

# Deviations: Bloodlines



Elissa Malcohn



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**Elissa Malcohn**



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For more about the author, go to

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

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1. Science Fiction. 2. Fantasy 3. Anthropological-Fiction. I. Title

Also by Elissa Malcohn in the Deviations Series:

Volume 1: *Covenant*

Volume 2: *Appetite*

Volume 3: *Destiny*

What people are saying about the *Deviations* series

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

-Rachel Baker, Old Musty Books

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

-Debra, at Goodreads

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

-Windborn, at HubPages

"[T]he social commentary that is woven throughout the story is thought provoking and makes you reevaluate what you think you know about yourself and society at large."

-Lakisha S, at Manybooks

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

-Scott T. Barnes, editor, *NewMyths*

What people are saying about *Covenant*

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

-Lady Emily, Redbud Book Club

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

-Julianne Draper, Miami Examiner

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

-Jean Roberta, in her blog

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

-Glenda Finkelstein, in her blog

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

-K.L. Nappier, in a MySpace comment

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

-Gypsy Wynd, on Amazon

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

-Alan Petrillo, on Amazon

"The author's tone coaxes and guides the reader to judge the ethics

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

-FatChickDancing, on Amazon

"This novel is, in a word, riveting."

-L.W. Rogers

*For survivors*



# Introduction / Acknowledgments



Welcome to the fourth and longest *Deviations* volume.

I originally wrote *Bloodlines* as a single work. In 2007, when I was still with Aisling Press, we discussed dividing the volume in two and I started referring to a "seven book series." If anyone's followed my blog entries and wondered about a mysterious seventh volume, there never really was one. I'd briefly considered splitting *Bloodlines* as I was drafting the book, but it remains in one piece, with two more installments to go in the saga.

My characters refused to leave me alone after I ended the original *Deviations Trilogy* with *Destiny*. For one thing, I'd turned the world I'd built on its ear. The fall of Destiny Farm provided one form of closure, but how would the region cope now that at least two ways of life had been destroyed?

Then there was TelZodo, whose life began unfolding for me almost immediately after I'd written his birth scene at the end of *Appetite*. He becomes the title character of volume five, which I'd started writing while working on *Bloodlines*.

Finally, would a solution ever be found to the Masari's dependence on Yata flesh? Would the Big Problem driving the series ever be resolved? I didn't find that answer until I was well into *TelZodo*. Even before then, back in April 2006, I knew roughly how the series would end - "roughly," because the characters had their own ideas.

Heartfelt thanks to all of you who have stayed with me through this saga's unfolding. Your interest and involvement in the story thrills me.

Thank you to everyone who is carrying the downloads and otherwise helping me get the word out, including the MobileReads Forums, Matthew McClintock at Manybooks, Tony Stanton at Obooko, and Susan Crealock at Online Novels. Thanks also go to Ed Patterson of Operation E-Book Drop, for his visionary method of getting free e-books to personnel serving overseas; and to Ellen Pekar at Books For Soldiers, for delivering the works on CDs to soldiers in remote areas with little or no Internet access.

I am also grateful to everyone who has helped me promote the books, including Glenda and Tony Finkelstein of *Andromeda Library*, Mark Eller of *Chronicles*, and Cyrus A. Webb of *Conversations LIVE!* and The Write Stuff Literacy Campaign. Thanks also to Broad Universe and to Trisha Wooldridge for spearheading the Broad Pod.

In addition to fabulous support by Citrus County Library director Flossie Benton Rogers, I'd like to thank Michelle Howard at the Land O'Lakes Library and Sue Griffiths at the Hudson Regional Library for their work organizing Author Fairs. Thanks also to convention organizers Ann Morris at Necronomicon and Juan Sanmiguel at Oasis for years of support, and to all those staff members and volunteers working behind the scenes.

I am again grateful to Belea Keeney, K.L. Nappier, Loretta Rogers, Lakisha Spletzer, Meredith West, and the late Nelson G. Williams, for their extraordinary fellowship over the years.

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

## About the Author:

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

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

More publications news may be found on her website:

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

As with the other *Deviations* volumes, *Bloodlines* contains mature language and situations. Please share responsibly.

## Chapter 1

### Early Summer

### The Central Valley: Alvav

"Be careful you don't fall over the edge, Governor."

Brick-colored chops twitched. HigherBrook suppressed a wry smile at the deputy's dry warning. *Like you, Shabra?*

No, that was unfair; they'd all fallen over the edge. His diminutive host had merely expressed concern for his personal safety, resting tapered, bronze-hued fingers on his thin linen sleeve. He was surprised he could hear her at all, given the shouting around them and the weapons fire far below.

The leader of Crossroads backed away from a milky balustrade that ended at his hips. Beside him the Cliff's deputy clutched the same marble at waist height and shrieked at combatants deaf to her encouragements. Her long black braid swung out above the carnage.

A high sun baked the battle. The Games raged in full view across the clearing and continued hidden inside distant thickets. Two fighters separated from ringing metal and gunshot and clashed by the river separating the Yata territory of Alvav from the Masari town of Rudder.

A collective cheer erupted from the balcony as rifles and armor fell on meadow grass, revealing bound breasts and glinting machetes.

Shabra chuckled. "I'll bet you don't see *that* in your valley."

Even if she were offering a real wager, which she might well have been, it wasn't worth taking. HigherBrook shook his head. "That would be suicide in the far woods."

"It's an act of honor here." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Though I've heard your people *are* committing suicide in your so-called sacred hunting grounds."

HigherBrook didn't answer. He raised his handheld clarifier to his eye, thankful for the little tool. It saved him from having to compete with revelers mobbing the larger scopes cemented into the balcony. Dizzy, swiveling lenses.

The two women by the bridge circled each other. They'd have both been picked off by now if this were a hunt in Crossroads-Basc. Or they'd have called for assistance. They would not have dropped their firearms unless they were courting death.

"The people in my valley fight for survival," he murmured.

Shabra's amused voice intoned, "Ours fight for immortality."

"Ours have already attained immortality."

"Through *what*?" She paused as another pair separated from the battle, Yata against Masari. "Through insipid drivel in dusty books?"

Hammered goblets clinked on the balcony before the shouting picked up again. HigherBrook glanced at the knuckle bones strung around her neck. Large bones, Masari from the look of them. Didn't she ever bet in favor of her own kind? "Our 'drivel' will be remembered long after your drinking songs have disappeared."

She purred, "Would you care to place a wager on that?"

*Yes, I would.* But which generation would survive to collect?

He'd had too much to drink, himself. Empty bottles of goldberry brandy gleamed at his feet, including the one to which he'd laid claim an hour earlier. Around him Yata and other visiting Masari tipped flasks to their lips when they weren't screaming adoration or passing coin from smooth-skinned, coppery hands to pale, furred ones and

back again. The rarefied air around him fruited, the bouquet of well-aged liquor competing with rising metallic stench.

Thank the gods Izzik was here. The comely Yata from Basc leaned far over the balustrade, scribbling notes on parchment. His traveling clothes looked regal against the local citizens' wrinkled finery. With their system of slavery so recently collapsed, the masters hadn't yet learned how to tidy up after themselves.

A small crowd pressed around the young man, drawn by his earnest sobriety as much as by the bloodletting beneath them.

*He's doing his job. I'm not.*

Easier to vie with Shabra for bragging rights than face the Yata bodies being piled on transports for the trip into Rudder, or the Masari corpses being hauled past the Marsh's immense, open gates. Beyond the gates a paradise sparkled, waters swelling beneath piney ribbons of boardwalk.

HigherBrook re-focused his clarifier and watched squabbling geese inside the former prison turned walled city. Closer to the fighting, well-organized teams of Yata tended wounded comrades and dissected the dead.

What was Izzik recording? Was he sketching battle formations, comparing the strategies here with those at home? Or was he studying the choreography of hand-to-hand combat, weighing Masari bulk against Yata quickness? What improvised weapons and ingenious traps could be adapted for their own valley's controlled war?

HigherBrook focused on the fighting again, struggling to remain detached. No such luck. Whenever he tried to picture the warriors as

game pieces instead of people, his vision blurred.

Ghost had stood on this spot a half-year earlier, numb with horror. Crossroads' lanky scientist could afford that luxury.

*You can't, Governor. Not any more.*

HigherBrook laughed, surprising himself. It must be the booze and the heat.

*You're a scribe, aren't you? Write it down.*

Shabra's curiosity prickled against him as he dropped to his knees, spread his provisions, and filled his pen.

He stood and wiped a tear from his eye, setting nib to the clean sheet clamped to his tablet. He envisioned his fine linen dropping away, replaced by his functional tunic and the weight of a fully-loaded StormCloud rifle against his back. He'd learned to murder, hadn't he? He didn't kill Yata for sport like this, but he still killed them.

If HigherBrook closed his eyes to the festivities and his nose to the drink he could be back in the far woods, like a crow perched on a high branch, mindful only of nature's brutality. He should be thankful for the Cliff and its unparalleled view of warfare. The central valley's Games were as necessary here as the sacred hunts were at home. He was here to learn, not judge. Leave judging to the gods.

*I will make you into drivel in a dusty book, Shabra. I will grant you immortal notoriety.*

He laughed again, blinking to clear his sight.

~ ~ ~

Lanterns flared to life as the sun set, with more toasts raised to the newly dead. Bawdy obscenities curdled the air as warriors on both sides cleared corpses from the meadow. Survivors stopped to comfort and chide each other, now that their battle had ended.

Then they separated. Yata combatants limped back to the Marsh hauling dead Masari as fertilizer and clanging the heavy, filigreed gate shut behind them. Visiting Masari departed the Cliff to help their comrades trundle freshly-butchered food over the bridge into Rudder.

HigherBrook's boots thumped against large, carved steps. Ahead of him Izzik dropped down the bluff, grasping iron hooks pounded into the stone.

The youth's knotted shirt flapped around his waist. Muscles jumped around bare scapulae and white lines drawn by battle scars.

More carnage waited in the woods as they negotiated an old smuggling route, brushing aside strips of pelt snagged on tree limbs. Remnants of Yata and the nutrients they contained were gone, too precious to leave behind. HigherBrook idly counted Masari remains ripening against the ground.

Izzik squatted by a naked body, waving off flies and slipping a knife from his belt. "I promised Ghost a sample," he offered.

"What could Ghost possibly want from a dead Masari?"

"He didn't say."

The Yata shrugged off his pack and drew out sheets of oiled tent canvas, preservatives, vials. HigherBrook held his lantern closer and wrinkled his nose, cataloging the decay. He shoed vermin away from pooled blood.



Later they left a gaping cavity behind and washed up in a stream before climbing narrow switchbacks to the Alvav ridge. HigherBrook balled his linen shirt to pat dry his pectoral fur, gleaming ruddy in the lamp light.

Flames flicked shadows over his young traveling companion as they camped. Forest hid the central valley's lanterns but a thin yellow haze rose from Crossroads-Basc, pointing the way home. Half a day's march still lay ahead.

Izzik reclined by the fire and turned from his notes to lift strips of laminated parchment. Crude drawings peeked out from behind ground-in dirt.

HigherBrook fished out a pair of his own, retrieved from the arena. "Charms, do you think?"

"I think it's a card game."

"Left on the battlefield?"

Izzik shrugged.

They could have blown off the balcony. HigherBrook raised a strip to his mouth and curled his lips back. He took a sharp, indrawn breath and held the scent.

"I envy you your glands," Izzik murmured.

*You'd have killed me by now if you had my glands.* HigherBrook whistled a slow exhale. "This card was never on the Cliff. A Yata carried it out of the Marsh."

