him, robbing him even of the peace of sleep.

He had to return to the others—to their gentle hands on his shoulders, to massages loosening the knots in his back. To the multitudes of wheels and gears whirring in the machinery of love. To the only cart he had left.

## **CHAPTER 22**

Fog curtained the clearing by the house, cooling TripStone's pelt as she advanced into the dark. Her lamp scattered its light, casting a halo on the few objects she could see. Behind her the household

slept, unaware of the nightmare being perpetrated several days' travel away.

She did not know if she walked in a circle or paced a straight line back and forth. She knew only that she must keep moving, like the thoughts that raced inside her head, tearing her apart bit by bit.

Moisture clung to her, raising goose bumps. FeatherFly's training would have to wait until the fog burned off. He would be irritable at breakfast, setting her teeth on edge.

She pictured fingers pressing flesh in the dark, communicating by touch, learning the new language. Drumming through and past exhaustion. She wanted to be in Ghost's cabin with them—immersed in their vocabulary, tapping in code. But she also wanted to be on the canyon trail, a sniper taking aim, exacting justice.

Her leaden feet moved, one in front of the other, sinking in dewy ground. She stopped at the sight of a dull swath of light disembodied by fog, waving unsteadily in her peripheral vision. The light became still and a heavy voice echoed, "Who's there?"

"It's TripStone, Father." She picked her way toward the light. "What are you doing out here so late?"

"I might ask you the same."

"I couldn't sleep."

Even up close, he was obscured. Gauzy curtains of chill floated before his face, reducing it to mist. She had to look the same to him, vapor and lamp light spreading her woolly form into a misshapen blur. Even the night birds were silent. She could picture them huddled in their nests, cloaked in the wet press of feathers.

Her breath rose from her lips. "Are you warm enough?"

"Whether or not I am warm does not matter."

His words were lined with pain. Suddenly TripStone wanted to shake him. She wanted to scream that his sin, committed in the throes of panic, was as fleeting as the mist compared to what she had seen through Piri's drumming. She could not still the tremor in her voice. "Father, there are acts so much worse than yours had been." She swallowed hard, clutching her stomach as memory resurfaced.

She did not see until too late the open hand sprouting from the mist, swinging toward her. But NightShout was as blind as she and his fingers only grazed her chin. She grabbed his wrist, holding it fast as their lamps swung wildly. "Believe me when I say that I do not speak heresy," she insisted. "I speak the truth. That is why I cannot sleep."

He freed himself from her and pushed her away. His voice assumed a hardness she had not heard in years. "Make light of my disgrace once more and you will bear the scars for it, daughter."

"Listen to me," she hissed. "I understand that if it were not for my illness, you would still be shouldering your rifle on Meat Day and facing that awful moment when we look on the faces of those we are about to kill. I understand that your love for me destroyed your aim that day, that there is Atonement left unfinished. But believe me when I tell you that there is an evil greater than even you could imagine."

They stood, insubstantial and wavering before each other, mingling their breaths with the heavy air.

"You believe you can bring me back to life with stories, TripStone. You cannot. I am as dead as if it had been my own skull shattered, and my own soul denied passage."

Beneath his grief and anger lay an urgency TripStone could barely detect. She peered through the fog, their lamp light crazed between them. If only she could see his face.

How could she tell him that she would have to leave? That he would have to be strong again, that his soul would need to live again when she was gone? That she had to hurt him again, and the rest of her family as well?

"There is so much I want to tell you," she whispered. "But I can't. I have already said too much."

"You've said nothing. And you ask that I believe nothing." She heard him spit at the ground. "Whatever you and WindTamer consecrated this day, I doubt strongly that it was something of which your mother would approve."

She would have to wait until the rains filled the box canyon's small, muddy creek, and even then she would take as much water as she could carry. She would need to shield her skin against the burning heat and drench herself with the tainted stream. She would have to fill herself on Meat Day before her departure, and then cart extra provisions.

Piri had recounted her journey as best she could. Her passage had been littered with dried, bleached bones, both Yata and Masari.

TripStone breathed deeply, trying to calm herself. She had to make herself useful, arouse no suspicion. She had to tame her own impatience. The rains would tell her when it was time to leave.

Then she would have to leave in secret, unable to say goodbye. Until she could bring evidence of the farm to Crossroads, part of her would

be as dead as her father.

How often had he come out here, pacing the field? How often had she slept through his agony, as ignorant as the others?

"We can go inside," she said, softly. "I will serve you tea."

They wavered, shadowy figures to each other's sight. After a few moments NightShout walked past her and his light began to dwindle. TripStone caught up with him and followed, marveling at his surefootedness. Even in this murkiness her father knew what cues to follow, which direction to take. She almost asked him to teach her how to find her way—even as she felt pulled further and further from the house as surely as his lamp was leading her home.

## **CHAPTER 23**

BrokenThread's morning arrived with its usual torments. Fire burned through her veins. Invisible knives sliced through her pelvis until she was sure Ghost had dismembered her in her sleep for body parts. One sharp, indrawn breath and she was awake, lying in a pool of her own chilled sweat.

Piri's face blurred before her eyes. The Yata woman leaned over her, looking concerned. Slim, bronze-hued fingers gently brushed back BrokenThread's wet hair and came away covered with loose strands.

Ghost's voice sounded faraway. "Some days are worse than others." Piri nodded, knowingly.

Pain brought its own paralysis, and like Piri the girl was unable to speak. All she could do was lie motionless until her misery passed, her racing thoughts locked inside her head. It was better that way. No

sense burdening the others with her worries.

Whispers of RiverRun's disappearance had begun to circulate through Crossroads. BrokenThread could barely think of that strange name as the one her parents had given her. She could barely think of her parents. Ghost's cabin was her home, her universe. She was at once his experiment and his protégé.

No, she was her own experiment. Ghost merely studied her, just as he studied Piri, her adopted sister.

But her parents had overcome their shame enough to speak of their vanished *yatanii* daughter to others. WindTamer had heard the whispers, and TripStone. It was only a matter of time before a search for her got underway.

BrokenThread was the stalwart, the brave. She endured pain, inscribing new natural law with her very body. She accepted death even as her life continued impossibly. RiverRun was the frightened little girl who wanted to be safe and cradled in her mother's arms. She was childish and weak and not worth consideration.

But sometimes—like now, when it hurt too much even to scream—BrokenThread felt herself to be RiverRun. She tensed with fear when twigs cracked outside. She had nightmares of stone cairns toppling, of an angry mob ripping the leaves and bark from the cabin and setting it aflame.

She wanted to be two people at once. She wanted to send RiverRun back to her mother and still remain here as BrokenThread. Ghost needed her, but her very presence endangered him. Piri needed her because BrokenThread could look at Piri and not be plagued by hunger.

Deep inside, RiverRun cried like the baby she was. Hot tears spilled from her eyes. Let the others believe it was from the pain.

She would have to teach Piri how to take care of Ghost. She would need to be prepared. Pain shot through BrokenThread's fingers, but it was easier to drum than to speak. *I'll be all right. Go to him.*

~ ~ ~

Piri gazed down at the ailing girl. She offered water. BrokenThread shook her head. The Yata bent to touch her cheek to the girl's in the manner of a Masari greeting, then stood and padded toward the lab, still holding wisps of hair. She handed the hairs to Ghost, watching him measure chemicals to preserve the sample. She observed as he wrote down the quantity of hair, its consistency, the time of day, the season.

Drug-free spring water coursed through Piri and gave her an almost frightening sense of clarity. At first she thought she would die from grief, once the mud had cleared from her mind and she remembered. She had thought her heart would stop, her chest burst open from a flood of unshed tears.

The others had rocked with her, howling until she thought they too might die. Surely she had to be dreaming, she told herself again and again. She would awaken amidst a tangle of limbs like her own, hungry for slop, bending to the troughs. The moment of carelessness, the gate left open between the nursery and the breeding pens--that had been a dream. Her brain sparking, a force pushing her that was something apart from her flesh, something beyond her dulled mind--that had been a dream.

And this--the starving girl, the man with his bottles and lenses, her rescuer at the canyon, and the woman with the parchments saying

Piri's people had a name, a language, a set of laws--was almost too much to bear, let alone believe. She was in the midst of a very long dream in an endless night from which she did not want to wake.

"Look at this." Ghost bent over the lenses, his voice tinged with awe. He pointed to the box by his table. Piri stepped up. He adjusted the glass and gently repositioned her. In a smudge of her blood swam creatures invisible but for the lenses. Different shapes floated and mingled.

Amidst the bottles, Ghost's table filled with parchment scrolls alive with drawings and numbers. Even now his pen raced as he scratched out more numbers and arranged them into diagrams and calculations. Piri did not remember seeing him go to bed.

He spoke excitedly. "Different animalcules populate living Yata blood than populate the blood of the dead. There is much your blood shares with mine, and even more that it shares with Thread's." He gazed from his papers to the smudge. "And there are similar proportions of other creatures in our saliva. If only they could talk to us."

Piri pointed to her hand. Ghost nodded and extended his pale, hairless palm, where he could feel her drumming more easily. She took his hand and tapped out, *Their numbers talk*.

"Yes." He caressed her fingers in his.

She pointed to the diagrams, the bottles. *Teach me*.

He frowned. "You know what the bottles hold."

*I know*. Her fingertips pressed harder against his skin. *Teach me*.

His breathing quickened. His movements turned clumsy as he

plucked materials from the table. He placed the lenses a safe distance away from his awkwardness.

Piri watched. She caught sight of his sheepish smile and returned it.

"I, uh—" he stammered, "--I made a list when I was young of everything we use—use Yata parts for. How they help us. Medicines and such. And other things. But I will teach you about the medicines and--and the meat. They're what's important right now."

Ghost's hands were dry. The pen he lifted slipped from his fingers, spattering ink. He cleaned up quickly, setting the pen aside. "I feel very strange telling you all this." He barked a laugh. "I don't know why. It's not as though I've lived a conventional life. Let me get the list."

Piri studied his jerky movements. He pointed around the lab aimlessly, settling finally on a low drawer. He followed his finger, mumbling to himself.

"I've been studying everything I can under the lenses, how they change among different...different individuals...different Yata individuals." He coughed. "I want to know *why* something does what it does, *how* it does what it does. But everything's come from people who are already dead, and the parts are smuggled here, and sometimes it takes a long time, and by the time I can preserve—" He crouched and pulled hard on the drawer, jumping back as it came free of his desk. He muttered, "Too much grease," and carefully guided it back onto runners before grasping hold of the tightly-rolled sheet inside.

Gingerly he closed the drawer, straightened, and hobbled back to Piri. "I guess this list is as good as any for teaching you how to read."

He unrolled the scroll on the table. It escaped his hold and snapped

back into a tight coil. Piri helped him weight the corners down. His handwriting was tiny and constrained, taking refuge in its own regularity. The exact words were a mystery to her, but the mood behind the letters was apparent.

She took hold of his hand. *You were afraid.*

He whispered, "We're all afraid."

*I am afraid that I will wake up, she drummed, and you will all be gone.*

Standing on the box she was head to head with him. He looked long into her unblinking eyes.

They heard BrokenThread struggle to a sitting position. Piri turned toward the sound, ready to again offer water. The cheese from her own breakfast, melted until it flowed smoothly past her ravaged tongue, had begun to solidify. Piri arranged a plate to bring to the girl's pallet.

Then she saw the *yatani*'s gaze rest on the chamber pot. Piri nodded, motioning to Ghost to pull his tapestry across the door separating lab from anteroom.

"It's all right," BrokenThread wheezed. "I know how to do this by myself."

Piri retrieved the pot and slipped her arms around the girl, gently lifting her. She hummed, trying to calm the child's trembling.

BrokenThread wanted to clutch at the tiny woman and bawl but she had to be strong. Her pain had faded--she was only weak now--but her breastbone ached with longing. Piri mopped her forehead,

cleaned her bottom. The girl's humiliation warred with her comfort. Speechless with confusion, she could only drum her thanks, lightly and repeatedly, savoring the Yata's embrace.



# CHAPTER 24



TripStone watched her brother from a distance, shaking her head.

As FeatherFly's older sister she bore the responsibility for his training, but not a day passed when they weren't at odds. They couldn't even rebuild and reposition the straw dummies without a fight. This morning, after the fog had cleared, her brother had warned her not to come near him, insisting on practicing by himself.

She remembered her own training when she was FeatherFly's age, her father's steady hand lifting the barrel, repositioning her shoulder, teaching her about trajectories. NightShout's words had traveled into her ears, through her veins, and down her arms. His instructions infused her shoulders, her spine, her stance.

She had hoped to do the same with her brother, passing down their family's hunting traditions and skills one-on-one. Killing correctly and reverently took more than simply lifting and aiming a rifle. It took concentration and a frame of mind at once confident and humble.

Now she stood by the house, wishing she had some of Ghost's lenses to magnify FeatherFly in her sight. She could not tell how well he was handling the gun, whether he leaned too far on the balls of his feet or needed to bend his knees more. Earlier he had whooped with glee, raising his training rifle high over his head and prancing in a circle. Then he ran and all but dragged her to the fallen dummy, its heart spot cleanly punctured by his bullet through the back.

Sickened by his merriment, she had snapped, "You do *not* dance after you make a kill."

"I did it!" he yelled, deaf to her protests. "I finally did it! Got it right through the heart!" Eagerly he reloaded, sending her away.

Maybe she only imagined the grim determination in his face, his deceptively calm exterior as he took careful aim. She wondered if he thought of anything other than the fact that he could now boast to his friends. Was this anything more than a game to him?

The first time TripStone had hit the heart spot in her own training, she had stood dumbly, her training rifle dangling at her side. In her mind straw and burlap had turned suddenly to flesh. She had fingered its brittleness tenderly and cried.

NightShout's hand had caressed her shoulder. "First you give thanks to the Yata. It means you have brought the promise of continued life back to your family and your community. Save your mourning and remorse for Atonement."

Her father's voice had been calm, free of the burdens he now carried, though even then TripStone could tell he was worried about her. Her sensitivity to the dummy was already an indication of the trauma that awaited her after her first kill.

But FeatherFly, her polar opposite, racked up successful kills like points. To her brother the straw was only straw. How would he respond to an actual person? TripStone didn't want to speculate.

A loud crack echoed back to her as FeatherFly missed but came very close to the heart spot. Calmly he reloaded, re-set and locked the bolt, turned to the next dummy. TripStone studied the alignment of her brother's shoulders and knew that in his mind it was him against

the target. Bile rose in her throat, burning as she swallowed it back down.

NightShout stepped outside and stood beside her. He watched his son impassively.

TripStone muttered, "He has no respect in him."

"Neither do the other boys," NightShout murmured, "at his age."

She studied her father out of the corner of her eye. "Were you like that?"

"In the beginning. A couple of the girls were like that, too."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Sometimes it's a nervous reaction." He studied his daughter, noting the dark circles under her eyes. "Might have been better for both of us if you'd been like that."

TripStone forced herself to hold her tongue. She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed deeply to calm herself, then opened them again.

"You still won't tell me why you couldn't sleep."

"Believe me when I say I want to." She winced as FeatherFly exulted, his bullet again hitting its mark. Automatically her hand clutched at her stomach.

NightShout looked down at the fingers clawing her abdomen. "There is a *yatanii* reported missing," he said, plainly. "Her parents belong to the Hunt Guild. She has not yet come of age. Is that what's been bothering you?"

TripStone fought to keep her voice even. "I've heard of RiverRun's disappearance. No, Father; that's not what keeps me up at night."

"If you know anything about her, you must tell her parents."

*I know nothing of RiverRun's whereabouts*, TripStone told herself. *All I know is of Broken Thread*. "I know that RiverRun is missing. Nothing more."

FeatherFly finished his victory dance and sprinted toward them. "Father, look!" he shouted, eyes bright with excitement. "Look what I did!" He leaned forward to grab NightShout's hand.

NightShout slapped it away. He bellowed, "Stand still!"

FeatherFly stopped in his tracks, trying not to fidget.

"Now," NightShout's eyes were smoldering embers. TripStone noted that her father was no longer hunched. His spine became straight, his chest broad and full, his head high. Only part of his wrath was genuine, but that part was more than enough. "We will walk slowly to the target, you and I. We will spend time by the fallen body, and I will teach you what it means to truly kill a Yata. And if I see you dancing and shouting again after you hit your target--" He made a fist and raised it before the boy's face. "You will not have much to brag to your friends about. Do I make myself clear?"

FeatherFly looked away. "Yes, Father."

"Look me in the eye when you say that."

TripStone caught a quick glare from her father and backed away, then turned and headed inside. She grabbed a chair and sat, suddenly weak-kneed. NightShout had not shown such strength since

before her affliction. Seeing it now was enough to make her rejoice, but not comfortably. She knew he called up his strength because something was terribly wrong.

NightShout could try to force information from her. He could tell her mother of their discussion out in the fog. But ever since TripStone's fast he had treated his daughter gingerly, perhaps afraid of sending her into another *yatanii* episode. Or perhaps he identified with her, now that his own Yata consumption was a constant reminder of his sin against the Covenant.

They had gone to their separate rooms in the predawn after drinking tea in uneasy silence. Now her father took the upper hand in FeatherFly's training. TripStone breathed a sigh of relief. She did not share her parents' authority, could not force the boy to obey. It was a weakness on her part, this inability to assert herself sufficiently.

No--she must assert herself in different ways. Other matters needed her attention.

Out in the training field, NightShout squatted by a toppled dummy and stared down at a bullet hole already partially filled by collapsed bits of straw. His finger touched ripped burlap. FeatherFly squatted next to him, struggling mightily to rein in his excitement.

"You've never met a Yata, and that's unfortunate." The rumpled man couldn't gaze upon the head, even one made of straw, without seeing the abomination of his last kill, its skull burst like a melon dropped from a great height. "There are no real opportunities for the children of our villages to meet each other before they come of age. That is the one part of the Covenant I truly question." Abruptly he stood and pointed. "Lie down, son."

FeatherFly twitched, roused from his reverie. "What?"

"You heard me. Lie down next to the straw."

Uncertainty filled the boy's eyes as FeatherFly lowered himself onto his back. A cloud passed overhead, casting its shadow on the field. NightShout listened to leaves crumpling beneath his son's jacket, watched as a beetle scurried away from the red shock of hair fallen about FeatherFly's shoulders.

The boy asked, "What do I do now?"

"You lie there." NightShout folded his arms across his chest. "Notice how your feet are aligned with the target's feet, how your head is aligned with the target's head."

"I'm a little taller."

NightShout nodded. "A Yata boy your age would be no higher than your chest." He pointed. "Think of that straw figure next to you as his father, whom you have just killed. What kind of life do you think your prey led before you shot him?"

FeatherFly shrugged.

"You'll find out." NightShout walked to the other side of the dummy and gazed across the torn back at his son. "During Atonement you will be told about that man's life, about the children he left behind, about the other members of his family."

"I know all about that." FeatherFly reached behind his shoulder to scratch, saw the look on his father's face, and stopped. "I have to remember what they tell me, I have to tell the stories to you and Ma and TripStone, and I have to tell them to the scribes."

"*Have* to." NightShout shook his head. Once his energies had been

just as restless, his attitude just as cavalier. Even his first kill had not sobered him sufficiently. "All those bothersome rules to follow. A reverence you don't feel because you really don't know who these people are or the importance of our mutual respect. Right now, the only reason you show any respect at all is because you know you'll get walloped if you don't. Am I right?" He watched the boy struggle with his thoughts. "Answer me, son. It's a simple question."

It had been a job in the beginning--an important one but a job all the same, to carry on the hunting tradition. NightShout had struggled with his own ignorance and fear once, hidden behind a young man's cocky attitude. Swaggering was easy when one held a gun.

The scrimshanders set story to bone to keep Yata memory alive. The full-time farmers at the Grange supplied nutrition to their own people and sent Thanksgiving Day tithes to the Yata. The scribes copied and preserved Covenant texts, and all those who came of age taught its laws to the young.

But the hunters were the life-givers of their communities, entrusted with the most serious of responsibilities. They alone were permitted to take sentient life. They gutted and cleaned the bodies, breaking them down into their component parts--food, healing balms, ceremonial instruments. They were the only ones who carried stories directly from Yata survivors back into Masari culture.

To be a hunter was to be a hero. A master hunter, renowned for both prowess and compassion, became imbued with both fame and anguish. As a young man, before he knew any better, NightShout had seen only the fame.

FeatherFly said, in a small voice, "I don't know which answer is the right one."

"The *truth* is the right answer. You won't be punished for speaking the truth."

The boy frowned. His back twitched; he tried to dislodge plant debris that had snuck inside his jacket. "I don't know where respect comes from, except I'm supposed to show it." He tried to scratch his back surreptitiously. "I'm scared."

"Scared of meeting your first Yata," NightShout asked, "or scared of me?"

FeatherFly whispered, "Both."

His father nodded. "That's an honest answer. The rest of your training today will be hard, and it will feel like punishment, but it is not." He squatted, pressing his heavy hand on the boy's chest as his son began to rise. "I didn't tell you to get up. You're going to lie there for the rest of our training session."

"But how will I practice my shooting?"

"You won't. Not today." NightShout increased the pressure on FeatherFly's chest, holding him hard to the ground. "Son, I want you to look at that straw dummy lying next to you. You're going to keep company with it for the rest of today's training. You're going to get to know it." He frowned at the boy's shock. "FeatherFly, that target is going to be me. Before you think of it as a Yata, think of it as your father. Or your mother. Or TripStone, or any of your friends. It's someone you know, someone you care about. And whoever that person is, he or she is dead, shot cleanly through the heart and killed instantly, painlessly, out of respect. And I want you to think of the bullets you hear as coming from someone who is truly remorseful. Who kills not because he wants to, but because he *has* to." Sadly, NightShout patted his son's chest, and then his shoulder, and pushed

himself to his feet. "Maybe then you'll learn where this mysterious 'respect' comes from."

The boy breathed raggedly below him.

"Whatever you do," NightShout warned, "do not try to stand up until I tell you to. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

Had he been this frightened when his own father taught him what must be taught? The old man tried to remember. He had borne the lesson bravely, at least by outward appearances, perhaps even with a touch of rebellion. But FeatherFly seemed almost delicate, with his mother's small frame and graceful build. It was TripStone whose physique--and whose bravery, and rebellion--most resembled her father's.

NightShout straightened with a heavy sigh and surveyed the training field. Three dummies had fallen to the ground. Three still stood. He turned away from FeatherFly and walked back to the boy's training rifle. In NightShout's hands it felt as dainty as the boy.

TripStone rose to her feet inside the house. She watched with tears in her eyes as her father loaded, aimed, and fired a clean shot through the next target, and the next, and the next. Even from this distance she imagined she could feel her brother flinch, his eyes widening in fear. Behind the closed door to her parents' room her mother meditated, preparing for Atonement.

With a start, TripStone realized that each of them was utterly alone.

She watched as NightShout made his way to the fallen straw. Her father carefully reconstructed each target, save for the one lying next

to his son. If FeatherFly called to him, he was ignoring the pleas. Again he took up his position and recommenced firing.

TripStone longed to turn away from the window but her feet refused to move. For hours her father's aim remained flawless, even though he had hardly touched a gun in years. When he finally stopped it was due to the mangled dummies, shot so many times their heart spots had to be rebuilt with fresh straw and burlap.

She watched him help FeatherFly to his feet, saw her brother sway and clutch at his father. NightShout's arm encircled his son's shoulders, grasping them in an uncharacteristic show of tenderness.

When they came close enough to the house, TripStone glimpsed her brother's eyes. They were dark, dead pools. She had seen the same dead pools in her parents' eyes--in Ghost's, in WindTamer's, BrokenThread's, Piri's. In her own.

NightShout looked at her blankly as they passed through the door. "Go gather the spent bullets and casings." He turned back to FeatherFly. His flat, tired voice claimed the boy's undivided attention. "Hunting takes more than marksmanship. You must learn to move without disturbing the woods. You must learn to follow scent, to read the wind..."

## CHAPTER 25

Zai surveyed her practice results, stepping around straw replicas of fallen Masari littering the ground. Her rifle held extra cartridges, a Yata modification.

"Remember that the Masari must stop to reload after each bullet." Gria's words followed her. "You don't. Take advantage of that extra

time."

Zai gazed toward the far side of the clearing, where black smoke rose from the smithy, and ran her fingers smoothly across the magazine assembly. The single-shot rifles Watu brought to the training camp already seemed primitive. They left Masari hunters no room for error, requiring the skills to execute perfect, painless killing as the Covenant dictated.

Here the smithy transformed the guns into better, more powerful machines. Aim did not matter so much as finishing what one started.

Without the scriptures, what weapons would the Masari have developed? How technologically advanced would the Yata themselves be?

The holes in Zai's target were widely spaced, though in her short time here she rejoiced that she could hit anything at all. Other trainees clapped her on the back. They encouraged each other, cheering each other on.

She had learned to run with the heavy beast in her hands, to fall to the ground and roll while maneuvering wood and steel. She had learned to clean and check the magazine tube, the firing pin, the barrel, the springs. She had taken her rifle apart and put it back together. She had taken it with her to her pallet, leaving it within reach. It rested across her back as she ate, both out in the field and around the fire. In time, Gria assured her, she would hardly feel its weight on her back at all.

Until then, the agonies in her muscles were her friends. At night Zai groaned, the knots under her skin burning while a hutmate massaged her. After her muscles had loosened and relaxed, she turned to the next woman. They pounded the pain from each other's limbs before

sinking into numb, exhausted sleep. By the end of the day they could do little more than lift a meal to their mouths.

Others at the camp tapped into additional energies, but even exhausted recruits needed to know about reproductive control. That morning Gria had passed around an intestinal sheath and motioned for one of the men to demonstrate by putting it on. Zai stared as the women around her whooped good-naturedly at the demonstrator strutting obligingly in the center of their circle. She marveled that one could remain barren from the mere act of a man slipping such a thing around his cock. Or from a woman inserting pastes into herself, mashed from the wood's secret stash of bitter fruits.

Even considering such uses amazed her. How, in the midst of their grueling regimen, could anyone think about sex at all?

The image came unbidden to Zai as she stood in the practice grounds: the Masari woman with the strange name, naked and prostrate before her and covered with dust, the mound of slain rabbits by her side. Zai again looked numbly upon the tears streaming from TripStone's eyes, both of them locked in regimented formality, reciting to each other according to tradition.

Zai saw herself back in the visitor's hut, bending calmly to one side. This time she reached for her modified rifle as she sat in her white robe listening to the lie of Atonement. The unarmed Masari's forehead pressed to the floor.

Zai took careful aim at the *yatanii*. Gunshot echoed sharply around the adobe walls, the rabbits further bespattered with blood.

She flinched as a hand rested on her shoulder. A deep voice asked, "Are you all right?"

The image vanished. Zai looked from shattered straw into a face as sunburnt as her own. "I'm fine," she stammered. "I was just--remembering."

The man nodded. Zai noticed the fine lines in his forehead, the tension in his jaw. "My own memories keep me up at night ever since I lost my daughter."

She squeezed his arm. They bent down together to repair and reposition the targets.

## CHAPTER 26

Bloated with the stories of Adzon's life, ShadowGrass dragged herself up the gentle rise home. Grime and the blood of small game smeared her tunic. Her pelt was filthy, her eyes defiant with stoic silence.

Adzon's grandchildren had filled the visitor's hut, so tightly packed their body heat had massed like an oven about her. They had all dressed immaculately in white, some of them younger than ShadowGrass's juvenile, untested son. Nine of them, all of them straight-backed and poised, had taken their turns reciting to her as she knelt on the dirt floor, her forehead pressed to the ground, her palms open and up at her sides, her tunic tossed behind a still-warm pile of matted fur. Her offerings would not feed their numbers for long.

The few times she had faced them during her own recitation, they had stared back down impassively at her denuded body. Their young faces bore no trace of emotion, but ShadowGrass could tell how well trained they were in hiding their rage. A mother knew such things.

Sweat rolled from her graying pelt onto heavy breasts as she told

them of Adzon's death. Her dugs pulled on her chest muscles. The veins in her legs throbbed. She maintained her own decorum as best she could, fighting a powerful urge to sleep.

Three of Adzon's wives, two co-husbands, and twelve children were already dead. Their lives were already enshrined in carved household bones and in Crossroads' granite Rotunda with its sheaves of Yata narratives and genealogies. His grandchildren, quiet-spoken and merciless in their detail, poured minutiae into ShadowGrass until she felt her head would burst.

The younger grandchildren had been forced to stay at home. They would have beaten her as she bent naked before them. An older boy named Izzik, one who had learned selective decorum, so informed her.

Passed from villager to villager in Basc's collective outpouring of grief, ShadowGrass stumbled more from vertigo than pain. Her identity had settled somewhere beyond her body, floating in the open, out of her reach. She was a cloud passing between the pines, casting its shadow on the dirt roads, marveling at the wailing crowd convulsing like a great beast—finding, losing, finding herself again, the lone Masari woman they had swallowed whole. She was a red-tufted rag wrenched at the seams, crumpled into a wrinkled ball, and finally tossed frayed back into the woods as the bloody sun sank.

Now her thin, bespattered tunic hung unevenly off her shoulders, her hair wild, her ankles swollen. Her family burst out the door to meet her. They lifted her by her elbows and eased her bare, blistered feet over the cold stones. She fought nausea as the many narratives pooled like lead in her stomach. Soon enough they would spill out in the Rotunda, over the heads of exhausted scribes who would write until their wrists burned and their fingers stiffened, inflamed into claws.

No one said a word. Even the melody of bird song became unbearable and the wind through the trees nothing but sinister whispers, the abomination of speech disguised as something beautiful.

~ ~ ~

In the morning, her daughter begged to go with her.

ShadowGrass did not trust this new zeal in TripStone; she knew her daughter too well. The young woman was even more moody and distracted than before, her eyes holding flames so intense they sliced into ShadowGrass's sleep.

NightShout had changed as well. Father and daughter circled each other in some smoldering alchemy. Their movements passed from dreamlike to decisive and back into a brutal reverie that they kept jealously to themselves.

Oddly enough, ShadowGrass understood her son better, now that FeatherFly began to grasp what it meant to be a Masari. His was the simple realization that his childhood was coming to an end. He had tasted a poor approximation of death, enough to temper his tomfoolery. Soon enough, what innocence remained would be gone, the townsfolk would obscenely celebrate his ascendance into the guild of hunters, and he would wish he had never been born.

Now mother and daughter walked silently, side by side and equally grim as the road forked. The marketplace on the left buzzed with incessant chatter. Bearded goats bleated and chickens squawked above loud, drunken wisdom imparted from one beery mouth to another. Laughter pealed like glass shattering over the cobblestones.

The spiral walk to the right glistened with smooth pavement so wide that it dwarfed the women as they approached the Rotunda. The trees seemed impossibly distant, an optical illusion muffled in waves of heat unrelieved by shade. Sweat stained their tunics.

Nettles promised more pain if they tried a shorter, radial approach. They circled the hulking granite hall, their orbit tightening with each revolution. The marble facade loomed. The soles of their sandals burned.

ShadowGrass stepped delicately through the heat, as though more cavalier movements would sweep the stories into swirls of dust, their notes tumbling disjointedly into nonsense patterns. She glanced at her daughter and knew that TripStone retraced her own recent journey here. Any landmark—a slight discoloration in the stone, the way the light hit the Rotunda's sculpted coffers—would act as a mnemonic for TripStone, triggering narratives of Ulik's life. All the more puzzling, then, that ShadowGrass's rebellious daughter padded softly beside her, gazing on the granite with a stare that revealed nothing.

At last they reached the center and climbed a flight of massive steps carved far enough apart to make their muscles tremble. Small clouds flitted across the sun, making the mica around them wink. By the time they reached the great bronze doors their eyes chased afterimages that burned irregular holes in the metal's embossed scripture.

Inside, the great dome's symmetry was broken by a small, distant room set to the side off a stubby corridor. Therein rested the Masari records—births, deaths, transfers of land and property, accountings of business. They were colorless and flavorless, a simple recitation of tedious lists scratched on parchment. The Masari were very good at making lists. They were also good at telling tales, but those rose on fermented hops and barley, dissipating in sour breath.

A small tapestry hung in that room, a consolation prize of sorts. The Masari made a pretty picture when they put their minds to it.

Between the women and the small back room, the walls hung heavy with sheaves of parchment stitched into massive books. Rows of them arced in circle upon circle from the tiled mosaic floor up the buttressed dome, almost up to the zenith. Narrow staircases spiraled like ivy up the dome walls. A shaft of sunlight speared the windowed oculus, sending down an angled, silver column of dancing specks.

The books held stories, grouped by family relationships into a matrix whose invisible strings constructed a many-times-knotted web. One Yata life wove into another after death, down through the generations. The Rotunda became a loom of words dedicated solely to the village of Basc. Identical Rotundas, one for each Masari-Yata village pair, cobbled the outskirts of Masari society like corpulent, unhatched eggs.

ShadowGrass traced her gaze across the invisible strings. She found the volume her recitation would fatten once it filled parchment. Her stomach lurched as the voices of Adzon's grandchildren rose in sour waves to her throat.

She rounded the curve to her left and rushed past an elaborate archway into the Rotunda's outer dome. There the scribes sat, cinched between the inner and outer walls, at the juncture between Yata past and Masari present. Black ink stained their callused fingers. The weight of paper surrounding them was as blank as ShadowGrass wished her mind could be.

TripStone gave her mother's shoulder a firm squeeze and vanished, her footsteps echoing down the tiles and around the smooth granite bow. ShadowGrass stared after her, suddenly abandoned. "Where--"

The first scribe barked his command. "Speak!"