His other card bore Masari scribblings and smelled of Rudder.

Fighters from both sides had carried these things.

The scribblings read, *Please, gods, grant this prophecy.*

"They're divination tools," HigherBrook said. "Used to foretell the outcome of the Games." He raised an eyebrow. "At least now we know they're as desperate as we are."

Were they? HigherBrook returned Izzik's smile, grinning back at the small, white teeth belonging to a man who was equally capable of becoming his dinner as his executioner. At the moment, Izzik was neither of those things.

He was instead an amiable Yata son-in-law, as much a mystery to HigherBrook as his own adopted Masari daughter.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Fertile Lands: Crossroads**

The two young men could be brothers. The bronze-hued skin on the smaller, older corpse had dulled to gray. The other still had his soft, boy's pelt. Small differences.

Their hunting clothes were similar, sewn with Yata and Masari leathers. They wore the same talismans around their necks, strips of skin from both their peoples tightly intertwined.

The Yata had been killed by a StormCloud from more than twenty paces away, the Masari from a poisoned lance thrust directly into his heart at point-blank range.

Ghost looked down at the bodies sharing a single stone slab. They

should be out under the open sky, not shut up inside this crowded tent. The air was stuffy with preservative and stoic grief that made it difficult to breathe. The canvas around him billowed in the breeze, sounding too much like beating wings.

His son TelZodo napped, the infant's head heavy on his shoulder. Better that way, after a morning spent crawling around a fallow field. Ghost caressed the child's long, narrow back, Yata-coppery skin with violet tufts born of Masari blood.

TelZodo's down already began to darken, looking more like Ghost's rich, plum-colored pelt. Beneath them, the vivid lavender of the dead Masari's fur all but leapt from a drained complexion.

A Yata soldier stood at stiff attention by the stone slab. "Your kinsman VineSong took a life with care, and he gave his own life just as admirably." The man's attitude of respect balanced obvious pain. Dirt streaked his tunic beside blood spatters from his dead comrade's gunshot wound.

His well-practiced Masari bore no trace of an accent. "VineSong was adept at avoiding our traps, especially for one so young. Our attempts to ambush him failed. He was heavily outnumbered, a testament to his bravery and his skill. That he aimed well speaks of his compassion." The Yata glanced at the slab and turned back to those assembled. "Our comrade Foro died instantly."

A sob caught inside the tent. Ghost glanced aside as his sister SnowMoth struggled to regain her composure. Her face worked, sorrow mixed with pride.

VineSong had killed his prey without inflicting undue pain. Her son's honor.

Ghost fought the sudden urge to duck outside, to fill his lungs with the aroma of crops. This was the *Grange*. His kin were farmers, not hunters.

*That was before.*

Quiet dignity surrounded him. Almost everyone around Ghost was a stranger, but he could see his face in each of the others. He looked away from his family, back toward the diminutive soldier a few feet away. The Yata's blue tattoo blazed across his bronze forehead, a solid band from one temple to the other, the sign of a Preserver. He could be wearing a dark circlet.

The soldier wore an empty belt, his weapons left outside the tent. He adjusted his tunic as he studied VineSong's body. The canvas wall behind him rippled, imprinted in two languages with tributes to the fallen.

"VineSong advanced to claim Foro but released a spring net." The voice sounded like a boy's, coming from the smaller body; but the body was hardened and mature. "If your kinsman struggled, he would have strangled. He did not. I could see he had prepared himself for passage." He gave the dead Masari's shoulder an affectionate squeeze. "Among us I had known him best because we had worked together in the fields. Killing him fell to me.

"We talked while my comrades stood lookout. I told VineSong of my deep gratitude for his help-for all your help-in sharing your agricultural expertise with us, at a time when we could all too easily have been enemies. I told him I would honor him."

The Yata bestowed a sad smile on the boy. "He said he was grateful he was dying at the hands of a Preserver-and that I had chosen to hunt Masari to keep both our populations sustainable. He expressed

the fervent wish that the gods will lift from you your need to consume us. I asked him how he wanted to die. He chose the lance, tipped with heart-willow resin." The soldier looked back up, into the crowd. "He died peacefully."

Ghost tightened his hold on TelZodo. He listened to the uneven breaths around him, to an occasional, barely-audible snuffle. Beside him his Yata wife Piri blinked, tears glistening in her eyes.

His coupling with her had once been an abomination. Now Crossroads pinned its hopes on hybrid children. He had returned from exile to a world turned inside-out.

TelZodo fidgeted and began to wail. Ghost edged toward the tent flap.

Piri's fingers drummed on his arm, *Let me take him. This is your family's sorrow*

Ghost rested his free hand on her cheek as he cradled their son. *I've got to get outside. I've been gone for so long. VineSong was a small boy when I left. I've hardly had a chance to get to know my own siblings again, let alone my nephew.*

Piri touched him lightly, her palm hovering. Hesitating. It didn't matter. Ghost knew she wanted to say that he runs away from them. He flees into the lab. He spends long hours in the crowded Deliverance Inn, whose patrons try to wean themselves from Yata with controlled fasts, a practice Crossroads once shunned.

Why not flee into the lab? Being a heretic had been easy, compared to this. Being ready to die for his convictions had blessed him with a certain simplicity. Not now.

He didn't live under a death sentence now. Spared from the hunt, Ghost's research was the only thing Crossroads required of him. He got to watch other people die instead, including kin. It was an agonizing reprieve.

The screaming TelZodo might be hungry and Piri might have to take him, but the child was also sensitive to crowds. Ghost slipped from the tent and almost cried with relief at the broad sky overhead, strands of cirrus feathering bright blue above the mountains. He stood off to the side, gulping air.

"Let's go find that beetle you like so much," he gasped, kneeling in the grass. "The skinny, shiny one that turns different colors." He grinned as TelZodo hiccuped, falling silent and wide-eyed. "Have I ever told you how much I adore you?"

So far the child had shown no appetite for Yata, but it was still too early to know for certain.

"If we were Yata we'd be in Basc and I'd be standing with you outside the Soala right now." Ghost touched his chops to the baby's delicate down and looked into wide, dark brown eyes. Piri's coloring. "People would be calling out to demons. You'd be frightened." He frowned. "So would I."

The clouds thinned, the blue above deepening. The hills darkened into summer green, a shadowy crown rising about the valley. Honeybees meandered around blossoms. Ghost looked toward a patch of young yellow squash.

Basc had always lost its people to Masari appetites. Why then was it so difficult to relinquish his own kind in turn? Crossroads had been wracked with guilt under the Covenant, but most of the guilty had remained alive.

*It's not that Masari are dying. It's that you have nothing to show for their sacrifices.*

Ghost shook his head vigorously, trying to banish the thought. TelZodo laughed at long curls bouncing in the air.

"You're right." The laughter was like bells; it was better not to think. Save thinking for the place where it would do the most good. Return to the tent before people wondered about him more than they already did.

Ghost swallowed hard and paced back to broad, illustrated canvas. The Yata militia could have massacred his entire family. Better to be thankful most of his kin were still alive.

Voices floated to him from inside the tent, telling stories about VineSong and Foro. Even before Ghost lifted the flap he could picture HigherBrook wearing once again his mantle of scribe. Not long ago, the leader of Crossroads took dictation only from hunters; now he listened to everyone telling a memory. Offerings scratched on parchment.

Blue sky vanished in a mist of body heat as Ghost passed the tent flap. Piri took TelZodo from his arms. He tried to think of something to say and remembered his nephew calling him to dinner, peeking inside the lab. Grimy from weeding.

It would have to do.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Fertile Lands: Basc**

HigherBrook studied the young woman by his side as they advanced down the narrow path to the Yata side of the valley. Their lanterns swung small arcs in the night. Beyond them the killing fields lay quiet.

She walked straight-backed, her shoulders squared as though still carrying her rifle. In the lamp light, HigherBrook realized CatBird wasn't wearing her usual hunting tunic and breeches. Instead, she padded beside him in a plain linen dress.

She looked too vulnerable. HigherBrook's hand grazed her back.

She smiled at him, her azure eyes twinkling. "I'm all right, Sir."

He shook his head. "This ceremony doesn't worry you?"

"Why should it? I'm proud of lzzik."

Her face pinched, her roseate chops twitching with indecision.

HigherBrook knew what it meant. "CatBird, nothing you say will offend me."

"With your pardon, Sir." His adopted daughter-how much longer would she call him *Sir*?-fixed him with a direct gaze. With a start, he realized that in less than a season she had grown as tall as he.

Her face softened. "You have learned from me how to hunt, and you have mastered the skills well. But you were not *born* a hunter." They passed an outer row of adobe huts and strolled beside a cluster of Yata lodgings with low doorways. "You kill reluctantly."

He blinked at her. "I refuse to believe that you don't."

"I kill as best I can." She faced straight ahead, her bearing taller.



And as mercifully as I can, for as long as I have to. Izzik knows that. He wanted to do the same, and he's already proven himself an accomplished soldier." She glanced sideways at HigherBrook. "You needn't be ashamed for feeling nervous."

HigherBrook hugged her across her shoulders and wondered, not for the first time, which of them had agreed to be guardian to whom.

*He staggers amidst the carnage, through smoke and stench. Crackling tinder and gunshot roar in his ears. He listens for direction, looks for the leaders of Crossroads. But they are all dead and bodies pour in over the border. Dead hunters caught completely by surprise. Dead Yata impossibly armed for battle.*

*Orders fly from HigherBrook's mouth before he realizes what he is doing. He is a scribe. Someone else is yelling with his voice, but that isn't important. Saving Crossroads is.*

*Tables have been dragged out to the front, where the Hunt Guild orphans butcher. HigherBrook stares at tapered fingers working a blade. The girl mouths quick prayers that no longer do any good.*

*He grasps the wood, swallowing his nausea. "Teach me."*

*Without hesitating, she presses a knife into his hands.*

CatBird had pressed a rifle into his hands, too. Now he looked past her bravado, her pride in her Yata sweetheart, and saw familiar lostness in her heart-shaped face. As young as she was, she would have been consecrated as a hunter by now had the Covenant survived, an individual come of age. "Would you have wanted a ceremony of your own?"

She hugged him unexpectedly around his waist, then returned her

hands to her sides. "Teaching you to hunt was ceremony enough, Sir."

Ahead of them the visitor's hut glowed from the inside. Torch light breached slits in the walls. CatBird's face became a mask.

HigherBrook touched her arm. "This was where Atonement occurred."

CatBird nodded. She whispered, "This is where all the stories were told to the hunters. The ones that you and the other scribes all wrote down."

Each of her parents and her older brothers had knelt here, naked and unarmed, trusting their lives to the Covenant as they listened to and memorized the words of their prey's surviving kin.

CatBird held herself taller. "The Yata had called it the Day of Remembrance."

"I know."

She tried to smile. "Now we both have days of remembrance, Sir. We hunt each other. It is no longer so one-sided."

She ducked through the doorway, blinking in the light as she lowered her wick. HigherBrook followed, his heart thumping. They passed into the largest room, a central amphitheater large enough to fit the most fertile Yata families. So many mouths reciting so many memories. Now those immense households were also a thing of the past.

Plain wooden stools dotted the room, the right size for Masari children. These held Yata adults instead. Smooth-skinned, bronze-skinned, furless. Several looked up from their seats, greeting the two

Masari with raised eyebrows. Some wore defiant grins. Small challenges.