Her jaw snapped open. The stories spewed forth.

~ ~ ~

TripStone walked quickly, listing to the right to follow the curve of the dome until she was sure one leg was truly shorter than the other. She stopped at the census room and turned, straightening her spine. A crick in her side made her gasp. She rubbed it away as she caught her breath.

For a moment she basked in the featureless gray that covered her sight like a cool stream. Here the books rested in tidy rows. They held no wild proliferation of memory, only lists of Yata as practical and austere as the Masari records were.

TripStone knew the generations, knew the names.

Ulik. Zai. Ila. Abri. Evit.

Each name became the hub of a wheel with untold spokes, each spoke the hub of another wheel. No paper could hold them all inside her hunting tunic. She would need to commit the patterns to memory. Masari hunters were nothing if not well-trained in memory.

Parchment slid smoothly beneath her fingers. TripStone sat at a long wooden table, bent over angular letters that transliterated the Yata script beside them. Every note left by prey named those left behind, adding to the ever-expanding puzzle of lineage. Brothers and sisters. Aunts and uncles. Cousins. Co-husbands, co-wives. Sons and daughters. Parents, grandparents, if they still lived.

She had to learn the combinations and permutations until she could

recognize a name, any name, written in the woods by one prepared to die. In the steamy grass her rifle would lie inert at her booted feet. TripStone would wait, reading as her prey wrote the names of survivors, until the blood labyrinth of memorized connections gave her the path leading to Zai's brother Ila.

Then she would gird herself once again for sacrilege. She would recite the connections knot by knot, weaving a tapestry no Yata expected a Masari to see. Only then would she ask, "Where is Ila? Which hut?" and offer to spare her prey's life in return for a reply. Other hunters would feed Crossroads that Meat Day.

Then she would crawl into Basc under the cover of darkness and trust her fate to the gods.

TripStone could not risk telling the authorities. Basc's spiritual leader believed that even a reformed *yatanii* was capable of anything. The Honorable One had made it clear that she did not want to see TripStone again unless the Covenant demanded it, and then only for formalized ritual.

But Ila had to be told about Destiny Farm, in case they had taken Zai.

~ ~ ~

TripStone awakened with a terrified shout as a hard fist slammed into the wood by her cheek. Her mother stood before her, tight-lipped, eyes blazing.

ShadowGrass glowered down at her daughter. She was done with words. She had heaved them from her gut, expelled them from her lungs. Adzon, like the corpses before him, would follow her into her dreams. His grinning skull, his metacarpus on her shoulder. *Do not forget to tell about....* She was done with words.

She did not know how long she had stared, uncomprehendingly, at her daughter napping in the quiet, unadorned census room. That sight polluted the mind she had emptied to the scribes, her eyes glazed with negation. ShadowGrass was a vessel. She carried TripStone, carried FeatherFly, carried the Yata. For years she had carried NightShout as well. She spilled over into emptiness. There was nothing left of her.

Nothing left but a fist crashing onto the table. Only then did she look beyond her daughter's fright, seeing the records, the open books. She grabbed TripStone by her long hair and yanked her to her feet. ShadowGrass shoved trembling hands back into her pockets, turned, and strode out of the census room, back into the curved hallway, listing to the left.

TripStone followed obediently, the name-patterns in her head turning to spoke-wheels of flame. Her scalp burned. All she could do now was keep out of her mother's way.

They returned through the great arch. The oculus had turned to black. TripStone could see a single star through its window. Lanterns flickered in the center of the dome, far from paper. The books filling coffered granite threw long shadows that danced an arrhythmic jig. Footfalls echoed from rooms unseen. No one spoke.

Their shoulders relaxed beneath eddies of crisp night air. TripStone followed the spiral path outward, gazing up into a clear patch of sky away from the woods. The Great Wagon rose from distant treetops. Directly overhead, the Caterpillar spread its chunky, undulating body of stars.

She glanced to her left and saw ShadowGrass discerning the constellations as well. When their eyes met, TripStone looked away.

## CHAPTER 27

Ghost chewed listlessly on dried goat meat and washed it down with water. Its gamey flavor was gone and it tasted like dust on his tongue. *The first sign.*

He shuffled to his desk to log the symptom, wondering which was worse--large sacramental meals spaced widely apart or a years-long weaning, a constant state of starvation punctuated by a few desperate bites. He could consume the entire goat if he wished, but until he ate Yata again he would go hungry.

He had decreased his overall consumption of Yata meat, but so gradually that it made no difference. His body could compensate only so much for the nutrients it could not produce on its own. Even the miraculous BrokenThread paid a terrible price for her abstention.

He looked back toward his laboratory and the two wooden boxes that were now part of its furniture. On one stood the pale, bruised feet of the child. The other held dainty bronze toes and ankles whose sores healed quickly. Piri had waved off his medicinal salve, insisting she could do without. Finally she relented. Half of her would receive treatment while the other half healed on its own.

She had been right, and Ghost marveled at her recuperative powers. In contrast, BrokenThread's corpuscles burst and her skin discolored from the sheer act of standing and walking. That didn't stop her from helping him with his research and now from instructing Piri, both of them bent over the table, taking their turns at the lenses.

The muscles in Piri's foot had shifted under his fingers when he spread a cool herbal cream over her skin. Her high arch flexed, her calf twitching into a tight, hard ball. Then she had relaxed, smooth and

supple, leaning forward to observe him more closely. As he leaned over the foot in his lap, she tried to look through his plum-colored fur and the wildness of his tied-back hair, wanting to see through to his skin.

Ghost had instructed BrokenThread to bring him different lenses slipped from their iron scaffolding. He had held them one at a time, examining Piri's injuries. Even the deep scratches on her legs had remained uninfected during her journey through the woods, out of sight, to his cabin.

From the time he was a boy, he had seen Yata skin applied as a bandage to serious Masari wounds. Now he knew why.

His growling stomach brought him back to the present. He gazed at the smooth contours of diminutive bronze legs, watching as Piri recorded observations and showed the child what she'd written for corrections. Beneath her nightshirt the woman's waist bore scores of stretch marks, more visible now that her lesions were fading. Ghost remembered many blued veins, muscles crossing her limbs and torso like tight cords.

When he had treated the flesh on her left buttock it was only skin to him, tempered by the fear that came from having such a being under his roof. Now his attention wandered to her pelvic roundness, to the soft globes shifting under her nightshirt as she moved.

The slab of Yata jerky locked in his cabinet was rump meat. Ghost closed his eyes, driving the thought from his mind.

~ ~ ~

BrokenThread heard creaking behind her as Ghost settled himself into the chair at his desk. She recognized his labored sigh and

tapped on Piri's arm, *His time soon.*

Piri tapped back, *I will be careful.*

Piri knew what it was like to be driven by uncontrollable urges. Surviving even the canyon's unrelenting heat seemed minor, compared to keeping her wits about her until her body was purged of Destiny. No one ever told her of the natural cycle of ebb and flow, but she could feel it now, a distant shadow of her former frenzy.

She took hold of her practice slate with its neatly-formed Masari letters and numbers. She assigned one symbol to the tingling between her legs, another to the swelling of her breasts. She would keep track of these as she did the ebb and flow of the animalcules in their different bloods.

She looked up as Ghost approached them both, scrutinizing their notes. He avoided facing her directly, instead lingering over the parchment, adding variables to consider. Puffiness absent the day before spread under his eyes. He rubbed his temples and stretched his neck muscles from side to side.

BrokenThread asked, "Headache?" He nodded.

Piri pointed to the cabinet.

"No, not yet." Ghost grimaced. "I try to do without for as long as I can."

Piri's first days without Destiny had burned her from the inside-out until she was sure she would die. Half-choking, her throat closing from thirst, she had sought to relieve her urges with whatever she could find in the barren, chalky dirt. Bones. There were plenty of bones.

How could she tell Ghost that his laboratory had no power to shock her with its body parts and extracted fluids? How could she explain that even the need for water was secondary to the dictates of the drug?

She had managed to resist it long enough to press on, her insides screaming. In time the screams lessened, a distant chorus to angry, sun-crisped skin. By the time WindTamer found her, she had finally shed Destiny from her starved and dehydrated body.

Ghost's log told Piri that his hands and feet would grow numb and his eyesight would blur by morning. Sometimes he could resist his hunger longer; other times it had gripped him so severely that his mind was no longer his own. An ailing BrokenThread had once pulled Piri to the floor with almost supernatural strength and scooted in front of her, serving as a Masari shield.

It had not been necessary, Ghost said later. He would starve before he'd hurt Piri. But his faculties had returned by then. BrokenThread had suffered for days afterward, wracked with cramps. No matter how delicately Piri bathed her, the girl had flinched when touched.

Sometimes the walls of their two-room cabin closed around them so tightly that Piri gasped for air. It had to be that much harder for her host. For years he'd been the only one here, working quietly in his laboratory and entertaining the occasional guest, another believer smuggling in food and supplies and then departing.

Now only WindTamer and TripStone were allowed to visit for any length of time. Ghost greeted the others at his door, accepting their gifts with thanks and insisting it was too dangerous to come inside.

Inside, he was forced to share his most intimate battles whenever they seized him.

Piri wanted to comfort him somehow, tell him she understood. But now was not the time. He maintained his distance, his shoulders singing with tension. She knew he was cursing his body for its betrayal, once again, of his soul.

## CHAPTER 28

WindTamer wished he had remained a hunter. Just this once. He would know for certain, then, what he was seeing.

He stared down at broken twigs, following a trail of crushed berries and pits tossed on the ground. Weren't pits dropped in fumets after animals ate the berries? There were no fumets here. Could an animal have broken the twigs and compacted the brown leaves at his feet?

He was afraid to look up the slope in case anyone was hidden in the woods, watching him. Ghost's cabin lay just short of the border with the Yata of Alvav, who lived beyond the ridge and fed the Masari of Rudder. Footing became more treacherous there, the path uphill well hidden.

In contrast, the pass through the mountains separating Crossroads from Rudder rolled gently over a low shoulder, far from here. That was the place where people went, its trail well worn and friendly.

But RiverRun was still missing and the citizens of Crossroads were widening their search. If they had come this far, how much longer before they discovered the first of the cairns?

WindTamer wished TripStone were here. She could tell him about the twigs and the pits. Maybe this was all his imagination. Maybe there were beasts about who picked their teeth like the Masari and who found swallowing pits distasteful.

No sense climbing further unless he was sure no one followed him. The carpenter sighed and turned to descend the slope. He scooted on his bottom where the rocks turned steep.

He heard intermittent rifle fire as he crossed into town. The young shooters were practicing. FeatherFly and MossDancer would come of age soon. TreeRain's daughter CatBird would do so in another season. WindTamer took the outer walk past Hunt Guild houses and their training fields, squinting into the distance as best he could.

NightShout has picked up a gun again. What did *that* mean? Up and about again, taking over the training of his son. The boy looked much older, somehow. WindTamer took the outer turn, advancing down cobblestones. He waited quietly until it was time to re-stuff the targets, then waved.

NightShout took his son by the shoulder and pointed, imparting a few lines of advice. He strode toward his visitor as FeatherFly tended to fallen straw. The hunter's chest was no longer sunken, his eyes no longer dulled. Something had changed.

"I was in the area," WindTamer said, mildly. "Thought I'd stop by."

"Come inside with me."

The other man's voice was flat but gruff. WindTamer followed him in.

NightShout reached wordlessly across him, eased the door shut, and lowered the thick wood beam. He grabbed WindTamer and swung him hard against it. "Now." Soft-spoken, almost a whisper. Deadly. "You are going to tell me what you've been doing with my daughter."

The beam bit into WindTamer's back. A rifle shot cracked outside.

"I assure you." His collar was crumpled in NightShout's fist. For the first time he realized how tall the other man was. "We do nothing dishonorable."

"Then you will have no trouble telling me about it."

"Telling you could endanger some lives."

The fist pressed harder into his chest. "Including TripStone's?"

WindTamer wanted to look anywhere but into NightShout's eyes. He wanted to scan the inscribed bones and parchments lining the walls. It didn't matter that he could read only elementary Yata. Anything was better than the gaze boring into him, gray orbs of menace and pain.

"Including TripStone's, yes," he finally said.

NightShout released him and indicated a small, rough-hewn table. "Sit."

WindTamer gingerly rubbed his back and stumbled toward a simple chair. The walls muffled another gunshot.

"My daughter and I shared tea here, not long ago." NightShout sat opposite him and leaned forward, his arms flat on the table. "She told me there is an evil greater than I could imagine, and then she refused to say more. I can see you're not surprised."

Suddenly WindTamer realized that he was looking at a stranger, a legendary hunter turned pariah turned near-vegetable. And now, what? He tried not to look away. "She's right."

"And you say that telling her own father could endanger her life. I find that deplorable."

Beneath the scowl was a man trying to protect his daughter. And what else? WindTamer saw how much of NightShout had rubbed off on TripStone, but how much of TripStone had rubbed off on him?

Another shot rang out. WindTamer's brain was melting like the cheese in Piri's defiled mouth. He shifted uneasily on the hard chair, wishing the rocks he'd slid down had been less sharp. He cleared his throat loudly, craving water.

"My wife and daughter are tending crops," NightShout said. "I expect them to return after sundown. We can wait for them together, or you can tell me about this so-called evil that needs to be kept secret." He leaned back in his chair, worrying his thumb along the table edge. "I will decide whether to keep the knowledge to myself."

"Something to drink first, please." WindTamer started at a loud crack. The damned shots made him jittery. Cornered and frightened, he felt like prey himself. He wanted to ask about animals and berry pits. He didn't dare.

NightShout heaved his bulk from the chair, off in search of a mug.

How long to reach the door, raise the beam, flee? *You don't stand a chance, Windbag. Don't even try.*

Scent reached him that he hadn't noticed before--a long-ago pungency like an echo of Ghost's laboratory, or of the place where WindTamer himself had grown up. A hunter's house was a butchery. Yata were consecrated and processed here. In the past WindTamer had smelled only cleanliness and fragrant herbs in this common room, but now his senses were heightened. The bones themselves gleamed with light from within, though that couldn't be.

The gnarled hand set a brimming brown mug before him, almost too

delicately. Foam teased the lip.

"You're not having any?"

NightShout retook his seat and answered with calm silence.

"Gods help me." WindTamer drank deeply. He returned the depleted ale heavily to the tabletop and wiped his beard. He leaned forward, rested his head in his hands, and wished it would buzz. The slur in his voice did not come from drink. "What do you know of the canyon beyond Promontory?"

"I've heard of it," NightShout said. "Never been there."

"I met a lovely young woman from there, spotted her climbing up the canyon wall." He drank again, tilting his head back until the flow thinned to a trickle. He frowned. The mug was too small. It sounded too loud when it hit the table. "Tongue mangled, brand on her neck, no name. Raised to do nothing but breed." His broad fingers gripped the mug, which remained mockingly empty.

"You're talking about livestock," NightShout said.

"I'm talking about a Yata woman."

He wanted to look up from the mug and couldn't. He heard nothing but his breath, his heart beating like a drum stretched too taut.

Unceremoniously, NightShout pried his guest's fingers from the earthenware handle and disappeared again. WindTamer couldn't move, walled into the moment. No past, no future, just an insistent thumping in his veins. Anything other than the present was far too dangerous to contemplate.

His field of vision shriveled to the gnarled hand again, to bubbling

froth running down earthenware. NightShout's chair creaked with the added weight of his own mug. The gunshot outside could just as well have been smothered in down.

His host said, softly, "You've seen this for yourself."

"I know the woman. I haven't seen the farm."

"And where is she?"

"In a safe place." WindTamer forced himself to look away from the brew. He raised the mug to his lips, wondering whether he lied. "Recuperating from her journey."

NightShout hadn't touched his ale except to tap his fingers against the mug, his attention focused on WindTamer's unruly head. "It's a long trip to Promontory. What were you doing in the canyon?"

WindTamer said, sharply, "I believe I've told you enough."

"You haven't told me about TripStone's role in this."

The mugs in this house drained too quickly. WindTamer turned the vessel in his hands as though seeing it for the first time. Warmth teased his fingertips, edging slowly toward his melting brain. Across the table bubbles called. His throat was parched again.

His host's mug slid toward him, moaning against the wood. WindTamer closed his eyes and let the ale infuse his bones. "You raised a good daughter, NightShout."

"Her *role*, neighbor."

WindTamer rested his head on his arms. The mug stood at an odd

angle, drops of condensation slipping against gravity. A hot tear dropped onto his sleeve.

"Fumets and pits," he said.

## CHAPTER 29

*Observe. Gria's pen snaked across parchment. We can preserve our own stories. Our pens are as much arsenal as our weapons.*

So began each of her writings, reminders to her readers that such a thing was possible. They need not rely on the Masari to safeguard their memories for generations. The Yata could do it themselves.

If they had the time. If they had the energy. If they had the means.

The letters flowing from her nib were crisp and neat, but how long would they remain that way? Her older volumes already moldered in the camp library, needing to be re-copied. *Our problem, as always, is resources. The Covenant makes our children our resources, which then become expendable by decree. We invest our lives in propagating our people, to the point where we can condemn just enough of them to death to ensure the rest of us survival—and idolization. And that idolatry is the deadliest game of all.*

Gria set her pen aside and extinguished her lamp as a red sun lightened to orange beyond the clearing. It crested the horizon in the foothills, behind a thick stand of trees. She sat cross-legged by the shore of a clear lake fed by runoff from surrounding peaks. A hawk glided above flame-colored water, its reflection broken by ripples in the wake of a leaping fish.

Soon the camp would be up and bustling. Gria was sure she already

heard distant grunts, the echoes of early calisthenics.

She frowned at the parchment. She had written this all before, the same sentiments expressed in different ways. Sometimes she wondered if she tripped through the reflections of her own rhetoric, caught within her own mirrored pond.

She would rather wrestle with her book of numbers, but that held no solace, either. How many trained soldiers could overrun the Masari, not just within Crossroads but in the other villages? She would need to recruit more Yata from Basc and from additional settlements as well. *How can we recruit when we don't even have trade routes among our own people?*

Each Yata/Masari village dyad remained locked in its own dance of death, with its own hunting grounds nestled in the valleys. The Yata of Basc knew more about the Masari of Crossroads than about their own people in Alvav, or in Skedge, or beyond.

*There must have been trade among our villages once .* But why trade when the Masari showered you with produce, material goods, adoration? When all they asked was that you took to the woodlands when they needed your flesh? When they prayed to the gods for a clean shot and you prayed for a good death, should you be so chosen?

*They keep us soft, and pliable, and compliant. For all that they remember of our lives, just how much of our own heritage have we forgotten?*

The sun climbed higher. Voices carried on the air. Commands, explosions of gunpowder. When the sun crested the treetops, she would rejoin the troops.

Barrenness enabled one to train adequately for battle, but too much barrenness depleted one's forces. Right now the only way she could recruit was through Watu's network of spies, watching and listening for dissent, for heresy. All Gria could do was trust the instincts of her operatives and take whatever willing soldiers she could get.

*Sacrifices of a different kind.*

She wrote fluidly on the parchment, *What is the difference between dying as prey and dying as a soldier? As prey we perpetuate the status quo. Yes, we will be remembered. Yes, we will attain a higher level of divinity when we are no longer alive to experience it. But our divinity is a conceit of the Covenant. Without the Covenant what does our culture, the culture of the Dirt People, have the potential to become?*

*If we die as soldiers, we die to overthrow more than the Masari alone. We die to overthrow the Covenant. It is the Covenant that has kept us enslaved to the Masari and the Masari enslaved to us. We need to break that lethal bond for the sake of both our peoples.*

Her nib jerked up from the parchment. *For the sake of both our peoples?* Since when did she feel any compassion for the Masari?

Before she became an outlaw she had been a little girl. It must have happened then. One of her fathers--the funny one, with the wide face and little eyes, who made her laugh a lot--was alive one day and then he was dead. She hadn't remembered anybody dying before then. The whole hut had changed. Everything started moving very slowly.

She had snuggled that night, held against her mother's chest outside the Soala. Her other mothers and fathers were inside, and the older children, though they did not sound like her family at all. She had clung to her mother's neck and wailed, terrified by the howls and

shrieks of demons. She was certain everyone in the Soala was being devoured, consumed by the torches that always burned whether it was night or day.

She had cried, "We have to save them!"

"They will live, Gria," her mother said, dully, postponing her own grief.

Her mother had been right, of course, though Gria had barely recognized the faces emerging from within the black adobe walls. At first Gria blamed her poor vision on the nighttime, with its wild shadows and nocturnal spirits. Then she had wandered through her family's hut the next day, counting the bruises.

Days later another mother had combed and plaited her hair, when it was still long enough to tickle her waist as she ran naked around the village. Another mother had dressed her all in white linen that felt delicious against her skin. She went with her family to the visitor's hut, where she saw a Masari for the first time in her conscious memory.

("I took you to a Thanksgiving," yet another mother once reminded her. "But you were too young to remember. We were standing in the back of the crowd, unable to get a good look at them.")

Surrounded and protected by her loved ones, she had looked upon a giant man with dark red, fuzzy hair all over his body. He was naked and dirty and had very sad eyes. In a strange, clumsy accent he told the story of how he had killed her father. Her father had been generous, the Masari said. Before he died he had written down all their names and described all of them.

It was true. The Masari man faced each of them in turn and said their names. A small thrill passed through Gria when he recognized her. She wanted to smile back at him, but wrinkled her nose at the stink of

dead rabbits instead.

Then the most amazing thing happened. The giant man bent to the floor until thick red tufts rose from his spine and he said nothing more. After a moment one of her fathers started to speak, telling stories about the father who died. The Masari man just lay there, bent over. Gria wondered if he had fallen asleep.

Then the mother who had held her outside the Soala spoke, and then one of her older brothers, and a sister, and another brother, and another mother, and another father. And the rabbit stink grew stronger, and the day got hotter. And the Masari man was crying.

She remembered thinking he was a very nice man, even though he had killed her father. When it came time for her to speak she had looked down at the shaggy, filthy head and wanted to pat its wayward curls into place. "I think my daddy liked you," she said.

The Masari man looked up at her with red-rimmed eyes.

"I want to know what he tastes like," she added.

"Gria!" Her mother drew the child close to her side.

"Well I do!"

Before she could say anything more another sister began to speak, blurting out something silly, and the giant's head pressed back against the floor. He was so furry that Gria wondered why the Masari wore any clothing at all.

During the procession, when all of Basc wailed along with her family, she wanted to go find the Masari man dressed again in his ratty clothes. But there were too many grownups pressing around her, and

soon one of her fathers lifted her up and carried her home.

Over the years her parents were picked off one by one; some families seemed more destined for "divinity" than others. How many Masari hunters, men and women, had bent naked before her? Gria didn't remember. She had told stories to the giant man more than once, so many memories pouring from her that she felt she knew him. But she knew nothing about him at all, except that he was sad, and he embodied the spirits of her loved ones because his body had absorbed them. By that time, she couldn't bring herself to ask what anybody tasted like.

When she was big enough, she shouldered her way to the front of the crowd one Thanksgiving and looked with awe upon the mounds of food from Crossroads' Grange. She had felt superior, then, watching the young ones tussling inside great, emptied wagons or pulling on the ungainly Masari's pelts. The Masari were an accursed race and she was sacred food. She paraded before them, showing off her swelling hips and her growing breasts, taunting. Believing the myth.

Gria's nib touched the parchment and stilled. She lifted it as a small stain spread. Hypocrisy, to exhort her followers to write of their lives, while she froze at the notion of committing her own personal truths to paper. *Later.*

Superior firepower would give their small numbers a greater advantage. So, too, would the element of surprise. She had to weigh an all-out assault against the irregularities of sniper fire. Either way would place Basc at risk. She had to consult with her lieutenants and set up a defense perimeter when the time came.

The sun broke from the treetops. The lake sparkled between deep blue veins. Gria slipped her ink, pen, and papers back into her tunic pockets, grasped her lamp, and rose to her feet in one unbroken

motion. Breathing easily, she climbed the rise to the training grounds as morning heat burned the dew from her trousers.

~ ~ ~

Broad-leafed canopies held the sun's heat at bay, wrapping Watu in cool air and shadow underneath. A gentle wind lifted the sweat from his cheeks. Out of the corner of his eye he spied chipmunks popping into and out of burrows and songbirds tending their nests.

He knew that countless animal eyes watched him from a safe distance as he clacked and whirred down a secret trail between trees. Today the beasts seemed unperturbed. His harness pressed lightly against his chest as greased chains and sprockets turned smoothly behind. Within his wagon bed lay two large burlap bags, lumpy with the bladders he had sealed around quantities of Destiny.

He couldn't help but see killing fields overlaid on the day's idyllic calm. During the Reckoning--what to the Masari was simply "Meat Day"--the woods became a different place altogether.

Whenever he came here he scanned the soil around his feet, looking for places where someone's vial of ink had been ceremoniously spilled into the dirt. Most times nothing remained by the time he arrived to harvest or to trade. All the Yata bodies became nothing more than memories once their corpses were slung over Masari shoulders and carried back to Crossroads.

But glorified, immortalized memories they were. Who would remember Watu when he was dead?

*The ones who will rewrite history*, he hoped.

"Herbalists are cowards at heart." His father's voice, harsh words

from such a gentle tenor. A statement of fact. All the children knew it. "Most live to a ripe old age, when their bodies and minds decline and they simply pass away. They sacrifice nothing."

By the time Watu came of age, his mother had already sacrificed herself on the altar of the Covenant, in these very woods. What would her spirit have said to his decision?

High on a ridge, their bellies filled with the feasts of adulthood so many years ago, Watu and his peers had sat cross-legged in the dusk. Two brown pouches sat in the dirt before them, almost identical except for the uneven lumps in one and smooth continuity in the other.

The lumpy pouch to the right held parchment, a bone vial of ink, and a pen. Elegant tools spoke the language of memory and godhood, courage and poise. They embodied Yata strength and resilience and smelled sweetly of mortality. Only later did Watu realize that this pouch had indeed been perfumed, soaked in the nectar of night-blooming lilies. The odor itself had seemed to promise paradise.

The other, smooth pouch held a foul-smelling mash of withered roots chopped fine. Even after a brief handling Watu had to wash the stink of decay off his hands. This was the herbalist's pouch, designed to make the children gag. Add only a few ingredients, he later learned, and that same root mash gripped one in unrelenting ecstasy.

Most children chose the pouch to the right—the sweet smell, the pretty pen and crisp parchment, the chance for them to record their souls for eternity. Before the sun sank beneath the ridge they had stood up and belted that pouch around their narrow waists. They stood as one and faced the woods, now murky in shadow, knowing that the next Reckoning would take them down the trails and into open hunting grounds. They already rehearsed the words they would write for posterity if a Masari spotted them, rifle at the ready.

Now Watu stepped off the trail in the heat of day, leaving his wagon behind on the pounded earth. He would move furtively if this were a Reckoning, crouched behind outcroppings, gambling that he was downwind from Masari hunters, and wondering if he would live to procreate another day.

If this were a Reckoning, and if he had picked the other pouch...

The future herbalists were the last to stand with their chosen packet belted around their waists. Gorged on the feasts, two of them had heaved up their dinners but still held tight to the fetid mash. Sometimes the will to live outweighed the desire to become a legend.

Most children descended from the ridge to loud, tearful embraces, though Watu could never tell whether the tears arose from happiness or from grief. Only a few adults remained by the time he and his companions reached the valley, and those stepped back, grimacing. Watu's father had regarded him stoically and said nothing, while his sisters cried from the stench.

Only the adult herbalists approached their apprentices, smiling. Watu would leave his family hut and make his home in the forest, discovering the ways of insect and root, nectar and bark, pale toadstools and sticky mosses, the treasures one found in droppings. He would learn the trick of the perfumed pouch quickly enough. More important, he would learn the reason for his existence: ensuring the burgeoning families of others.

A tall woman slipped her arm around his shoulders. She was only a few years older than Watu but she carried herself like an elder. "You're with me." She led him away, filling her lungs with the rank air rising from his belt. "You're my first apprentice, so I'm sure to make

mistakes, but I assure you they will be good ones. Notice how the biting insects keep away from us the way the townsfolk do? They don't like the way we smell, either." She pointed to his belt. "The root comes from a plant called toad needle. It grows by the water."

He gazed up at her short hair, wanting suddenly to unbutton her tunic to see if she had breasts. "I never heard of a girl herbalist before."

"There's a first time for everything," Gria said.

~ ~ ~

It was not yet time to harvest the lichen. Watu's colleagues would be home instead of in this small clearing on the far side, where he made his trades.

Soon he heard clumsy footfalls and brambles snapping. A flock of mourning doves burst from a copse nearby. Two Masari approached him, far too ungainly to be hunters. They made a racket.

In moments like this Watu felt invincible, far superior to the hallowed townspeople of Basc. Instead of hiding from these men, he strode forward to greet them, craning his neck to behold them eye to eye. No sad smile passed between them, no remorse. Watu would live to produce Destiny for another day because the Masari couldn't pry its secrets from him. They'd tried.

He waited while they bowed low to him. It was a respectful gesture, one he did not believe for a minute. These Masari exuded a careless air unused to ritual, no matter what they tried to convey.

He studied their filthy vests, the dirt smudging their trousers. They claimed to be from Crossroads, but Watu knew better. It was probably safer not to contradict them. Better, too, to look upon their

faces and take small comfort in the belief that their hunters had not killed in these woods.

"So," he said, in blunt Masari. "Let me see."

The smaller one, the one called SandTail, unslung a long burlap bag from his shoulder. He held it out by a woven handle, unwavering. Watu extended his muscled arm and grasped the weave, his sinews straining.

During their first exchange the weight of the guns had forced his arm to the ground, but he had built his strength since then. He lowered the bag slowly, unwrapped the burlap, and lifted the first of two rifles.

How he wished he could fire it, but he couldn't take that risk outside the camp. He could only examine the action, the barrel and pin, the trigger. He took apart what he could. "It must be nice to have a rich clientele," he murmured, "that you would give us guns for a spice."

The larger one, BrushBurn, answered in fluent Yata, "It's much more than a spice. It's a heightened communion."

"How so?" Satisfied, Watu reassembled the first gun and slid the second from the bag.

"We haven't sampled Destiny ourselves." Watu's native tongue sounded obscene in BrushBurn's low, gravelly voice. Even the wind quieted, stopping the leaves' faint applause. "We are couriers, not customers."

Watu looked from BrushBurn back to SandTail. "Does anyone tell you what it's like? That communion?" SandTail shook his head.

Watu had once bragged that a few Yata believed he was trading

different ales with the Masari, given the popularity of his brewery. Indeed, he had concocted a "Masari blend" to fuel the deceit. It was more popular in rumor than in actual consumption.

SandTail had thrown his head back with a full-throated laugh, wiping tears from his eyes. The Masari made a fine ale, he had assured Watu, and needed no help from outside.

*Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if you didn't need us .* Watu returned the second rifle to the bag and tied it shut. He lifted the burlap with a grunt. *We could throwaway the Destiny, throwaway the guns, and raise our mugs together. We could have heated arguments about who made the better brew* He might even be able to take on SandTail if the debate ever came to fisticuffs.

"These seem acceptable, as always." Much as Watu hated to admit it, straightforward business dealings sounded better in Masari. He pointed toward the trail. "Over there."

The couriers followed him to the wagon.

"Our offer still stands," SandTail said to his back. "Give us the formula and you can have all the weapons you want."

Watu allowed himself a smile. Once Gria's smithy had enough raw materials it would manufacture its own rifles, better ones than these. Some day the Yata would have a mine and enough people to work it. Some day they would have a stratified labor force as the Masari did.

Some day.

"It's a tempting offer," Watu said flatly, "but no."

"Your loss," BrushBurn said. The larger man removed his vest,

unwound several bandoleers from his torso, and tossed them into the wagon. They clattered loudly against the wood. He shrugged his vest back on as his partner added several pouches of gunpowder, frowning at one of the bags whose straps had loosened.

Watu restrained his wonder as BrushBurn lifted the first great sack of Destiny with ease and SandTail hoisted the second. There had to be many wealthy Masari to consume so much spice. He wondered what they really used it for. The sooner Gria's camp could manufacture its own guns, the better.

He waited until he no longer heard oversized boots crashing through the brush. Then he secured the guns, strapped himself back into his harness, and followed the trail he had cleared. Soon he would return to pick the flounce buttons just coming into season. The pale pink fungi by his sandals were beginning to darken.

The lichen would have to wait. Watu examined a cluster of fire cups blanketing a narrow branch, their spiny orange suction cups gleaming in the sunlight. It was not yet time for the sap mites to breed, laying dozens of tiny eggs within the flesh of each cup. Only when the larvae hatched, and the fire cups grew tattered as they were eaten away, would Watu comb through the woods. He would harvest a third of each cluster so that the rest could regenerate after the sap mites molted into adults and flew away.

The marriage of molted carapace and toad needle root began the first of many transformations into Destiny. *Just grind it all together*, the Masari probably thought. They had no idea. Neither, for that matter, did any Yata outside the herbalists' guild. To them it was a sacred powder, handed down by the gods and the Covenant, that infused them with almost too much life to bear.



# CHAPTER 30



The Grange at Crossroads was a quiet place, once one left the animals and the workshop behind. The sky became a deeper blue. Light from the setting sun streamed through breaks in the high clouds and turned the windbreak golden. Trench silos ran deep seams along gentle slopes. They reflected muted light as the landscape to TripStone's left turned fuzzy with dimming haystacks.

Even from here she discerned the faint insistence of bleats and clucks and a cock crow that refused to surrender. All around her gates were being locked and the last pieces of equipment rolled into sheds. Her mother conversed in silhouette with another woman, whose hands moved in precise, careful gestures. A child ran giggling across a yard empty of goats, uncaring as to where she stepped.

TripStone smeared a rag around her hands. Her fingers stank from a day bent over pumpkins, killing squash bugs with her thumbnails. Lumbering creatures, they had simply observed her, unmoving. In an instant she had plucked their large black bodies and severed their tiny triangular heads. As a child she had crushed them and reeled at their pungency, though part of her had enjoyed the mess. Part of her still did.

More and more she appreciated the wisdom of vegetables. A hunter needed farm time, even if that time was spent hunting insects. The scribes needed to use different muscles in their hands and arms. The scrimshanders needed to escape the grain that ran through Yata

bone and be merely in the company of grain.

The Grange was their common denominator of respite as they rotated out of one life and into another, if only temporarily. Sometimes TripStone envied the full-time farmers even as she knew her blood ran differently than theirs. Ghost's kin.

She had moved from pumpkin to pumpkin, from one immensity to another, lost in a field of orange lanterns swelling off thick vines. Distant rhythms of windblown corn leaves raked the air. She watched their silks catch the light.

She had stayed away from the animal pens, waiting instead for ShadowGrass to finish working at the laying house. Now her mother ambled toward her, eclipsing fenceposts.

Their talk on the way home concerned neither the Yata nor the Covenant. Instead they spoke of chicks and bunnies, the latest harvest of rodents by the farm cats, the fantasies attending hot summer days while one repaired cold frames. Of scribes' hands steeped in mud rather than clutching a pen. Of the uncomplicated tyranny of weather.

Even the marketplace was quiet, slung between the Grange and Crossroads' cluster of dwellings, its colorful stalls packed away. Beyond the fork in the road the Rotunda sat unlit, a pumpkin in negative, blotting out the stars. Neighbors joined them, lanterns bobbing like fireflies in the darkness.

TripStone's muscles wanted to flow onto her pallet despite her light work of bending and straightening, of pulling minerals into her body from a heavy bladder of switchel. FeatherFly was already asleep by the time she and her mother arrived home.

Her father ushered them into the house. NightShout's breath percolated with ale, causing ShadowGrass to lay a hand on his arm and stare into his eyes. They didn't waver.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Get your rest." He took TripStone's elbow as she turned toward her room. "You'll tell me about the farm in the morning."

When she turned to look back at him, the sight of his face made her knees buckle.

~ ~ ~

He waited for her in the predawn as she padded quietly through the house and out onto grass chilled with dew. His low lantern wick cast a dull yellow spot by the firing range. TripStone smelled the loam under her feet and heard the occasional crack of a tiny twig overhead.

She lowered the wick in her own lamp and made her way to the storage shed where her father leaned against the wood, arms folded across his chest. This time no fog obscured the bags beneath their eyes.

"I see you understood my meaning," NightShout observed, studying the sky.

"You could at least have allowed me some sleep."

"Your friend WindTamer is getting enough for both of us. I all but carried him home." TripStone detected a whiff of freshly-quaffed brew as her father turned toward her, his eyes red-rimmed. "Tell me about the Yata woman."

TripStone folded her arms and leaned against the shed next to him.

"What did WindTamer say?"

"I want to hear it from you."

She took a deep breath and studied the grass between her feet, the dew drops gathering yellow lamp light. "She's in a safe place."

"So WindTamer tells me. Then he started babbling about fumets and pits, which tells me he has a tracking question. One that bore much repeating in a drunken stupor, I might add."

TripStone focused on the grass and said nothing.

"If you won't talk about the woman, then talk about the farm."

TripStone lowered her voice. "From what she told us--she can speak with her hands--Destiny Farm lies within the canyon outside Promontory." She took another deep breath and closed her eyes. "Somehow a group of Masari found a way to obtain--or create--enough Destiny to keep Yata in a permanent state of breeding. At least one generation has been there since birth."

NightShout bent to snap off a long blade of grass and wrapped it around his fingers. He studied his daughter's slow, even breathing and the tautness of her shoulders. "There's a reason you haven't brought this to the Chamber. I want to know what it is."

"She is recovering--"

"They can come to her." He leaned over and looked closely at TripStone. "Whom else are you protecting, that you would keep this a secret? What was WindTamer doing in Promontory?"

Her shoulders hunched further. She hugged herself more tightly around her waist.

"You would not have come out here if you didn't want to tell me, daughter." NightShout gently squeezed her arm. She shuddered. "You would have waited until breakfast and then regaled us with stories about the crops. I said nothing other than *farm*. I gave you that choice."

She choked and whispered, "I'm frightened."

She sounded like his little girl again, staring uncomprehendingly at her first fallen target. *Daddy, I'm frightened*. He wanted to cradle her in his arms and tell her that she would be fine, that she would know to do the right thing. Now he feared he had taught her too well.

He frowned at the pinched lines in her face. "There's much a man can think on when he can't sleep. When he is concerned about his daughter's safety." His fingers began to throb where the grass blade cinched them. "You and WindTamer were both *yatanii*. There is a young *yatanii* girl who has gone missing for a season, whose parents have overcome their shame enough to come forward and request a search party. By some coincidence, WindTamer seems to be concerned about a tracking issue."

The muscles in her arm jumped. NightShout pursed his lips and nodded. "You've already told me you know nothing about RiverRun, and I've always known you to be honest with me. I've spoken with her parents. They said she stopped eating Yata close to a year ago." He waited while TripStone's breathing quickened, watching her struggle. "She almost died when they tried to force-feed her at first, so they let her be, and found that she remained relatively healthy until recently. Then she disappeared. My guess is another *yatanii* has taken her in."

TripStone slid down the shed's wood boards. Dew stained her pants. Her stomach shook with cold. She hugged her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on her arms.

NightShout shook the grass from his fingers and sat beside her. "If I'm right, if tracking is a concern, I can assume that RiverRun, the Yata woman, and the other *yatanii* are somewhere in the mountains beyond Crossroads. The searchers have been combing the hillsides." His large hand engulfed her own. "Can you tell me what condition RiverRun is in now?"

She turned her head to face him. Chill night air wheezed from her open mouth. The redness in her eyes rivaled his own. "I'm not just protecting people," she managed to blurt. "I'm protecting the future of the Masari. The knowledge that can help us is forbidden."

He regarded her for a moment, then nodded. "Ah," he murmured. "Experiments."

Her lips compressed into a thin line.

"That is a capital crime, TripStone."

"Why?" She straightened and grabbed NightShout by his vest, wild-eyed. "Those Yata are already *dead*! How can you compare that to what Destiny Farm is doing to those who are still *alive*? Who here will look at blood and urine and saliva and bits of skin and know what differences they see? Who here keeps records of those things? *No one*, Father!" She sucked in air and heaved a great sob. "Years of research are in peril, not just people!"

His hands covered hers. Her grip on his vest weakened. "Have you performed any of these experiments yourself?"

She shuddered, hard. "No," she whispered. "I can't bear to look at them."

"But you believe in them."

She hiccuped, swallowed. "I have to."

"And RiverRun is part of those experiments, and the Yata woman as well." He looked upon a body hunched in pained exhaustion. He reached up to TripStone's cheek and caught a tear on his finger. "You don't have to say anything. You speak to me without words."

He eased his daughter's hands away and returned them to her lap. "I will tell RiverRun's parents that their daughter is still alive and that you know where she is. And I will go to the Chamber and ask that they send investigators, well-provisioned, to the canyon. They will want to see the Yata woman for themselves. You will lead them to her."

TripStone clamped her mouth shut, refusing to speak.

NightShout tapped his chops, squinting into the dark. "Who was that *yatanii* you used to like, the one who tried eating everything in the woods and kept a log of how long he could hold it down? The skinny boy whose hair looked like wine." He leaned back into the wall and gazed skyward. "He disappeared, too, when he resumed eating Yata and got his strength back. What was his name? SunDog." He nodded to himself. "That's it. SunDog."

He glanced quickly at TripStone, long enough to read her face. "Or whatever he calls himself now. Next time you see him, tell him I'm glad he's still alive."

He prepared to carry TripStone back to the house but she struggled to her feet, swaying, one hand against the shed wall to keep her

balance. NightShout lifted and handed her a lantern, retrieved his own, and led her to their door.

Once inside, he listened. ShadowGrass slept off her exhaustion. FeatherFly fidgeted in bed, already in the throes of unpleasant dreams.

TripStone shuffled to her room, then turned around. Her beseeching gaze told NightShout that everything he suspected was true. He waited until she disappeared behind her door before he headed toward his wife. He eased himself into their room and waited.

Through the wood he heard TripStone crack the door to her room back open. Without sight or hearing, he knew she barely breathed as she took a last look around her. Her stealth rivaled his, but she was wracked with nervous energy.

She would see what sleep she could get before there was enough light for her to flee.

NightShout waited behind his door, willing his pulse to slow. He dozed like a small creature, half-aware, his numbness tenuous and fleeting as the clouds.

The morning birds were in fine voice when his daughter glided across the common room and passed outside. NightShout counted off the seconds. Then he echoed her footsteps, his boots in his hand as the sky began to pale.

## **CHAPTER 31**

BrokenThread awakened to the sound of ripping and a quick intake of breath, followed by the uneven music of liquid spilling into

earthenware. She rolled over on her pallet to find Piri's spot empty next to hers.

Ghost trembled at his desk and struggled to write, his pen jerking across parchment. His nib was broken. Ink stained his fingers, blotting out entire words on the paper. Sometimes the pen slipped scratching on wood.

The girl called, "Ghost, stop." She made her way to him and peered over his shoulder. "It's become illegible."

He turned toward her voice and looked at her with unseeing eyes. Ghost was not completely blind. He could follow her hand. His breathing was ragged, his stomach rippling with spasms. His walking stick leaned against the wall by his chair. BrokenThread guided it into his hands, not for walking but for clutching.

Ink smeared as Ghost gripped the shaft, white-knuckled. He held it against his cheek, gulping air.

The *plink* of drips continued. BrokenThread traced them to the laboratory, behind the tapestry. She drew the curtain aside and gasped at spatters of blood staining the floor and Piri's nightshirt.

Piri knelt, pressing the inside of her elbow hard against the lip of a mug. BrokenThread looked, dumbfounded, at a fist clenching and unclenching, and quickly dropped down beside her. Piri's lifted arm showed the girl a dark gash running sticky rivulets into the cup.

BrokenThread shook her head and whispered, "He's already tried blood."

Piri lay her free hand on the girl's arm and drummed, *From the dead, not the living.*

"All right. But that's enough for now." She tried to remember. Did they need a tourniquet? The only tourniquets in the laboratory were made from Yata sinew, kept in a drawer in the rear of the lab. They should be made of something else. It wasn't right.

The girl warred inwardly. Piri raised her lacerated arm and found pressure points with her free hand. The dribbling slowed, crimson tracks beginning to dry. BrokenThread rummaged around for a clean cloth to bind the wound.

Afterwards she circled around to the cabinet, found Yata jerky, and pulled it out. "He may not be able to go outside when he eats," she cautioned. "He's already very weak. Stay in this room." She retrieved the mug from Piri's side, drawing the tapestry across the doorway as she left.

She found Ghost doubled over, still grasping his walking stick, his head almost level with his knees. BrokenThread left the jerky on a bench near his desk and leaned close to his ear. "Piri has bled into a cup. I'm going to feed it to you."

He might knock the mug over if she set it on his desk. She left it on the bench instead. She would have to keep Ghost's head raised while she tipped the blood into his mouth.

He had bitten his lips against pain. They bled, too.

"Ghost." BrokenThread pushed against his shoulders. "I can't move you. You have to lean back." He strained against the stick. His head still lolled forward. Chilled sweat poured down his neck. "Try harder, Ghost. I can't do this alone."

His body spasmed. The stick fell from his hands and raised a puff of dust as it hit the dirt. His arms dropped to his sides, dead weights.

Suddenly he was falling forward, half-whimpering as he tried to stop his momentum.

The tapestry behind BrokenThread shushed open, followed by footfalls. Piri grasped Ghost's shoulders to lever him up. Her bandage seeped. Ghost's narrow nose twitched, and then his hands. His nostrils flared. His stomach rumbled as he turned his head toward Piri, smelling her flesh.

"Get away!" the girl whispered urgently. "It's too dangerous here."

Piri shook her head, her grip on Ghost secure.

BrokenThread guided his chin away from the Yata and lifted the mug to his mouth. He swallowed reluctantly, trying to turn his head away. At least he had enough presence of mind not to spit out the blood.

He convulsed toward the smell of meat and grasped Piri's thigh, struggling to lessen his grip as his nails broke skin. Piri held his shoulders tighter and waited for BrokenThread to tilt his head back, spilling the last drops into his mouth. Blood smeared and dried into Ghost's chops, staining his thin goatee. He spasmed again and swallowed hard, twisting his head and straining again to the side.

His hand worried Piri's thigh. He pulled on her flesh as though to wrest it from her bones. She set her face into a hard mask as fresh blood trickled down her leg.

She distracted herself by studying the strip of dried meat lying on the bench. Piri tried to imagine the person it once was, who had set foot willingly into the hunting grounds. The Masari who now protected her had explained this elaborate ritual of sacrifice. This valley had placed her kind on a mythologic pinnacle, not inside a pen.

"Indiscriminate slaughter almost wiped out both our peoples," Ghost had explained, when not in the throes of hunger. "Yata were dying out. Masari faced mass starvation. The Covenant was supposed to create a mythos that assured our mutual survival."

The teachings had described village dyads everywhere. Crossroads and Basc, Rudder and Alvav, Promontory and Skedge dotted the intermountain valleys. The Masari villages kept a detailed census, setting the day for each hunt and rationing Yata meat among the populace. In return they tithed their paired Yata communities, erected shrines and collected testaments to immortalize those killed, and offered worship. To adherents of the Covenant, be they Yata or Masari, heresy meant extinction.

Piri's existence demonstrated beyond a doubt that the teachings were wrong.

Tears ran down Ghost's cheeks as he continued to maul Piri's leg, unable to let go. Her pain was inconsequential. She would heal. Ghost's grimace told her that he exhausted himself with restraint. If he were physically stronger and spiritually weaker he would be on her in an instant, ripping her apart with his bare hands and sinking his teeth into her neck.

BrokenThread whispered, "It's not working."

No, it wasn't, Piri had to agree. She nodded as Ghost surged helplessly against her.

BrokenThread dropped the empty mug on the bench behind her and lifted the meat, frowning with worry. "You're not supposed to see this."

Piri offered a wan smile and maintained her hold on Ghost. She watched curiously as the girl edged toward him, reaching around to

his side to hold the strip before his blind eyes.

His sense of smell was still acute. He released Piri and grabbed the jerky instead, shoving it into his mouth and gnawing off a great gob. BrokenThread withdrew to the other side of the room and sat with her head half-turned away, enough to look and listen for any signs of danger.

Ghost's tremors quieted as he ripped off a second bite. A great moan rose from him. He leaned back, back, the pain in his face replaced with a different tension. His clammy skin turned warm, then hot. From beside him Piri glanced down at his lap, where his other hand frantically pulled on his breech strings.

Then he stopped, blinked, shuddered. His hand jerked from his pants to his shoulder, where Piri's tapered fingers still rested. He whipped his head toward her, forcing his eyes to focus. He spotted the seepage on her arm, the crescent-shaped punctures on her leg.

With a yell Ghost pitched himself from his chair, kicking his walking stick aside and clawing the wall while dragging his rubbery legs to the door. Clutching the remains of his jerky, he threw his weight against the wood until it yielded and he tumbled out onto the ground.

BrokenThread was already up, closing the door behind him.

Piri limped toward the girl. She drummed, *Yata affect Masari like Destiny, then.*

"Not normally." BrokenThread turned away from the door. "Not when they eat the approved ration during a sanctified feast. But Ghost eats only a little and then he tries to go without."

*He should not be...* Her fingers hesitated, *embarrassed.*

BrokenThread slumped back down on the bench and let fatigue take hold. Piri, still standing, stared thoughtfully at the closed door, mulling over the throbbing in her leg.

## CHAPTER 32

TripStone subvocalized to herself to stay awake, repeating names to banish worry. The census of Basc unraveled inside her head, its knots and fabrics folding back on each other as Yata kin groups intertwined, split off, recombined. Her boots clacked on Crossroads' cobblestones, her thoughts flitting in rhythm, relation to relation.

Easier to invent ways of reaching Ila than to face what she was doing now. How long could Ghost remain hidden? Would he and the others need to leave the cabin? If they did, where could they go? What would they be able to move? What would they have to leave behind?

If the search parties were thorough, the only alternative left would be to camp in the Yata territory of Alvav, which would be trespass of the highest order. Bringing Ghost food and supplies would pose a considerable risk. And if the Yata discovered them, they'd be no better off than if the Masari did.

The cobblestones dwindled to dirt. The wind shifted. TripStone detected the faint sweetness of honeysuckle. She didn't remember passing any outcroppings. She must have been distracted. Fine tracker she was.

*SunDog* . An ancient name. TripStone smiled wistfully at the memory. Even before he became a *yatanii*, Ghost had been a skinny kid, the son of farmers. His parents kept trying to fatten him up, but nothing seemed to take.

They had both learned to butcher early--TripStone slicing through Yata, SunDog dressing and gutting small game. For as long as she knew him, he had been fascinated by body parts. Or plant parts. Even then he had experimented, carrying pollen on his fingertips like a gargantuan bee, creating hybrids when he wasn't tasting the nectar himself.

He had snuck up behind her during a work day at the Grange. She was supposed to be weeding. Instead, she watched insects troll diligently among wayward blossoms and tried to imagine a map of their routes. She was still adjusting to her training rifle, years away from her coming of age.

SunDog was a few years older than she but his plum-colored pelt was still thin, his voice reedy. He squatted next to her without a word. When she flinched and blurted, "I didn't see you!" he put his finger to his lips and smiled. He let a spider explore his hands, one palm and then the next, then back to the first. Most any other boy would have dropped the orb weaver down TripStone's back and lived to regret it. Finally he set it back on the ground and pointed to another. "Don't touch that one," he warned. "That kind bites."

She assured him she had no intention of touching that or any other spider. "I should be weeding."

SunDog pointed to a small gathering of wasps dipping toward small white petals. "They don't think so. And they have a say in the matter."

"The farmers have a bigger say."

SunDog grinned. "Then I say we keep watching them."

One day, years later in the marketplace, he had looked even thinner. When TripStone commented on his health, SunDog told her he had

found a way to disguise rabbit as Yata. He had snuck the rabbit onto his plate, mixing the two on Meat Day so that the stronger Yata smell predominated.

Horried, TripStone had asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you told me how you cry when your aim is good." Even in the surrounding bustle he leaned close to her so he could whisper. "Think about it, Stone. How will you feel when you kill a real Yata? And why can't we just do without them?"

She was used to his blasphemies, but this one seemed wrenched from her soul. "You're a *yatanii*, then."

"Not completely." Even hollow-cheeked, his smile was winsome. "I'm working on it. There are several of us. One has abstained for five Meat Days now."

"SunDog." She linked her arm with his and held him close. "I like you. I don't want to see you get hurt."

He squeezed her back. "Do I look hurt?"

"You don't look well."

"I'm not supposed to." He leaned over and rubbed his cheek against hers. "Everything will be all right. You'll see."

Everything had been far from all right. The next season, TripStone visited SunDog's bedside and looked upon a skeletal face splotched an angry red around fur that had dwindled to sparse, dulled patches. She held his hand carefully, afraid his bones would crumble in her grip. Soon afterward he began eating Yata again, but his eyes had a faraway look to them that TripStone couldn't ignore.

By the time she came of age he was well enough to attend her Consecration, when she traded her plain training rifle for a sacramental gun engraved with Yata and Masari scripture. A bountiful feast from his family's farm lined the marketplace amidst torches crackling in the crisp night air. He watched, already a bit bowlegged, as TripStone pledged to provide life-giving Yata for the people of Crossroads. Her voice, sufficiently grave for the occasion, also sounded stunned.

When she greeted him she was draped in new hunting clothes and ceremonial kerchief. Her first words to him were, "I can't feel my feet."

"Your boots are too tight."

"No," she said. "I can't feel my fingers, either. And the torches hurt my eyes." A nervous giggle escaped her. "SunDog, what am I going to do?"

He squeezed her hand and murmured, "You won't know until you do it."

Within days she had shot a Yata man through the heart. She prepared him according to custom, blessed the meat, and ate it without tasting a thing. She underwent her first Atonement as a new hunter in the midst of Basc, scrutinized at length by its villagers.

The stories of her prey's survivors resonated in her own bones long after she had dictated them in the Rotunda. The words circled her in her dreams, snapped at her heels, tore at her hair. She was not one voice but many, all of them speaking at once.

Everywhere she looked she saw bones and inscriptions. That, at least, was more reality than imagination.

The next Meat Day she sat through the consecration, the blessings and thanksgivings, the silent prayers. Then she excused herself from the table without touching her plate--she had come of age; she could choose--and she walked through the dark, empty marketplace and out to the Grange. SunDog waited for her by the northwest corner of the windbreak, along with three other *yatanii* well enough to make the journey. He was abstaining again, which he would do on and off until the day he disappeared.

They welcomed her into their midst and held her while she cried anguished tears. Within a season two of them were dead. Had SunDog's caresses or his convictions fueled her own?

One night she had staggered to the windbreak, her joints aching, her pelt grown thin, and told SunDog--no one else had been well enough to come--that her parents had banned all *yatanii* from visiting the house.

"Then you'll have to visit mine when you can." SunDog fished a crumpled sheet of parchment from his pants and spread it before his campfire.

TripStone gazed upon a crudely-sketched trail map that led uphill, very close to Alvav. She asked questions about the slope, the placement of cairns, the way in which SunDog had cleared the brush just enough for passage, but not enough to be obvious.

Finally, she asked, "What will you do up there?"

"I will be a ghost," he said, with exaggerated melodrama, "doing ghostly things." He held up the paper. "You've committed this to memory, yes? Good."

The sheet floated briefly in air, before the flames snatched it.

~ ~ ~

The trail steepened. TripStone found footholds and clambered over rock. The path became obvious if one knew where to look and how to interpret the signs. She reached a plateau, where her boots sank into deep undergrowth. She stopped for water, listening to the nearby spring as she lifted her water bladder to her lips. Raptors rode the updrafts above, breaking a bright blue sky.

When she looked back down she saw crushed foliage and broken twigs, a wide scattering of berry pits to the side, more when she squatted to part the undergrowth. She gathered several in her hand and sniffed before straightening to gaze around. Wherever the fruits grew that produced these pits, it was not in this terrain.

But there was something else. She raised her fingers to her nose and inhaled deeply, then stared at them. She dropped to her hands and knees and buried her face in the brush. When she looked up from her crouch she discerned a second trail, one she hadn't seen before, that was equally well hidden. Ahead of her it skirted Alvav. Behind her it dipped toward the hunting grounds.

A sudden gust of wind carried the scent of pine, too strong for this altitude. With it came a faint trace of honeysuckle whose sweetness had somehow followed her from Crossroads. TripStone drew her lips back, teasing a familiar tang from the air.

A grim smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. She called, "I know you're there, Father." Had she been more awake, she'd have noticed the trick earlier. He'd taught it to her. His pockets bulged with aromatics, exposed to the air as needed to conceal his own odor when upwind. She could tell he was slightly off the trail, staying invisible.

He remained silent as well, waiting.

"Father, there's been gunpowder spilled here." She looked directly at him and still saw nothing. "Do our search parties carry rifles now? And there is a trail here that is not the one you want."

That was all. She would say no more. She reminded herself that he would notice where she was *not* looking: farther uphill and off to the left, where the cairns began. She glanced in their direction briefly, innocuously.

Finally she sat, folded her arms across her knees, and silently measured the passage of time. She ached to stretch out on the plateau, close her eyes, and drift off, preferably to another world entirely.

Did her father blame Ghost for her affliction, or was he genuinely happy SunDog was still alive six years after her recovery?

She stirred and looked up at a decisive *crunch*. NightShout stood several feet from her, his gaze trained squarely on the first cairn. At first TripStone didn't know how he could tell; from the plateau it looked like a natural formation. But she could see enough other "natural formations" of the same type, laid out in a predictable pattern.

"No," NightShout answered. "Our search teams do not carry rifles." He added, "Whoever they are, they came by about two days ago, judging from what I dug up. They seemed headed toward the hunting grounds."

It made no sense. Outside Meat Day the hunting grounds offered little, and each dyad possessed its own sacrificial woods. Whoever had come this way had traveled from beyond Crossroads, probably

for a purpose other than hunting. But then, why the gunpowder?

"I should stay here." TripStone peered down the second trail, toward Alvav, now that she knew where to look. The landmarks were few but she could find them: a stand of trees, a sitting rock, a bend in the stream before it veered off into Yata territory. "Whoever they are, they'll probably come back this way."

But NightShout had moved beyond her, heading toward the cairns. She sprang to her feet and ran after him, her pulse racing.

## CHAPTER 33

ShadowGrass looked through the cupboard and took stock of missing items. FeatherFly hunched over the breakfast table and picked listlessly at his food. His legs twined about his chair. He seemed lankier than usual. His mother spotted the stubble of secondary chops. She tried not to gawk, startled by how much he'd grown.

She called to him, "If you won't eat, then use the time to learn what your father and sister are doing. They've left clues behind. You'll be a better hunter if you can read them." She struggled to keep her voice calm. Let her son think his family was only testing his readiness.

NightShout's orderly pallet proved he never came to bed. The missing food and water skins indicated a day of travel. The missing herbs were tracking tools. The missing boots befitted rough terrain, which meant they were likely headed for Rudder. Beyond that, ShadowGrass could only guess, but NightShout's sober stare and inebriated breath the night before unsettled her.

She should be happy. Her husband no longer shuffled through the

house like a wraith. Instead he exuded a power ShadowGrass had not seen in years. Her once-rebellious daughter now buried herself in Yata records and Covenant texts.

Neither had told ShadowGrass why.

She watched her son examine the evidence left by their departure. Even indoors, FeatherFly exhibited newly-acquired stealth, as though training his body to glide through woodland grasses, melt into rock, and bend into branches and trunks. With a start ShadowGrass realized how much his immaturity had been an odd comfort to her. Now that, too, was gone.

*You'll always be an outsider, ShadowGrass. You'll never know their secrets.*

The memory of her mother's voice rose unbidden. Scrimshanders and hunters did not intermarry. ShadowGrass's friends insisted a scrimshander's daughter would just as soon learn to shoot as learn to fly.

Young and supple, she had mocked them. "I must be already sprouting my wings."

How, they asked, could a girl raised in such a pristine home survive in an atmosphere of gore? The bones delivered to ShadowGrass's family had already been cleaned of blood and sinew and drained of marrow. They shone in her hands, white and ethereal, in no way reminiscent of bodies slain within the hunting grounds.

No one in her family--no one she knew in the Scrimshaw Guild--had ever entered that arena. No one had dismembered Yata or dried and smoked their flesh. No one had drained their fluids into bottles. The dirt and sweat in ShadowGrass's pores came not from the hunt but

from work days at the Grange--and from the exacting labors of sanding, carving, stippling. The stains under her nails came from ink as much as from soil, and she could never scrub the tints away entirely. Not until they yielded, one day, to dried blood.

FeatherFly worked his way from shelf to shelf. He frowned, squinted, sniffed. With a nod from his mother he entered TripStone's room. His footfalls echoed. Objects scraped as he moved them around. The boy was diligent, showing no glee when permitted this invasion of his sister's quarters.

He was old enough to inspect his parents' room, too. ShadowGrass could think of nothing she'd want to hide from him any more.

How many etched bones had she sanded down to nothing because her fingers had slipped? How could she hold a rifle so steadily when she'd had so much trouble with simple blades and delicate needles?

As an adolescent she had stood on the sidelines, her fascination overriding fear as the hunters returned to Crossroads each Meat Day, their tunics bulging and spattered, Yata slung over one shoulder and rifle over the other. She wanted to see where the bones she engraved came from. She tried to picture them inside the small, limp bodies whose skin had turned ashen.

The census takers waited for the hunters as well, counting corpses toward the number of allowable deaths. Then they raised bone horns to their lips and blew a deafening blast toward the woods, recalling Crossroads' providers back to the village.

Chills had gripped ShadowGrass's spine at those shrieks. Even out in the woods the call made her skin prickle. When she first began to hunt she had often returned to Crossroads empty-handed. She had trained late, slow to master the tracking skills. Even now she could

not shake her belief that NightShout's influence had kept the Hunt Guild from dismissing her entirely.

Was that why she didn't question him now? Were there mysteries she was simply destined not to know, simply because she hadn't been born to them?

FeatherFly's unfinished breakfast began to congeal. She covered it to keep the flies away. Bone carvings caught the sun, shining down on her from the walls. ShadowGrass could sooner match the etchings to their makers than decode the ancient pictograms, carved in layers that seemed to shift in different light. Easier to study modern Yata text, simple and lyrical. That was all a hunter needed to know.

ShadowGrass's ungainly hands had shattered practice bones even after she had come of age. She tried to learn the ancient syntax of the symbols she carved, but they all fused in her brain. No sooner had she decoded the onelegged bird against the sun at dawn than its shadows shrank and it became the lily pad in the lake. A blue lake meant one thing, a green lake another. And then the pictures formed patterns...

How many Yata currently living still understood the ideograms? Like her own daughter, ShadowGrass had rebelled. Why did Masari need to know these things? Why preserve a dead language that wasn't even theirs? The more ShadowGrass slaved over her tools and concordances, the more frustrated she became. Her restlessness drove her to the village boundary, her ears straining toward gunshots.

The hunters returning from the woods were uniformly grim, but NightShout's solemnity had been defiant. Suddenly flushed, ShadowGrass had stared openly at his rumpled tunic, his strong arms and legs balancing the burdens of weapon and flesh. She should have been ashamed for her indiscretion but was not, even

When his metal gray eyes met hers unblinking. Instead she fell into their depths, her legs quivering.

What would it be like for his large hand to grip her thigh, his forearm to support her buttocks? What if she had been draped over his massive shoulder, her breasts pressed against his scapulae, her fingers brushing repeatedly against his well-muscle back?

At first she told her feelings to no one. Hunters were dirty and their houses smelled. All her friends said so. Hunters were dangerous and predatory and still part beast. Yet they were sacred as well, communing intimately with the Yata. Were they even still Masari or some breed in-between, bridging the worlds of life and death?

Once she had glimpsed NightShout, she could not touch the rationed meat on her plate without remembering the swinging corpse. As a child ShadowGrass had attached Yata flesh and bones to distant, supernatural beings pure and unsullied, existing on a higher plane. Even learning that they were people who walked the earth had lessened neither their divinity nor their sacrifice.

But now she wanted to know the Yata--or was it the hunter?--more intimately. When she next saw the man with the gunmetal stare, ShadowGrass stepped into his path and commanded, "Teach me to hunt."

First he had blinked at her, uncomprehending. Then he broke into a belly laugh that made her fingers and toes tingle. "You're far too dainty for that," he said.

"I can learn," she insisted.

NightShout cupped her cheek in his hand and she thought she would faint. When he kissed her in the street she moaned aloud. Nostrils

wide, sniffing curiously, she detected no stench of decay but only the crisp sweetness of lavender.

His home was tidy yet filled with steely glints. His bed was a perfumed garden. NightShout's hardened but gentle hands had lingered over her, his tongue exploring every boundary where her rich pelt yielded to bare skin. Autumn air chilled the moisture his kisses left behind until she felt herself engraved by him.

The next morning he placed a training rifle in her hands and the universe had fallen into place.

She still told no one until she swelled with TripStone, swaggering alongside her mate. When ShadowGrass grew too big to shoot she drilled herself on the memory tricks needed for Atonement. She started speaking in her sleep, reciting life stories of all the imaginary Yata populating her dreams.

The kick from her butt plate proved mild compared to the hammering inside her from TripStone's tiny feet. Her family reluctantly let her go, keeping a respectful and skittish distance. Feeling godlike herself, ShadowGrass had eagerly traded her scrimshander's blades for butcher knives.

Now she keened her ears toward the room where long ago she and NightShout first mingled the aromas of their love with the heady bouquet of crushed petals. FeatherFly advanced to their bedroom and pulled open drawers, lifting and carefully replacing weighted objects. His slight build matched her own. He had been almost too placid in her womb, emerging into the world with a thin, mewling cry. Idly, ShadowGrass wondered whether her son might have been better off learning the rudiments of cross-hatching, of wiping excess ink from hair-thin, brightly-colored lines.

At last he stepped back into the common room, his lips pursed, thick brows knotted.

ShadowGrass asked, "Well?"

"Why would they be tracking if their guns are still here?" He paced the floor, counting his findings off his fingers. "They dressed for climbing. They probably left at dawn. They're probably headed for Rudder, but I don't think they're taking the pass."

His mother raised her eyebrows. "Why not?"

"Because TripStone wanted to trade her hair clips at the pass and she's left them behind." He cocked his head to one side. "If they're looking for RiverRun, why don't they join a search party?"

*Hair clips?* "What's wrong with trading her clips here in the marketplace? What does she trade them for?"

Her son frowned, shuffling from foot to foot. "I don't know." He shrugged. "She doesn't bring anything home. I guess she didn't want us to know."

ShadowGrass bolted from her chair and strode to her daughter's room. Save for ceremonial objects whose sale was forbidden, the walls and bureau were bare of adornments. It looked like the room of a transient, of someone about to depart on a long journey.

FeatherFly gingerly touched her arm. "Mother? What are they doing?"

She stared at barrenness. No one had told her the life of a hunter was as many-layered as the pictograms she'd struggled to decode. No one warned her that they had their own language, a twisted syntax

she would learn badly, if ever.