HigherBrook nodded back, wondering if they saw him in the same jumbled layers he perceived them. Comrades in the battle for this valley's freedom. Trading partners. Adversaries in the sanctioned hunting grounds.

CatBird left his side, retrieved her small stool from beside the wall, and threaded her way toward the front of the room. By the time HigherBrook caught up with her she was hunched low on her seat, speaking in Yata and gesturing, laughing with the members of Izzik's modest household. Two women and a man laughed with her. One woman punctuated the air to make a particularly graphic point.

HigherBrook wanted to turn from them but settled for letting a flush rise to his cheeks, thankful for the subdued torch light. When CatBird made room for him, he finger-pressed through the light fabric at her shoulder, out of sight of the others, *I know you love Izzik, but must you share your intimate details with his kin?*

She answered aloud, "Sir, these are his two wives and co-husband. They have been with him longer than I have. They are giving me advice." She cocked her eyebrow at HigherBrook, reaching for his arm. *Yata talk about this all the time*, her fingers drummed. *You understand their culture, Sir. You've read the histories.*

He scowled. *Many more histories than you have, young lady.*

Reading them was not living them. The man and women beside CatBird were all as fresh-faced as she, but their eyes glinted with knowledge she was just now beginning to plumb. What traditions was she learning, that never made it into the great tomes?

HigherBrook was here at all only because of CatBird's acceptance by Izzik's house. In other matters Basc recognized him as the leader of Crossroads. At this ceremony he was simply the foster father of a young Masari learning how to be one of Izzik's mates.

CatBird squeezed the closest woman's arm, almost encircling it with her rose-furred hand. "HigherBrook says I don't read enough. Do you know *howmany* books of Yata narratives the Rotunda has?"

The woman shrugged. "I've never been there."

"Oh, you should *visit!* It's open to Yata now. It's an enormous place."

She faced forward at the sound of chanting. HigherBrook keened his ear, scouring his memory to translate the ancient dialect.

"It's a hymn of the Dirt People." Beside him, Izzik's co-husband whispered to CatBird. "They sang it to prepare for battling Masari in the days before the Covenant."

The corners of HigherBrook's lips ticced up. Without turning around he murmured in the old tongue, "They also sang it when our peoples hunted wild game together." When game was large and plentiful and hadn't died out. When it had provided all that the Masari needed to survive in that age of peace. "*That's* why it's important to read the books." He suppressed a smile at CatBird's labored sigh.

She shifted eagerly beside him as the voices grew louder. They were all high-pitched; HigherBrook had trouble teasing out the women's from the men's. Initiates passed beneath the arched, illuminated doorway, nearly identical in the dimness. All of them wore hunting clothes, their hair close-cropped beneath bleached kerchiefs woven with black pictograms.

Against their chests rested pendants of braided skins, Yata and Masari intertwined. HigherBrook reflexively touched his own, a talisman of their new covenant. Symbol of their combined forces in their recent battle against Promontory.

Fourth from the left, one of eight men out of eleven inductees, Izzik's gaze darted about the room until it rested on his family grouping. He flashed them a brief smile as he breathed between stanzas. HigherBrook didn't need to see CatBird to know how brightly she beamed back.

A high, hardened soprano sliced through smoky air from beyond the room. A staff slammed its rhythm against the stone floor, echoed by boots. When the woman wearing them passed beneath the arch, her brief glance bore into HigherBrook with the force of a drill. She still didn't trust him.

*And yet I trust you with this alliance, Zai.* Even though to look at her brought back pain. *Our peoples could have finished each other off so easily. We did not. Remember that.*

~ ~ ~

Zai sang the last chorus of victory, pounding a stick that by all rights should have been held by Gria instead. But Gria, who had taught her this song and who had begun the training of these soldiers, was still possessed by demons. The gods must have their reasons.

Reasons, too, for the pair of Masari in their midst. That was easier to understand, though Zai took mild pleasure at HigherBrook's thinly-veiled discomfort. She kept her satisfaction in check. Her own demons had not fled her completely, but she had negotiated with them as skillfully as with the Masari. Better, in fact.

CatBird curled around a chair beside Crossroads' leader. Her sweet-faced attentiveness sent shivers through Zai's stomach. A different kind of demon, that one. How many Yata had that girl already sent into the afterlife?

*I should thank the gods for sending you, CatBird. Zai meditated to quiet her nerves. You remind us of how diligently we've got to train. How vigilant we have to be to defeat you.*

The Yata around CatBird were better artisans than hunters. They barely realized what kind of creature they had welcomed into their family.

Zai held the last note, echoing the inductees standing beside her. She drew a deep breath when the singing stopped. "We have guests from across the meadow. Tonight we welcome them as we do the other members of our community." Raw Yata power radiated throughout the room. Zai acknowledged the Masari with a curt nod.

She paced before the eleven, scrutinizing. They met her gaze, their faces calm and relaxed. Izzik, silent and sober as the others, was equally focused, his dark brown eyes unclouded and his lips pressed into a straight line. A black lock of hair, his dead brother Foro's, reflected the light where it had been pinned to his tunic sleeve.

"Throughout the days of the Covenant, Masari hunters had murdered our people with the utmost respect, and without malice." Zai reached the end of the line and turned. "But they *had murdered us*. It was the price they exacted for feeding and clothing us, when we could not accomplish those simplest of tasks ourselves."

She scanned the room. Even eleven kin groups could not fill it now. "In turn, many in Basc bore child after child, raised to believe it was our sacred duty to sustain the Masari with our flesh while the Masari

sustained us with their worship and their tithes.

"Because without our flesh, the Masari die. But without the Masari, we are a lesser people."

Zai's sons accepted that bitter truth much better than she. They stood across the room, next to her lieutenants guarding the outer door. Abri, stiff and alert in his child-sized hunting tunic, studiously ignored his younger brother Evit, who fingered dirty play clothes and fidgeted.

"The Masari of Crossroads taught us the skills we needed for our independence, so that together we could defend this valley against Promontory." Zai swung around again, observing her guests' humility in a sea of Yata pride. "When we marched on Destiny Farm, those of Crossroads who stayed behind guarded and kept our children out of harm's way. In truth, we have needed them as much as they have needed us."

The words stuck in her throat. Zai drew herself up straighter, quelling the need to flinch. She leaned her ceremonial staff against the wall, lest she appear to need it for support.

HigherBrook once told her that Masari hunters had often grieved at their consecration. Under the Covenant they had been an elite group charged with killing their gods, leaving their fellow citizens to shoulder a lesser guilt.

Now that oppressive system was gone. Next to HigherBrook, CatBird sat with an air of simple acceptance. She looked as guiltless as the Yata inductees standing at attention, their breaths even and unhurried.

"Through the grace of our Preservers, we extend our respect for Masari onto the battlefield. Tonight we add eleven warriors to that

tradition." Zai stopped her pacing and turned to face her kerchief-adorned troops. "You carry upon you a badge of honor, a promise to fulfill. You have already demonstrated your prowess in the hunting grounds. We now entrust you to demonstrate your mercy toward the people of Crossroads. To take their lives skillfully, reverently, and without undue suffering, from this day forward."

She crossed to the far left and addressed a russet-eyed woman as wiry as herself. "Hanza, house of Layot. Twelve Masari kills." Zai's fingers dipped into her vest pocket and withdrew a dried square of pale skin, a swath of crimson-colored pelt. "May this Masari's spirit guide your aim and your compassion, until such time as the gods decree an end to our mutual sacrifice."

She leaned in and pinned the fur above Hanza's heart, discerning no change in the young woman's stoic facade. Without a word Zai plucked the kerchief away. She nodded at fresh blue ink blazing a line across the soldier's forehead and moved on. "Det, house of Tanat..."

A cousin, that one, but distant. In the days of the Covenant, Zai's relatives had stayed away once she had made it clear that she would take only one husband and bear only two children. Now her children were all she had left, but at least her people no longer shunned her.

On the contrary. In the wake of Gria's disability, they looked to Zai to lead them.

She turned away to hazard a glance at the Masari. HigherBrook hid his pain well, but his young charge watched the proceedings with quiet fascination. Her shoulders were relaxed, her eyes bright.

*I have my sons to protect.* The thought rose unbidden. Zai couldn't push it away. *Who do you have, CatBird?*



She intoned above the demon, driving it off. She stepped again down the line. "Izzik. House of Adzon. Seventeen Masari kills..."

Most of those had been Promontory's citizens, but Izzik has felled Masari in this valley as well. Surely CatBird knew that, just as Izzik must know of the deaths his new mate has dealt. Zai wondered how much it mattered to either of them. They had almost slaughtered one another, each stretching the other's limits as they'd trained together against a common enemy. At some point their combat had transformed, inconceivably, into love.

Death itself must have mutated. Zai pinned a ruddy pelt to Izzik's tunic. She looked into his face, his confident demeanor, and felt suddenly old. His tattoo redefined his forehead as she plucked his kerchief away. Pictogram-imprinted linens dripped from her pockets.

These days she walked on the other side of an equation. No Destiny powder remained to quicken life. No more houses swelled with Yata children who grew up only to be cut down before they could realize their potential. Now, as the Yata decreased, so too must the Masari. Their slow weaning from Yata flesh was not enough.

The ashen-faced leader of Crossroads understood. HigherBrook was bearing up well under the weight of this ritual, this induction of warriors trained specifically to cull his people. He was watching Zai, but he also watched the new Preservers. He had passed them countless times in the villages, had traded goods with them. He might even have raised a toast with them.

Now he and CatBird categorized their stance, their scent, every identifying mark for detection in the hunting grounds. The Preservers gazed back, their scrutiny mutual. The air around Zai crackled with alertness. The blue line extended forehead to forehead, a mortal and

spiritual boundary.

She turned from the last inductee and nodded to her lieutenant. He threaded his way among respectful kin, carrying a small stone plate. Narrow slices glistened against granite.

Zai bowed to him, accepting the meat and holding it up before the initiates. "The balance of life and death in this valley now resides with you. Remember that as you consume your prey."

One by one the hands reached out, grasped the slices by their edges, and guided flesh between teeth. Most of the Preservers had eaten Masari before, but that had been to stave off a winter of famine. They were not hungry now. This meat fed not their bodies but their souls.

The Yata lieutenant took the empty plate from Zai and carried it deliberately past the living Masari in the room. As he exited a heavy curtain seemed to lift. Zai's people stood and stretched, welcoming the initiates into open arms.

Her sons had learned restraint at these ceremonies. Now more children, less controlled, streamed in through the rear doors.

CatBird hugged her new Yata family to her, bending down to be head to head with Izzik as she embraced him with the others.

From above Zai's head a low tenor intoned, "You're a good orator."

She glared up at HigherBrook. "Is that all this is to you? Rhetoric?"

He offered a shallow smile. "No, Zai. Not at all."

Color had returned to his face. HigherBrook pinched the bridge of his sharp nose. His long shadow wavered in torch light.

Zai watched Izzik and CatBird. "If they were both farmers, or merchants, I might understand their pairing better." She shook her head. "How can they possibly celebrate each other's accomplishments?"

"I don't know." HigherBrook looked out over the crowd. "You may have destroyed the Covenant, but you were raised under it. So was I. They live in a different world than we do."

Zai bristled. "You and I have never lived in the same world, HigherBrook."

"Still." He folded his arms across his chest. His goatee tilted toward the lovers. "Tell me you know them better than you know me."

The initiates clustered together, an intimate cadre, young and exuberant. They all joked with CatBird, comparing the scars they'd inflicted on each other. One step over the border would transform them and her seamlessly into each other's would-be executioners.

Zai looked back at HigherBrook and shuddered. Her hands clutched small shoulders as Abri and Evit hugged her around her waist, squealing with delight.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Arid Lands: The Canyon**

TripStone teased scent from the desert, her throat and sinuses dry. She shifted beneath the corpse draped over her shoulder, tightening her soiled kerchief around her nose and mouth.

This hunt was nothing like the ones in her valley. Crossroads was several days' travel from here, but on the other side of the world with its musk and resins and wet decay. Here the air was acrid and molten, the sweat of distant prey elusive. More often than not TripStone inhaled dust, taking brittle breaths inside canyon walls magnifying the heat. Her braided hair formed a thick crimson club. Sweat ran in rivulets between swaths of neck fur as her party climbed back toward Promontory.

Its citizens were still learning to be hunters, but she was still learning the terrain.

The sun had set behind a darkening cliff at the start of their ascent. Now it rose again as they gained altitude. It would set again, this time for the night, before they reached the rim. Craggy outcroppings faded to black against a dim halo of dusk.

Below the trail the seasonal riverbed was dry, cast into shadow and too dark for its bones to gleam any longer. Torrents had jumbled the skeletons together half a season earlier, hybridizing Yata and Masari fallen during the battle for Destiny Farm. TripStone averted her eyes, listening to brief pauses in the footfalls. Each person here could put a face to the remains.

The trail widened; boots crunched an uneven cadence on chalk. TripStone eased closer to the wall as FlitNettle stepped up beside her. BrushBurn's young cousin gazed straight ahead, pensive. The naked Yata she carried smelled of disease.

"I looked at her branding number," FlitNettle said, matter-of-factly. The back of the corpse's neck was exposed, its farm tattoo clearly visible as the small head lolled against the young Masari's back, touching the barrel of a StormCloud. "Her father was culled during the final Destiny shortfall, but I think her mother is still alive."

The body TripStone carried was similarly tattooed, as were all the Yata being hauled up to Promontory. Only the babies, born after the fall of Destiny Farm, were unmarked. "How many of their numbers have you memorized?"

"I don't know. It's more like remembering groups. Categories. I could check the one you're carrying if you like."

TripStone looked into a face of eager concern. "All right. When we reach the Warehouse." She plucked another cloth from her vest pocket and dabbed at her forehead.

The exposed skin around FlitNettle's pelt remained dry. The girl had grown up in this climate. A long, chestnut-colored braid coiled atop her head, making her look older than she was.

*She is older. I could never have killed at her age.*

The shooters around them swapped jokes, some more cruel than others. TripStone cringed inwardly at profanities and raucous laughter echoing off striated rock walls. For most, the hunting inspired no reverence. It was a job to do, part sport and part revenge, sweetened by the economic incentive to keep Promontory fed. Not long ago their prey had been shut up in pens and bred for meat. Now the Farm Yata ran wild.

At least Promontory's marksmen took only enough for sustenance, seeking out the weakest while defending against the strong. BrushBurn's numbers had been irrefutable. His survival statistics restrained otherwise eager trigger fingers.

TripStone suppressed a wry smile; at least no one had shot *her* yet. Many wanted to. More than once she'd been ready to drop a body

and unslinging her rifle. Not only had she been a fanatic of the Covenant, she had guided Gria's army to Promontory. Now she trained its citizens to hunt. Miner, seamstress, mason, whore, anyone willing to learn the skills and risk their lives in the canyon climbed the dusty trail behind her.

She studied FlitNettle, a child carrying a child. The dead Yata girl had already fallen to dysentery and dehydration before the adolescent's bullet had taken her down. TripStone said, softly, "This is your first kill."

FlitNettle nodded, gazing at the shadowy rim.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"She was sick." The others hauled their quarry like sandbags. FlitNettle held her own securely but respectfully, as though carrying a younger, sleeping sister to bed. She looked up at TripStone. "Do you think they're happier?"

A smooth voice answered from behind. "It's an irrelevant question, kid."

TripStone raised her eyebrows. "You didn't see them on a daily basis, DustClaw. She did; she grew up on the Farm. It's a legitimate question."

"It can be a *gold-plated* question. It's still irrelevant."

TripStone ignored him. "I don't know, FlitNettle. I know some of them were very unhappy even drugged, but they were protected until the culling."

"Let me remind you." DustClaw's voice grew closer, tightly controlled.

"Happy or not, it was Destiny Farm Yata that kept your *Crossroads* from starving. I saw that myself, TripStone. I was there. When your people arrested my associates and me, they thought nothing of laying claim to our meat cart so they could watch over Basc's children instead of eating them-while you were here, ready to arm the parents."

"Yes," TripStone said, mildly. "As I recall, those parents were the same Yata whom Promontory armed to massacre *my* people in an attack that *also* created your Destiny shortfall. Which forced the Farm to cull more Yata. Which made the surviving livestock *very* unhappy."

She slowed her breathing despite the climb, trying to dispel tension from her shoulders. Yata limbs rose and fell with a shush against hunting leathers.

"I think they're happier now." FlitNettle pursed her lips. "But I think they're more scared."

TripStone nodded, sighing. "Like the rest of us."

"Scared enough to create booby traps and rockfalls," DustClaw mused. "Scared enough to move deeper inside the canyon. It took us much longer to find them this time."

"I've noticed." TripStone rounded a switchback, casting a glance at the courier's seamed face, his shortened hair and chops the color of dried blood. Part of it was real blood; all the hunters bore flesh wounds. She nodded at his steady gaze. "That means we keep moving farther out along with them or we give them a good reason not to retreat."

He laughed, incredulous. "They have no good reason to stay behind, TripStone."

"Then why haven't the *Skedge* Yata left to go into the canyon?" Dulled skin slid against her own; she adjusted her load. The talk behind them lessened as some of the others fell silent, listening in. The only buzz remaining came from flies. "Promontory and *Skedge* still depend on each other. So do Crossroads and Basc. So do Rudder and Alvav. What did the Farm offer its livestock? Gruel, confinement, and oblivion. That's all those Yata knew until now." TripStone motioned toward the girl. "Except for kindnesses from people like FlitNettle and BrushBurn, who honestly cared about them."

"And in return the Yata killed their family." DustClaw edged toward FlitNettle. "You haven't mentioned that once, kid, and this is your second trip with us. No matter how many times your kin might have punished you, they were still your blood."

TripStone snarled, "Leave her alone."

"She needs to face that."

"Yata killed *my* family, too. Do you want to know how many of them I've shot?" TripStone rasped through gritted teeth, "Until now, you all bought your meat in pre-cut slabs. You didn't have to *think* about what it was."

FlitNettle tightened her grip on the corpse in her arms. "I know why they did it," she said, barely past a whisper. "I still get mad sometimes." She narrowed her eyes. "At everyone." She turned her head to the side, pitching her voice behind. "I don't care what you say."

TripStone glanced surreptitiously at the thin-lipped girl for any sign of tears, but FlitNettle's attention was focused on the rim where the contrast between rock and sky drained down. Soon they'd have to



light the lanterns.

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## The Arid Lands: Promontory

A dim glow rose from the top of the Warehouse, through its open oculus. Closer to the ground the great dome wore a necklace of distant lamps that shimmered as the guards marched their rounds. An occasional command drifted across the clearing, toward the canyon rim.

TripStone stretched her neck until cartilage cracked. The Great Wagon approached zenith up above as the Caterpillar set behind the mountains, its hindmost segment fat with stellar dust. The night sky was brighter now that the smelters didn't burn so frequently. Instead their haze scattered, herded away by winds whistling from high passes to the north. Amidst the threat of starvation and the collapse of its industries, Promontory had become almost beautiful.

She tried to ignore the cold, stiff flesh she carried and the contents of the closely-guarded granite up ahead, but the town's survival lay within that dome. Hung with Yata headless and smoked or butchered and marinated in brine, the Warehouse could have been much uglier. The same people who filled piss buckets while guzzling at the bar exercised almost saintly restraint when faced with a food supply that continued to dwindle.

"I confess I'd expected riots after the Farm fell." TripStone raised her eyebrows at DustClaw. "But everyone quieted down after only a few half-hearted assaults on the guards."

The brief resistance had seemed almost obligatory, the town raising its hackles in a burst of theater. Most citizens had been too busy

digging out of the rainy season's catastrophic mudslide to put up any show of force.

DustClaw spoke slowly, as though lecturing a child. "We didn't survive the frontier wars by panicking. You forget how many of our ancestors starved willingly to preserve their neighbors."

She stared at the bloated dome up ahead. "I can't forget those histories." No amount of alcohol had been able to blunt that knowledge. Better to remember SandTail's lessons sober.

All around TripStone the city's ancient toughness re-emerged, as though awakened from a long sleep. But the crude jokes echoing around her could not cover the longing of people who had left their families behind to hunt the Yata down.

DustClaw's seamed face crinkled in amusement. "Imagine my surprise when I learned how uncivilized *Crossroads* had become after only a single attack by the Yata." He shook his head. "Pure, pious Crossroads. I remember BrushBurn telling me how much you were all stealing from each other. How HigherBrook had placed your own possessions in safekeeping. Put in our position, *your* people would have rioted."

TripStone bristled. "We didn't turn the Yata into farm animals."

"No. You convinced them to die for you and become gods instead." The courier shrugged. "It's in the past now. All of it." He grinned at her. "You'll forgive me if I gloat, TripStone. Crossroads looked down its nose at Promontory for generations. You thought we were all such boors."

Their debates had whiled away the long hikes. This hunt had been no different.

*Neither of us admits how much more alike our villages have become.* The sudden realization jolted TripStone. Now Crossroads kept its own dead Yata in the Rotunda, storing consecrated bodies levels below its rarefied library of great books and changing forever the character of hallowed ground. HigherBrook's missives to TripStone described the fruits of added industrialization in Crossroads and in Basc. Widened scars stained her valley's green hills in his pictograms.

And most every Masari was a *yatanii*, trying to wean away from Yata consumption. Crossroads' hunting calendar under the Covenant had kept its citizens one Meat Day away from malnutrition, but Promontory's rationing at the end had been just as strict. Both communities had been well-prepared to fast.

TripStone called over to FlitNettle as the hunters waded through scrub and puddles of lantern light, "Go on ahead. I'll stop at the Lodge to get BrushBurn."

"He'll want to know I'm all right."

"I'll tell him you're all right. He expects to see me bloodied like this, not you."

The voice in the dark turned petulant. "He *knows* I went with you to hunt."

"Let him see her," DustClaw drawled. "There's no sense delaying his shock. We'll wait for him to record the numbers before we start cutting." He smirked. "You protect him too much."

*He was hardened once. I don't want him hardened again.* TripStone stopped grinding her teeth and held the lantern away from her face.

She spoke low to FlitNettle, "Come with me, then."

The Warehouse filled the horizon. TripStone and her ward peeled away from the others, turning instead toward a handsome new structure of sandstone walls and polished wood beams. TripStone smiled to herself; the Lodge might be the only place in Promontory with a sense of refinement worthy of Crossroads. Herb tea instead of alcohol, a pissoir outside rather than buckets inside. Smooth rather than coarse and splintered tables.

She pushed the heavy doors open and stepped into a brightly-lit parlor. Its stations of hanging scales paid homage to BrushBurn's obsession with exactitude. A bony patron glanced in her direction before returning to the columns of statistics etched in chalk along the walls.

As usual, BrushBurn sat at a large round table by the meat counter, hunched over sheets of parchment. A mug of fennel tea sent up a wisp of steam by his elbow. Beside that rested an earthenware plate half-emptied of mutton and greens.