She replied sharply, "No one will be around to give you the answers during a hunt. There are still more clues to find."

Perversely, ShadowGrass believed being the mother of a *yatanii* somehow admitted her to an inner chamber of the hunter's psyche, though the disorder could strike anyone. She had prided herself on her methods of deduction. She had been the provider, the strong one, weathering NightShout's plummet from grace, nursing her languishing daughter back to health.

Now their powers again dwarfed hers and she was once more an outsider, unable to pinpoint anything, as unsteady as the clumsy girl ruining practice bones. Even her son remained standing where he was, gazing placidly through her deception.

Fighting back tears, she forced herself to face him and whispered, "Don't expect me to tell you anything. I don't know the answers either."

## CHAPTER 34

If TripStone were a little girl she would throw herself screaming at her father's feet. She would grab his ankles from behind, trying to pull him back down the steep slopes. He would have to drag her, cutting her on sharp rocks and rubbing her filthy with dust, to be able to climb any further.

She pushed the image from her head and trudged after him. He negotiated the steep path with ease, moving at a steady and careful pace and not taxing himself. So why was she gasping for breath?

Better that way. It forced her to remain silent. NightShout could not

see her trembling if she remained behind him. For all his bulk his movements were sinuous and assured. He stopped every few minutes to sniff the air and sip from his water bladder.

Not long ago TripStone had feared coming home one day to find him dead of a broken heart. Now she wondered which felt worse, her guilt or her terror. Beneath its pounding her heart leaped with joy. She was with her father of old and once again he was training her, teaching her by example. She prayed they would not become combatants here.

They passed the last cairn. Alvav Ridge loomed above them. Downhill a stream trickled. The trail dipped, becoming more lush. In the distance TripStone spied the familiar bulk swathed in foliage, whose door faced away from their approach.

She swallowed hard as her father headed directly for the hidden cabin. They circled around. She tried to still her breathing as he pounded on the door.

Ghost would know immediately that this was trespass. In her mind's eye TripStone pictured his sleeping pallet moved aside, wood planks lifted, the occupants descending foot- and handholds into the cool, moist root cellar. She wanted to hurry them underground, shouting *Go! Go! Go!* She wanted to be ahead of her father and not behind, barring his entry and making Ghost's laboratory magically disappear.

NightShout pounded again. He pressed his ear against the wood, waiting. He leaned his bulk against the door. On the other side a beam creaked in irons. He would have to shatter the wood to get inside.

Strange laughter carried on the wind. TripStone lunged forward, grabbing NightShout by his shoulders and pulling him from the cabin.

She grasped and squeezed his hands, tilting her head toward the sound. NightShout listened for a moment before nodding his assent to silence.

TripStone released him. The second trail was invisible from here. Hilly terrain blocked her view. Stepping lightly, she scrambled to a small, rocky summit and peered over the edge.

Two men, both Masari, hauled twin sacks below. Gunpowder? They had spilled gunpowder heading toward the hunting grounds. Would they carry more of it back? TripStone stared beyond the boulder, shaking her head. If the men were illicit traders, they could have come from Destiny Farm. They could be carrying the drug itself.

She glanced back toward the cabin, feeling ripped in two.

Gritting her teeth, she returned to her father and whispered, "Give me your camouflage. You don't need to track me any more." Her hands flew to his vest pockets before he could answer. She snatched roots and leaves, petals and sap, slipping them into her own clothes. "Father, I'm going to follow those people."

She looked up into his eyes, gray into gray, frowning. "I am trusting you with the safety of my friends in that cabin. One of them is the Yata woman, and you know as well as I do the penalty for harming a Yata outside the Meat Day allowance."

Her father grabbed her wrists; loose leaves drifted to the ground. "This is not your errand, TripStone. The Chamber will investigate--"

"The Chamber will want to come *here* first, and what they see they will destroy. I want nobody killed." She worked her hands free and continued to stuff her pockets. Then she circled the cabin and ducked behind its wood shed, toward a storage bin. She reached for her

knife and listened for any sound coming from inside the walls. Ghost and the others knew they were being sought out. Their silence was well-practiced.

"Forgive me," she whispered toward the logs. "I wish I could stay here with you now. I can't." She scanned the bin for water jugs and found none. They must all be inside.

NightShout stood behind her as she cut provisions from a wheel of cheese. "You're one person, TripStone. It's too dangerous for you."

She jerked her head toward the second trail. "I can still hear the travelers, Father. Even if they were hunters, which I'm sure they are not, they couldn't detect me. They're too careless." She straightened and laid her palms on his shoulders. "If you value my life, you will value the lives inside the cabin. *All* of them. Promise me."

"The *law*, TripStone--"

She raised herself on the toes of her boots and rubbed her chops against his. "I know you'll do the right thing, Father."

She wheeled from him and climbed away before he could call after her. If he raised his voice now, it would only alert the men to her presence.

By the time she reached the second trail the strangers had rounded the ridge and begun to descend. She heard snatches of words, enough to know they were heading toward Promontory and to a place they called the Warehouse. She would have at least two days of foot travel.

Her water bladder had fallen below half, but the only spring she could see ran through Alvav. Unless there was another, hidden source or

the men took a detour into Rudder, she would have to improvise.

## CHAPTER 35

NightShout could only wait. Someone would open the door eventually. He positioned himself downwind from the cabin, out of sight of the entrance.

Over and over he saw his daughter's receding form, the breeze teasing her shaggy hair, her vest and breeches blending into the background. For all her camouflage she should have worn a kerchief. Despite her solid build, the quiet, off-cadence *scritch* of her boots had mimicked the movements of a small beast, like a squirrel climbing a tree. Had she really become that proficient or had he dreamt it? When did he last sleep?

*We should have gone back together. I should have pressed a rifle into your hands.*

She had enough time to travel unimpeded to Promontory and back before the next Meat Day if she took the main road, which she would not. NightShout forced a deep, slow breath into his lungs and held it.

He couldn't have shouted to her without the men below knowing. They were careless, but he'd heard the muscle in their voices. They would be armed if they traveled with gunpowder. He'd had to let her go.

His lips parted; his breath passed silently into the world.

When TripStone was born she had fallen into NightShout's hands with a shrill yell that made his neck prickle. He'd been powerless ever since. He could threaten but not deny her. She was indisputably his, broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, furrer than most babies. Only

her height resembled her mother's, squat where ShadowGrass seemed merely petite.

How could his wife, almost Yata in her own proportions, have carried such a creature? How could TripStone have slipped into the world so easily, tearing no fabric but the air itself with a blast from her tiny lungs? After years of dismembering cadavers and treating wounds, NightShout thought he knew everything possible about body parts. The sudden appearance of an infant shrieking in her mother's blood had made him tremble, his swagger quelled by wonderment.

*They have gunpowder, daughter. You should have a gun. Come back.*

It was no use wishing. She either would come back or she wouldn't.

The sun approached zenith. It would be hot out on the ridge, where she was, until the trail descended, if it did. NightShout cursed himself for his comfort and his shaded concealment. The least he could do was return RiverRun to her parents, make sure one daughter at least came home.

If this cabin was SunDog's hideaway, what then to tell his family? The ethereal youth had come of age years before he left Crossroads. His circumstances were different. He was a man, could make a man's decisions. *Tell them nothing.*

The Grange had taken SunDog's absence in stride. His experiments had yielded some hardier crops, but mostly he had been a nuisance, tinkering rather than tilling, slipping underfoot when least expected to snatch a specimen that appealed to him.

As a *yatanii* his popularity had sunk even lower among the townspeople, though not among his peers. The sight of him at the

marketplace, leading a clot of malnourished youths, made NightShout scowl even now. SunDog's bowleggedness had become a talisman to unsolicited but fervent followers. They cleaved to him simply because he was there, hobbling defiantly on the cobblestones.

TripStone had looked up to SunDog long before his heresy, ever since she was a child. Would she have become a *yatanii* without his influence? NightShout knew his daughter's sensitivities, had witnessed her horror grow as keen as her aim. She needed no further provocation than that.

She had witnessed SunDog ravaged and wasted, dissolving before her eyes. She had argued repeatedly that he eat, worried to the point of sleeplessness. Far from encouraging TripStone's disorder, SunDog's suffering might well have delayed its onset.

Even in his worst moments the youth had been as easygoing as he was resolute. What could six years of self-imposed exile have done to such a man? TripStone had guarded his secrets, never mentioning him again after his disappearance.

*You could have been by her side when she was dying, SunDog. She was there for you.*

No. By then he had not been welcome inside the house. ShadowGrass had threatened to leave if any *yatanii* were allowed into the yard, standing close enough to call TripStone's name from the outside. TripStone had certainly called to SunDog, her voice growing fainter each day.

If she had been able to look on his face, feel the touch of her friend's hand--what then?

Now a cabin, probably his hiding place, sat inert in the day's harsh

light, silent and overgrown with weeds. It looked abandoned. The barred door told NightShout otherwise.

*I should have given her water.*

Perhaps the trail was sufficiently far from a stream that she would have to turn back. Perhaps she would forget what NightShout taught her about drawing fluids from succulents growing in the forest, or about licking her own sweat for its salt content.

No. She was his daughter. She would remember.

~ ~ ~

NightShout's shadow was long and the horizon colored dark gold when he heard movement from within. His neck fur stood on end.

The door creaked open. A wary SunDog emerged with a chamber pot in his arms. He scanned the clearing, trying to look more deeply into the trees. Had he grown thinner still, or was NightShout's memory clouded? The door swung shut. A decisive *thunk* indicated the bar was being replaced from within.

The lanky man paused and frowned, then hobbled decisively down a narrow side trail. NightShout waited through the sounds of scraping and spilling, earth-moving. Of wastes being emptied into a pit, the pit mounded with dirt, the dirt tamped down. He listened to the careful rearranging of broken twigs and mulch.

Insects buzzed in NightShout's ears and flitted about his face. He tried not to breathe them in. The sun dipped behind a distant summit. A small branch cracked as something scuttled above him. Everywhere creatures of the day retreated, replaced by bright, nocturnal eyes. Odors on the wind sharpened as a gentle musk rose

from the forest floor.

No, that couldn't be. The animals couldn't be staring at him. With a shock NightShout realized he had dozed off. He pinched his flesh hard, forcing himself to stay awake.

A faint glow lightened narrow, parchment-lined cracks in the cabin walls. Someone had lit a lamp. SunDog's face was obscured by dusk when he returned, holding his chamber pot loosely at his side.

NightShout watched him sniff the air, set the pot down, and step away from its remaining stench to get a better reading. Did farmers develop a sense of smell as keen as a hunter's, or had this talent come by SunDog naturally? NightShout's haunches rose, his muscles tightening.

Hesitantly, SunDog bent to retrieve the pot and NightShout sprang from the brush. His head slammed into ribs and the younger man went down.

The empty vessel rolled against a clump of tangled roots. NightShout's gnarled hands found and pinned narrow shoulders to the dirt. Even his callused fingers could discern SunDog's thin pelt beneath a threadbare tunic. The smaller man gasped convulsively, trying to catch his breath.

"So." A reedy tenor floated up, panting. "You found me."

NightShout had not expected so weak a voice, nor so skeletal a frame beneath him. "SunDog."

"His name is Ghost!" Light poured from the open door, illuminating a frail girl in a dingy nightshirt. What little pelt remained hung in dulled orange wisps. She trembled with fury. "Get off him!"

"I told you to stay inside, Thread!" Ghost raised himself on his elbows as NightShout released him, straightening. "I know this man, but we could still be in danger." He studied NightShout's face as though waiting for confirmation.

The child continued to glare from the door. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"I'm NightShout. TripStone's father." The elder leaned back on his haunches, squinting toward the door. Slowly he stood and brushed dirt from his breeches. "And *you* are RiverRun."

"RiverRun is dead." Her high voice penetrated the woods, clear and strong. "Go away. We have nothing for you here."

She braced herself against the door, her fingers clasping its edge. NightShout realized she could not stand on her own. Below him Ghost struggled to his feet.

The biting bugs were out. They would all be suffering in a moment. "There are things you need to know," NightShout said, forcing calm into his voice. "May I come in?"

"No, you may not!" the girl shouted.

Ghost said, softly, "That only pretended to be a question, Thread. You heard how he sounded at the door this morning. He was about to break it down." Rubbing his chest, he limped to retrieve the chamber pot. "Yes, come in, and tell us what stopped you. I thought I heard Stone's voice earlier. There must be a good reason she's not here now."

The girl vanished into the cabin. Ghost's eyes smoldered in the lamp light as he glanced back at NightShout. He led the way inside and

barred the door.

The hunter blinked in the brightness. RiverRun sat on a far bench, shielded by a light-haired Yata standing taut, unblinking, and ready to lunge. The woman held a carving knife by her side, blade upturned. NightShout stared at the dried blood on her arm and leg and asked "Who cut you?"

"She doesn't understand Yata," Ghost said, mildly. "You can put down the knife, Piri. He's the last person who would hurt you."

Piri shook her head and moved closer to the girl. Ghost hesitated, then nodded. "She's not afraid for herself. She's protecting BrokenThread. You'd better sit down."

NightShout lowered himself to the opposite bench and quickly scanned the room. To his right lay Ghost's desk and lamp. To his left a walking stick leaned against the wall. Two pallets covered the floor. Ghost dropped the empty pot behind them, beside a tapestry that hung from a beam, and returned to sit hunched by his papers.

NightShout stared at the weaving of Masari harvesting corn, loath to imagine what lay beyond it. He forced his gaze back to Piri and flinched involuntarily. For a moment he was back in the hunting grounds, facing a young woman whose name he never learned and whose expression shifted from resignation to horror as he raised his rifle, sighted her in the crosshairs, and squeezed the trigger. Her terror shattered with her skull.

He did not remember draining the fluids, hoisting the body, or running past stunned census takers. He did not remember slicing and preparing flesh. He recalled only that he guided the bloody meat past TripStone's cracked lips while coaxing her to bite, chew, swallow. He remembered ShadowGrass peeling the food from his grasp when his

hands shook too hard.

That Meat Day a phantom bullet had pierced his own heart and lodged there. NightShout knew no survivors from whom to seek forgiveness, could collect no stories to bring back to Crossroads. His arms lost all feeling when he touched a gun, and the hunt had fallen to his wife. Once TripStone recovered, it had fallen to her as well.

Now he did not know which jolted him more, the atrocities that must be hidden behind the tapestry or the scrutiny burning into his soul when he looked at Piri, the first living Yata to face him in six years. For a wild instant he was sure she had risen from the dead.

He swallowed hard and asked, this time in Masari, "Did SunDog--did Ghost--cut you?"

Piri shook her head. With her free hand she pointed to herself.

Ghost became terse. "You said you had something to tell us. What is it?"

In the light the younger man's face was harder and more seamed than NightShout remembered. Life as a fugitive had taken its toll. The people in this small room exuded more than just hostility. They looked haggard.

The hunter rested his large hands on his knees and cleared his throat. "There is a trade route, probably illicit, very close by. My daughter is tracking two men she saw passing within sight of the cairns, carrying large sacks. We don't know what they hold. We do know that these Masari carried gunpowder toward the hunting grounds a couple of days ago." He leaned forward, trying to spot RiverRun's face behind Piri's nightshirt. "Believe me when I say you're not safe here. You must leave."

The girl hissed, "He's lying."

"Why else would TripStone leave you to me, then?" he snapped. "Surely she would want to protect you better than that." His fingers knotted together. "I wish she were here as much as you do. More than you do."

The voice behind Piri became more shrill. "You've told us your news. Now go."

"I'm not finished." Before him the Yata took a wide stance, her gaze direct. Her knife didn't waver. She would kill him if he tried to touch the girl. "The traders have not discovered this cabin only because they are careless, but that could change. The search parties are also moving closer. They could find you here, RiverRun--"

"My name is BrokenThread!"

"--and when they do, how do you think they'll react to the experiments in the next room?" NightShout looked to Ghost, whose face betrayed no emotion. "You know I cannot condone what is happening here. The only way to call the search parties off is to return the child--BrokenThread--to her parents. I am prepared to do that."

The girl growled, "I am not prepared to leave."

"Then your stubbornness could end up killing Ghost."

"And transport back to Crossroads could kill Thread," Ghost said. "There are days when she can't sit up, let alone walk. We know how best to care for her."

Their shadows wavered. Ghost reached absently across his desk to raise the wick. For a moment bright light washed blindingly across

the walls.

It was the instant NightShout needed. His muscles jumped. Thought vanished behind instinct as his left hand slammed the wall and grabbed the stick. In a few short steps he crossed the pallets, parrying the thrust of Piri's knife. BrokenThread screamed. He swung the rod back as Ghost's shadow advanced and heard a sharp grunt, a thud.

With a roar NightShout dove forward and ripped down the tapestry. He burst into the lab, closing his eyes against nightmare, sawing the wood aimlessly back and forth. His other senses took over. Glass shattered; pungent smells rose from chemicals spilling to the ground. His boots crushed soft tissue, slipping in muck as he whirled toward footfalls and anguished shouts, gauging distances. He swung the rod again, heard stumbling.

*If you value my life, you will value the lives inside the cabin.* His daughter's voice propelled him, directing his arm. If there were no laboratory, there would be no cause for execution. NightShout was smashing *things*, not people, annihilating only bottles and beakers, instruments of measurement and calibration. He splintered no bones, sliced no skin, shot no bullets. Jars burst at his feet, not skulls. There were no accessories to the crime because he was erasing the crime.

His muscles took over, acting independently of his brain. He spun as though in a dream. Shards chimed like distant music filling the putrid air. Screams became the calls of animals beseeching each other across a great chasm. For all his speed, NightShout moved with the slowness of eons. *I am clearing the way for you, daughter. Come back.*

He had to open his eyes again to fight his way past the others but he

would look only at them, leaving the rest a blur. *I saw no experiments*, he would tell the authorities. *I witnessed no abomination. There is no evidence.*

He held the staff outward and gazed straight ahead, startled to see clear passage to the front room. He stepped over the crumpled tapestry and saw BrokenThread howling inconsolably as the others held her, rocking back and forth. Ghost murmured. Piri's fingers drummed lightly on the child's arm. Rank with preservatives, NightShout felt as sick from the stench as from the grief and rage before him.

"I did this to save you," he said, his voice thick. "Some day you'll understand that."

Ghost looked up from the bench, gritting his teeth. He could barely speak. "Some day you will understand how much you have destroyed."

The older man sighed. He would camp outside, take the girl with him in the morning. His body trembled with exhaustion. When did he last sleep?

He began to turn away when a withering gaze from Piri pulled him back by force, robbing the strength from his legs. Her eyes were the eyes of judgment, her lips a merciless thin line. She was on her feet, clutching the knife. The top of her head barely reached his chest, but she was a giant before him.

Glass shards ripped through NightShout's breeches as he dropped leadenly to his knees. He could do nothing but bend forward and touch his forehead to the floor with his arms at his sides, palms up. Everything around him receded, insubstantial save for frost seizing his bones.

BrokenThread's wails diminished. Cloth rustled and Ghost said, "Let him live." The blade clattered onto wood.

NightShout wanted to get up, stand, flee. He couldn't move. He should be naked in this position of Atonement. This should be the visitor's hut. He should have brought freshly-killed rabbits. Why was he not prepared?

He should have a story to tell of one who died properly. He was ready to hear the survivors' memories, ready to absorb another life into his own. But the memories didn't come. Instead he heard only wordless sorrow, which was confusing. His breeches stuck to bleeding legs. That was also confusing.

Ghost's fading voice sounded oddly concerned. "He's in shock."

A body shifted. Shadows moved on the dirt floor. NightShout's head reeled from a sudden, savage blow. When he could open his eyes he craned his neck enough to watch Piri limp back to the bench and enfold her arms again around the quaking child.

Then he blinked against the pulsing light of a thousand torches that all vanished at once. His stomach lurched. The child's sobs fell away into silence like pebbles kicked beyond a ridge.

Where was he? What sharpness had bitten into his cheek?

And why had TripStone tucked him lovingly inside a heavy blanket, pulling its darkness over his head?



# CHAPTER 36



TripStone held her breath before the traders passed out of her hearing. She knew now that the smaller man was called SandTail and the larger one was BrushBurn. The firearms they carried were like nothing she had ever seen before. They were small-handled and small-muzzled, able to fit into pockets. Multiple bullets spun in their chambers.

The bright revolvers reflected a fire lit deep in the Alvav woods. The couriers had set up camp and now reclined under a lean-to, inspecting their weapons. For all their clumsiness and lack of hunting expertise, the men possessed an extraordinary arsenal.

Even if she had brought her rifle, TripStone would be hard-pressed to defend herself against this firepower. Her gun was designed for a single, ritual killing at a time, performed slowly and deliberately, in an attitude of deep respect. She had honed her hunting skills not only for tracking prey but for earning its blessing.

The compact revolvers she spied from her hiding place were machines rather than sacraments. The chills they sent through her overrode weariness. *How many Masari possess these things?*

She had almost turned back when the trail jogged away from Rudder and into Alvav, following the clear mountain stream into Yata land. SandTail and BrushBurn crunched through the foliage unperturbed, their vests darkening with sweat as they passed from forest into

meadow.

TripStone had dropped back, nauseous with fear, reducing her progress to a crawl through the tall grasses. Had she known then about the guns, she would have made a full retreat rather than let herself be so vulnerable.

Even on soft ground the men made enough noise to keep them oblivious to her presence, shifting their large burlap bags from shoulder to shoulder, trading bawdy humor like patrons tossing back mugs of ale in a tavern. When at last they passed again into the woods TripStone seized a moment to rest, leaning hard against a thick oak and letting the tremors drain from her limbs.

Now she took uneasy naps, ignoring the insects that came to dine on her blood. In between, she watched the men feast on dried Yata outside Covenant strictures. Their dietary sacrilege made their connection to Destiny Farm all the more likely.

TripStone's lack of shock surprised her. Their sins paled next to the revolvers' existence. She prayed that the gods protect her from nightmares as much as from the men, before she surrendered at last to unconsciousness.

~ ~ ~

In the morning the men buried their firepit, breakfasted lightly, and disassembled the lean-to. The Alvav woods remained strangely quiet, so unlike the forest of Basc, which filled with its citizens between Meat Days. Those Yata told of children brought to the wilderness to chase rabbits in the hunting grounds, away from the settlement. The adults taught them, "Here is where we cross the sacred portals into the next world."

None of the stories kept in the Crossroads Rotunda told of Yata children exploring the forest to map hiding places. They must have learned strategies to maximize their chances of survival once they came of age. Many more Yata entered the forest than died every Meat Day. Once quota was met and the horns recalled Crossroads' hunters, the Yata survivors returned to Basc, spared by both skill and luck.

Even as TripStone tracked the couriers she used lessons learned from the Yata who had foiled her own skills of detection. More Alvav citizens should be here, exploring the hunting grounds at a time of safety, outside Rudder's Meat Day. But the forest was deserted, the Masari negotiating its winding trail with impunity.

They passed into another meadow, too far now for TripStone to turn back. She kept following them, emboldened by a night's sleep. Again she dropped back, sinking to her belly, but not before her eyes caught bright white cliffs to the west. When she dared to raise her head for a longer look, she saw whitewashed houses carved into the mountainside. They glinted with a marble sheen in the rising sun, as blinding as the Rotunda, a village of opulence. Modest waterfalls detoured around the buildings and collected into fountains and pools.

*But the settlements are east of here.* She stared at stately porticos and columns shimmering in the heat. *What is this?*

SandTail and BrushBurn saw them too. Ahead of TripStone they pointed and gestured but did not seem particularly amazed. She was too far behind to hear what they were saying, but dared not move any closer.

All around her the meadow's brightly-colored flowers sparkled with dew. A lark soared overhead. Sudden movement marked the spot where the grasses blended into woods beyond. The tan flash of a

hare turned from the men and loped behind the trees.

Even if she could sneak up to them long enough to cut into a burlap bag and inspect its contents, TripStone would not know what to look for. She had never seen Destiny, had never touched or smelled or tasted it. Piri would recognize it instantly, but to bring even a small sample back to the cabin would be a cruel act.

The hunter shuddered, remembering the stunned look on her father's face as she touched her cheek to his. He had expected her to follow him into the cabin. Leaving Ghost and the others at that moment had been the hardest thing TripStone had ever done.

Now they were all miles behind. NightShout would have to explain her absence to ShadowGrass and FeatherFly. She would not be home for days.

She couldn't worry about them now. One misstep and the couriers would find her. Their circuitous journey through Yata territory would leave her no time to relax her guard. Beyond the forest lay a steady upgrade to another ridge, and then a descent into dry grasslands leading to the broad mesa of Skedge. They would have to trek across a salt pan before they passed into Promontory--where, if she was lucky, the men would lead her to the Warehouse.

## **CHAPTER 37**

Piri stared dumbly into a deep pit filled with granite rocks that once made up the cairns leading to Ghost's cabin. To the side of the pit lay the pile of timber she had hauled from his woodpile to this high bluff. Her scrapes oozed blood, her sweat mingling with dirt.

Every bone and muscle in her body told her she should be dead. But

she must still gather the leaves and set the bonfire, soon. She had neither time nor excess energy to grieve. She could not mourn at the farm and she could not mourn now. Her body was once again a tool. She must use it.

Moaning, she piled the wood atop the stones, set dry brush, and arranged what was left of Ghost's intact lenses to catch and magnify the sun. The smoke would be visible for miles, but she had to take that chance. Let the villagers believe a brush fire darkened the summit, the anticipated flame-child of summer's dry heat. She would keep a careful eye on the sparks as the crackling furnace of maple burned, reducing to embers. Only then would the pit be ready to receive her adopted sister.

Ghost would hate her for it. She had to take that chance, too. He had been unconscious when she grabbed the last of his cured wood. Except for his sunken chest filling with shallow gulps of air, she'd have thought him dead as well.

Smoke began to curl up from the brush in pretty tendrils, the lenses held in place by twigs. Piri hoped the glass would not crack from the heat. Perhaps she could remove the lenses when the brush erupted into steady flames, before the wood caught.

~ ~ ~

Ghost had rushed into the laboratory the night before, cleaning and salvaging what he could. He had pleaded with her not to kill the comatose man at her feet. She had let the old man lie there only because BrokenThread needed her, and the child was more important. The *yatanii* clung to Piri with a supernatural strength, screaming to the gods for mercy.

*Calm yourself, Piri kept drumming. We will fix this. All is not lost.*

She tried to hum a lullaby. The girl thrashed with seizures when she wasn't crushing Piri in an iron grip. Piri thought she heard something snap and checked to see whether any of BrokenThread's limbs hung at an unnatural angle. Bits of the child's orange pelt drifted down to mingle with spilled fluids and broken glass. Several tufts came to rest on the monster named NightShout who still breathed, prostrate and motionless on the floor.

Ghost had been a man torn in half--rushing to the girl's side one moment, returning to tend his ruined laboratory the next. Back and forth he careened, a tattered rag in a tug of war between his passion and his compassion, muttering incoherently in the back room, whispering soothing words to BrokenThread in the front.

The night advanced, the cabin lamp throwing wild shadows as Ghost carried it back and forth for hours. Torn herself, Piri wanted desperately to help him but knew she must remain with the child. In time BrokenThread's convulsions eased, her howls reduced to hiccups. But her hairless skin became dry and clammy by turns, until the girl could only lean against Piri's breast, alarmingly limp, drumming wherever her fingers could reach until they, too, stopped.

Piri at first had not understood. The request made no sense. Then it became all too clear. *Rest*, Piri drummed back. *Rest. I won't leave you. I will do as you ask. Rest.* With tears in her eyes, she added, *We will always love you, sister.*

BrokenThread all but melted away in Piri's arms. Piri held the body tightly when Ghost looked out from the lab, his eyes wide and frightened, his chest heaving. He leaned hard against the wall. Piri nodded, forcing calm. She tilted her head to one side and closed her eyes for a moment to demonstrate. Let him think the girl had fallen asleep.

He whispered, "Almost everything is gone."

She nodded again.

"Come get me if either of them awakens. And sleep if you can."

Piri held up her hand as he approached. She glanced down at the child, then back up at him, cautiously.

"All right," he whispered. "I won't come any closer." He shook his head. "That poor girl." Ghost studied the collapsed hunter at his feet. "You must promise me you won't kill NightShout, no matter what he's done. And wake me at the first sign of anything."

She hadn't the tongue to promise anything and Ghost was too far away for her to touch. She looked into his eyes and gave the barest of nods, then watched him turn and hobble back to the lab, continuing to clean. Less than a day after suffering from Yata deficiency he was still weak, now more so. Piri watched Ghost's hunched and rounded shoulders, his unsteady legs, until he vanished into the back room.

She listened as he swept broken glass, sopped puddles of alcohols and less familiar stench, moved parchment to places of safety. An occasional groan escaped his lips from physical exertion or despair, or both.

Hours later, Piri heard the dried wheeze of his pallet as Ghost lowered himself into bed. She sat quietly, cradling BrokenThread and counting the silent moments. When she was sure Ghost was asleep she kissed the child's forehead. She ran her fingertips along the rigid cheek, the lips beginning to draw back. The girl's arms were still limp and pliable, but soon those would also stiffen.

*I will do as you ask, dear sister. I promise.*

She lowered BrokenThread's body to the floor and turned to the other inert figure. *Monster*. Would Ghost have still requested her mercy if he knew his ward was dead?

NightShout was a large man, but her rage was stronger. Piri knelt beside him and pushed, rolled. A quarter-turn, a half-turn, prostrate to supine and back to prostrate, the old man's jaw slack, the rest of him a massive heap.

As she moved him toward the door she thought of neither BrokenThread nor Ghost, nor even of the murderous beast against her back. She was a body with a job to do. Part of her was still in the canyon, staggering half-crazed and half-aware of who and where she was--or in the nursery, birthing yet more meat.

Push. Strain. Roll.

One child. Another child. Another child.

*Push.*

All gone.

The old man rolled prone again. Piri heard a soft crack as blood gushed from his nose. His shoulders twitched and she waited with her eyes narrowed until he once again lay quietly. Glass slivers scarred his clothing and now raked and broke her skin as well.

*Demon. Get out.*

She positioned herself against him again, filled her lungs and planted her legs, and shoved. She would have to turn him, force him out the door, and roll him the few feet to the switchback's edge. From there he would fall, though not far. She could move Ghost's lantern to the

opening to help her find her way.

The Great Wagon was almost at zenith and the Sheep rising by the time Piri shoved the old man a last time. She was far enough away from the cabin to allow herself a grunt for her efforts. She listened to NightShout crash into the underbrush below. If the fall killed him, so be it.

Piri returned to the cabin, soft-footed. BrokenThread was even more shrunken now than in life. Her fingers had closed into claws, but the muscles in her torso remained soft. She seemed to float as Piri lifted her—*Oh child, there is so little of you!* The Yata woman bent to grasp the lantern, lighting her way as she climbed the ridge.

*Sleep, Ghost , she prayed. Do not awaken to find all of us gone. Not yet.* Tears streamed from her eyes and soaked into BrokenThread's nightshirt. Soon what little cloth covered Piri ripped on branches and brambles until she wondered whether she should strip the rags off entirely. She would be as she was when the other old man, the kind one, WindTamer, had found her, possessed of only her flesh and her will to live. Piri hunched over the girl's body, shooing away insects. *She is meant for another, little ones. You cannot have her!*

She had to risk scavengers once she reached the high bluff, leaving BrokenThread unattended and driving animals away when she returned with armloads of timber and satchels of stones. Between her trips to empty Ghost's woodshed, Piri ventured to the cairns and took them apart one by one. She peeled off her nightshirt and wrapped it around the boulders she dragged up the mountainside.

The Great Wagon dipped toward the west, the Sheep tilted toward zenith, the Dove rose. Soon the vultures would rise as well, real ones, gliding on updrafts with the dawn. She had to hurry.

Her body was a tool but even her body began to disappear, until her promise to the child became all that remained to drive her onward. Piri was a wraith, smoke moving through mist, retracing her dew-covered footsteps over and over, log by log, stone by stone. She returned Ghost's lamp to his cabin with the advent of daylight, took the carving knife in hand, circled back to his now-depleted woodshed, grabbed a shovel.

Ghost still slept in the laboratory. Daylight rendered the back room all the more awful, its walls and floor discolored, its work table splintered. Ghost's pallet was badly stained beneath his body. The boxes on which Piri and BrokenThread once stood had collapsed under the force of NightShout's boots and lay scattered. Piri's nose wrinkled under the onslaught of lingering fumes.

*Turn around, she told herself. You can't stay here. You have to go.*

Oh, how she wanted to tarry. Oh, how she wanted to sleep.

Then she recalled the drumming, the urgent press of BrokenThread's fingers as her life slid from her. Piri turned and fled from the cabin, stopping only to cut a slab of cheese and grab a bladder of water.

As best she could she covered the girl's body with wood and stones to hide her from scavengers. BrokenThread was like the wood herself, now. The child's body had stiffened before, during seizures, but during her seizures she had breathed.

As sunlight washed over the bluff Piri began to dig--steadily, methodically. Her hands blistered and bled. Her back and shoulders raged.

*Then I will call you Piri.* The wood and stones seemed to speak to her, her memory of the child's voice bell-clear. *It's the Yata word for*

'hope.'

Mouth open, her useless tongue dangling, Piri howled as she thrust Ghost's shovel into yielding soil.

~ ~ ~

Now the brush smoked, caught, brightened as flames started consuming the wood. It was no use removing the lenses; they were deformed beyond repair. Piri watched, her face expressionless, as they shattered one by one.