His face looked thinner even through his heavy chops. He'd stopped eating Yata before this latest hunt began. He would break soon.

*And you break so wonderfully.* TripStone felt the flush at her neck and reined in her fantasies. BrushBurn was still at level two, but he had passed the Threshold. Acclimated to weaning now, he could eat less Yata without suffering deprivation effects.

Were she not so soiled she would tousle his rust-colored curls. But it was one thing to stock the Lodge with barrels of meat steeped in brine, another to enter it bespattered and hauling corpses. TripStone remained just inside the entrance. "Don't get too attached to those figures," she called. "They're about to change."

She caught her breath as he looked up. He nodded, said, "A minute," and looked quickly down again.

FlitNettle whispered beside her, "I told you it would be okay."

"Your cousin's upset," TripStone whispered back. "He just hides it well."

"I know."

BrushBurn drained his tea, gathered his papers together, and stored sheaf and dishes behind the counter. TripStone couldn't hear his exchange with his assistant, but she could read his practiced neutrality. *Inventory*. Stockpiled thoughts hidden in dark corners.

She offered a meek smile as he rounded the counter and strode to meet them, his steel-blue eyes wavering. "We've all come back safely. A little roughened," she added as BrushBurn examined a gash on FlitNettle's arm and sniffed the medicines applied to her wound.

He led them outside, white shirt flapping about his waist. TripStone lifted her lantern and counted the steps they took toward the Warehouse. Usually he faced her after fourteen, comfortably out of earshot of the Lodge. But FlitNettle carried a body, too, this time.

He stopped after sixteen. Stared up at the Great Wagon. Lowered his head, turned around.

"Dear gods." He winced at the dead Yata girl slung over FlitNettle's shoulder.

"She was sick," the young Masari explained.

He bent and touched his chops to hers in greeting, unmindful of the dirt. Emotions flickered across his face almost before TripStone could untangle them. Worry for FlitNettle's safety, despair that his only remaining kin had taken up the hunt, rage that now he loved two people who killed. And, beneath those, the feelings he was best able to express, focusing his grief on the Yata.

"Did you know her?" he asked. "Before?"

FlitNettle nodded. "We played a bit at the Farm. Before she was moved to the breeding pens."

He didn't have to speak. TripStone knew what he wanted to say. *She could have died pregnant.*

"It's all right, BrushBurn." FlitNettle smiled up at him. "I think they're happier."

He wrested his gaze from limp flesh and looked into river-green eyes. "What about you? Are *you* happier?"

"Yes, BrushBurn. I'm helping."

He forced a laugh. "You're helping dangerously. The Yata could kill you, too."

"I know." She turned testy. "Any of us could die anywhere."

His gravel voice dropped. "True."

His neck fur lifted as he straightened. TripStone murmured, "They're waiting for us at the Warehouse."

BrushBurn shook his head with unsaid admonitions before he brushed his chops against hers. He would fume later, while FlitNettle

slept. TripStone slid her free hand beneath his shirt, touching where his ribs were more pronounced.

"I'm sure I'll break tomorrow. That's not what makes me irritable." His lips brushed TripStone's cheek, then closed in on her mouth. Heat rose to her face, but the body between them reminded her of where her duty lay. She gave him a gentle squeeze as he withdrew.

He exhaled a heavy sigh. "Let's process the catch."

## **Chapter 5**

### **Promontory**

Heat climbed quickly. Monsoon rains evaporated into steam. The steam climbed up and over the mountains, carrying the salt lake's last humid waves. The water level dropped, the air turning brackish until its bitterness, too, faded away.

The citizenry dug itself out. Sweat dropped onto cobblestones exhumed from floods and mudslides. Gravel hardened into rebuilt roads as shutters closed against the sun. This summer could be like any other, when the smelters still operating closed by day and fired up at night, glowing dirty orange on the horizon. Smoke hung above the canyon, dripping into rocky crevasses, waiting patiently for a wind that wouldn't come.

SandTail opened his eyes and shook. Every time he awakened, bone-shattering cold sent him scrambling back toward his cave of sleep. This time he tried to stay awake.

White curtains shielded him. He lay in a tunnel of wooden hoops draped in thick gray blankets. Air passed beneath them, carrying

chills; the wool was useless. Analgesics numbed his small, compact body mummified in Yata skin. Foreign biology reached into his own, rebuilding him quietly and insidiously.

*How soon before those bandages run out? How soon before the Warehouse empties of dead Yata? How long have I been asleep?*

He was a boy again, pulled from a factory fire, his body melting and then freezing as his skin had burned away. SandTail had been wrapped in flayed Yata then, too, wearing their skins like a shroud until the shroud dissolved into him. The descendants of raiders who had killed his ancestors repaired him in death, a grisly reminder that his own Masari flesh wasn't good enough to heal on its own.

That had been a long time ago, when Promontory was still alive. Promontory was dying when last SandTail looked. Overrun by the proud Basc Yata militia, its leader Gria half-naked, bloated with the Destiny he'd shoved down her throat. The one riding his back, cutting pieces from him as she screamed senseless with lust under the drug.

Gria should have died that day. He'd had his revolver in her. He should have squeezed the trigger.

Voices filtered in from behind the curtain. First the doctor DevilChaser's, thin and acerbic. This was the barracks, then, built at the edge of the salt lake across from Skedge. The last time SandTail was here it was filled with mudslide victims, in those moments before Gria's army had attacked.

The second voice startled him. "Are you afraid I'll heal him or kill him? To tell you the truth, I don't know which I'd rather do."

*AgatePool.* In a moment the curtain bunched, its hooks sliding. SandTail closed his eyes, trying not to smile at smoky Masari



undertones trapped in that small Yata mouth.

DevilChaser said, flatly, "I'm only warning you about what to expect."

"Yes. More scars." AgatePool's spicy musk enveloped the pallet. "I've seen him as naked as you have, and you've already shown me what Yata skin can do for Masari-"

Footfalls stopped. SandTail heard a sharp indrawn breath.

He opened his eyes, creating another stir, curling his lips until pain rose to his cheeks. *I'd say how much it means to me to see you if that demon hadn't cut out my tongue.*

"Hello, SandTail." The mixed-blood woman stood stiffly at the head of the tunnel. She wore factory clothes, but the denim coveralls and leather straps on her short, broad frame were Promontory-issue, not from her native Skedge.

SandTail's head swam as he nodded in reply. Skedge had maintained only one factory, producing Destiny. That was gone now, along with the Yata farmed and breeding, controlled by the drug. *What's left?*

At the very least, one mixed-blood had come to Promontory to work here. Where there was one, there were others.

DevilChaser asked, "More for the pain?"

A compassionate offer with a noncommittal delivery. SandTail shook his head. He was *cold*, not hurting. He envied the sweat trickling down AgatePool's copper-colored cheeks, nestling into her bushy black chops. Even the doctor, as slim as the woman was portly, glistened.

DevilChaser nodded. "This is the first time I've seen him fully conscious. I'd say the chances of your killing him are remote unless you work at it."

AgatePool's dark eyes gleamed with triumph before she turned them with a grimace toward the ceiling. She hugged herself. Twitched.

*You're glad I'm still alive, otherwise you wouldn't be so troubled.* SandTail had no tongue, but he could still move his lips, managing a wordless grunt: *Howlong?*

"Half a season," AgatePool said, without pause. "That *is* what you want to know, isn't it? How long you've been here. How much has changed." She looked back down, studying Yata wrappings. Lozenges of translucent orange, their bronze-hued layer stripped away, held fast to SandTail's open wounds. Several had already changed, beginning to match his pale skin. Haphazard tufts of ochre pelt rose around the bandages.

Her gaze was everywhere but on his face. "You've lost a lot of blood." AgatePool turned to DevilChaser. "Go back to your other patients. I'll be all right."

"Call me if you need me." The doctor gave SandTail one last critical appraisal before drawing back the curtain, leaving just the two of them.

*A good healer, that one. As ready to treat a man he hates as to tend anybody else.* The thought provided some solace. Promontory's citizens still looked out for each other. There must still be something left of this town.

SandTail watched AgatePool pace, her copper Yata complexion

gleaming in natural light streaming through high windows. Her father's coloring.

A season ago she'd never heard the word "Yata." She knew her pedigree now.

*I've lost everything, my dear. If I am to lose you, too, it doesn't much matter any more.*

No, that was a lie.

"All right," AgatePool hissed, more to herself than to him. "Business first, because I can't talk about anything else right now. It's too painful." She glared at him. "We were always good at business. Funny how I always thought that made us more alike than not."

She pulled up a stool, settling her bulk by the raised pallet. Her legs practically dangled off the floor, but SandTail's would as well. If his parents had survived his childhood, they might have wondered why their son remained Yata-sized.

They'd been robust Masari, with no outstanding characteristics save for their lives being cut short. But that was typical of Promontory. *His* survival was twisted.

SandTail smiled a little, closing his eyes.

AgatePool asked, "Tired?"

He shook his head. *No. Thinking.* It didn't matter he had no tongue; she could read him.

AgatePool sighed explosively. "Promontory's production is off by more than half across all industries. Many Masari died in last

season's mudslide. Additional Masari died battling the Yata from Basc. Many Masari *believed* to be dead were in fact drugged unconscious, spared by those Yata."

SandTail's eyes sprang open.

"You now have a significant labor shortage," AgatePool continued, ignoring his surprise. "Skedge, on the other hand, no longer manufactures Destiny and has been looking for work. We have very few mixed-bloods, but we're starting with those. Eventually we're going to have to find a way to employ our Yata in your factories and mines."

Croaking filled the room. At first SandTail didn't realize the hideous attempt at laughter was his. He stopped when his stomach jolted suddenly with the memory of Gria's blade carving him. *Flank. Tenderloin...*

There had to be parchment and pen nearby. He tried to form the words with his lips.

AgatePool nodded. "We anticipated that. DevilChaser set aside a slate and chalk."

SandTail yelled as he tried to shift onto his side to write and forced his mouth shut against nausea. AgatePool turned her broad back to him. He followed the loose hair kinking about her shoulders, night-colored like a Yata's but frizzed like a Masari's. Amazingly soft in his hands, but too far away to touch. Always farther away than he'd like, the salt pan, salt lake between them, separating his city and her mesa.

She turned from a low wooden table set back from the pallet, behind SandTail's head. Writing implements dropped before him. SandTail

grasped AgatePool's hands as she helped him move inside the hoops. *Come into bed with me, please. I need your warmth.*

Only the cold was real. That, and the thick black fur SandTail held against his cheek, his paramour's fleshy knuckles underneath.

"I'm half-Yata, you know," AgatePool said. "This hospital started as barracks built for launching an attack on Skedge. Those were my people you were planning to kill. Are you sure you still love me?"

*You're afraid I'll say yes.* SandTail turned her hand over and kissed her palm. Easier when the Yata of Skedge thought they were Little Masari, smaller offshoots of his kind instead of food. Easier when they were ignorant of Destiny Farm, believing they manufactured an aphrodisiac for Promontory instead of a drug to control their distant kin as livestock.

His teeth began to chatter, his hip and side protesting against new, strange pressures. Without DevilChaser's analgesics he'd be screaming.

The slate filled with barely-legible scribbles. *Destiny Farm is gone. We have no backup food supply. You can't expect Yata to survive here, especially after what Basc did to us.*

And after the poisoning of Destiny, perpetrated by a handful of Skedge Yata who thought they were killing Masari instead of their own kind. As much as anything else, that act had destroyed the Farm as well. Fortunately, he had no more room to write.