She had wrapped BrokenThread's body in leaves and vines but she needed to find more. Beasts were less likely to approach a fire, but the fire itself was now a potential threat. Piri hoped her pit was deep enough to contain it. She must descend the trail again, pull the leaves from branches she could reach, fill her nightshirt with them, and hoist them back up to the bluff. Her cheese melted in the heat. She pinched off a softened gob and swallowed it whole. She found a cluster of berries and squeezed their juice into her mouth.

She collected foliage, saw smoke rising during her ascent. The fire would not die down for hours. Even from this distance it tried to burn her alive, scorching her arms and legs, driving water from her eyes.

She sat by the body and wrapped BrokenThread's face, swathing the child's rigor mortis in soft green that caught and held the light. *Enter into Ghost's dreams, dear sister, she begged. Tell him what you told me. Help me to persuade him.*

Wood popped and sizzled behind her. She must return to the cabin for more water. The nearest stream was too far away. BrokenThread's body had cooled but now the flames warmed it again. They imparted a fleeting blush to the child's skin.

Piri eased leaves around the neck, looping and tying off the vines. She began to wrap a skeletal arm. Sweat dropped from her and glowed on rigid flesh. Her thoughts wandered. *Is it a pleasant world beyond, my cherished one? Do the spirits of Yata and Masari travel together? Are they kind to one another? Do any of my children wait for you on the other side?*

She choked, laying her cheek against the girl's bony breast. Her throat rasped with sobs.

## CHAPTER 38

FeatherFly glanced over his shoulder at MossDancer while the other boy gathered Atonement texts scattered on the floor. MossDancer's house looked like a museum: every Yata parchment framed and dated, every scrimshawed bone accompanied by verbose, explanatory text. FeatherFly couldn't wait to get out of there. He slung his own parchments over his shoulder and stood at the door.

For hours they had tested each other on memorization, first reciting and recalling Yata stories, then interjecting their own. Tales of chasing goats through the marketplace, of slipping frogs and salamanders into girls' tunics. Stupid things.

Still, FeatherFly was thankful for the diversion. His father and sister had been gone for a day and a half and no one knew where they were, not even Mother. He had stopped asking her questions. He saw how worried she was, how much she tried to hide her dread.

But he would never tell MossDancer his problems. They'd be one more thing his rival would lord over him.

"You were lousy today, chicken feather." Though younger by a season, MossDancer's muscles were larger, his bearing taller. His chops were already bushy along with his bright red goatee. He strode toward FeatherFly, dwarfing him. "MeadowRose is the one with the big pimple on her chin, not LeafGlow. And she didn't cry when I teased her about it--she squeezed it until it popped and then she stuck her tongue out at me. Only a moron would forget a detail like that." The larger boy shook his head. "Some hunter you are. You'll be telling the scribes the Yata have tails and live in trees."

"Oh yeah? What about *you*, moss puke?" FeatherFly bumped his chest hard against MossDancer's and glared up into the other boy's pale, indifferent eyes. "I snared *three* rabbits yesterday, not two. And they were on the *Yata* side of the border, not ours." He tried not to blink, tried to make the lie sound believable.

"All that means is you killed their food. That's a crime, you know. You don't *want* me to remember that."

The smaller boy bristled. "The point is, your memory is no better than mine."

MossDancer laughed. "The point is, you're a shrimp."

"And you have the brain of one."

"Oh, I'm so hurt." MossDancer's mock pout blossomed into a grin. "See you tomorrow, feather pluck." He wagged his finger. "Don't forget to study your mnemonics."

"Don't worry about me, moss rot. You don't stand a chance."

FeatherFly blew a mock kiss at his tormentor and tried not to bolt from the house. *Be casual, FeatherFly. Keep your dignity.* If only

they weren't so close in age. Soon they would share the same Consecration ceremony, when he would have to stand beside MossDancer's smug superiority. The younger boy would find a way to embarrass him. Afterwards they'd go out on the same hunts, eternal competitors to see who killed first, who received more blessings, who supplied more meat to the Masari of Crossroads, who was the more pious.

FeatherFly corrected himself: Who was *perceived* as the more pious.

NightShout and TripStone were out tracking without weapons, probably climbing the mountain toward Rudder but not toward the pass. And, by the look of her room, FeatherFly's sister had probably left home for good. If Father was trying to bring her back to Crossroads, he had not succeeded, or they'd have both returned by now.

Maybe they were on a secret mission of some kind, one they wouldn't even share with Mother.

*What did you expect?* MossDancer would say. *Your daddy's a cripple, your sister's a sick yatanii, and your mommy was never a real hunter anyway. You're a freak because you've got freak in your blood. It's that simple.*

FeatherFly gritted his teeth. His father had been a legend once and now he was strong again. His sister was one of the best hunters in Crossroads. And his mother had to work twice as hard to prove herself worthy. All MossDancer had going for him was his stupid family purity, nothing but hunters going back for generations. He didn't *have* to work at it.

FeatherFly kicked a pebble and watched it skip over cobblestones. *Make believe it's Meat Day*, he told himself. *It's your turn to hunt.*

*Nothing matters now but your instincts. Every other problem has to disappear. Otherwise, we will starve.*

He made his breathing slow and deep as he walked, trying to clear his mind with the meditations ShadowGrass had taught him. He closed his eyes. Maybe by now he was skilled enough to find his way home by smell. His lips drew back as he sampled one odor after another. The blank spaces in his mental map began to fill—lilacs here, manure patch there. Freshly-chopped wood. Raw compost. Burnt oil.

Then his eyelids shot up as someone grabbed his arms, teetering. His parchments fell to the ground.

"Ish the middle of the day." WindTamer slurred spittle from his lips, barely understandable. "You shouldn't be shleepwalking."

FeatherFly looked around and saw that he had strayed severely off course. WindTamer's cottage squatted nearby, plain and in disrepair. But it looked in better shape than the old man before him, whose eyes were redrimmed and whose breath stank of old ale.

"I—I'm practicing my tracking," the boy stammered. "A hunter can't rely on sight alone, especially at night." He stared at WindTamer's stubble and pursed his lips. "I remember you. You came to see my father two days ago."

"That long ago?" WindTamer squinted against the daylight. "I should go shee G--"

The old man stopped suddenly and drew himself up. He held a wavering finger before the boy. "Oh no." He shook his head, wincing in pain. "*Oh* no. You won't get anything from *me*. Your father shent you here, didn't he?" The watery eyes narrowed into a scowl. "I'm keeping my shecrets. Tell him I've shaid enough!"

FeatherFly looked down at the hands gripping his forearms and whispered, "I don't know where he is, and TripStone is gone, too."

The grip lessened. The boy looked up into a face struggling toward sobriety.

The red eyes blinked, trying to focus. "Gone how long?"

FeatherFly tried to keep his voice from getting small, without success. "Since early yesterday morning, before sunrise. And my mother's worried about them."

WindTamer leaned against his fence and took a deep breath, grimacing. "I will--I will shearch for them, I promish." He swallowed hard, forcing his lips to move slowly. "*Promise.*"

"You're worried about them, too." FeatherFly's muscles tensed as the old man nodded. "Do you know where they are?"

"I said I'll *look* for them." WindTamer grasped the boy's hand and squeezed it. "As shoon as I can." He patted his vest, looking for water, to no avail.

FeatherFly removed a bladder from his belt. He handed it over and waited while WindTamer drained it. "Let me come with you."

"No." The old man shook his head and licked his lips. "Too dangerous."

"I'm not a baby!"

"No, you're not," WindTamer said, sadly. "But you're not of age, either." He pushed himself away from the fence, swaying. He handed the limp bladder back. His mouth worked. "I'm a drunken fool."

"I'll help you sober up," FeatherFly insisted, "if you let me come with you."

"No. Go home."

The boy folded his arms across his chest, immovable. He should pick up the fallen parchment before it blew away, but this was more important.

"Fine." WindTamer waved him off and began to stagger toward the house. "Shtay there, then."

FeatherFly watched the shuffling feet, the bent back receding from him. Silently he bent and retrieved his texts. There should be enough time for him to return home, make sure his mother was all right, and be back here to practice his own tracking. WindTamer was no hunter and he was old and creaky. Following him shouldn't be too hard.

Then maybe FeatherFly would learn the secrets that were so dangerous, the mission his father and sister were on. Let MossDancer try to top *that*!

## CHAPTER 39

Sharp pain wrenched Ghost's joints as he pushed himself upright. *Bad dream.* He hadn't had a nightmare so vivid in years, not since his time near death.

Then his nose twitched in the acrid air and he levered himself to his feet, the call of his chamber pot almost forgotten. His gaze traveled around the wrecked lab, and he remembered.

Closing his eyes would not make the reality go away, but he closed

them anyway. When he opened them again the scene before him remained unchanged.

He leaned hard against the wall. He must force himself out of the back room and check on BrokenThread and Piri, and on NightShout. His walking stick lay in a corner. Ghost couldn't bring himself to touch it, as though the staff still retained the power to destroy. He cursed himself for caving in to nonsensical superstition, but still steered clear of it.

He stumbled into the front room and its emptiness stopped him cold. A messy trail of blood discoloring the ground led him out the door, to the switchback edge. The brush down below was flattened. Whoever had fallen there was gone.

"Piri!" he called, trying to keep panic from his voice. "Thread!"

The day was already warm. How long had he been asleep? Did NightShout take them both?

He hobbled to urinate against a tree, returning to the cabin with a clearer head. His carving knife was gone and the lantern was in a different spot from where he'd left it. Only two of his lenses, spiderwebbed with cracks, remained in the lab. The others were missing.

His stomach growled. Out by the cheese his woodpile had vanished, along with his shovel and one of the water bladders. The cheese was soft enough for him to tear off a chunk. He chewed on it dazedly, tasting nothing. Sunlight fell between the wood slats, drawing bright lines on exposed dirt where the logs once lay.

*Oh, gods, he prayed. Please make this go away.*

No, he must find them. They couldn't have simply left him here. Something must have happened. His thoughts raced from one possibility to another, each one worse than the last.

*Stop, Ghost.* His hands fisted at his sides. He set his mouth into a hard line. *Study the evidence. Figure it out.*

The chemical spills from within the cabin overshadowed an odor of burnt wood. A dip in the trail masked part of a thin, rising plume, but gauzy haze hung beyond the lookout above the treeline. Aching, Ghost grabbed a water bladder and climbed until he reached bare rock interrupting stretches of moss. He spied the remains of a dark column in the distance, unmistakably smoke.

He reached out to steady himself and almost toppled. Something was different. A rock was here to lean on before. Stones. Now a large footprint of dead vegetation darkened the ground beside him. With growing shock, he realized one of the cairns was gone. As best he could he scrambled farther up the trail, peering over the edge. Large brown spots stood out like a great pox against the foliage below, each one marking where a cairn once stood.

*All of them!* Ghost pressed on toward the dissipating smoke, leaving his established route behind. *Gods, what is happening?*

The fire must have burned itself out. Even if the smoke disappeared entirely he still had a trail to follow, newly-made of flattened dirt and vines. Someone had been through here repeatedly.

He pushed more cheese past his lips and pulled water into his mouth. For the first time he felt like a ghost in actuality, his corporeal self a figment of his imagination. He only thought he needed food, an old habit left over from his earthly existence. He was spirit only, floating without anchor, lost in the wind.

*Stop!* Bristling, he raised his forearm to his mouth and nipped his flesh. The pain told him he had a body after all. He spit shed fur, another strong reminder that he wasn't yet a phantom.

He climbed another rise. A bluff lay ahead. The smoke was gone. A mound of earth shimmered in the distance and he hastened toward it. Beyond the mound a figure struggled to its feet and slowly made its way toward him, dirt-streaked and naked. Ghost could make out short sandy hair, breasts. He squinted to see better, confirmed the lack of body fur.

"Piri!" He broke into a run and fell, forced himself upright and ran again, his joints screaming.

She continued toward him, walking faster now, stumbling. Her face was pinched. The shadows under her eyes looked like bruises. When they met her arms wrapped around his waist and her legs gave way.

He eased her down to her knees and held her against him, lowering himself until his head was level with hers. "You're shaking," he whispered. "What happened?" He offered her his palm.

She gulped air. Her fingers rested lightly on his hand and drummed, *I have promised.*

"Promised what?" He looked into a gaze that wavered, trying to escape his own. "What happened to NightShout? Where's Thread?"

Fresh tears tracked down her cheeks. She tilted her head toward the steaming mound.

Ghost's stomach jolted with fear. "Who is buried there?"

*She.*

Ghost's eyes shut tight. He gently pulled Piri closer and gasped when she clutched him. He asked, carefully, "Why the fire?"

She pressed hard, her fingers jerking against his back. *To keep my promise.* Her quaking intensified.

"You promised something to Thread."

She nodded.

"What did she tell you?"

Piri buried her head against his chest. A moan escaped her closed lips. Her fingers staccatoed against him, too tremulous for him to read.

He didn't need the exact words. Ghost forced his eyes open and stared helplessly at the mound, wondering numbly how Piri, confined throughout her life to breeding pens, came to learn about cooking pits. He could reach only one conclusion. How many of her own people had been slaughtered and baked right in front of her? How many open-air feasts sated the Masari at Destiny Farm?

His throat closed. He choked, "How can you trust any of us?"

She lifted her head and squinted at him, confused.

"I'm sorry." He took her face in his hands, wishing mightily that he could make its shadows vanish simply by passing his fingertips over her skin. "I know what Thread wants." Piri's face wavered before him. With a start Ghost realized he was shuddering. "I will help you to keep your promise."

Piri sighed with relief and clung more tightly to him.

*I am reduced to cannibalism*, he thought. *My life becomes that of a beast.*

White spots danced before his eyes. He spun away, retching into the grass.



# CHAPTER 40



Shadows danced across the quiet cloth of Gria's tent. Her lanky body draped around a wooden stool. Her short hair was tousled and dusty, her face smeared with dirt, her rifle still warm.

Across from her Watu unrolled parchment, using rocks to anchor its corners to her broad tabletop. A brief sadness clutched her heart as she studied the map: here were the wildflowers, there the roots and tubers. Here were the groves where she once walked freely, a respected herbalist of Basc. There was the thatch where Watu's jaw had dropped in wonder the first time she demonstrated for him the magic of mortar and pestle, the power of seed mixed with carapace.

And there lay the first stand of herbs her own teacher had never shown her--the serrated leaves she'd found, sniffed, tasted--that had loosened her womb and drawn her blood from her. She had licked off her palm the power to prevent life, a dull brown smear crushed in her hands, mashed with other smears--the interplay of nature's apothecary.

The knowledge had made her tremble. Her spirit's insistence that she share that knowledge--cautiously, looking always over her shoulder--had made her shake.

Now she and her pupil were soldiers and she was an exile. The old map, copied and re-copied, bore new marks that showed the hollow trees, rock outcroppings, knolls, and the other traditional hiding

places sprinkled through the Basc-Crossroads hunting grounds.

This time Watu was the teacher, sitting across the table from her, using a thin twig as a pointer. "The recruits have provided most of these locations," he said, "though I've done some reconnaissance, myself."

"I'd think the Masari would know about those covers by now, if they've been used frequently enough. And our people know that the old hiding spots are useless." Gria frowned, following the inky trail. "Talk to the newer recruits again. They've survived the hunts more recently, and the woods are always changing."

Sweat streamed from her as she snatched a chunk of bread from the woven basket to her left. *Food offerings from the Masari. Compensation for the killings.* "If there are newer places to hide our people will use those first, and the Masari will still find them if the wind is right. We want to place ourselves where the hunters are most likely to go, so we can take them by surprise."

She followed Watu's grave nod as he reviewed the map, his hand bypassing faded ink for fresh. The faded ink commanded more of her attention, but she must look away from those botanical indicators. They were no longer where her duty lay.

Watu said, drily, "The next Reckoning is in six days."

"I know." Her teeth tore into the bread, her body starved for fuel. Her troops, lean and sunbaked, had been driving her through the drills as much as she'd driven them. They were hungry now, and not just for meals. "It doesn't leave us much time, but emotions here are too high for us to wait any longer."

"I've stockpiled our extra weapons at the Meethouse."

"Good." She frowned. "Though they'll be useless if the villagers refuse to learn how the simplest ones work, even if the Masari invade Basc."

A thin smile played on Watu's lips. "The Masari won't invade if they're anything like the boy I saw. He took one step across the border while chasing a rabbit and froze. Looked like he feared lightning would strike him dead on the spot."

"Did he see you?"

"He didn't have to. He just turned tail and ran."

"That's fine for a boy," Gria said, "but I doubt the adults will be so timid once we start killing their hunters. And despite their caste system, they are *all* hunters." She removed the rocks and watched the parchment curl in on itself. "Most of them have repressed that tendency, but they will kill with their bare hands to stay alive."

Watu studied the tired lines in her face, her thin-lipped scowl. "But that's not what's worrying you." His thick arms rested on the tabletop as he leaned forward, squinting. "You look worse than the day of your arrest."

She tried to smile at her brawny pupil and abandoned the attempt. "I was ready to die for my convictions then. And I'm ready to die for them now." She sighed. "You're at the Meethouse more than you're here. You haven't seen the changes in the recruits."

"I've heard the chants." Lamp light flickered as he reached for a heel of bread. He turned it around in his hands. Robust wheat, grown by the devoted farmers of Crossroads.

"Then you know that's not what I intended to happen." Gria shook her

head. "Sometimes I wonder if I understand the Masari better than our own people."

It had become a daily ritual: the recruits assembling at dawn, raising their weapons high, and shouting *Death to the Woolies!* Red, contorted faces, wild eyes. She had not expected this level of primitivism.

Watu chewed, washing the bread down with a swig of ale. "Why is that surprising? You *do* want to kill Masari."

She said, heatedly, "Yes, in order to kill the *Covenant*. Then the Masari who are left will have to hunt as nature intended, and we will *defend* ourselves as nature intended. I want balance, not revenge."

Her shadow wavered as she stood and began to pace. "I've seen our own people ridiculed if they have excess body hair, Yata abusing Yata who even remotely look like they have a pelt. That's how bad it's become." She snatched up another chunk of bread and shook it before Watu's face. "Do you realize we have almost no skills in agriculture? The Covenant gave us peace with the Masari, but we are almost totally dependent on them. We willingly sacrifice ourselves to them, and in return we've lost our own self-reliance. I don't hate the Masari." Crumbs shot from her clenched fist. "I hate *this*."

"You must admit," Watu said, "it's a subtle distinction."

"It's an obvious distinction."

"To you." Watu took another bite, exploring the soft food with his tongue to identify its bouquet of herbs. "Gria, the people I bring here are not philosophers. No matter how much you train them, physically and mentally, they are still terrified. In six days they'll be aiming rifles at Masari, not at the Covenant." He cradled his lips in his palm to

hide a sudden smile. "Who came up with *Woolies*? It's really quite fitting."

She glared at him. "I wouldn't repeat that word if I were you." Did no one share her ideology? Was her reasoning relevant to no one but herself? "Most likely Zai, one of the newer recruits. She's been lusting for blood ever since you brought her here." Gria shook crushed bread back into the basket. At least a Yata had woven that. She dropped heavily onto her stool and rested her chin in her hands. "Most everyone else here had seen the *necessity* of what we are doing. Zai came here already enamored with the idea of killing, regardless of its necessity."

Watu nodded and took another swig. "Her brother visits the Meethouse almost daily, whether or not I'm there, asking if anyone's seen her. He tells me that some days her sons are inconsolable. Still."

"You should have sent her home from the Meethouse."

"She mentioned guns specifically," he snapped. "I didn't know how much she suspected. I didn't dare turn her away." He muttered, "I was afraid she'd expose the camp if I dismissed her and she knew anything at all."

Gria reached for the ale, then pulled her hand back. Someone's head had to be clear.

Watu slid the rolled map to the side and pushed his mug toward her. "If you ask me, this unrest was waiting to happen--if not from Zai's rabble rousing, then from someone else's. The Masari are predators. They're our natural enemies. You know that better than anyone. The Covenant doesn't work because despite the peace there are Yata who hate them, deep down inside. If anything, that *proves* your

theory."

She ignored the mug and tried to rub exhaustion from her eyes. She tried to read the man who had helped her escape from Basc a generation earlier, using her teachings of poisons to incapacitate the guards as she awaited death inside a cramped adobe room. Even he might become a stranger to her. "Do you hate them, Watu?"

He rested his hand lightly on hers, trying to sound reassuring. "I wouldn't hate them," he said, "if they didn't consume our flesh. But they do." He squeezed her palm. "And so, I must."

## CHAPTER 41

Dirt yielded to gravel as the narrow trail climbed out of Alvav and into Skedge. Mist thinned, lifted, burned off entirely. Cloud cover dissolved into a threadbare sky. TripStone followed the couriers, passing into stretches of uninterrupted rock.

Her boot dislodged a last cluster of pebbles and she cursed the name her mother gave her. But the couriers, far ahead now and almost out of her sight, didn't seem to notice. Again she crawled, flattening herself against the ground in an unrelenting landscape bereft of cover.

They had zigzagged up the mesa. TripStone had watched SandTail and BrushBurn lean into the steep grade, carrying their heavy sacks with almost exaggerated care. The men bickered with falcons swooping about their heads near nests hidden in the cliffs.

Even the homesteads scattered about the summit were fashioned of rock. TripStone marveled at their construction--finely-cut blocks gleaming with mica, windows fashioned of paper-thin minerals, thick

ceilings guarding against the heat and supported by numerous columns--before her stomach iced. No Yata had stopped them in the Alvav woods, but now they walked without hesitation into an actual settlement. She had no choice but to follow the couriers, who seemed bent on unrepentant trespass.

The hardscrabble trail beneath her feet became a wondrous mosaic of quartz and alabaster, sandstone and granite, star-patterned in octagons and triangles or cut into interlocking spirals. Specks of gold and silver shot tiny reflections about her breeches. Never before had she seen a walking path so opulent, but what purpose could it serve?

She froze as a tiny hand grasped her pant leg. When TripStone turned she gazed down into the deep brown eyes of a Yata girl whose long black hair bore gem-encrusted combs. Gold strands meandered throughout the child's silken dress. Bejeweled sandals revealed gaily-painted toes. For a moment TripStone wondered if she truly looked into the bronze-hued face of a god.

The girl whispered, "Why are you hiding from the ambassadors?"

TripStone tried not to flinch. *Ambassadors?* Burying her panic, she glanced in the men's direction, checking to make sure they were still oblivious to her presence. She bent down close to the girl's head and whispered, "We're playing a game."

The girl giggled. She asked, "Are you an ambassador, too, then?"

TripStone smiled and tried not to sway on her feet. "I suppose I am. What else would I be?"

"An angel, of course." The child turned and pointed. "That's why my uncle is talking to SandTail over there. He and BrushBurn will go home and send us angels." The jewels in her hair glistened as she

nodded. Her words tumbled as she counted on her fingers. "We need angels to take away greataunt QuickWing and our neighbor PurpleDust and my baby brother SkyTears --he was born dead--and--"

"Wait." TripStone struggled to lower her voice. "Those are Masari names, but you say they're related to you?"

The girl screwed up her face, craning her neck to get a good look at the perplexed adult. "We *are* Little Masari," she said, archly. "You must be a very new ambassador." She peered at TripStone's clothes. "Especially since you're not carrying any treasure." She reached up toward a tunic pocket. "Or are you?"

TripStone looked dumbly at the girl, her mind racing. Yata who spoke Masari were not uncommon, but Yata who claimed to be Masari had been unheard of since the days of Ata and his daughters. And those Dirt People were considered cursed.

She fumbled in her pockets, pulling out cheese and aromatics. "I don't know," she said. "Is this treasure?"

The Little Masari gawked at TripStone's hand, then doubled over with laughter. Tears leaked from her eyes as she straightened. "You are so silly! You have to stop now or you'll make me pee." With exaggerated formality the girl removed a hair clip and presented it in her outstretched palm. "*This* is a treasure. The ambassadors bring us *their* treasure, and we give them *our* treasure, like all the other Little Masari in the world do." She fixed her hair and pointed to the sacks slung over the men's shoulders. "They got *that* treasure from far away."

TripStone's gaze followed the girl's delicate hand. "Is Destiny the treasure you give them? Is that what's in the sacks?"

"We give them bed snuff." Her smile was almost too sweet to bear. "Some bed snuff comes from the forest," she added studiously, "but we make it in our factory. The Masari need a lot of it because they have a *terrible* time making babies." She raised an eyebrow at the hunter. "I think it's because the air in heaven is so thin when the angels bring us there. It damages the Masari because their bodies are so large and there is so little air to breathe. When I die I will tell the gods to make the air thicker, so the Masari can have babies more easily when they return to the world."

TripStone knelt to keep from falling and tried to fill her lungs. She gentled her voice. "But if the gods grant your wish and the Masari don't need bed snuff any more, what treasure will you have to trade them for all your pretty things?"

"Oh." The girl pursed her lips. "I hadn't thought of that." She shrugged and looked TripStone eye to eye. "But I'll be dead then, so it won't matter. Heaven has *lots* of treasures." She peered past the hunter and pointed again. "They're going away. You'd better catch up with them or you'll lose the game."

The girl leaned forward and rubbed her cheek affectionately against TripStone's chops, as though she possessed facial hair of her own. "When you catch them, tell them PetalDove says hello and that I helped hide you. What's *your* name?"

"I'm--" TripStone stammered, rising to her feet. "My name is TruthSeeker."

"What an *old* name," the girl said.

## CHAPTER 42

*Think, Windbag.*

He must have taken a wrong, still-intoxicated turn. Everything else about the trail looked right; then why was he hopelessly lost? Retracing his steps only pointed him back toward town, while pressing forward sent him sprawling into false switchbacks until his skin prickled with nettles.

WindTamer raised his hand again, shielding his eyes from the sun.  
*Think, Windbag. Where are the cairns?*

FeatherFly had wandered into his yard the day before, when WindTamer's head was still muddled with the memories of his interrogation. Try as he might, he couldn't drink away NightShout's wall of a body and hard, glintless stare. The fog of his inebriation shuddered and struggled to lift at the news of the man's disappearance, and TripStone's.

WindTamer had waited until FeatherFly trotted home, then gathered food and water for his vest pockets, strapped his tent to his back, and fled Crossroads.

Were father and daughter headed toward Destiny Farm? Toward Ghost's cabin? Had the search parties found BrokenThread? And, if so, then what?

Despite the fuzziness in his brain, WindTamer's feelings were abundantly clear: the boy should not go missing as well. Once FeatherFly was out of sight the old man wove unsteadily toward the edge of town, his head a leaden anvil ringing with the hammer of his hangover. Every jar of his boots against the cobblestones threatened to split his skull. WindTamer observed wryly that he had sobered up enough to be disgusted by his own rankness.

Sore and exhausted, he had pitched his tent at the base of the final climb toward the cabin and fallen into an uneasy sleep. By morning his head had cleared.

*I should know where I am. Where are the cairns?*

A light breeze rippled the tent flap, raising dust. WindTamer's nose twitched at a slight smell of burning in the air, but then the wind shifted and it was gone.

He planted himself on a sitting rock and gnawed on dried mutton, nursing a water bladder. Not far off a chipmunk dove into the protective crook of gnarled roots, thwarting a red-tailed hawk that pulled up quickly, wheeling into the wind.

TripStone should be here. She could point him in the right direction. But she wasn't here. She was lost, and WindTamer was looking for her.

No. WindTamer was the lost one.

He rested his head in his palms and took deep breaths. When he opened his eyes, maybe the landmarks he needed would miraculously appear.

The wind moaned. Perhaps a storm was building, its lamentations deep enough to be a Masari voice. WindTamer squinted into a bright blue sky and frowned. Not a single cloud bank massed. Only a slight breeze teased his long, unkempt hair.

He heard the moan again and followed it, stepping cautiously away from the tent and edging into the brush. Twigs cracked but his boots rested on soft, pliable soil. "Who's there?"

The sound of a heavy fall made him rush farther away from the trail. He could find his way back to Crossroads if he didn't lose sight of his tent.

The next groan carried on the breeze, laced with pain.

"Stay where you are!" he called. "I'll come get you."

WindTamer hugged the dirt and let gravity carry him down a steep incline, toward the voice. So much for being able to see his tent, which vanished behind a wall of rock. He refrained from moaning, himself.

He spied a filthy trouser leg, couldn't tell where muck ended and spattered blood began. The body exuded a faint chemical whiff. WindTamer's heart jolted, but the limp shape was too massive and its voice too deep to be Ghost. Still, he knew that smell. This couldn't be good.

He parted tall weeds, crawling along level ground. The other man's vest was blood-stained for sure. For a moment WindTamer was confused by the nose, caked with dried gore and shoved disturbingly to the side--and by the bruises purpling his neighbor's face around grimy, matted chops. Then he saw through the distortions.

"You've looked better, my friend." He lifted his water bladder. "Drink first, then I'll clean you up a bit. Don't try to talk yet." He wasn't sure he wanted to hear what NightShout had to say.

He eased up when his neighbor began to cough. NightShout gulped air through his mouth between parched, cracked lips.

Three days earlier they'd sat opposite each other and WindTamer had felt like a caged, doomed animal. Now he looked down upon a

broken body and recessed steel-gray eyes that still held him fast. "My tent is up there--" he waved aimlessly, "--somewhere. We'll probably have to climb to get to it." The larger man nodded. "When you're ready to travel again, I'll take you home."

NightShout rested his heavy hand on WindTamer's arm and squeezed. Their gazes met, but the hunter seemed focused on something else.

~ ~ ~

NightShout did not remember having eaten. Vague memories flitted by him: the cool trickle of water down his throat, the chunks of mutton in his neighbor's proffered hand. He'd had to control his breathing, his nose a large throbbing rock, useless. His throat was raw. How long had he been gulping air through his mouth?

They pulled themselves up to WindTamer's tent. NightShout's left leg dragged behind him but his hands still worked, finding the crevices he needed, pulling his body against gravity. Nightmare boiled at the base of his skull, not quite within reach and he was not ready, yet, to grasp it. All that existed was the present--the striving against physical pain, the mixture of concern and awe in WindTamer's face.

The smaller man struggled up the rocks, panting. "Even with broken bones you're in better shape than I am."

NightShout blinked, numb. He was a hunter. He had trained to survive in the wild. It was a simple, unconfusing truth.

With a mighty groan he hauled himself to level ground and waited for the pounding in his head to stop as WindTamer strained next to him. Not far off a dun-colored tent shrugged in an occasional gust of wind, leaning into bushes.

His neighbor bent over him and NightShout flashed a crooked smile. WindTamer should not be so concerned. The smaller man parted his lips and then closed them, afraid to voice questions that would spill from him eventually.

Holding each other they hobbled three-legged to shelter, where rough cloth blotted out the trees and sky with beige monotony. Cushioned against the ground inside, NightShout closed his eyes. He saw the rage in Piri's face and opened them again.

"You need to sleep, friend." A wet cloth soothed the hunter's brow, teasing dried blood from his face.

He had already slept too much and the Yata woman come back to life haunted his dreams. The splattered skull of long ago fused suddenly together and his bullet flew back into his rifle, ripping his gun from his grasp while his daughter turned her back on him and disappeared into the mists.

He turned his head to the side and followed the regularity of the tent's comforting weave.

In time he heard cloth rip, followed by WindTamer's meaningless words about a fractured leg. Pain drew tears from NightShout's eyes as the carpenter wielded stout branches and strips of more cloth. Someone else must be moaning, though NightShout's lips buzzed with vibrations.

"I'm sorry." WindTamer leaned over him with sky-colored eyes. "Been a long time since I've set a bone. Wish I could give you spirits for the pain."

*Cabin.*

WindTamer bent closer to his lips and NightShout repeated, "Cabin."

The other man suppressed a shudder. "You've been there then."

"Spirits there." Agony rocketed through his nose and NightShout breathed hard, his mouth wide open. "Al--alcohol."

*No, not alcohol. Not any more. Broken bottles.*

"I've looked for the cabin," WindTamer said, quietly. "I can't find it. The cairns are gone, but that's nonsense. They can't have simply disappeared." His warm hand squeezed NightShout's shoulder. "And you're in no shape to show me where they are."

NightShout grasped one of the branches and levered himself up.

"I said you're in no shape to show me."

He shrugged off WindTamer's insistent grasp and dragged himself from the tent, blinking in bright light. Breathing through his mouth, he gathered what information he could. His nose was useless. In the realm of scent he was all but blind.

He scanned the switchbacks, the arrangements of shrubs and rock outcroppings, the angles of trees descending back toward a ravine. Here was the spot where TripStone found gunpowder. There was the trail that should lead to masses of granite arranged to look like natural formations.

But those were gone.

Perhaps the cabin's strange inhabitants were gone as well. Angry BrokenThread, sallow Ghost, silent Piri. People out of a dream, surrounded by bottled atrocities that were not supposed to exist.

*Illusion.*

How could he have destroyed what never was?

WindTamer was beside him, half-holding him up. "NightShout." How long had the voice been calling him? "I'm not imagining things. The landmarks *are* gone, aren't they?"

There were never any landmarks. There never was a cabin. And yet, perhaps that distant interruption in the tall weeds marked the spot where a cairn once stood. He was too far away to know for sure.

No. A boulder, perhaps, washed over the edge with the last great rains.

*That was two seasons ago. The weeds would have regrown by then.*

"Let's get you back inside." WindTamer pulled on his arm insistently, like a child. Like TripStone: *Father, I must show you! Here is the scent trail laid down, and the barest hint of tracks....*

NightShout's lips began to curl into a smile before he remembered. The girl grew up. Worry lines spidered across her brow. She lifted her fingers to her nose, told him about the gunpowder, emptied his pockets of aromatics so she could conceal her own scent. She left him behind, her back receding as she pursued Masari men: *If you value my life, you will value the lives inside the cabin....*

He swallowed the dribble collecting in his open mouth and turned toward WindTamer, reading his neighbor's fear. This time it was fear for his own, NightShout's, safety. Perhaps for his sanity as well.

"Yes." Each word threatened to crack his face like an egg. He pointed uphill. "Gone."

Perhaps they had all vanished into the night, removed all traces of themselves. But what was he then to tell RiverRun's parents--BrokenThread's parents--if he said anything at all?

WindTamer touched his arm gingerly and whispered, "Do you know where TripStone is?"

He pointed toward the second trail.

"Gone into Alvav?"

NightShout studied his neighbor's wide-eyed incredulity and nodded.

WindTamer shielded his gaze, peering first uphill, then downhill. Distance melded craggy features into a murky tableau, enough to shift perspective. Boulders that earlier seemed to stand before granite outcroppings now hid behind them.

Haltingly they moved as one back to the tent. WindTamer murmured something about getting NightShout home to his family, where his nose and leg would heal and where he could rest. But the smaller man's gaze returned again and again to the maze of switchbacks, trying to tease from them the hidden trail leading to the cabin.

More and more its ruination crept back into NightShout's memory. As much as WindTamer wanted to find the cabin, NightShout wanted to follow his daughter into Alvav and beyond. The two men held each other tightly, inching through their slow, aching descent toward Crossroads.

## CHAPTER 43

BrokenThread continued to burn while Ghost and Piri slept. For more

than a day she had cooked underground as they lay in the open, their skin rubbed with herbs to repel biting flies, their alternating bouts of fitful sleep cued to predators and scavengers. Their skin felt almost as crisped as they imagined BrokenThread's to be.

In the daylight their cheeks were sunken, their hair matted. Piri rearranged her soiled nightshirt around her beaten body and kept vigil by the pit. Ghost hobbled back to his cabin and began to gather what belongings they could carry--food, small tools, selected parchments covered with observations. He wrapped those, along with his last clean nightshirt, in plain burlap that he lashed to his back.

He knelt by the dislodged tapestry, its harvest dance border rigid with sticky fluids, the ripening corn in its center stained and malodorous. This, too, NightShout had destroyed. That rare record of Masari history and culture had survived the Covenant but fell to a single man driven by his own demons. Ghost sighed long and loud, hugging his knees, his eyes closed. Perhaps he should simply burn the whole place down.

He argued with himself and shook his head. *No. Leave it there. Someone may yet understand what it all meant.*

Torture, to look again upon smashed vials and shredded anatomy held within sturdy, notched logs, the cabin's internal walls planed smooth. Handcrafted furniture, simple but robust, bearing WindTamer's modest brand. A quiet virtuoso, that one, not given to embellishments.

The image assailed Ghost before he could fight it: BrokenThread's awed yet defiant stare a season earlier, after she had fought her way up the mountain. She had read the signs without a map, her small hands probing vegetative cover to find sanctuary beneath.

"Tell me you're Ghost!" she had whispered, breathlessly. "Tell me I've found you!"

Excitement melded with exhaustion in her glowing face. He could tell immediately that she was a *yatanii*, but he had never heard of her. "How do you know my name?"

"Rumor," she said, simply, walking past him through the open door. Making herself at home, sitting daintily on the bench opposite his desk...

Now he turned sharply from the bench, from sour tang thickening the air. Other things had become more important, suddenly and impossibly.

He struggled back to the bluff, to find the scene the same as when he'd left it. Piri sat with her knees drawn to her chest, her ripped cloth falling from her, exposing random swaths of sunburnt flesh. She stared past the precipice into a clear blue sky, her eyes dry and bloodshot. The pit smoldered beside her, mounded into a dome of earth over layers of leaves. The air above it buckled with intense heat.

He dropped down beside her and loosened the pack from his shoulders and waist, drawing out the clean nightshirt. She nodded but made no move to put it on. He was relieved when she accepted his proffered water. Only then did he raise a second bladder to his lips.

The mound wavered like a distant hill spied through layers of atmosphere. It was a mirage, a trick of the senses. Ghost felt thin, roughened fingers on his chin, turning his head away from the undulating dirt until he faced red-rimmed, dark brown pools under short hair begrimed with soil and sweat. The pools blinked.

*We must sleep, she drummed on his cheek, or practice what she taught us.*

How many hours had they already spent tapping on each other's palms, arms, face? In the beginning Piri and BrokenThread had worked out individual words, concepts rendered into ideograms of movement through pelt, across skin. Then they reduced Masari to its component sounds, pieces of forever-changing puzzles. Patterns of silent speech evolved, delivered through fingertips.

Piri had known Masari but her knowledge was limited to what she had heard on Destiny Farm--the language of agriculture and animal husbandry. Yata husbandry. She had learned from overhearing squabbles and business deals even as her mind became clouded under the drug, her lusts driving her.

BrokenThread had taught her a new language entirely, one of heart more than of words.

When had Ghost's eyes closed? He must have lain down after shrugging off his pack and slaking his thirst. He forced himself to sit and shook his head. Coughed. "I'm sorry. I should take this watch."

Piri took his hand in hers. *Tell me this way.*

He repeated the words onto her life line.

She nodded and turned his palm up. *Good. You sleep. I will keep watch.*

He was too tired to argue and sank back down to the ground.

The sky lightened, becoming almost white as the sun climbed. Piri's tattoo burned into the back of her neck. They were exposed here,

with no shade. She shifted closer to Ghost, lay on her stomach beside him, draped the clean nightshirt over their heads, and willed her eyes to stay open. They must wait until dusk before opening the pit.

She had almost suffocated in the desert. Even under awnings protecting Destiny Farm's livestock from the sun, she'd been buried in a furnace of body heat. It didn't matter. Life swelled inside her; sweetness poured into her. She could never tell where her ecstatic moans ended and all the others began.

She tried to remember their faces and couldn't. One embrace was no different than the next. The farmers came for her people while she slept. Those who survived the culling would awaken and be aware only of voids within their numbers. They embraced all the harder, then, hammering into each other's loins to drive the memory away.

Piri scanned the mountains from underneath clean linen that smelled only faintly of aldehydes. A lone cloud scudded toward a far summit. She looked into the land called Alvav, a settlement of Yata who lived freely. Who had their own language, their own culture.

Her own people.

Perhaps, if she could meet them, she would remember their faces.

Ghost twitched beside her. His hands fluttered and she wondered if he touch-talked in his sleep. If she closed her eyes she could still see his face clearly. And BrokenThread's, and WindTamer's, and TripStone's. All Masari. She had no memory of her own mother, did not know who her father was. Among Yata she remembered only the comforting press of flesh.

~ ~ ~

Ghost felt Piri's body shift beside his own, heard the rustling of her rags as she stood. When he opened his eyes his world was white linen. He lifted the nightshirt from his face and placed it aside. Beyond the precipice the sky mellowed. Late sun gilded a nearby grove.

She stood above the pit, wielding his shovel, removing the top layer of dirt. He hurried to her and gripped the haft gently, firmly.

She drummed onto his arm, *Be careful you do not disturb the leaves. Do not allow the dirt to fall any deeper.* Steam rose between them.

A layer of rocks showed beneath the dirt. Piri removed her rags, using them to protect her hands as she lifted the granite stones one at a time and set them aside. Ghost pulled off his own threadbare tunic and breeches to follow her lead. Large leaves and aromatic sprigs crisscrossed each other beneath the hot rocks. Ghost could barely discern the outline of a torso, limbs, head.

His stomach lurched and he twisted away, then forced himself to turn back. The panic rising in his throat made him feel more naked than the evening breeze playing across his thin, uncovered body.

"You'd think I would be used to this," he choked. "After all the body parts I've put into bottles, all the measurements, all the dissections." He knelt, wet his fingertips, and began to peel back limp foliage. Piri worked steadily to unwrap the child, staying mercifully away from the head. The skin she uncovered had darkened to a deeper brown even than Yata flesh. There was hardly any pelt left to scrape away.

TripStone's voice rang in Ghost's skull with stories of her ritual preparations: the final exchange of words with Yata before death, its

preparation on a sacramental table, its consecration with prayers. She had come to know her prey, and then her prey's family, while Ghost had accepted anonymous organs already separated from people who had once lived, breathed, loved. He had been passionate about his work, but--he realized now--sorely dispassionate about its component parts.

Before him Piri moved with slow, disciplined reverence as she arranged BrokenThread's leaf wrappings on the ground. Beneath the child's body lay more leaves, and more rocks underneath those.

The sky darkened a shade further. Ghost heard crickets calling for mates.

He uncovered a foot, a calf, a thigh. The herbs he removed exuded a heady scent. His hunger warred with his nausea. He peeled back the coverings from pelvis and abdomen. Piri had already exposed the chest and arms. They were denuded, the three of them, before the gods.

He muttered, "I am an accursed creature."

*We must be able to carry her.* Piri's tapered fingers spoke to his collarbone, where his pelt was thin. *I will use the knife.*

"I am a scientist," Ghost insisted, trying to convince himself. "I should be able to cut meat from bone."

Piri straightened and retrieved the carving knife she had taken from his cabin two nights earlier. She handed it to him.

*This is Thread's wish,* Ghost reminded himself as he bent toward the body, as the heat beneath it dissipated, making his face and chest run with sweat. "Forgive me, child," he whispered, slipping the point

of his blade into muscle. The meat fell away easily, coming apart in his hands. A thin grease coated his fingers.

Piri's fingers drummed lightly on his arm. *She thought she was—* She puzzled out the word. *Magical. Blessed. She wondered if she could extend your life, assuage your hunger.*

So. Ghost's lips twitched into a wry smile. Perhaps BrokenThread had been the scientist and he the unwitting experimental subject. When she had first struggled up the mountain to find him, had she plans for herself even then? And plans for him, and by extension for all Masari? Had she come to his cabin to live or to die?

Ghost saw the girl standing on a wooden box, hunched over his lenses, recording her observations. Had she been observing him as well? Had she been keeping track of his symptoms, insisting he keep a log, as part of her own scientific inquiry, sampling his experiences as readily as he'd sampled her fluids?

He studied the flesh in his hands as though it were a strange gem unearthed during the planting of spring crops. Tears nestled in the corners of his eyes. Beyond him, the blurry form of Piri nodded, encouraging him. Granting him permission.

He raised the meat to his mouth. Chewed. Swallowed.

His body breathed. His muscles unclenched. Blood coursed freely through his veins. The food seemed to glide to his stomach, spreading through cell walls, recharging his lymphatic system. But it was too soon. He must be imagining things.

*You need more.* Fingers informed his shoulder. *You need to eat. We will wrap the rest.*

How was it that he had never felt such extraordinary reverence for the Yata as he now felt for this dead Masari girl? He blushed before Piri. For years he had hated his dependence on Yata, hated his people's slavish adoration. Through that worship ran resentment, like the thin strands of nerves in the muscle that bore his teeth marks.

If BrokenThread could free him from that dependence, she would be a liberator worthy of the gods.

But then what?

He took another bite of the meat in his hands and sat back on his heels, letting the tears track down his cheeks and into his chops. He cut another piece and consumed that as well. When he was sated he bent to the task of slicing, handing the cuts to Piri. She wrapped them tightly in the leaves.

He felt her scrutiny, knew that she took time from her own work to observe him. The dusting of purpled fuzz on his neck, the pattern of his pectoral fur. The furry ridges extending out from his spine, the plum-colored brush feathering his buttocks. Was it just curiosity? Was it the same fascination he had felt when she had waved away his herbal creams as her smooth bronze skin healed itself, her lacerations closing as he peered at them through his lenses? When he looked back at her she tried to smile, even as he felt a flush climbing his neck.

She was studying him unapologetically, bereft of inhibition. He turned back quickly to the corpse.

## CHAPTER 44

Bandages of Yata skin continued to gel, seeping through

NightShout's cuts and into his flesh. ShadowGrass had cut strips of them, layering them over and around his broken, mangled nose until they blocked his sight almost completely. Still, they could not stop him from giving his wife a slow, painful wink.

He had been three days missing and TripStone was still gone. ShadowGrass busied herself preparing food, rearranging pillows, and applying medicinals. She hadn't slept.

She had reeled to a frenzied pounding in the night. NightShout and WindTamer swayed at her opened door, locked in a tight embrace to keep themselves and each other from collapsing.

Now her neighbor sat at her dining table, answering questions posed by the Chamber representative she'd sent her son to fetch. Through the bedroom's open door she saw FeatherFly sit as though turned to stone, unable to rip himself away. He should be here by the pallet, helping to tend his father's wounds.

WindTamer spoke haltingly to HigherBrook, a polite functionary who ShadowGrass doubted was much older than her boy. A junior member, probably elevated from a recent position as clerk or census taker.

She had looked upon his short styling, his trimmed goatee and brickcolored chops. Even FeatherFly wore more facial hair than this one. "I thought," she said, controlling her voice, "that the Chamber would have sent us someone more experienced."

HigherBrook had merely smiled at her. Only then did she realize his eyes looked old.

Now she held NightShout's hand and listened to voices drifting in from the next room. Her husband seemed preoccupied. She couldn't

tell whether he listened along with her or relived experiences she could only begin to grasp. The functionary's speech was smooth and unhurried, a soft tenor.

"You're telling me that a Yata woman is the cause of his injuries?" HigherBrook's fine gray linens rubbed together as he shifted in his seat. His pen scratched on parchment.

"From what I can gather, yes," WindTamer mumbled, low and gravelly. "But that's not what you should be investigating."

"I should think not. For Piri--you said her name was Piri?--to wage such a ferocious attack on an experienced hunter like NightShout is a physical impossibility."

WindTamer said, "I believe he may already have been incapacitated."

"Physically?" HigherBrook asked, drily, "or mentally?"

ShadowGrass started in her seat, her hand gripping NightShout's. She whispered, "Bastard."

A still-strong hand gently squeezed back. NightShout's other arm came up. He pointed toward the door.

"No, my love; I'm staying right here with you."

He pointed again. "Go," he said, softly, wincing. "Learn."

*Learn* . The magic word. The one NightShout repeated to her over and over as she developed her hunting skills. He had never laughed at her atrocious errors or her panicked insecurities. *Learn*, he had told her. *Keep practicing*.

They had both swaggered, then. Now he lay broken on their pallet and she cowered in their bedroom, horrified that her call for help had become an interrogation.

Perhaps the mysteries that were closed to her would emerge in the next room, unwinding a bit more with each snide question posed by the lackey in fine linens. She wanted the Chamber to hear *her* questions, give *her* answers provided by neither husband nor daughter. She realized now that the Chamber existed to gather rather than disseminate information, if its members knew anything at all.

WindTamer, the strange carpenter who refused to use bone in his work, knew mysteries hidden even from NightShout. ShadowGrass left her husband's side reluctantly and stepped toward the table. She watched FeatherFly's head swivel back and forth between HigherBrook and WindTamer, as though their dialogue from opposite ends of the table were volleys in a game of slapball.

"You need to investigate Destiny Farm," WindTamer insisted. "You need to send someone to Promontory and down into the canyon."

"Promontory has its own Chamber." The functionary pursed his lips as he wrote, his eyes cast down at penmanship dainty enough to be Yata script. "We have no jurisdiction there." He raised his head as ShadowGrass pulled up a chair by his right shoulder. "How is your husband?"

"Quite lucid," she snapped. "I want to know the whereabouts of my daughter."

"As do we." Straight-backed, HigherBrook looked from ShadowGrass to WindTamer. "You said she was headed into Alvav. Why?"

NightShout saw her descend into Alvav." The carpenter sighed. "He's been unable to tell me why. It hurts him too much to speak right now."

"His hands are still functioning well, yes?" HigherBrook slid sheets of parchment toward ShadowGrass. "Have him answer these questions. I will be back to collect them tomorrow." He gathered up the remaining sheets, squaring their corners. "I will send a messenger to the Chamber in Rudder. Perhaps they can contact a Yata search party in Alvav, though I cannot say with certainty what will happen. Such Masari trespass on Yata land is unprecedented."

"Perhaps 'unrecorded' is more accurate." ShadowGrass lifted a sheet of questions, cleaning her fingernail on an edge.

The functionary leveled his gaze at WindTamer. "You say you found Piri in the canyon, whose climate is hot and dry this time of year. Let me point out to you that the effects of wine and ale are particularly pronounced under those conditions. You tell a horrific tale, but offer no proof except to say this woman attacked NightShout, and you can supply me with no motivation for her attack. It is obvious NightShout sustained a serious fall--again, due perhaps to the effects of wine and ale. He has not hunted in years. I am sure he finds other ways to pass the time."

ShadowGrass said hotly, "I had not known the Chamber to trade in slander."

"I offer a *possible* explanation," HigherBrook murmured. "If your husband can answer my questions satisfactorily and you can provide us proof of illicit activity, then we can act more in accordance with your wishes. Until then--" He rolled and bound his parchment, pushing his chair back. "There's no need to stand. I can let myself out."

"Do, please," ShadowGrass said acidly.

They listened to the door creak open, shut.

FeatherFly made a fist. "As soon as I come of age--"

"Quiet." ShadowGrass tilted her ear toward the door and listened. "I believe I'll make us all some tea." She lowered her voice. "FeatherFly, in a few minutes I want you to step outside and see if HigherBrook is still with us."

"Either way," WindTamer ventured, "I'm sure we'll be under surveillance." His fingers drummed nervously against the table top. After a minute he stopped and stared at his hand. A faint smile spread across his lips.

ShadowGrass asked, "What is it?"

WindTamer turned to FeatherFly. "Have you studied your mnemonics yet today?"

The boy's eyes widened. "No. I've had a busy day."

"Let's study them together, then. Go get your papers." He turned to ShadowGrass, his face impish. "What are the mnemonics? Individual words?"

She stared at him as well. "Sound group patterns."

"Perfect. No wonder that's how they invented it."

"Invented what? What has memorizing Yata stories got to do with--"

WindTamer placed his finger against his lips.

ShadowGrass rose. "I'll start preparing the tea."

## CHAPTER 45

A white desert, like spilled and crystallized milk, spread out before TripStone. The flat meadows had placed her in enough danger, but this--this was impossible.

Nothing to do but wait until SandTail and BrushBurn dwindled to small dots within the salt pan, almost invisible on the horizon. She might lose them, but knowing there was a Warehouse at her destination might be all that she needed to continue her investigation.

She had ripped up her shirt and bound up her hair, but TripStone's sweat still flowed between swatches of pelt. The sun burned her neck even through fur.

She'd been lucky. She thought for certain she'd be spotted as they climbed down the rock face from Skedge. But the couriers, burdened by their sacks, had focused only on the granite and sandstone before their eyes as they negotiated handholds and footholds carved into a crevasse.

Beside them hung a series of chains and pulleys guided by metal pins and hooks driven into the rock, yet lacking any apron to transport goods. TripStone had squinted at engravings on the oversized pulleys, whose ancient Yata script composed a dirge.

Perhaps these were used by the angels, then, to lower bodies to the wagon that would take them to "heaven." Flattened against the cliff, TripStone had held her breath, terrified of dislodging a pebble.

Now the horizontal path laid out before her promised to be as

treacherous as the vertical. She hoped she continued to provide the gods enough amusement so they would continue to let her live. She noted where the couriers changed course, avoiding the last of the mud left from the rainy season's temporary lake. TripStone negotiated shallow waves of salt sculpted into odd formations, milk petrified in mid-drip.

Her lips cracked and bled. She was rationing her water and food. She had to find a meal in Promontory before she dropped from exhaustion. She lowered herself once more onto her belly. *At least here I will not lack for a salt lick.*

Black smoke rose in the distance, belched from smelting factories. Promontory was not an agricultural town. Never before had TripStone seen such an enormous swath of non-arable land. Instead, the town's citizens depended on imported water from Rudder and cisterns to collect the monsoon rains. Storms blackened the sky when, she had heard, the mountains themselves tumbled and were washed away. When those days came, the very streets submerged in boiling mud. The gods' sticky fingers grasped and smashed all but the hardest Masari structures--while across the merciless salt pan, turned into lake by the monsoons, the high, rocky cliffs of Skedge continued to stand even as the rain etched them slowly away.

Quarries and mines lined Promontory's outskirts, dug into the hillsides. The city's huge carts traversed the trade routes, creaking under their loads of heavy sprockets and chains, glinting steel knives, rifles and ammunition.

TripStone suppressed a shudder, remembering tales of collapsing shafts and of hard, seamed faces. She had never expected to reach this place-- so far away, so alien. In the past few days she had seen impossibilities, wondering more than once if she were dreaming, if

she'd gone mad.

She wanted to rest in the cool shade of Crossroads. She wanted to be in her own bed. She wanted to be arguing with FeatherFly and negotiating the fine points of living with her parents. Why had she ever left? What was she doing in this cursed place?

She was learning that things had gone terribly, terribly wrong. In Alvav. In Skedge. And, she was sure, in Promontory. Her oppressor, the Covenant, had sent her here--and much as she loathed so many of its scriptures, she must protect it.

Even through her clothes her body burned against the salt. Scrub brush shimmered in the far distance. So long as she kept it in her sight she was sure she could survive the journey across. Mentally she argued with vultures circling overhead. *Go find your meal somewhere else! You won't get it from me.* Which was worse, desiccation under the sun or a bullet from a silver revolver? She *must* find out more about those guns.

She gritted her teeth against the blisters forming on her hands and pushed on.

~ ~ ~

Cold, clean water dribbled into her open mouth and she sat up quickly, coughing. She could not feel her right arm.

A sharp voice called above her head, "She's up!"

TripStone's eyes hurt even in the meager light of a darkened room. She whispered to herself, "Still alive."

"And you should be dead," the voice scolded. The blurry form

attached to it moved out of her sight. She strained to hear him. "Especially since two of our angels brought you back. Biggest, hairiest damned Yata they said they'd ever seen. We had a good laugh at your expense. Of course, we thought you were a corpse then, part of the pile you rode in with."

TripStone tried to raise her right hand and bit down on a scream. Fire seared her muscles, melted her joints.

"Don't move that arm; you'll disturb the poultices. It's swelled up pretty bad."

"What happened?" Her words shattered in her throat.

"You've got a mixture of ailments we call Idiot's Delight." The man was back at her side. He lifted her chin, coaxing her lips open to drip more liquid down her throat. Her nose wrinkled at the scent of unfamiliar, bitter herbs.

"Severe dehydration," he continued. "Skin burns and infections. Salt blindness, which in your case is probably temporary. And a full dose in the arm from a mud adder."

She swallowed and managed to gulp, "A what?"

The man guffawed and called out, "We've got another one, DamBuster! Just waltzes across the salt pan and never heard of a mud adder!"

"I told you!" The hearty baritone erupted into laughter. "The more foreigners come in, the busier we get. You'd think someone would teach these people."

"I can tell this one's a hunter by what's in her pockets. They think they

know everything." The thin voice snickered. "At least this one's alive enough to blush."

Between swallows TripStone managed to blurt, "Who are you?"

"Welcoming committee for those who can't handle the salt pan, doctor and apothecary for everybody else. I'm DevilChaser; my partner DamBuster is preparing your dinner. While you're waiting, you can bite down on this."

Jerky contacted her teeth. She almost gagged when she began to chew and forced herself to remain silent. Still, she could not help grimacing.

DevilChaser made a slight moue of surprise. "Most in your position can't get enough meat when they arrive here half-starved. Or is it the *type* of meat that bothers you?"

TripStone chewed slowly and obediently, swallowed. She did not know if the Yata flesh in her mouth came from someone slaughtered at the farm or from one already dead, collected by the angels. Her Meat Day had not yet arrived and her years-conditioned stomach rebelled.

"I don't know who sent you, or why," DevilChaser said, "and I don't want to know. This is not a town in which to ask questions. You'll find we do things differently around here." He pulled the jerky from her mouth. "This is just enough to give you an appetite. You don't need any more salt. DamBuster's fixing you something nice and bland that will fill you up and help you fight your infections."

He gave her more bitter liquid. Her arm began to throb. She whispered, "What day is this?"

"Fourth of Bellows. I don't suppose you can translate that into your calendar of hunting days."

She shook her head. She wouldn't know where to begin.

"From your condition when you arrived, I'd surmise you were out in the salt pan for two days. Fortunately for you, the adder got you near to the end of that. And you've spent almost a full day here."

TripStone caught her breath. She had left Skedge three days ago! It was five days since she left home. Five days since she had torn herself from Ghost's cabin, leaving the fate of its inhabitants in her father's hands.

The next Crossroads hunt was in two sunrises.

The blur moved in front of her, wiping away the tears coursing from her blinded eyes.

## **CHAPTER 46**

Ila groaned in the Meethouse, his loins hammering upward. Hands squeezed his buttocks. Other fingers probed delicate, hidden places. His mouth closed around a surging breast and sucked hard.

Across the room his young wife Teza panted faster. She was a teaser, that one, cresting toward climax, then suddenly quiet, then building again toward orgasm regardless of which husband lay with her. This was her first visit to the Meethouse. Ila wondered if she would be the same way with strangers. He wondered whether the gods would mingle her good looks with the traits of any of the congregants, granting her a child out of this cauldron of love.

Even in this ecstatic din he knew which noises were Teza's, could

discern her rhythm from all the others. Her pleasure excited him from afar. So, too, the half-dismayed delirium of her consort as she slowed and began again, drawing her paramour out like taffy.

Ila could not see the woman with whom he himself mated. Too much was in the way. He slipped out, then back in. Perhaps the bodies had changed. A tongue powdered with Destiny displaced the nipple in his mouth and swelled against his teeth and he fountained, pumping life over and over and over.

He had come here more and more frequently, with or without his wives and co-husbands, since Zai's disappearance. He had returned home with a bellyful of Watu's ale, with legs slightly bowed and a groin sore but happy. His lust still could not distract him. His vanished sister still haunted his dreams. Zai's young sons still regarded him reproachfully, but perhaps he only imagined it. One minute they tumbled and hollered with their cousins, the next they were eerily silent.

Sprawled across damp, parti-colored pillows, he inhaled deeply the fusion of Destiny and musk and waited for his body to reanimate. Fingers, toes, tongues, genitals rubbed against his skin and he smiled with mild arousal, his eyes closed. Teza's climactic hoots returned him to full alertness. Someone straddled him before he lost his hardness. Someone else slipped underneath them both and opened him wide.

For a few minutes he forgot the tension beneath Watu's joviality, the Meethouse proprietor's furtive glances toward the back room. The air around Basc had changed and now seemed charged. Most of its citizens were oblivious, but some, like Watu, walked the streets with nostrils flared, glances darting, then fixing on and scanning particular huts. Watu's laughter was too loud, his gestures exaggerated. Something in his face--an unintended glare, a severity around the

mouth--stilled Ila into silence.

One night, even this long after the last Reckoning, the Soala filled not with wails of grief but with entreaties to demons. The next night it was again becalmed.

Someone spilled ale into Ila, mouth to mouth. He buzzed from the numbness of beery lips and sucked on a tongue as though to draw sustenance from it. The tongue withdrew. The mouth returned with more ale. He was reduced to exhausted, half-hearted fondling. When he opened his eyes, he grinned at Teza's rapturous face, at the cowlicks plastered to her forehead.

He sighed, "Good?"

"Wonderful."

She sucked from her mug until her cheeks bulged, and bent again toward his waiting lips.

## **CHAPTER 47**

Ghost and Piri rose from sleep that had swaddled them in the succulent forests of Alvav. Steady trickling played from the springs extending from Rudder. Liquid rhythms washed through the travelers, closing their eyes with cool fingers.

The days filled with slow and aimless meandering. Ghost bent to examine mushrooms and berries foreign to Crossroads. He missed his lenses, relying instead on his own unaided perceptions, his own instincts.

His curiosity comforted him. He did not feel quite so vulnerable when

holding an oddly-striped blossom, coaxing its pollen onto a fingertip.

He had stepped nervously across the threshold three sunrises before, descending into the valley. He had reached out gently, his fingers on Piri's shoulder. *I've never stood on Yata land before.*

Her eyes shone with a new brightness. She tapped back, *Neither have I.*

For three days she coaxed him to unwrap the leaves holding discrete portions of BrokenThread's remains. She watched him chew numbly, his eyes vacant even of sadness. Piri had examined Ghost every morning since they left the cabin, recording her observations next to his notes on flora. His skin regained elasticity. His dull pelt developed a modest sheen.

*You're getting stronger.*

Ghost took Piri's hand in his but tapped no reply on her palm. Instead he studied her fingers, her resilient, smooth Yata skin. She was right. He had fashioned a new walking stick in the woods but used it sparingly, his legs still bowed but less apt to buckle beneath him.

They were all but naked to each other and no longer noticed. Their clothing fell from them in tatters as the forest claimed once-pristine linen. Still, the rags would offer some protection at high sun once they crossed into the meadow. They spotted the grassy expanse past a grove thinning into low berry patches.

The fruits were edible. Piri gathered them until her hands purpled with sweet juice. She smiled at the color, so like Ghost's fur. She could paint herself with it.

Today she watched him especially closely, waiting for a grimace or a

stumble. Neither came. She had kept track of time, while Ghost devoted his attention to the ferns on the forest floor and the lichens girding bark. He did not yet realize what day this was.

He had consumed one leaf-wrapped package in the morning and would eat another before he sank again into a long and dreamless sleep. The tightly-bound servings resisted spoilage. Ghost wanted to save the spent leaves for future study.

"I no longer feel as though I carry her," he mused aloud, shifting his pack. "She has become so light." The words felt strange in his mouth. When did he last speak aloud? He would need to converse when they met others. He squinted in bright sunlight as they crossed into the meadow.

Piri reminded him, *You still have dried meat from the cabin. It will sustain you for a few days more, once she is gone.*

"I'd almost forgotten." Ghost shook his head. "Imagine that. The last time I ate Yata--"

He stopped and stared openly at Piri. She smiled back.

"--was before the lab was destroyed." He squatted and shrugged off his bundle, unrolling parchment. He bypassed his own notes to read Piri's delicate script. "My symptoms should have begun manifesting yesterday."

*They may yet appear.* Piri's hand cupped his cheek. *BrokenThread lived without Yata, but she was ill.*

Ghost returned the parchment to his pack and stood, hoisting it to his shoulders. "What was inside BrokenThread that made her so extraordinary?"

*You said she and I had the same animalcules.*

He nodded. "If our peoples had a common ancestor--if she retained some of that commonality..." Piri's face looked suddenly stricken, but then the sadness fled. A lingering grief over Thread, perhaps. "Could there be other Masari with those traits?"

Piri smiled at him but hugged herself tightly across her stomach.

He drew her arms back out, caressing her hand. *I'm sorry. It is too soon for me to talk of this again.*

She shook her head. *It's not your fault.*

*But you're troubled.*

Piri's hands came up to Ghost's face but did not drum. Instead she explored the curves of his chops, looking up into eyes the color of storm clouds. A breeze teased his plum-colored hair.

She stood as high as his chest. Her fingers moved back down, finding a large rent in his tunic. She teased it open, finding a place where his pelt yielded to skin. She bestowed a kiss on his bony sternum, letting her lips linger.

His arms came around her as much as her own pack allowed. He hunched over and kissed the top of her head.

She slid her hands underneath the burlap at his back and held him tighter.

He whispered, "This could be very dangerous."

*It is all right.*

"There are many ways I could hurt you."

*It is all right.*

Her fingers descended, trailing lightly along his buttocks. They moved toward his stomach, dipped lower.

Ghost caught his breath. "Our sizes are too different. I could damage you."

*No. It is all right.* Her hands withdrew briefly. Her pack slid to the grass. When she raised her head again she saw Ghost's bundle on the ground. He stood with his back to her, warring with himself.

She wished her tongue were whole. She wanted to shout after him, get him to turn around without tapping out a plea. She needed to tell him as others had told her. The Yata faces she'd forgotten became suddenly clear-- the women swaying on their feet, tears tracking into open mouths. They'd had no touch language at the farm but sometimes one pantomimed, her meaning unmistakable.

Piri could not speak but she could call. She filled her lungs. "*Hai!*"

His back muscles jumped. He turned.

Slowly, deliberately, she cradled her arms in front of her chest, rocking them back and forth. She raised her hands to her face and drew imaginary lines on her cheeks, then drew more imaginary lines up and down her arms.

Ghost squinted, his gaze turned inward. He still didn't understand.

She took a step toward him, touching her fingers again to her cheeks, then touching his chops.

How could she tell him that some of the farmers slipped naked into the breeding pens for sport, eager to be cinched so tightly they courted intense pain until it bled into pleasure? How could she explain that in the midst of blind couplings an embrace could change, turning exquisite thrusts into fiery impalement before her muscles had adjusted?

Realization began to dawn in Ghost's eyes, but he remained uncertain. Piri again cradled an imaginary infant, ran her finger down its tiny arm, then down her own. She reached out to Ghost, tracing the fur that ran from his wrist to his shoulder. There she drummed, *Some babies born at the farm were not allowed to live.*

His hands encircled her upper arms. He could barely speak. Finally he whispered, "Hybrids."

Yes.

He held her to him. Part of him realized his body shook, but that part was far away, looking down at the two of them as though they were specimens in a jar.

Her fingers traveled over him again, bringing him back to himself. Warmth flowed toward his groin. His slow hands eased beneath her tattered nightshirt. His fingertips remembered where she had healed, recalling the map of her burns and lacerations the day she had appeared at his door wrapped in WindTamer's vest.

He squatted until he was face to face with her. He touched his lips to hers, caressing her mangled, crippled tongue with his own.