AgatePool raised bushy eyebrows at the chalk. "I didn't say it would be easy, SandTail, but right now Promontory needs Yata economically as well as nutritionally. Believe me when I say there are many Yata on Skedge who'd prefer that the Masari simply die out."

She shrugged. "Others produced people like me-which, I hasten to add, was done with Masari cooperation."

Just rubbing the slate clean was exhausting. *Too few to make any difference.*

"Don't be so sure." She took SandTail's hand in hers. "Skedge knows about the frontier wars now. We know what our ancestors did to yours. I've been trying to calm the *fear* here as much as anything else. So have Masari who have overcome that fear, including those spared in the attack."

*Spared.* Funny word. It made no sense. Spared to do what-starve? What possible purpose would Gria's army have had in allowing Promontory's citizens to live while taking away their food supply?

*Who is left in the Chamber? Are they dead, are they rationing meat? Is anyone in charge?* Chalk hovered above a gray slab that looked ridiculously small. He had so much to say and no way to say it.

SandTail's head fell back on his pillow as he tried to huddle for warmth. He curled as best he could around the slate. His angle was wrong, but he didn't need to see. He pushed the chalk like a wagon through a snowdrift. *I still love you.*

AgatePool answered, softly, "But you hate Yata." Her face crumpled, her copper skin reddening above a heaving chest. "I still love you, too, and I can't fathom why. I can understand your lies to us about who we were. As much as my mother loved my father, she had lied to him. She ate the Yata raised on Destiny Farm and kept him ignorant about everything. It was a *sick* system, but it worked."

SandTail wanted to swim in the heat of her palm where she grabbed his chin. Her voice rose. "Right now there are three dozen children on

Skedge whose parents are unaccounted for because they were captured by the Farm. We don't know if those children are orphans or not. If their parents are alive they are hiding somewhere in the canyon, probably wondering if Skedge has been wiped out." Tears dropped into his neck fur. "You were ready to *massacre* my people! What the *hell* were you planning to do with *me*?"

She released his chin and rubbed her eyes. "Then I saw what you did to Gria and I wondered whom I'd been sleeping with all these years. It serves you right, what she did to you." Her body quaked, her hands limp in her lap. "You should be dead."

She might get her wish soon, but she probably knew that, too. BrushBurn would have figured out the numbers by now, arranging them meticulously in his maddeningly neat handwriting. As though hopelessness looked better when presented in tidy columns and rows.

If only he were here. Not knowing how much longer Promontory had before its people starved was even more distressing. SandTail sighed and shuddered, gripped by renewed chills. *At least come into bed with me before I die. Consider it my last wish.*

He'd been accused of being cold-hearted before. Now he knew what it really felt like. He reached for the chalk. *I'm freezing.*

"I can't lie next to you until after you've absorbed the bandages."

The chalk drilled like a woodpecker as it trembled against the slate. *Pretend.*

A dull ache rose through him and sharpened against his bones as the drugs wore off. Soon the thought of starvation wouldn't matter, only the immediacy of agony.

The mudslide had buried Promontory's pharmaceutical supply in the center of town. Unless any of that had been retrieved, he was using up precious resources. SandTail set his jaw, would grind his teeth to stumps if he had to.

AgatePool wiped a fresh layer of sweat from the skin around her neck fur. Even her sturdy factory clothes wrinkled in the heat, her hair plastered to her forehead. SandTail tried to smile. She needed someone to cool her off. They were meant for each other.

The sight of her wilting would have to do.

Suddenly his nerves twisted and he sucked air through his teeth. *Talk to me.* The slate filled with scrawls as he gasped. *Say anything. I'll listen.* He squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced.

"I'll get DevilChaser."

He shook his head, ignoring the needles shooting between his ears. He could do without medicine if he had words. If AgatePool truly wanted him dead, she would remain silent.

~ ~ ~

"All right, then."

AgatePool stood and turned away as SandTail struggled to catch his breath through gritted teeth. She didn't need to look at him to know tears leaked out onto his cheeks. "I was afraid this would happen, that I'd feel sorry for you."

She paused to study the metal hooks holding the curtain in place. Almost no one in Promontory spoke Yata; now that she finally knew



the language she didn't want to forget it. Simply changing tongues quickened her blood, as though she'd always carried the words in a deep, ancestral memory.

Each sentence returned her from exile, generations of ignorance crumbling. "You learned Yata when you were arming Gria's militia against Crossroads. Can you understand what I'm saying?" She glanced back at his painful nod. "It must sound strange coming from me. Get used to it."

She circled back to the small table. "I came here to find you. When I learned you were still alive it terrified me, so I buried myself in the factories. I talked to the Chamber, made myself visible around town."

Spoons and open-mouthed syringes lay wrapped in linen on the wood. Metal canisters cobbled the shelves underneath, next to bottles of preservative. Grisly reminders. "I learned a lot about you. I'd been wondering why Promontory didn't just let you die, until I found out how much you had invested your own funds in this city's survival."

SandTail's labored breathing scratched at AgatePool's spine as she squatted by the shelves. She didn't want to look at him. The canisters made real what was so hard to imagine. "TripStone and BrushBurn were here every day in the beginning. You probably don't remember. They fed you."

Not for the first time, AgatePool tried to picture the syringe guiding its contents into SandTail's slack-jawed mouth, the gentle massaging of his throat until he swallowed gruel made from finely-ground Yata meat mixed with curatives and water.

AgatePool's palm grazed cool, tightly-stoppered containers. Dull silver, anonymous. She could be grasping the remains of someone her own workers had inadvertently poisoned, someone who'd

dangled headless on a hook in the Warehouse.

She held the canister before his face. "This is all donated. That's the only reason you've lived this long." She nodded at fresh tears, knew he cried from more than physical pain. "Many citizens here believe you're to blame for Destiny Farm's destruction, but they remembered how well you took care of them."

Her arm began to shake; she restrained herself from hurling metal against the wall. "My *gods*, SandTail! You farmed people for generations and no one said a *word*! You bedded me for eighteen years and convinced me I *knew* you. Even when I met an escaped Farm Yata face to face I didn't believe it." She shoved the canister back on its shelf. "How was I to know the tattoo on her neck was ancient Yata? How was I to know the matching brand on a slab of meat was the symbol for Destiny?" AgatePool reeled backward, her heart jolting and threatening to break all over again. "Then I saw it carved into the walls all around my factory. I thought it was just a *design*. When I realized what we'd been manufacturing for you all those years I wanted to kill you."

SandTail's eyes were shut tight when AgatePool whirled from the table. "Still want me to talk?" she hissed. "Am I easing your pain any?"

He grappled blindly with the chalk. AgatePool took uncomfortable pleasure in his struggles, then wanted to gather him into her arms. She snorted derisively.

Her workers had *adored* him. To them he was another Little Masari, someone their size, proof positive that they were all related. SandTail had known each of them by name. He'd inquired about their families, just as he had with the real Masari in Promontory. He may have hated

Yata, but his concern for those who didn't know what they were had been genuine.

Then Promontory's demands on AgatePool's workers became intolerable and SandTail's compassion had transformed into thinly-veiled threats.

AgatePool watched him write over other letters. She followed the chaotic rise and fall of his chest, waiting patiently as he dropped the chalk. He patted the pallet until he found it again. Was he concentrating against fresh spasms or was he afraid to face her?

Tangled lines smeared one atop the other. AgatePool peered at hand movements to decode the message. "Yes, there was an escaped Farm Yata. Her name is Piri now. She lives in Crossroads."

She grabbed SandTail's hand and yanked it toward her; chalk shattered on the floor. AgatePool turned his palm up as he winced. *You don't deserve to know this*, she drummed, nails digging into his flesh. She shoved his arm away and felt his forehead. Frigid sweat.

She smirked at his confused squint. "Yes, it's language. Piri taught it to me. You're far from the first person to have your speech taken away from you." Her boot found broken pieces and ground the chalk into powder across rough-hewn boards.

It didn't matter; he couldn't write any more. AgatePool bent stone-faced to pluck up the slate.

She watched SandTail twist from renewed seizures. His hazel eyes were open; when he fixed them on hers she looked away. She strode to the curtain and stopped, forcing herself not to flee.

"What would you tell me if I taught you how?" she muttered. "More

lies? What would you incite among Masari who want to choke the life out of Yata?"

A short, high-pitched grunt answered her. AgatePool turned back toward a man who lay in pieces. Lozenges of Yata skin had transformed SandTail into an oddly-colored, misshapen melange. Gria had carved his torso deeply but carefully, avoiding major organs. DevilChaser must have had to apply multiple layers, waiting patiently for each chemical reaction to take place.

How much of that alchemy happened in a mix-child's body every day? How much of what now wracked the Masari twitching beneath her had AgatePool taken for granted?

SandTail extended his arm, bending his wrist over the edge of the pallet, fingers splayed. His palm beckoned her as his other hand tightened into a fist against the cold.

She drummed on the palm, *Not yet*. Curled the fingers back in. SandTail was reduced to the simple need for comfort, his breathing less erratic as her skin pressed his. He managed an exhausted, disarming smile.

AgatePool sat again beside his bed, flushed from the heat. "Gria spared your life; I see you remember that. She did not expect to find mudslide refugees camped in her army's line of approach, otherwise your death toll would have been much lower. Her soldiers eventually realized the Masari were unarmed, otherwise your death toll would have been that much higher."

SandTail had no tongue, but he still had a brain. His hand turned clammy in hers as more sweat beaded on his face. Laughter played at the corners of his mouth, but that couldn't be right.

AgatePool frowned. "Gria's people were threatened with becoming livestock. Their target was Destiny Farm, not Promontory. But the Farm Yata had already freed themselves. They killed all but one other member of BrushBurn's family." She shook her head. "Don't ask me why BrushBurn chose to keep you alive. I can't fathom that, either."

A tortured groan pushed past SandTail's lips. More than his body responded; at last he showed some remorse. AgatePool smoothed wet hair back from his forehead. His scalp was soaked. No wonder he was freezing.

He needed a cap, but she could find only linen wrappings. He didn't smile up at AgatePool as she dried him off. Instead she caught the troubled look in his eyes.

She switched back to speaking Masari. "Gods forgive me if I'm making the wrong choice." She uncurled SandTail's fingers and sandwiched his hand between hers. She rubbed the chill from his palm. "Every sound has its own fingerpress, regardless of which spoken language is used. You can thank Crossroads and the Covenant you so detested. This touch-speech derives from the exercises its hunters used to help them remember Yata stories. When the Yata were still worshiped."

SandTail struggled to swallow. He waited, looking spent. He blinked once, hard, before giving her his undivided attention.

AgatePool positioned her fingers. "So help me, beloved, if you betray my trust again I will kill you myself."

## Chapter 6

BrushBurn tried not to squirm in his chair as another wave of moans

descended from another private room. His assistant stopped wiping down barrels and stacking dishes long enough to stand still and listen from behind the meat counter. BrushBurn didn't need to turn around to see the young man's grin.

*Private.* He bent above his round table and filled his pen. *Hardly.*

His fingers had thinned. Neat columns before him delineated the time left, at the current rate of Yata deaths and consumption, before Promontory's people would begin to starve. Unless things changed, that decline would start in earnest come late winter.

He fished bits of cloth from his breech pockets and eased them into his ears. Sighing, he continued his accounting through muffled Masari lust.

His numbers became an academic exercise, like the chalk-filled walls around him. Like the burnished scales hanging at the Lodge's weighing stations and inside its private rooms. In the short time since it was built, this stately parlor had grown leaden with statistics on the volume of readily-available meat, individual levels of weaning, trends and projections.