Piri leaned into him, the patterns of his pelt a fine embroidery sliding against her palms. Her body spoke to her as though for the first time,

the veil of Destiny ripped away. She pulled her mouth from his long enough to lift his tunic above his head, then raised her arms as Ghost freed her from her nightshirt. His fur was a fine down against her breasts.

Ghost nuzzled the nape of her neck almost fearfully. On another day his first instinct would have been to clamp his jaws down on her windpipe, suffocating her. His ancestors had dispatched death efficiently. Even this far removed from them, he still knew what to do.

But he was sated now, had been for days. His body and his instincts were both at peace so long as his hunger was kept at bay.

Now a different instinct prevailed. He strained against his breeches, felt Piri negotiate cloth. The last rags dropped and he freed his feet from them. His hands explored her hairless skin, stopping at the wiry nap between her thighs, edging further. She guided him down to the grass.

*You will not hurt me*, she spelled on his stomach. *I will make sure of it.*

The air filled with wondrous sounds: warblers, the muted applause of windblown loosestrife. Even as her heart raced and heat traveled down her spine, Piri could not help but marvel at the clarity, the nuance surrounding them. She tasted, inhaled musk. Only her own biology, pure and clean, drove her now. She gazed down at beads of sweat forming on Ghost's face, felt his hip bones against her knees and shifted forward, began.

The center of Ghost's world became a red setting sun at midday. A sun pulled inexorably toward the mountains, guided into a narrow, glowing notch between dusky peaks. A gradual enfolding as night grew, round crimson twitching as it dipped into the horizon. He sank

a tiny fraction at a time, swallowed in deepening twilight.

He forced himself to remain still, savoring sweet ache. In time Piri sighed above him, signaling with her hips that she held him comfortably. His hips replied. They rocked slowly, then more insistently. Ghost levered himself up, grasping her across the back, letting his tongue do what hers could not. He permitted himself a mild nip at her shoulder, a careful teasing from his teeth. Their rhythm quickened.

Only one body pressed against hers. One pair of arms, one pair of legs. It was only the two of them now. There were no fences, no troughs, no slaughterhouses. There were only small flowers and weaving grasses, breezes playing on her skin. Two moans rising, each fueling the other until passion drenched them in waves and they cried out like birds wheeling freely on the high winds.

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The meadow shimmered. Ghost cushioned Piri on his chest and listened to her even, deep breathing. Her eyes were closed, her face untroubled.

But her skin remained white where he pressed his thumb, slow to turn back to bronze. She needed water, and coverings against the sun. "Piri--"

She smiled in her sleep and made a tiny sound.

"How I wish I didn't have to wake you."

He raised his head and planted kisses on her brow, her nose. When she yawned he caught her tongue on his own and coaxed it back into her mouth. Her lips closed. She freed him slowly.

"The sun's still strong and you're dehydrated. We need to move. More woods lie up ahead. We'll be sheltered there."

Piri sat up and tapped onto his chest, *I never saw you grin before. Not like a little boy.*

Ghost bent to kiss her navel. His lips wandered briefly across her torso. "I'll get us water." He gazed into her eyes and cleared his throat. "I—" He could not look away, couldn't speak further.

How could he verbalize what he could not understand, himself? Who was the farm boy who left home? Who was the outlaw who stole away from Crossroads to build a cabin and then a laboratory, dependent for years on secretive benefactors? Who was the man who quietly kept his own company, self-reliant and working in isolation, before he suddenly found a child at his door and then a Yata woman?

Now the child was dead and the laboratory was gone, the cabin beyond repair. He and Piri had nothing left but each other, wandering lost in a foreign land. And yet, not lost.

*I don't know who I am*, Ghost realized, his fingers stilled. *I don't know what I am.*

And yet he knew, somehow. He just didn't have the words.

He said, "I don't know what I would do without you."

She took his hand in hers. *You would live.* Her cheek brushed his knuckles. *Go get water.*

## CHAPTER 48

FeatherFly gloated. The new touch-language gave him a much clearer grasp of his mnemonics, enough to lord his new skills over MossDancer.

That wasn't right. He should feel guilty. He should be worried about his sister tracking smugglers, not be so eager to best his study partner.

He'd laughed at WindTamer's surprise when they all picked up the tapping sequences so easily. FeatherFly knew early on that whoever invented the touch-language must have come from a hunting family. To realize it was RiverRun gave him a jolt. She was only a baby!

Most important, he now had a secret. They all did.

HigherBrook had returned for his parchments as promised. ShadowGrass handed him scribbles of vague generalizations. FeatherFly was proud of his father for playing a drunk, unable to answer simple questions. Let the authorities think NightShout was a buffoon, it just proved how stupid they really were. Anyone who picked on FeatherFly's family was a jerk, even one who represented the Chamber.

NightShout still had trouble speaking, his voice slurring over their spoken conversations. But his fingers retained their steadiness, his drumming precise and authoritative. He could sit at the table but had to sip his tea a bit at a time, through a long, thin bone.

The past two days had turned FeatherFly's world topsy-turvy. Masari carrying drugs through forbidden land! Yata kept in breeding pens! A secret cabin built by SunDog, the weird one. FeatherFly remembered him vaguely: TripStone's boyfriend. That figured.

*I know I can find it*, he drummed excitedly on his father's arm. *Let me*

*go. I want to see the cabin!*

*No, son. They'll track us if we look for it now.*

FeatherFly snorted in exasperation. WindTamer had scowled when NightShout told them about RiverRun. Her parents should know where she was. FeatherFly was sure his mother agreed with him. He looked to ShadowGrass, who stood with her arms folded across her chest and a faraway look on her face. RiverRun was only a little bit younger than he. Surely she'd talk to FeatherFly if he could find her.

WindTamer had taken NightShout aside and the men had tapped each other's arms for a long time. When they were finished WindTamer looked grave and sick and NightShout's eyes were clouded over. FeatherFly kept asking his father what was wrong until NightShout slapped his hands away. WindTamer just shook his head.

"It's two days to Meat Day," ShadowGrass said, to no one in particular. "If TripStone isn't back here by then, where will she get Yata? The calendars are different in Rudder and Promontory."

"Very different in Promontory," WindTamer growled.

FeatherFly asked, "How do you know?" and was met with stoic silence.

Promontory must get Yata from the farm, then. FeatherFly rested his head in his hands, trying to imagine it. He ran his fingers through his hair, not knowing what to think.

ShadowGrass studied the gun rack next to the family shrine. All four of their rifles hung on their hooks--hers, NightShout's, TripStone's, and the unadorned training rifle that FeatherFly had to admit was his until he earned his own.

His mother lifted TripStone's gun and began to clean it. "In case she comes home and doesn't have time to prepare. I'll hang it up in her room."

NightShout limped toward ShadowGrass, his leg still in a splint. He slipped his arm around her waist.

She patted his hand. "I'm all right."

He tapped a reply on her arm. She frowned.

## **CHAPTER 49**

TripStone awakened with the dawn and groaned. Bad enough for them to feed her Yata meat before her time, unsanctified, its origin unknown. Too late she felt the effects of the soporific DamBuster had slipped into her stew. She had breathed hard, fighting listlessness. As though from far away she heard DevilChaser say, "The longer you stay awake, the less able your body is to heal." Then the buzzing in her bandaged arm ceased and her pallet met the back of her head.

She wrinkled her nose, not at strong herbs but at the sharp, metallic air. Stark contrasts assailed her when she opened her eyes. All the colors were too bright, all the outlines too harsh. At least she could see well enough to find her way to the chamber pot, brassy and garish. The sound of her own pissing clanged painfully inside her head.

Her right arm throbbed less than before but that could be the drugs. It was still swollen. Someone snored from behind a closed door.

She should be home meditating, laying out her ritual kerchief, setting her rifle in its sacramental hooks on the wall of her room. Her mother

must be frantic. All the more reason to finish what she'd come here to do.

She slipped off her boots and edged toward the door, opened it a crack, and winced hard. Simple daylight blinded her again. She wiped away tears, blinking until the knife edge left her sight and she could continue on.

She opened the door wider and stepped down. A large hand locked around her left wrist.

DamBuster said, "No guest leaves before breakfast. House policy."

TripStone studied his barrel chest, his thick neck. His smile was genuine, with no trace of malice in it. Still, she was a prisoner here. "And after breakfast?"

"That's for DevilChaser to decide."

She said, "He sleeps better than you do," and DamBuster laughed. Her heart sank as he guided her back indoors. "I'd like to watch you in the kitchen, if you don't mind."

"You don't trust me."

"I have no reason to."

"You're alive," he said. "That's reason enough."

His pantry was better organized than her mother's. TripStone squinted at bottles whose labels bore unfamiliar names. Their contents were similarly strange.

"Normally I cook outdoors in the hot season." DamBuster lit a small hearth and waited for the wood to catch. "That's because normally

our guests don't try to escape. It's going to get brutal in here." He pointed to a wooden counter. "Chicken eggs, fresh from the coop before you awoke. Oregano. Savory. Crushed mustard seed. Bell pepper. Scallion. They're all fresh-picked; we grow them in soil brought in from Rudder. And rabbit--since you didn't seem to care for my Yata yesterday." He indicated the bottles with a wave. "I won't be using the medicinals until DevilChaser renews your bandages."

TripStone swallowed. She waited while DamBuster chopped the meat and vegetables, cracked the eggs, set his black skillet above the flames. She looked down at the floor and shifted her weight from foot to foot, cursing herself inwardly for her sheepishness. She was behaving like her brother.

Finally she raised her head and asked, "How do I get to the Warehouse?"

The mixture sizzled as DamBuster poured it into cast iron. "Getting to the Warehouse is easy. Getting inside it is hard." He looked back over his shoulder. "Where are you from?"

"Crossroads."

He nodded. "Over there it's called the Rotunda." He chortled. "Crossroads. Could have guessed."

TripStone set her good hand on her hip. "Guessed what?"

"Never mind." He turned back to the skillet. "It's not my place to say."

She sniffed the air. The omelette's heady aroma tore at her stomach. She wiped her moistening mouth while DamBuster wasn't looking. After her time in the salt pan, the heat in the kitchen was inconsequential.

Her benefactor backed away from the hearth long enough to remove a sweat-soaked tunic. He lifted his skillet from the flames and set a pot of water to boil, then scraped the omelette onto plain earthenware plates. He added no drugs.

"Thank you," TripStone said, haltingly, "for letting me watch you."

"You still don't know what I'll be putting into your tea," DamBuster said, drily. He raised his eyebrows at her distress. "Oh come, now. I'm *joking*."

Since when had she become so fearful? TripStone bit her lip and tried to summon her courage. It must be her infirmity, her unfamiliarity with everyone and everything since she'd left home. She had lost her quarry. She needed to improvise.

There were no stippled bones on the walls here, no shrines. TripStone looked upon an expanse of unadorned wood and stone. Labeled cabinets described what must be surgical instruments. Beakers and pipettes lined tidy shelves. *Ghost would like this place*. She frowned, worrying about the people she'd left behind.

Her chair bore no cushions but was comfortable. DamBuster set her plate before her and said, "Don't wait." He returned to the kitchen.

The fork in her left hand wavered only a bit. She had learned to shoot with either index finger on the trigger. *Never let a good limb go to waste*.

The bedroom door creaked open. DevilChaser emerged in breeches and shirttails, rubbing sleep from his eyes. His thin face brightened when he looked at her. "You're smiling. That's good."

TripStone murmured, "I was just remembering something my father

said once."

DamBuster carried two plates to the table and set them down. He pecked DevilChaser on the cheek. "Mornin', sleepyhead."

"Mm." DevilChaser scooped a forkful into his mouth and frowned. "This is rabbit."

"Yep." DamBuster dropped onto his chair, one ear tuned to the pot. "Our guest is from Crossroads."

"I don't care where she's from." DevilChaser leaned forward and grasped TripStone's good arm, his tenor rising. "I'm not going to have a patient die on me because of some antiquated superstition! Young woman, you've got a wound that will fester and kill you without enough Yata to boost your immune system. If you want us to let you leave, you're going to have to eat it." He glowered at DamBuster.

"Getting her to eat *first* was my top priority. There's a reason I'm using the hearth on this sweltering day."

TripStone whispered, "You're not going to drug me again."

DevilChaser released her. "Not if you eat what you're supposed to." He looked at her curiously. "If you're so high-and-mighty about the Covenant, what were you doing in the salt pan? You must have been in Skedge. That's off-limits to your people."

The rabbit was chewy and comforting between her teeth. She swallowed. "You said you didn't ask questions."

"That was yesterday."

She looked from one man to the other. They'd saved her life. They

weren't going to kill her now.

"She also wants to get into the Warehouse," DamBuster said. "She asked me where it was."

DevilChaser regarded TripStone quizzically.

She took a deep breath. "I know about Destiny Farm. I was tracking smugglers. I'm pretty sure they were carrying sacks of Destiny but I can't say for certain. They talked about the Warehouse. They'd been carrying gunpowder when they headed into Basc, and they wore hidden, compact guns that--" Her left hand tried to outline the shape.

"Six-shooters." DevilChaser rubbed his chops and squinted. "That's common enough, no surprise there. But our gunpowder's already in the bullet. We've had it that way for years."

DamBuster frowned. "You're sure they were carrying gunpowder?"

"I'm sure," TripStone snapped. "They dropped some at the Alvav border. I examined it myself. I spotted them after they'd come from Basc and tracked them to--" She sighed. "To the salt pan."

The men regarded each other for a moment, their faces working.

DamBuster insisted, "It's *supposed* to be a tavern joke."

DevilChaser shook his head. "Doesn't sound like a tavern joke now."

"The Chamber can't be that barbaric."

"Oh yes, they can." DevilChaser pushed away his half-eaten plate and pulled his chair next to TripStone's. "Keep eating. I'm going to change your bandages."

She pulled away. "Not until you tell me what's going on. What 'tavern joke'?"

"The Yata militia," DamBuster said. He headed to the kitchen; TripStone heard him remove the pot from its hooks. "Too hilarious to be believed. Like those tall tales about--" He waved his arms. "Prehistoric draft animals. A Yata with a gun is as likely as a goat pulling a plow."

"Better harness up the goats, then." DevilChaser retrieved a clutch of steel instruments from the cabinets and a bottle of Yata skin. "Promontory gives the militia our outdated guns, the militia gives us Destiny. The more frightening part of the joke is that the Chamber is betting on the Yata."

TripStone asked, "To do what?"

DevilChaser sighed and looked her in the eye. "To destroy your hunting community. Without those skills, Crossroads will be forced to buy from Destiny Farm." He shook his head. "Until now we thought it was just a cruel yarn."

DamBuster brought a tray of fragrant tea and dropped fresh poultices by DevilChaser's elbow. "You've probably picked up by now that we think you folks are a bit--backward." He pulled his chair to the other side of her and folded his arms across the table top. "But the Covenant is your business. Honestly, we think it's quaint. Noble, even. We're not much enamored of Destiny Farm, ourselves. We buy from the angels because their Yata's more natural and doesn't contain drugs. It tastes better, and the practice of taking Yata who are already dead is more merciful. But sometimes the Little Masari don't die according to our needs, and then we buy from the farm."

"But Skedge doesn't know about the farm," TripStone said through

gritted teeth. "They think they're giving you bed snuff for your own problems. Destiny Farm is founded on a lie."

"Our Chamber would call it a necessity." DevilChaser unwrapped linen and checked swelling. "But you're right. That gives us the choice between a lie and a myth."

"She needs to warn her people," DamBuster said.

TripStone glared at him. "I need to bring *evidence* to my people. That's why I want to get into the Warehouse. That's where SandTail and BrushBurn were headed."

DevilChaser nodded. "They're involved with the farm, all right. But you're in no shape to try breaking into the Warehouse. It's guarded like a fortress. As for evidence--" He flashed DamBuster a grin. "Dear, this young woman--what did you say your name was?"

"TripStone."

"Lovely name. TripStone here could use a slab of Destiny's finest. Something she can carry inside her vest, something that's hard for her to lose. Why don't you take a quick jog to the general store? Make sure the Yata's stamped and that the ink hasn't smudged."

DamBuster pushed back his chair. "I'll put on a fresh tunic."

"And get a receipt." DevilChaser picked up steel and touched it to flesh.

TripStone clamped her jaw to keep from yelling aloud.

"Painful?"

"Yes!"

"Good. That means there's no nerve damage, which could have spread to your brain. Shout! It'll make you feel better." He applied Yata skin and poultices to areas of discoloration. "We've gotten almost all the poison out. The rest is up to you." He called toward the door. "DamBuster! Before you go, how about bringing us some of that *real* meat you've got stashed away?"

## CHAPTER 50

Zai caressed her rifle with a last rag, a last stiff brush. She made sure its repeating mechanism worked smoothly. It was a part of her now, molded to her body. Or perhaps her body had changed. Long hours in the sun had creased her skin and oiled her short hair. The muscles on her arms and legs stood out like cords. The ripples on her stomach bore no trace of the loose flesh left behind by her sons' births.

She turned up the wick in her lamp and reached for the nearest pot of clay. Her callused fingers lifted a gob that looked like congealed blood. Some of her hutmates were already covered in it.

"Gods, you look like stinking Woolies." She laughed and shook her head. "Just be sure I don't shoot you by mistake."

A low alto echoed from across the room. "The real ones will be wearing Covenant kerchiefs. Watch for those."

None of them knew who'd been the first to paint their skin to look like Masari. Zai wished it had been her idea. A fitting tribute to the legend of Ata and his daughters.

*But we are not trying to become the Woolies this time. We are*

*taking their power and turning it against them.*

Zai shut her eyes and rubbed clay into her hair, working it in, teasing out loose particles. When it was safe to look, she reached for more and began to paint her arms, her chest, her face and neck. Not too thickly, or the paste would flake off. She rubbed it into her skin, where it would mingle with her oils and sweat even after it dried back into powder.

Chains and sprockets whirled in the distance as carts lined up to take her and the other troops out of the camp and toward the hunting grounds. She would not be blindfolded this time, but would learn the route back home. They would travel well before dawn, lanterns and torches lighting the way.

If Gria's mission succeeded, Abri and Evit would never have to face a Reckoning. Zai's sons would use their parchment and their vials of ink to write their own histories for themselves and for their children--not carry their pens in pouches, to give blessings to Masari who would murder and eat them.

Eat them, or reject their flesh altogether.

Rage boiled inside her. She spat on the ground and plunged her fingers back into the pot.

A wavering hand brushed her wrist ahead of the red smear. The small flames around her sculpted the room's yellow glow into high cheekbones, full lips.

*Go away, Ulik.* She lifted her fingers to her chin and drew a scimitar shape extending to her ear. He was a trick of the light now, nothing more.

*I will always love you, Zai.*

His voice slid around her like sun-drenched water, threatening to carry her away. She closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. There was no portal to the beyond, no afterlife. There were only bones and entrails, fanciful manipulations of their bodies by the Masari. Desecrations of the Dirt People.

When she opened her eyes she saw only the faces of her hutmates flickering in the lamp light. She painted her other cheek. She lifted her chin, spreading crimson across her throat.

~ ~ ~

Gria paced before the carts while Watu assigned their runners. She would send her archers and spearmen to the ridge, where they would flatten themselves against the ground and lie in wait. Her shooters would take their posts in the valley according to information from the latest reconnaissance. The newer, less-experienced recruits would run the weapons and ammunition already hidden in Basc, as needed, listening for syncopated trills and relaying coded requests.

They would take the trails on the outskirts of Basc; it was too risky to wheel their carts among the settlements. Not only did her troops carry weapons, they sported war paint now as well. Watu and his runners boasted their own false chops and pelts of dye. They bustled about, checking harnesses and chains, greasing sprockets and gear clusters.

Gria's own skin and hair remained untinted. Masari coloring adorned many within the camp, but not all. She was glad of those soldiers who refrained from the practice.

Clouds ranged across the sky, blotting out the stars, but she could

still see enough to tell the time. She must roust the others from their huts, have them gird themselves with leather straps and sheaths. Triumphant chants already carried across the lake.

The troops were armored and waiting for her when she arrived at the training grounds. Shadows from their torches danced chaotically across the clearing. Dark silhouettes greeted her with rifles, bows, spears upraised: "**VICTORY!**"

She thrust her own rifle skyward and yelled, "Tomorrow we reclaim what is ours! Death to the Covenant!"

**"DEATH TO THE WOOLIES!"**

Their chanting turned rhythmic. The soldiers stamped. So, Gria thought, *this is what it becomes. Primitive blood lust.*

But her troops were focused, and ready. She must seize this moment because it would not come again. She walked straight-backed to the summoning circle and lifted a heavy mallet. The gong beside her rang a long, low, steady tone. In time both it and the chants diminished. Her soldiers stood at attention, silent and waiting.

Gria climbed a tall boulder, took a wide stance on the summit, and drew a deep breath. "Sisters and brothers, soon we will make our way to the transport carts that will take us home. Soon we will take our positions in the killing field and we will render it pure again.

"All around me I see nothing but courage and valor. Eagerness. Energy. Your training here has not placed those things within you. Arriving at this camp did not place them within you.

"No--your spirit was honed long before you swallowed your own terror and asked the first questions that led you here. It was honed through

your suffering and through the suffering of your families. It was honed through the indignities of the Covenant that have inflamed your hearts and minds, that have twisted its blade inside the Yata soul.

"You are here--we are all here--through the grace and immortality of the Dirt People. We bear their name once again. They burn within us. They *live*."

She could not see faces clearly in the flickering light, but she could hear their collective breaths. Even breaths, unhurried. Ready.

"We once ranged throughout these lands," she called out. "We harvested our own food, wove our own clothes. We fashioned our own weapons and prayed to our own gods. The gods of the Dirt People gave us intelligence and cunning, determination and strength.

"They are not the gods of the Covenant, who disguise defeat as mercy. Who command helplessness and name it veneration. You could have lived quietly as slaves under their dicta. Your longing for the freedom our ancestors bequeathed to us has brought you here.

"Soon we will enter a terrain most of you know well. Those dear to us have shed the blood that grows its flowers, nourishes the roots of its trees. Spilled ink blackens its soil. We will take this terrain as our prize, as payment for the sacrifices our people have made.

"To one side lies Crossroads, a village dependent on its hunters. The Masari who live there are killers by nature, but only a select few have practiced the art of murder. The others have not. Most Masari *fear* the taking of a Yata life. Their fear becomes our *strength*.

"To the other side lies Basc, which bends its neck to the hunt and prepares to mourn its dead at the hands of those hunters. To many in our own land we are sinners, perhaps demons. To them we must say:

Yes, I have sinned. I have deprived you of your dependence. I have robbed you of your right to be slaughtered.

"Say to them: You have the right to live into your old age without shame. You have the right to dandle grandchildren on your knee without guilt. You have the right to limit the fruits of your womb, to limit the passage of your seed. *To raise a civilization that preserves its own heritage, not food for an accursed race.*"

Cheers erupted; raised weapons breached the darkness. Gria remained standing. A nocturnal breeze teased her close-cropped hair. She waited for her troops to quiet.

Clouds covered the sky, but she didn't need to know the time. Time now depended on the skill of the runners listening from afar as they fitted their harnesses, wide leather straps, around their waists and hips.

She made sure her voice remained strong enough for them to hear. "Some of us may not return from the task that lies ahead of us. We have been told to leave our fates to the gods, to walk placidly away from the muzzle of a gun and into the next world. We have been taught not to fear death but to welcome it, to be complacent in the face of it.

"Today we retain our fearlessness before death, but we vanquish our complacency. Complacency is our battle's first and greatest casualty. We shall strike the head of complacency from its shoulders and watch it roll down the mountains of Basc. And with the power of its beheading we shall shatter its demon consort, the Covenant.

"Listen! At dawn we advance against creatures who all their lives have been trained to kill. Witness this truth: they have been trained to kill, but not to wage war. War does not dissect neatly. It does not

subsist on sacrament.

"The Masari know how to spill blood. They know our bones and our muscles. They know our entrails. They hold our ruptured hearts in their hands and they call it holy. But they do not know what it means to be in combat. Their hunting grounds will become our battlefield. Our complacency is our casualty. *Their* complacency shall be our victim.

"Listen! They have nursed at the rifle from the time they have suckled their mothers' breasts. They are one with their weapon. But they have known only *one* weapon.

"Their gun fires a single bullet, not five. They carry no bows, no spears, no spear-throwers. They carry bullets but no poisons with which to dress an arrowhead. We are inferior to them in our skill with a gun, but we have weapons in our hands, and in these we have everything.

"They will not be expecting us.

"Neither will our own people be expecting us. We will fight beside those who are ready to die not for their freedom but for deception instilled as dogma, for lies recited and memorized as irrefutable truth. We must conquer them not with weapons but with our resolve. We are determined to reclaim our history, and if it is the will of the gods then we will leave our bones upon the land. Not on Masari walls, not in Masari tables and chairs, not lining Masari beds."

Her voice rang through the darkness. "Some of you have left loved ones behind, who have grieved your absence. Meditate as we pass beyond their huts, and think of them. Think of them when you are on the battlefield. They will make your aim true. They will quiet whatever fear still resides in your hearts.

Some of you are without family. You have lost your bloodline to the Covenant's abominations. Tomorrow you fight in memory of the dead. Or you have lost your family because they fear your passion and your commitment to end their suffering. To make their lives more meaningful. Tomorrow you forgive them through the power of their liberation.

"On your shoulders rest the future of all Yata. May the blessings of the Dirt People guide us all. On this day we shed the skin of the hunted and emerge as the hunters, the victorious." Her rifle pointed, a massive extension of her finger, showing the way. *"To the transports!"*

The air shimmered with rhythmic shouts as combatants snatched their torches from the soil and raised them high. Lines of light and fury snaked past Gria. She descended her granite stage and took up the rear.

The carts had begun to advance by the time she reached them—a chorus of whizzing, slapping chains shifting with changes in terrain. Soldiers crowded into the open beds, sitting tightly and compactly, holding their weapons against their chests.

She watched a departing runner wait for the cart ahead to clear the trail before pulling out. Long chains extended to turn one gear and the next, and the next. Teeth interlocked. Metal spun, revolutions quickening, before the wagon's large wooden wheels at last began to turn. The mass of a dozen passengers lightened until their weight became no more than a breeze. Evervigilant for changes in slope, the runner shifted controls quickly so as not to be overtaken by the cart's sudden, relentless gravity.

Watu took up his position, double-checking the tightness of his harness. His passengers continued to chant. Their torches lit his way.

Gria slid past his cart's wooden walls and gave his shoulder a last, hard squeeze. She bounded ahead, threading her way to the front.

## CHAPTER 51

TripStone followed the rhythm of wheels over gravel, listening to the runner's smooth manipulation of gears, the quiet whirr of chains in blurred motion. He would take her as far as the marketplace at Rudder—to the bazaar where she had traded her combs for Ghost's linens and bottles, her baubles for finely-sanded glass. When she peered through that glass it had turned the whorls on her fingertips into broad rows, like beans planted in spirals. Ghost had combined the lenses then, showing her how they made even the invisible into something titanic.

DamBuster had stitched the slab of farm-grown Yata into her vest before DevilChaser bound her injured arm securely to her side, over the oblong lump. It weighed on her as surely as this crushing steel in which the men had carefully buried her, hiding her from the trader.

DevilChaser kept asking, "Too heavy?" and she kept shaking her head, until her lungs began to protest. DamBuster had coiled the last gleaming chain to hide her face. She had wondered as a child what death by pressing would feel like. Now she thought she must know. Her nostrils filled with the sharp tang of grease. Metal slithered about her as the wagon shifted, thick mechanical serpents hissing with friction.

But the runner was quick. He knew his way in the lantern-lit dark, able to get her much closer to home by the onset of daylight than she could manage alone.

He would reach the marketplace shortly before dawn, ahead of the

local merchants. He would be tired and hungry, would follow his nose to a warm breakfast in town. TripStone would have only a short time to slide from the heavy press of chains on all sides, climb over the gate, and drop low to the ground. She would need to hurry over the pass and continue her journey off the trail, skirting the outskirts of Rudder until she reached Crossroads.

The enticing scent of Yata cut through that of the cargo and her stomach rumbled. In the end she had succumbed, letting DamBuster coax his stew into her under DevilChaser's hawklike scrutiny. The meat delivered by the angels had been tender, the departed young. TripStone pictured PetalDove with her many combs and baubles and her beatific smile, and wondered whether the anonymous meal might have been a playmate of the girl's. What were the stories behind the morsels in her mouth? Did anyone remember the dead?

Derailleurs moved. Chains *thunked* into new configurations as the terrain dipped, turned, leveled out. The runner sang a jaunty tune. His voice was cavernous, floating through the sounds of clattering wheels and sliding steel.

TripStone had never before traversed the official Masari trade route between Promontory and Rudder. She couldn't tell where she was by shifts in altitude alone. The stars above her would point the way if her head weren't buried. The vegetation to either side of the trail would inform her senses, but she was overwhelmed by the chemical stench of lubricants.

Cold metal draped about her cheeks, fouling her hair and sideburns. She clenched and unclenched her muscles, forcing blood to circulate through a body that became more and more painfully squeezed. The meat at her chest would bear the imprint of her strapped, cushioned arm. Through the night she fought the onset of numbness as her deliverer warbled, his wagon jangling over the well-worn road.

~ ~ ~

Echoes changed. Sound reshaped itself, bouncing off buildings.

The runner executed a slow turn. His wheels reversed and stopped. The steel by TripStone's eyes reflected the dim, ruddy glow of encroaching dawn. She quieted her breath and listened for the whisper of a harness sliding to the ground, for the diminishing crunch of boots on cobblestones.

The runner made her task easy. His whistling continued, trailing off. She could measure his distance from her by his music.

When she was sure he had gone inside, she grasped a chain with her unbound hand and pulled. The chain slithered toward her. She grabbed another, straining until lubrication overcame the weight, enough to move her scant inches forward.

Breathing hard, TripStone clawed her way toward the gate, pausing to clear sliding metal from her face. Links slipped about her as she slowly rose toward the top of the pile, giving her lungs more and more room to fill. She fought her way into the air, birthing herself from a cold metallic womb.

Rudder's marketplace surrounded her in shadowy gray tinged orange and pink. She had never seen it so empty. Soon the wide square would fill with carts, tents, and lean-tos, and would blossom in color and sound and scent. Streams bubbled in the distance, eclipsed by insistent, repetitive cock crow.

TripStone spent only a moment marveling. Her arm shot out. Her hand grasped the top of the gate and she hauled herself from the press of chains until her bones threatened to break. At last the steel

relented and the mechanical serpents slid from her with an odd fluidity, leaving her streaked black with grease.

She flipped herself over the gate and tumbled onto the dusty road. She caught her breath and struggled to her feet, covered in dirt. On any other Meat Day she would be rising from a fragrant bath, cleansed and purified, her mind cleared of distraction.

On this Meat Day, the parcel crushed inside TripStone's vest held much greater significance than a full-grown Yata draped over her shoulder.

She limped toward the sound of flowing water, wondering if her body would forever bear the bruises of chainlinks, if her skin had been indelibly patterned. But her pain soon began to ease, her blood washing freely through her veins. She ducked into the outlying brush wavering between Masari and Yata land.

This must have been the way WindTamer had come with Piri, guiding her to Ghost's cabin. The signs of their passage would be long gone, absorbed into the lush, fertile landscape that whispered against TripStone's breeches, turning from gray to green in the brightening day.

## **CHAPTER 52**

Early morning mist edged in under the door, spreading from stone to stone. ShadowGrass watched it collide silently with the steam lifting from her vacated bath, the slow swirl of warm eddies melding with cold. Her skin prickled as her pelt dried.

Her daughter had not come home.

ShadowGrass had listened in the darkness at TripStone's door, then finally stepped inside to gaze upon the empty walls and the rifle inert on its hooks. Wordlessly she turned on her bare heel, eased her daughter's door shut, and attended to ritual.

She brushed her fur, her hair. She lifted a tiny finger of bone and bristle and combed her chops. She raised the silky weave of her ivory-colored kerchief, riotous with pictograms that appeared to move uneasily in the dim light. The eyes of the gods peered beneath the bony confines of her skull and down into her heart as she knotted the sacred cloth about her head. They lifted from her all her burdens but one: the ancient burden. The burden that defined and comforted her.

Already her muscles began to practice their motions in anticipation of the hunt. Beneath her stately glide, they twitched. She slipped into cleaned and oiled leather, laced her breeches, tied her vest securely about bound breasts. Her feet warmed pleasingly within their boots. Her rifle responded cleanly to her ministrations. ShadowGrass slipped its padded strap about her shoulders, the light embrace of its stock and barrel resting against her back next to her hunting satchel.

NightShout and FeatherFly looked up from their breakfast and stood as she stepped into the common room. She almost smiled through her solemnity. Her son was never meant to cook. Her family's eggs were runny, the cheese unappetizingly mashed. If TripStone were here, she would have seen to the meal.

*No. If TripStone were here the hunt would be hers, and I would be crouched over the fire instead.*

She bowed, her homage low and deliberate in response to theirs. For a moment she imagined the pain her husband must feel as blood rushed to his disfigured head. This time his eyes gleamed with

defiance, an old fever rising when they straightened and beheld each other. The stare plunged her back into the sidelines after a long-ago hunt, into a young body flushed at his cockiness and feeling her own.

He was ready again to grasp the gun that had lain idle for so many Meat Days. Even lame, even with his sense of smell crippled. He bore the visible signs of his Atonement now, freed somehow from his own debilitating guilt by the strange Yata woman who had attacked him--and who in so doing returned him to himself.

ShadowGrass's face blazed at the thought. She turned away when NightShout's lips quirked into a smile. Her carnal thoughts on this day were sacriligious enough.