BrushBurn controlled what came in and what went out. Any Masari who wanted to stay alive had to come here.

He pushed his figures aside and pulled up another sheet.

*My dearest Piri.*

Simply writing her name brought a smile to his lips. Writing in Yata effected deeper changes. For a moment BrushBurn's fingers seemed even narrower, his hand smaller. His cream-colored skin darkened to bronze despite the strong lamp light. The tufts at his

knuckles shrank and disappeared as his pelt fell from him, rendering him smooth.

He pushed the fantasy away and rested his palm against bushy, rust-colored chops, then dragged his fingers across fuzzy neck fur before picking his pen back up.

*Believe me when I say I understand your loneliness. We have both lived among Masari and among Yata and have felt part of neither.*

*You asked me whether Destiny Farm was to blame. I think it was, but only in part. Your husband fights his own demons, yes?*

Judging from the tone of Piri's letters, Ghost felt as much a prisoner in his shiny new lab as BrushBurn felt here, both of them entrusted with cheating extinction.

*I have a confession to make. He has made so many to her. What was one more? I miss the Farm.*

*As horrible as it was, I miss the Farm.*

His nib began to skip as his hand quickened. *Above me, right now three of the Lodge's rooms hold customers breaking their fasts. You know how potent Yata flesh (your flesh) is after a long abstinence. They are gorging themselves (on you), rutting as their bodies recharge.*

BrushBurn shook his head, trying to drive his mental interruptions away.

*I hate their helplessness, Piri. I hate mine.*

*I think-* His pen hesitated. *I think I begin to understand how you must*

*have felt inside the breeding pen.*

No, he couldn't possibly understand. He couldn't come close.

He drew a neat line through the words, cursing under his breath. Should he simply scrape them away? Erase his ridiculous claim?

Piri had learned the worst about BrushBurn and hadn't pushed him away. She might as well witness his stupidity, too. He left the knife alone. *I'm sorry.*

He dipped his nib in the well and waited for his breathing to slow. His skin pulled against his ribs as he inhaled, a reminder that his own Yata fast would end soon.

*Everything comes back to me in this place. I listen to Masari and I hear Yata, as though I am at the Farm all over again. Only I am not listening to livestock any more, but the sounds of my own people. As though we are fucking to drive away the reality of our own deaths.*

His lay his pen down and wiped sweaty hands on his breeches. He should cross that line out, too. It sounded too much like Destiny addiction. He had no right to compare.

Or did he?

The words stayed.

*I thought that running the Lodge was the right thing for me to do. I (sold you) was a meat trader for most of my life. (You were slabs, Piri. Product.)*

He shook his head again, pushing his pen forcefully across the page.



*I thought my grasp of numbers could help us survive. I still do.*

Climax reached his wadded ears. Yells rose as though from the bottom of a lake. Drowned.

BrushBurn's neck fur puffed. He plucked out the wads as he stood, and shoved the cloth back in his pocket. He blew on the ink and slid his letter beneath columns of statistics before stepping up to the counter. His voice was more subdued, more gravelly than usual. "Enjoying the show?"

He didn't have to ask. His assistant still grinned up at the balcony. The young man's chops had only recently begun to thicken from boyish down.

"Yeh." The answer held less shyness, less embarrassment than before. The boy laughed. "I'm glad I stayed alive for this."

BrushBurn couldn't help smiling. "Me, too, StemIron. It's helped your voice deepen."

"And it's growing my leg back." The youth flashed BrushBurn a mischievous wink. "But not in the same place."

One door opened above them, another. Exhausted but sated Masari in rumpled clothing edged down the stairs. The third room remained occupied.

BrushBurn helped his customers to the counter and climbed to the balcony, hurrying past the sounds of gluttony and sex. He ignored the musk in the air, the fluids on the floor. They didn't interest him.

The large plate of anonymous chunks steeped in brine did.

He lifted it from its table, set it on a nearby scale, and waited for the needle to still.

Level one. Baseline. No change after half a season of controlled fasting. BrushBurn gazed down at the glistening meat, then back up at the needle, begging it to move.

*If the gods exist...*

His prayers had not been answered these days. BrushBurn clamped down on his dismay as he took the plate to a small barrel and scraped the meat back in. He read the markings on the inside wall and checked for tampering.

No one had sneaked in any filler. Promontory's citizens were an honest lot when they dealt with each other. Maybe the gods existed after all.

The next room yielded better news, but that customer's weaning still progressed slowly. BrushBurn had memorized the records from Rudder's Milkweed Inn, but he still prayed for faster results. The *yatanii* across the mountains had practiced controlled fasting for years and reduced their Yata consumption admirably, but even the most accomplished among them were still dependent.

*We don't have years.*

BrushBurn swallowed his dread as he descended the stairs, listening to StemIron joking with their patrons below. The youth's wooden leg *clomped* as he rounded the end of the counter, clutching chalk. The mudslide survivor led the way to a slate panel framed by hardwood.

The third room would empty soon. Gasps and burps rode the air.

Customers flanked StemIron as he found their names. He called back to BrushBurn, "How'd they do?"

"Mixed."

The assistant took dictation, inscribing neat figures. "We'll do better next time."

BrushBurn forced joviality into his agreement. His guests should harbor some hope when they returned to their shifts, one to the quarry, the other to the smelter. He looked away from distended bellies and into reddened faces.

Hard glints of determination met him. Promontory's citizens didn't feign anything. These people were used to the truth, not comfort.

"I admire your courage." BrushBurn looked from his customers to StemIron. "All of you. You make me proud to be a Masari."

How odd the feeling, yet how real. It descended on BrushBurn like a dream. Like the pectoral fur curling beneath his shirt, the tufted swaths striping his back.

Whether he lived only until late winter or beyond, he would know what he was when he died.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Arid Lands: Skedge**

Children clung to Jirado as they all traversed ripped walks. The mesa's marble shards had been cleared away, leaving a pox of sandstone, but conditions could be worse. Bullets and stone

projectiles had only chipped the cisterns.

Their house still stood, intact beneath its cracked facade.

Jirado hugged the three youngsters flanking her. Her adolescent nephew was already taller than she. Her smallest nephew still didn't believe she was a grown-up. He thought she'd only played in the Destiny factory.

"I used to play there, when I ~~was~~ a child," she told Ladav, her voice still high like a girl's.

But children grew up. And then they worked.

Jirado once took pride in that and in her close-cropped hair, her tiny body fitting into the machinery.

She forced a deep breath. This was neither the time nor the place to be upset.

These were her sister's children, her brother's son. Her sister-in-law was already dead, caught between opposing factions of Yata during the battle for the factory. No one here knew anything about the surviving parents of these children, or about Jirado's husband, or any of the others captured by Destiny Farm.

She squeezed one arm and then another. Another. "I have something to tell you." She gazed toward a rosy twilight spreading beyond their mesa, dimming over the Alvav hills. "I'm going to go away soon. I have to make things safe for your parents and your uncles in the canyon."

She readied for the chorus of *Don't go!* but it didn't come. Instead, the children who so often treated Jirado as one of them studied her in

silence, their brown eyes wide. One lip trembled, but her youngest nephew remained brave.

She had to be brave, too.

"I'm going to go to AgatePool," she told them. "You remember AgatePool, the nice lady who ran the factory. My boss. She used to bring you treats." Jirado's stomach trembled. She rubbed her bare arms in the cool evening air. They'd lost their golden glow with the sunset. "She lives in Promontory now, with the Masari."

The little girl piped up, alarmed, "They'll kill you!"

"No, they won't kill me." Jirado stopped walking and knelt on cracked mosaic. The child's head was higher than hers. "I'll make them love me. You'll see."

She rested her palm against the small bronze cheek and brushed back loose strands of long black hair. The child struggling to conquer her fear still looked like PetalDove.

But that was a Masari name. The closest Yata equivalent was Adalora. A clunky, dowdy sound for such a sprightly girl.

Clunky and dowdy, but *real*. And these children hadn't been sprightly since the riots, no matter how often Jirado tried to engage them in play. They still cried in their beds when they thought no one was listening.

She straightened and they continued on. Past the ruins of the factory, destroyed by Gria's army and by many of Jirado's fellow citizens, including the one who had pulled her out from beneath fallen steel.

So many contradictions. So much waste. Jirado looked away.

To her right, her brother's adolescent son blurted, "I think they're all dead." He gazed in the other direction, across the salt pan fallen into darkness. Toward the canyon. "I think we're orphans."

"You want an easy answer," Jirado replied through gritted teeth. "I can't give you one, Tylie. We thought being Little Masari was an easy answer, and look where it got us."

"We didn't know any better."

"No, we didn't. But if there's a chance our kin are alive I'm going to bring them back here. I have to *pretend* they're dead, so the Masari think I'm only looking for work."

Tylie glared at her. He was a large Yata, like his father. Almost tall enough to be a Masari boy. Jirado shot him a warning look as Ladav began to whimper.

The teenager sulked beside her. He pretended to busy himself lighting the lamp when the last light of dusk began to fade.

When Jirado touched his shoulder he hissed, "If they're alive, how many babies do you think they made? How many other brothers and sisters do we have? How many strangers did they-"

His chest heaved. He turned back to the lamp.

"Stop." Jirado's voice dropped to a whisper. She struggled to keep her own grief under control. "I don't know, Tylie. But I *do* know it's not their fault."

The others pressed closer. Jirado herded them away.

PetalDove-Adalora-leaned past her. "Tylie's crying."

"Leave him alone, honey."

Jirado wanted to scream into the night.

*I love you all so much*, she wanted to tell them. *But I will lose my mind here.*

She was as unhinged as Tylie. *Who else are you husband to, SilverLode?* Jirado's mate had to know he was a Yata by now. Escaped food for Promontory. *How many are you father to?*

She'd risen each morning from a pallet half torn apart after nights spent churning the straw.

Thirty-six children on Skedge had lost one or both parents to the Farm. Eleven wives lost their husbands. Eight husbands lost their wives. Twenty-two of Jirado's neighbors lost their siblings and sixteen lost their children. The faces all around her were as cracked open as these walkways, these columns.

No one here could look for their kin. Promontory's hunters would kill them. Better to grieve and move on.

But what if you *couldn't*?

Jirado looked back toward Tylie as he straightened and lifted his lamp, his expression neutral. He stepped to her side, his tears dried. He pulled away when she tried to touch his arm.

She nodded as he growled, "Let's go."

She murmured, "You'll take care of your cousins?"

"I'm old enough."

"I know you are." Her voice was as hard as his. Not even Adalora's hand on her thigh could soften it.

"How will you get across?"

"The angels still bring our dead to Promontory." Jirado cast him a sideways glance. "I'll wait until they're called and then I'll ride in with the bodies." She barked a laugh. "I've sat with dead people before. It'll be like the riots, only quieter."

He nodded.

Then he screwed up his face and scrutinized his diminutive aunt. "What will you do once you're in the canyon?"

Jirado shook her head. "I'm not going into the canyon until it's safe. I won't give anybody a chance to hunt me down." Her breathy voice dropped. "I'm going to find a way to kill those monsters from the inside."

## **Chapter 8**

### **Midsummer**

#### **Basc**

When the gods were kind, Gria dreamt of a Basc she could not enter. A Basc of summer harvest piled into carts outside her hut's thick adobe walls. Looms clacked. Metalsmiths hammered. Her people were fledgling farmers and artisans now, practicing simple tasks of self-sufficiency completely unknown a year earlier. How to weave a shirt. How to grow a bean plant.