Her boots echoed on flagstones. The mist rose and dissipated by the time she reached the edge of Crossroads, joining the hunters and census takers clustered around tents. She stood with her arms folded, gazing calmly toward the hunting grounds. Her fingers drummed quietly on her biceps. Startled, she realized she was touch-talking to herself.

The air retained a slight chill. The seasons were changing. Crows called to each other in otherwise placid woods, a bubble of calm awaiting the first crack of gunshot.

~ ~ ~

Zai reviewed her sight lines as she and her comrades edged through the brush. Gria was further forward, motioning troops hidden in the tall grass. Try as she might, Zai could not see the soldiers waiting patiently on the ridge, though she knew they were there.

White light spread its halo upward from the high peaks, searing blue out of the sky. Soon her neighbors would leave the safe confines of

Basic to pad quietly through the woods, their belts filled with parchment, quills, and ink. She would choose one to shadow, scanning the landscape for signs of Masari moving in from Crossroads.

She knew which hunter she would most like to kill, but only the gods could grant her that request. For now, she was part of a greater whole, a greater purpose. She squatted comfortably, her rifle resting easily in her painted arms.

A lieutenant made eye contact with her, nodding. She nodded back and advanced her position.

Where had Ulik fallen? Where was that hallowed ground? And her parents--where had their ink spilled, their blood dripped?

More than once Zai had crouched here, cowering at the sound of a life passing, managing to preserve herself until the next hunt. She had become blank of all but instinct, wary of the winds and of distant movement. Now, at long last, she was prepared for a Woolie to spot her, who would expect her to approach with reverence and docility, fulfilling her sacred obligation. This time she scanned the woods eagerly for a flash of kerchief.

The sky gained brilliance. A breeze rustled the canopy around her. Or perhaps those were footfalls.

~ ~ ~

The hunters fanned out across the meadow, closing in on dense vegetation. ShadowGrass exchanged somber glances with the others. A couple of them gave her questioning looks. They knew it was TripStone's turn to be here. The burden of Atonement must be shared, and stories of Adzon still flared up in ShadowGrass's

memory like tiny perpetual flames of his soul. She must clear her mind and devote the proper measure of reverence toward the prey she was destined to kill.

Yata were already here. She could smell them.

The sky continued to blanch. Season-end heat began to climb. ShadowGrass became more sinuous, her senses more acute. She moved as if in a dream. Her nose, the prickling at her neck, the recesses of her spirit directed her. She squatted and eased forward, balanced on strong thighs.

A flock of birds exploded from a distant tree, too far away for her to tell what they were. The ridge above her seemed to swell against the bright sky, the contrast between light and dark so extreme the mountains lost their depth.

~ ~ ~

A pewee's piping slurred down and then up, followed by the queedling of a jay and finally a thrush's fluted song. Gria replied, calling like an ovenbird, "Teacher, teacher, teacher."

The hunters and their intended prey had entered the forest. Message received.

Even sight unseen, she felt the movement of her troops through the woods' botanicals. The trees and rocks became a part of her. After years away from these lands and despite the changes wrought by nature, the forest remained a second skin.

The ancient play unfolded. Gria knew she was being tracked, knew her scent announced her presence. It was an odd sensation. As an herbalist she'd been spared this experience. As an exile she'd been

forbidden any entrance into the hunting grounds at all.

There were hungry Masari out there who wanted her. They could almost taste her. And, amazingly, they would not shoot her without their ritual being fulfilled. She spied a distant glimmer of kerchief, a visual announcement that already placed the hunters at a disadvantage.

She almost pitied them. They were predators stripped of their instincts. Dumb beasts without sense.

The ridge remained quiet. Good. Arrows and spears could rain down upon them at any moment, but she had counseled patience. Wait until hunter and hunted beheld each other. Wait for them to stand, for the hunters to become fully visible, mesmerized by the approach of their prey. There was no sense placing Yata at risk when the Masari made such easy targets.

But they would not be easy targets for long. Not after the first transgressions.

## **CHAPTER 53**

The Covenant fell not with a shot, but with a whistle.

Movement stirred in ShadowGrass's peripheral vision, at the edge of a copse. A Yata male, barely come of age, rose hesitantly within the thicket, his face expressionless. Even from a distance, ShadowGrass could see his chest heave.

To her side TreeRain waited in the tall grass, statuesque and sad. The boy gravitated toward his killer, crossing into the open. His dignity built. His feet carried him slowly through the thickened air.

TreeRain stood at calm attention and barely breathed, already grieving at the loss of one so young-- light, so light--to carry back to the census takers.

TreeRain was a superlative hunter. She would shoot cleanly.

ShadowGrass was distracted by a flash on the ridge. Something screamed through the air from above and *thocked* through leather. TreeRain's brief cry was no more than a gurgle before she fell.

The boy trembled, his loincloth darkening. A short Masari wrestled him to the ground before raising a rifle, seeking a target. ShadowGrass flattened herself against dirt and crawled toward TreeRain, whose boot twitched and fell still. The small hunter whirled toward the scrabbling.

Not a hunter. Not Masari.

A bullet exploded, grazing ShadowGrass's heel. She yelped and dove toward the thicket. Another bullet whizzed by her ear. *Impossible. No one can reload that fast.*

The air suddenly filled with whistles. A bone-colored kerchief flew through the air, stained with blood. Other arrows and spears hit louder targets. Painted Yata ran from cover, yelling. In a moment the air stank of gunpowder.

*Woolies*, they were shouting.

*Kill the Woolies.*

~ ~ ~

NightShout and FeatherFly craned their necks toward the window,

then kicked back their chairs simultaneously. Had his leg been good, NightShout would have outraced his son to the door. The Masari of Crossroads filled the streets, befuddled at the noise.

FeatherFly turned around and sprinted toward TripStone's room.

"That's not your gun," his father called.

"It is now." FeatherFly emerged armed, filling his pockets with ammunition.

NightShout grabbed his own rifle from its hooks and followed his son outside. Pain erupted through his leg. He could not hobble so fast.

Once he'd had Ghost's walking stick in his hands. He remembered swinging it wildly. He wished he had that stick now. He should have taken it with him. No matter.

The whole of the Hunt Guild stood at the border, each member cradling a weapon. Each looked stricken. They listened to too much gunshot and no bodies to show for it. Incoherent yells filled the air. In the distance a puff of white smoke billowed up: fire. The smoke darkened and began to spread.

NightShout glanced back at his fellow hunters, at the census takers, at the villagers advancing. If he had gone mad, then they all had.

RiverRun's father was the first to break through their collective shock, running toward the hunting grounds. Others fell in line beside him. Someone pressed a staff into NightShout's hands. He turned to find WindTamer looking grimly up at him.

He squeezed the carpenter's shoulder, raised the stick in salute, and limped over the border.

*"Hey, shrimp!"*

MossDancer's voice rang through the crowd. FeatherFly homed in on it.

*"Come on!"* The larger boy grabbed FeatherFly by the collar. "That's TripStone's gun!" MossDancer's eyebrows shot up, with more than a touch of admiration. "You're nuts. She'll have your head for dinner!"

The boys rushed forward in a surging tide but FeatherFly held back at the border's edge. They were not yet of age. They should wait for a call from the adults.

*"You've got a gun, stupid! Come on!"*

They were not yet of age, but they were hunters. They'd trained for years. FeatherFly slapped MossDancer's hand away from his neck and hurried on. Consecrated or not, he would not be bested by *moss puke*.

~ ~ ~

They appeared immaterial in the cloying smoke--the Yata man writing carefully on parchment, the Masari kneeling peaceably, his rifle on the ground between them. Even now, while around them bodies shattered and voices screamed of death.

Zai lunged, cursing. The parchment bled black with ink, its vessel overturned. The Yata tried to push her away but she had no patience for that. Too slowly, face crumpling, the hunter raised his rifle, but Zai was faster and more determined. The Masari's torso splattered, and then his head.

She had passed fallen comrades, many of them dead by fellow

recruits blinded by the fires. Poisoned arrows lodged in their stomachs. The bullets were harder to trace. Perhaps the Masari had dispensed with their fetish for accuracy in the face of their own extinction.

Someone too tall to be Yata darted haphazardly through the fumes. Zai aimed and fired, missed. She took off in pursuit. The Masari vanished but a shadowy figure stood before Zai, straining to see her arms, her face. The man began to walk toward her, slowly and methodically, reaching for his belt of writing provisions.

*"Idiot! I'm not a Woolie!"* She shoved her way past him, chasing wraiths.

Downwind from her, running in the other direction, Watu forced himself to ignore the stench of incinerated forest. Whole harvests of herbs were vanishing in smoke. Breeding cycles of fauna had been snuffed out.

Only the Masari were supposed to die, not the biota.

He turned a corner and the muzzle of a gun met his chest.

"Gods help me," ShadowGrass said, "for I am about to join my husband in his shame."

For a moment the air smelled startlingly sweet, a parting gift of Watu's imagination. He saw ShadowGrass's finger jerk against the trigger.

ShadowGrass glanced down at ruptured organs and splintered bone. No internal voice told her to meditate. Nothing told her to hoist Watu's body over her shoulder and carry him back to the census tents. No horns would sound calling her back to Crossroads. No quota of

sacrifice would be measured this day.

No voice told her to flee for cover, because her reflexes outraced her conscience. Bathed in blood, heel smarting, she rushed to a thick stand of ferns and dove deep inside, long enough to catch her breath and reload.

~ ~ ~

They dashed headlong across the grasses toward an ever-expanding cloud. FeatherFly's legs pumped hard to keep up with MossDancer's lope. The larger boy would not wait for him.

Several archers were still firing. FeatherFly grabbed MossDancer's tunic and pulled hard. They crashed to the ground and rolled. They got up and ran again, more cautiously this time.

Their lips curled back to taste scent--the sweet incineration of wood, the putrefaction of already-decaying gore, the stink of gunpowder.

More hunters emptied from Crossroads into fields that steamed with Masari sweat and fear. Sounds of rage and agony were everywhere.

Flames leapt through the canopy up ahead. The air turned more dense. Shapes appeared suddenly out of the smoke and vanished just as quickly. Arrows from crossbows sliced into tree trunks; spears tilted into the ground. Rifles shot and repeated, repeated again.

The boys glanced at each other, counting discharges. Gunshot filled the air like corn bursting over a fire.

MossDancer tugged FeatherFly aside to avoid tripping over the fallen. Dead Yata sprawled across dead Masari, mutilated and unrecognizable. FeatherFly felt wetness between his legs. He

ignored the chafing. A squat shape moved at the edge of his vision. He raised his rifle quickly and swung about, but the shadow was gone. Huddled together and coughing, the boys advanced.

Someone shouted at them in Yata. It was an angry command, telling them they should be elsewhere. MossDancer aimed toward the voice and fired, but the voice had moved.

Hands parted undergrowth. Sets of eyes peered curiously up at them, set within red-painted faces. One mouth broke into a grin, showing small, even teeth. Bodies rose from a ring of bushes not yet scorched. Ruddy clay sifted down from dyed hair as the circle closed in.

One of the men, armored in dark leather straps, stepped up until he and FeatherFly were nose to nose.

"They're not Yata," he called to the others. "They're *children*."

MossDancer quickly hoisted his gun again. He gasped as the point of a blade slipped through cloth, pricking his back. Tapered Yata fingers reached around him and rested on the barrel.

"You've already fired," the voice behind him said, smoothly. "You've got nothing left."

FeatherFly wanted to look at his rival--no, his friend--but he was captivated by the deep brown eyes level with his own, by the crescents and sideburns painted on bronze cheeks. For a moment the Yata soldier seemed equally fascinated.

"He's just our size," the man mused. "Perhaps he should be one of us."

FeatherFly tried to catch his breath, too petrified to shake his head. The air around him was rank with Yata, overpowering even the smell of MossDancer's loosened bowels.

The soldier leaned in close, his breath hot against FeatherFly's ear. Voice low, he murmured, "Hungry?"

His hand came down hard on FeatherFly's gun, found the trigger, shot its single bullet into the ground.

## CHAPTER 54

The trade route between Rudder and Crossroads was a wide road across a high, gentle pass. In better times TripStone had helped clear it of debris, joining with the citizenry of both towns to smooth ruts laid down by the wagons of commerce.

Its short detours led to rest spots and nearby overlooks but went no further. No trail extended passage toward the uneven terrain where Ghost's cabin stood, hovering before the drop into Alvav. TripStone gazed toward the border, spending a moment's hesitation. Better that she hadn't blazed a path from here. It would have compromised his safety.

It would tempt her to change course now, and she could not. She had to deliver to the authorities the forbidden meat stitched inside her vest. From her hiding place in the outlying brush she heard merchants, their hearty greetings shouted among runners as they met on the road...

No. This time the voices were urgent. The runner bound for Crossroads executed a quick turn, falling in line behind his colleague to carry the news to Rudder and then on to Promontory.

Crossroads needed shooters. Weapons. The hunting grounds were burning. So many dead.

*It's begun.*

There was no sense hiding now and the road was faster. The runners were already too far away to spot a blackened, disheveled Masari bursting out of the bushes, matted hair flaming behind her. Legs pounding downhill, showering dirt. One arm pumping, the other swollen and strapped to her side.

~ ~ ~

A steady breeze protected the old oak, steering conflagration elsewhere, but it could shift at any time. Walking stick lashed to his back, NightShout noted the direction taken by rising tendrils of smoke, his splinted leg dangling over a high, strong bough. Climbing this tree had sent a knifeedge of pain clear up into his skull.

The fires were far enough away that he could see down to the weeds through gray haze, enough to spot telltale black tresses through powdery red clay. Yata passed beneath his tree without looking up, intent only on quarry at ground level.

He waited. He could not smell them but he could hear them--the rhythms of their strides, the timbre of their speech. He teased these sounds out from the explosions, the screams echoing through the woods, crackling tinder. When they vanished into the mist he knew that he had vanished as well, but the range of his rifle had not. He aimed toward blankness and listened to invisible bodies fall.

The tendrils worried beneath high clouds, corkscrewed with indecision. The wind became less resolute. Orange lines skittered, fiery serpents leaving char in their wake. They wormed through the

brush, edging toward him.

NightShout remembered this oak, colossal even when he was a boy newly come of age. He had wanted to climb it then, interrupting his hunt for a few minutes of glee in the company of crows, surveying the broad landscape even as far as the bucolic huts of Basc.

Wistfully he patted the thick, gnarled bark. The Covenant was dead, and this tree would die with it. Soon he would climb down and let the gods do to him what they might.

He lifted his rifle and aimed toward a man stumbling into his line of sight. Yata poured from the man's mouth between sobs--wailed entreaties and commandments. Prayers.

Scripture.

He had no clay or weapon on him. His belt of pouches dangled, partially severed, from his waist.

For one wild moment NightShout wanted to jump down. He wanted to limp to the man and bow low, expose his neck, lay down his gun. They would behold each other and face death together, a calm center in the midst of bedlam. They would make this ripped ground holy again.

NightShout lowered his rifle, suppressing a sigh.

He was ready to look elsewhere when a painted Yata sprang from the bushes, running headlong toward the devout. NightShout took aim and fired. He didn't care that he might be seen. Others might be hiding here. They could spot his position. No matter.

The soldier crumpled into the undergrowth. The surviving Yata turned

and scanned the forest. His sight rested first on NightShout's splinted leg, then traveled upward.

NightShout rested his gun on his thighs. He gazed down, blinking through tears.

The Yata man blinked as well and took a shaky breath. He rested his left hand on his ragged belt, his right hand over his heart. He turned quickly and sprinted into the mist.

~ ~ ~

Another arrow, tipped with the juices Gria had extracted herself, had found the wrong target.

Gria bit her lower lip to keep from screaming aloud. She did not know the identity of the dead woman who stared at nothing, wearing a look of perpetual surprise, her throat punctured. Gria withdrew the arrow carefully and considered for a moment. She broke the shaft over her knee and drove the arrowhead down into the dirt.

Leather cinched a narrow waist beneath stilled lungs. Gria loosened its ties, drew out the belt, checked the pouches. Bone vessel of ink, quill, small sheets of blank parchment.

She could have chosen this alternative, long ago. This perfumed belt, this coming-of-age celebration. The easy way, she'd thought then. The blind, easy way. Her hand had twitched to the other side, choosing the foul-smelling herbalist's pouch instead.

Other choices had led to her exile, otherwise she might have known this woman. This stranger from Basc.

She has seen them time and again: the slaves of the Covenant not

just resisting but actively fighting their liberators, facing calmly the hunters who would dispatch them. She has seen hunters who would sooner be dead than sacriligious. It made no sense.

But survival did. Armed and armored, Gria was a visible target. The dead woman offered a remedy.

She glanced quickly around, her eyes smarting from the smoke. *The forest will regenerate*, she told herself. *It will take time. But nature will prevail.*

The belt of pouches had been easy to remove. The tunic proved harder, forcing Gria to defile the body, breaking bones to counteract the effects of rigor mortis. It couldn't be helped. She adjusted her rifle on her back and slipped the pale tunic over her armor. It would camouflage her from a distance, hide her true intent through the fumes.

Her hands shook unexpectedly as she knotted the belt. The forest changed character around her, becoming dark and cavernous. Womblike. Deadly. And yet, so peaceful. She could almost believe that a portal to the next world might actually exist. The nib scratched. She watched in her mind's eye the smooth flow of ink.

*My name is Gria. I have been out hunting Masari...*

The sounds of artillery came closer, bringing her back to the present. Repeating rifles. Her people. She smiled grimly down at the denuded corpse, then tilted her head up. She aimed a series of high-pitched whistles toward her troops and moved on.

~ ~ ~

It became a pattern: squeeze off a single shot, plunge into the

undergrowth, reload. Or find a burned-out tree if the bushes were seared away, anything to hide behind. Work quickly. Fill your lungs close to the ground, where the smoke was not as dense. Calculate where the soldiers were, where to fire, where to dive for cover next.

Otherwise, do not think.

Somewhere in the blur, ShadowGrass remembered bullets dropping into her hand, her hand shoving them into her pockets. Her first three shots had hit their marks, depleting her ammunition. Ritual hunters relied on accuracy and traveled light. She had assumed she would need only a single bullet. The remaining two had been a hedge against extraordinary circumstances, presupposing an ordinary hunt.

Things had moved quickly beyond extraordinary.

The hunters of Crossroads filled the forest now. They sought out their comrades, pressed ammunition into their hands, departed in search of Yata soldiers. ShadowGrass glimpsed ordinary citizens here--farmers and artisans, scribes, even members of the Chamber--not to kill but to run supplies and retrieve the dead.

She'd seen many of them picked off and others moving in to take their place. She'd seen weapons and ammunition stripped from the bodies of Masari and Yata alike. She'd done some of the stripping, herself, lashing Yata daggers to her belt. A repeating rifle would be useful.

She felt around in her pockets and counted. Calculated. Bullets slid between her fingers like large kernels of grain. Gunpowder bulged from her vest.

The forest reeked of corpses. A fresh blast of wind made her sway momentarily. Flies congregated in black clouds. She stepped into an

arena, a ring of bushes burned away, their ashen stain on the ground like the outline of a small playing field.

She crawled from body to body, searching. The Yata soldiers had been picked clean. She hoped only that their weapons were in Masari hands. Small, all of them, a fighting unit caught in an ambush. Bronze skin dulled to lifelessness, its red clay paint a smudged paste.

She reached two nude bodies where the paste was that of blood, caked where skin had been flayed away. Cut from the cheeks and neck, in stripes up and down the arms. Cut off the chest, off the abdomen, down in a line toward the slashed pelvis where the ground was soiled. Cut from the legs. Cut from scalps where the hair had been removed.

Cut in the pattern of a pelt sliced away. Small bodies, hairless and Yata smooth save for deep gouges, the rapid ripping away of fur. The remaining skin was dulled like the others, but lighter where she brushed the gore and ash, the flies away. The boys' mouths stretched open, their eyes horrific.

The world stopped.

It became a slow rocking, back and forth. It became a long, low moan in her belly, rising to break at her throat. It carried far, a howl on the wind. ShadowGrass's strength drained into the dirt. The forest swallowed her up, pulled her down.

Her spine arched. Her throat opened wide, screaming obscenities at the gods. The flies alighted again, unmindful of the din. Others in the forest paid closer attention.

One heard her grief from a distance, could recognize her voice even

in its grotesquerie. NightShout ran toward the sound as fast as his broken leg could carry him.

ShadowGrass could not hear the gunfire around her, was unaware of the shouts. The clash between hunters and soldiers melded into an otherworldly buzz from a faraway place and time. She could not feel the arms that held FeatherFly to her breast, but even in her numbness she knew his back had been flayed as well.

His blood seeped into her vest, smeared onto her face. She flew out of her body, calling after her dead son.

Heat blossomed at the small of her back. Her arms fell limply to her sides as FeatherFly dropped away. The heat turned to pain and radiated before dimming into shock. Enough of ShadowGrass was left to know she lay on her side, and that the indistinct mass before her was MossDancer's bloodencrusted foot.

Her legs, arms, torso fled from her. Below her neck was nothing.

~ ~ ~

NightShout came upon a thin circle of hunters, several hefting stolen repeating rifles. Yata soldiers scattered under the onslaught. He tracked one and fired, watching him fall. He retrieved his stick and limped past the Masari, hobbling through the field of bodies.

Someone's hand rested on his shoulder. His wife lay below him, her breathing shallow. He looked at the dead boys, looked quickly away, lowered himself awkwardly to the ground.

He whispered her name. She blinked painfully, her eyes drained of tears. She whispered his name back.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "I'm so sorry."

NightShout's voice was wrapped in a cloud. ShadowGrass held onto it, trying to bring it closer. Her lips struggled to form the word. "Spine."

"Shot."

She fell silent. Then she whispered, "Please."

NightShout understood. He bent low and rubbed his cheek against hers. He placed a tender kiss on her lips. His mouth came away touched with blood.

Someone helped him to his feet. Members of the Hunt Guild stood to the side, respectfully, as he reloaded. They kept watch. They preserved his privacy.

ShadowGrass wondered what it was like to walk toward a gleaming portal, to pass through its boundaries. To see FeatherFly and MossDancer smiling on the other side, pursuing each other in friendly competition. Freed of earthly concerns. Happy.

She heard the bolt being pulled, locked down.

From above NightShout said, "I love you."

She mouthed the words back, closed her eyes. Smiled.

## **CHAPTER 55**

The settlements of Crossroads dotted a distant valley, rising within view as TripStone crested a small foothill. Twilight blazed in the wrong part of a sky grown dark too soon. Haze swallowed the hunting

grounds.

Her boots dug into the hard-packed dirt. Mouth wide open, gasping air, she pushed herself past the scorching in her lungs and the cramps in her legs.

Messengers had rushed past her hours earlier, streaming the other way. Promontory would not receive word until morning, but shooters from Rudder crowded the transport wagons that now careened toward Crossroads.

TripStone jogged to the side before one could run her down. Several hunters reached out over its gate and hauled her up, squeezing her in among them. No one commented on her greased hair and skin, her filthy clothes. Someone passed her a black rifle and ammunition. She held her good arm steady as she grasped them. The gun was heavier than she expected.

Still panting, she clenched the weapon between her thighs. She examined its parts with one hand and found a rotary magazine in the buttstock. She fed the bullets into multiple rows, counting them once, twice, glancing up at the somber men and women huddled around her. The magazine held dozens of cartridges. Pulling a cocking lever fed them into the breech. She ran her fingers gingerly over the firing mechanism, forcing herself to admit it was real.

There was no sanctity in what she clutched to her chest. No religious engravings on metal and wood, only a modest stamp on the barrel. How long had Rudder been buying these repeaters from Promontory?

The wagon jostled its passengers, tilting downhill. A darkening road retreated before her eyes. She wanted to turn around but there was no room, no way to tell what environment she entered. But she could

smell the burning. She could see the cart following hers, the next runner uphill, thin-lipped and unflagging, hauling troops.

She asked, "Is there a plan?"

"Defend the border." The man beside her looked straight ahead as he spoke. "The rest is up to Crossroads."

She studied his face. He didn't turn his head. She wanted to ask him about the hunts of Rudder but now was not the time. She thought of home and forced herself to stop, to concentrate on the mission.

She had to forget who she was, who she was raised to be. The gods had plucked her from one world and dropped her unceremoniously into another, where none of the old truths applied. Everything she ever knew had been wiped away.

*Yata killing Masari.*

*Yata armed by Promontory.*

She swam in eddies of body heat and sweat and wondered how much the people around her knew, how much they condoned. She dared not ask. The hunters around her had come to save her people, though she did not know for what.

More carried on the wind now. Putrefaction. They were getting close.

~ ~ ~

Pallets and tables both ordinary and sacrificial filled the border, holding the dead and the dying, and still citizens pulled more furniture from their homes. Blood sluiced over scrimshawed inlays, polluting the doctrine stippled into bone.

Only a few census takers remained at their stations. They bypassed anonymous Yata to record the Masari dead, carried in by colleagues in soiled Rotunda vestments. While scribes stacked the Masari on the ground, the Yata were brought to the knives.

WindTamer rubbed the numbness from his arms and continued to saw. He could barely cut and fit joints and buttresses before others whisked his handiwork away to the assemblers. The assemblers rushed crude tables to the front to accommodate the stream of bodies ready for processing.

The old man paused to unkink his back and bent again. He shaped the wood mindlessly, fighting muscle fatigue. His fellow carpenters surrounded him, each laboring repeatedly over their assigned components.

Further on, WindTamer spotted TreeRain's young daughter teaching dissection, forcing herself to bypass the prayers that accompanied Yata dismemberment. The bodies were unclean and befouled and they incubated maggots. Any salvageable meat had to be preserved quickly. CatBird's training was nowhere near complete but she did well, choking down her nausea admirably.

So too HigherBrook, who bent over the corpse, swallowing hard. His short hair and beard were spiky with muck. His fine linens blackened under a fresh rush of liquids as he sliced decaying flesh with a shaky blade.

Along with farmers and doctors scattered in a grisly triage, the underage children of hunters taught the fine art of butchery. Some already knew they were orphans. CatBird, guiding HigherBrook's hand with firm direction, was one of them. She wore her training rifle strapped to her back.

Someone hung a lantern behind WindTamer. Other lamps infused the border with a muted glow as the sun set. HigherBrook straightened and surveyed the grassland, directing the placement of more light. Small bands of Yata had already tried to force their way across. Skirmishes flared up in the distance and died down. Flaming arrows streaked toward the makeshift camp. Citizens ran for the wells.

Shouting erupted from the empty marketplace center, followed by boots thundering on cobblestones. Low curses mixed with bellowed orders as the hunters from Rudder encircled the camp and spread out along the perimeter, picking off incursions.

The children craned their necks to watch, listening to the rhythm, the mesmerizing rapidity of the guns. Then they bent back down to the knives. They had to tend to the food first. New hunting lessons would come later. Discarded innards piled at their feet while carcass parts were borne away. More Yata bodies slid onto slick, emptied tables.

An injured hunter staggered through the din, fighting shock. TripStone took her position at the front and knelt, using her thigh to balance her weapon. She bruised from its recoil. She leaned its muzzle against the ground and pulled the lever, rebalanced, fired again. Her right arm tensed against its restraints. She rolled further back and tried to worry the knots free with her teeth.

She couldn't. TripStone hoisted her rifle, bolted to a table, and grabbed a knife. She sliced her arm free and yelled against the pain, but then the pain subsided.

The meat from Destiny Farm pulled like rocks on the inside of her vest and dangled toward her waist. She had to bind it back to her chest. Her purpled arm protested, her fingers fumbling the cloth strips. Slab newlyknotted into place, she grabbed her gun and ran back to the front trailing gauze and working wrist, elbow, biceps,

deltoid. She still had to shoot lefthanded, but now it would not be so hard.

The hunters of Crossroads emerged from the woods as a light rain began to fall. The shooters from Rudder provided cover. Others left the forest who had never before set foot in the hunting grounds or draped bloody bodies over their shoulders. They split from each other, some heading for the butcher tables, others for the census takers. Further back, a makeshift infirmary began to fill.

NightShout limped toward the census takers, his staff in one hand, his other arm cradling ShadowGrass. Another hunter carried FeatherFly beside him. MossDancer's father stumbled behind, clutching his son.

TripStone guarded them, peering into the darkening landscape. She traded grim nods with her father, neither recognizing the other.

~ ~ ~

By morning the guns fell silent. TripStone's moans melded with the others as she traversed the edge of town. Some of the able-bodied bore Masari dead to the Grange for burial in a fallow field. Others continued to cut. Still others prepared the meat. Rain drizzled through gray dawn. Mud pulled against TripStone's boots. The scorched forest continued to steam.

Townpeople slept uneasily on spattered ground or crowded within the census tents. Most had not gone home. WindTamer lay collapsed amid wood shavings, his breaths shallow. The hunters from Rudder maintained their watch in shifts, committed only to protecting Crossroads. No one had followed the militia, what remained of them, back toward Basc.

TripStone could find no one from her family. She searched the grounds again, watching slow, exhausted processions. A begrimed man in a goatee was directing the transportation of food and answering questions. He ordered the lanterns taken down. His gestures were the only signs of his authority. Otherwise he was as filthy and weary as the rest. TripStone blinked to keep her eyes open as she made her way toward him through the wreck.

He hunched over a butcher table. TripStone planted herself opposite him and took up a knife. She could not dispel the hoarseness in her voice. "I must speak with someone from the Chamber."

He nodded. "That would be me."

She studied the steady movements of his hands, the sureness of his incisions. The Chamber regulated matters of commerce and religion. It was an association of parchment and pens, archives and accountings. No hunter had ever worked behind a Rotunda desk. "You learn quickly."

"CatBird is a good teacher." He raised his head. His eyes were redrimmed. "What do you need?"

She had rehearsed her message for days: *I bring proof of atrocities*. The ruins around them, their immediate needs, dwarfed the proclamation. TripStone shook her head, reminding herself the two abominations were related.

"The Yata who did this," she said, through clenched teeth, "got support from Masari."

She had his attention now. He whispered, "Can you substantiate that?"

She slit the bindings from her chest and untied thick straps. Pain shot through her shoulder as she tried to shrug herself free. "Help me."

HigherBrook hurried around the table to ease TripStone's vest from her. He cut it away from her swollen arm. A heavy slab filled a pocket stitched into the leather.

TripStone sliced into cloth. "This is processed meat from a farm that raises and slaughters Yata. They have been selling arms to the militia that attacked us in exchange for Destiny. Without our hunters, we would be forced to buy our meat from them." She ripped the last stitches free and laid the cloth flat, turning the flesh over. "The farm is backed by Promontory's Chamber."

The dark blue imprint adorned a generous vein of fat. HigherBrook stared at the name.

"You do read ancient Yata," TripStone ventured.

"*Of course* I read Yata!" HigherBrook frowned. "I know what this says."

"Good," TripStone said, flatly. "The Yata tattooed with it don't. To most Masari it's just a pretty pattern."

HigherBrook leaned hard against the table, holding the meat in his hands. TripStone watched his face working, a rapidity of thoughts she couldn't read.

Finally he said, "You're TripStone." He shifted the bundle and wiped rainwater from his face. "Your mother asked for my help five days ago."

"For your help. Why? Where is she?"

"She is--" HigherBrook took a deep breath. "She and your brother are casualties; your father is in the infirmary. I'm sorry."

TripStone struggled to remain standing. She closed her eyes for a moment, gulping air.

HigherBrook's voice reached her through a murky fog. "Your father had been attacked by a Yata woman who had escaped from Destiny Farm. He would not tell me why. Given the story's outlandishness and--" He swallowed and shook his head at the meat, sighing. "Given the circumstances, I chose not to believe it."

She glared at him. "I presume my family's reputation is now restored." She looked around them. "Within what remains of Crossroads." She snatched up a knife and watched him flinch. "From what I've seen, the Yata militia never knew about the farm. Whatever they believe, they've been tricked into trading Destiny for arms."

She resumed carving, quickly and efficiently, her lips set in a thin line. She ached to see NightShout, but this was more important. The more meat they could preserve, the more time they would have. The more time they had, the less power Promontory could wield, the less tempting would be the package she was entrusting to HigherBrook and the Crossroads Chamber. Opposite her the functionary followed suit, hastening his pace of dissection.

Time, like meat, could be stretched only so far.

## **CHAPTER 56**

The day began, extraordinarily green.

Raindrops trickled off the canopy, dripping leaf to leaf. Piri shivered

as they splashed against her skin. Ghost enfolded her in his arms as she snuggled next to him for warmth. He covered her. Rivulets streamed from them. The air grew crisp.

She knew his body now. The shape of him, the markings. She knew the ticking pattern of his fur, the subtle changes in coloration next to his skin. The small mole by his ankle. The scars. She knew the quickness of his gasps, the timing of his shudders. His hot breath bathed her throat. She was not afraid.

But they had to keep moving. BrokenThread's remains would last for only a few more days.

Another field lay up ahead, lush spongy ground in a valley where falls cascaded into meandering streams. The streams drained into Rudder's great watercourse, through heady marshes thick with dragonflies.

They wandered out of the woods. Sparkling waters coursed toward the sun-drenched east. Cliffs rose to the west, inlaid with marbled splendor. Fountains and pools danced in blinding light high up on the rock, caught in sun beams piercing the rain.

*Settlements* . Her fingers pressed Ghost's arm.

He nodded. *Yes. Yata settlements.*

Their linens flapped about them in ribbons. Piri took tentative steps forward and leaned back, blinking against the sun shower. Her heart hammered.

Ghost called out, "I see steps."

She turned back toward him, lips trembling in a broadly-bowed smile.

The grass was buoyant beneath her. He followed her as she hurried toward the cliff.

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