No Thanksgiving Day marked this season. No Masari hauled their tithes from Crossroads in transports groaning under the weight of collective guilt. No Yata entered the hunting grounds to be shot as willing sacrifices destined for godhood.

Now the Yata shot back. Now both sides mourned their dead from a contained war in the far woods, while within the village children of either blood raced shrieking up and down dirt paths. Safety was assured by the simple act of stepping across the border from wilderness into civilization.

Gria wished she could join them, but their voices still made her tremble. The gentlest hello, the slightest touch still swelled her with uncontrollable heat when she could feel anything at all. Her body held fast to its demon drug, strangling her with pleasure.

She sat upright on her pallet. She rubbed her arms as dread pooled in her stomach, her skin prickling. Her own shadow made her jump, cast by lanterns burning high above. Flames leaned away from walls that Zai had padded in straw.

Gria knew what was coming. She pleaded, squelching a whine, "No."

Zai couldn't save her this time, wasn't here to distract her. *But I need you!* Gria drew her knees up to her chin, huddling in a thin gray nightdress. She tried to laugh through her panic, a proud warrior turned utterly dependent. A leader unfit to be seen in public.

*You have your boys to raise and a village to govern. You have an army to maintain. I have no right to make demands on you.* Her voice still slurred badly, shaking. "Dear gods, Zai, please walk through that door..."

Disgusting, this piteousness. Gria jerked fingers through her close-

cropped hair and yanked. The pain felt too good. She stopped.

The pictograms painted on the ceiling and high above the straw had long burned into her brain. Stories of the Dirt People, the ancient Yata. They ringed the room in bright colors. Multiple meanings shifted in different light, overlaid on myriad sight lines hidden behind the padding.

Dun pallets stood on their ends while others lined the floor. When Gria fell out of bed she landed on yet another bed. This could be a barn, not the ancient repository of Basc's soul.

Her breath caught; soon she would need that padding's protection. She felt the changes begin, the tremor settling around her spine, numbness blooming outward like the branches of a tree. How many times must she split before she could finally mend back together?

*It feels good, my touch...*

SandTail's lyrical voice made her cry out. She was pinned against the Warehouse wall again, her skull ringing from repeated pounding against granite. Gria had begun to lose control of her body then, struggling half-blindly to free herself as blood matted the back of her head and dribbled onto her shoulders.

*Her spirit begins ripping away when he shoves the the first clod of Destiny into her mouth, forcing her to swallow Her clawing and the bites she inflict come from someone else. The rest of her floats, slipping into cracks between stone blocks, rising on the cries of her soldiers dying at the canyon edge.*

*She knows nothing but confusion, staring at SandTail's pockets bulging with brown powder. From farther and farther away Gria watches, unable to close her mouth as they empty one by one. The*

*drug dissolves her. The air fills with thunderous tearing as she peels away from herself, fleeing in the only way she can.*

*"I will melt you down." She can't scream his voice away; it comes from inside her now. "I will render you completely unrecognizable..."*

*She is reduced to a throbbing thing pressing hard against him, wanting more. He gives it to her, replacing his fingers inside her with the muzzle of a gun. It doesn't matter; her body is already lost. It cannot act on its own. Can only respond with need, hips pushing.*

*She watches herself dying from above; one squeeze of the trigger and her spirit body will shatter as well. All around her mica glistens as she floats ever-higher. A thousand silvery eyes wink from the stone, shining, directing her toward bright metal riding her hips as she thrusts.*

*He has disarmed her of her rifle but not her knife.*

The ceiling twisted. Pictograms bled together under the force of memory. Shrieks tore from Gria's throat, but she could not feel her lips open wide or the straw sticking her thighs as she tumbled onto the floor. She was in her hut and she was also at the Warehouse, one breath away from gunshot, slamming back into her body long enough to grab the hilt and pull the blade from her belt. Long enough for Destiny to sweep her spirit up in its flames.

*"Zai!"* Her body twisted; the room spun. No amount of calling would bring her caretaker through the door. The portal to the afterlife floated above Gria's terrified eyes. It had already claimed a part of her. Now it returned to pull the rest through its diaphanous, sparkling archway.

Nothing held her fast to the world. No feeling flowed skin to skin from

Zai's wiry arms. No one was here to lift her back into bed.

Her arms splayed. Her hips climbed the side of her pallet, toes pointing skyward. Air filled her lungs, but she didn't know how. Gria's heartbeat hammered in her head, but was missing from her chest. She could see her arms and legs, but they did not exist.

The portal thickened, dipping lower and drifting about her like fog. The pictograms blurred and faded away. Gria could not tell whether her eyes were open or closed, or whether she had any eyes at all. She'd been yelling, but when did the sound cease?

In time the fog dispersed. Odors of pine and honeysuckle tickled her nose. Her fingers curled around sun-warmed grass, nestling in heady loam.

She gasped and rolled upright. The grass bent against her palm, its blades yielding. She could *feel* them. Her pulse was quiescent, her lusts forgotten.

Her pallet and padded room were nowhere. Instead a broad meadow cupped her beneath a blue summer sky. An occasional cloud dropped its fuzzy shadow on a mountain.

Gria searched for landmarks in a landscape eerily familiar. Rock outcroppings, a distant copse. Bright happy greens of new growth expanded a lush, dark canopy.

*But this all burned down to ashes. Those trees can't have regrown so quickly.*

"They *are* ashes, back in the world. Everything here is dead, Gria."

She turned to the side, perplexed, and stared wide-eyed at Erta's

stern, wizened face. Basc's former spiritual leader sat beside her, feet tucked beneath ritual vestments embroidered with stylized beasts. The Honorable One's long silver braid coiled in her lap.

Gria looked away, struggling for breath. A nearby chipmunk skittered amidst fallen leaves. "This isn't real."

"It's real enough. To you."

Gria plucked at her own garment, the same thin, gray nightdress that covered her in the hut. Impulsively her palm went to the back of her head, to where new hair had grown in, covering her injury. She touched soft kinks more nappy than the rest-and that were, according to Zai, completely white.

"You're still alive, child," Erta snapped, drawing her back. "This is not yet your home."

Gria whispered, incredulous, "This is the afterlife."

"This is whatever you make it. You came here."

Gria twitched nervous fingers toward Erta's thin hand. She explored soft, wrinkled skin, papery over bone. Light veins, fingerpads. The smooth forearm.

She shook her head. "I read the note you gave to TripStone the day she killed you. You surrendered your carcass to her before she traveled to Promontory as my scout." A brocaded sleeve fell toward Erta's elbow, revealing glints of bronze. Gria brushed tiny hairs, following a constellation of freckles.

Her slur was gone. Her tongue no longer moved as though clamped in irons. "Your *bones* are in my hut, Erta. TripStone cut you up and

prepared your flesh before her journey. Your meat kept her alive." She held the narrow wrist. "What is this?"

Erta freed herself with a gentle twist. "Again you question a gift of the gods. Zai has been communicating with her husband Ulik ever since TripStone killed him. Now she speaks to her brother Ila as well. They are both apparitions to her, just as all this is to you."

"But I can *touch* you, Erta."

"You touch nothing."

Gria jumped to her feet. She could keep her balance now, had equilibrium again. The ground was spongy beneath her soles. She glanced back at the indentations she left behind.

This could not be an apparition unless she herself was inside it.

The parti-colored robe shushed beside her. "A lovely dream," Erta murmured. "That *is* what you're thinking. And you would not be far from the truth." Warm fingers touched her shoulder. "All those dead. All those gods. Where do they exist, where does everybody go? How can there be room for us all?" Erta bent with more agility than Gria remembered and scooped a pill bug onto her palm. "This creature decomposes the dead and is now dead itself, so where does one even begin?"

Gria whispered, "I don't know."

"No, I expect you wouldn't." The old woman brushed the dirt from her hands and straightened. "Do not expect us to understand the wisdom of the gods just because we walk with them. Only know that we are all here for you." She raised her eyebrows at Gria's confusion. "*All* of us, child; it's a simple word. Whoever has gone before."

Erta flicked her wrist, gesturing toward the forest. A warbler swooped low across the meadow, toward high, sharp trills. The clouds moved in, thick enough to blot out the mountaintops.

Hairs rose on the back of Gria's neck as the air cooled. Mist enveloped the woods, thickening into fog. Nothing felt more real since the day she'd gone into battle. Gria watched the elder's placid footsteps. She studied The Honorable One's lips set in a tight, pensive line. "You don't know how much I've missed you, Erta."

The other shot Gria a sideways glance. "I know."

"What do I tell our people?"

"What *can* you tell them?" The old woman blurred at the edges, her vestments fading into monochrome. "You have wandered here. Begin with that." She was invisible now, slipping with the ground into vapor. The meadow vibrated with her command. "*Live*, Gria."

~ ~ ~

"You *must* let someone else help me care for you." Zai tried to mask her exasperation, but her commander knew her too well. She turned Gria onto her stomach. "Can you feel this at all?"

"No."

"Most of your weight was pressing against the base of your skull when I found you. That's where I'm massaging you." Gria's skin yielded beneath Zai's thumbs, but the woman in bed remained inert. Zai hardened her voice to keep it from wavering. "You were half-fallen out of bed. When I opened the door your feet were pointing in the air. Your hips were up against the pallet and your eyes were completely blank. I thank the gods I saw you breathing because I thought you

were dead."

Zai straddled Gria's waist, kneading. "I don't care how much straw is in here. Those seizures can break your neck."

On other days these ministrations would be impossible, when just taking hold of Gria's hand would stimulate too much. On those days Zai tried to shut out Gria's deep-throated moans. Heat enveloped her as the general thrashed, laughing and sobbing on the edge of hysteria, acutely aware of her own lack of control.

Zai drove the feelings from her own skin then; one of them had to remain calm. She squeezed herself into a tight emotional corner, neutered and objective. When that proved too difficult, she acknowledged her own tingling, joining in Gria's laughter at the gods' whimsies.

These days were worse.

Zai probed for knots in Gria's shoulders, but the muscles beneath her hands were unresponsive, empty of any tension at all. She kneaded one arm and then the other, working down. "Anything?"

"Nothing." Slurred against the mattress. "I am gone."

Zai's voice turned sharp. "You can hear me and you can talk back. You're not entirely gone." Her hands moved to either side of Gria's spine. She grumbled, "I should have been here," and immediately regretted the lapse. There was no sense making them both feel guilty.

Sometimes Zai could stave off the change. Sometimes her touch eclipsed memory if she held Gria tightly enough, to the point of pain. But the memory returned again and again and Zai could only bear



witness to Gria's terror. In minutes the flesh in her arms passed from lust-possessed to insensate.

Now as then the general's gaze latched onto a point in space, nothing but emptiness. When Zai looked she saw only mattresses lined up against the adobe wall, not Gria's description of shimmering arcs surrounding soft, quiescent light.

Gria mumbled against the bed. Zai bent down close to her mouth, trying to decipher the slur. "Tell me again."

The low voice repeated, tinged with wonder, "I've been through the portal." A barked laugh. "I can feel everything there."

Zai rolled off Gria's back and knelt beside the pallet. Dark eyes continued to gaze beyond her with a longing that chilled. "That's impossible. You're still alive."

Spittle dropped from a half-open mouth and soaked into linen. "Erta said it was a gift of the gods." Gria winced. "We walked together in the forest. The way it had been before the burning."

Zai raked her fingers through short black hair, a gesture that had somehow passed from Gria to her. She held Gria's face in her hands and read puzzlement. *You'll tell me if you see Ulik or Ila there.* She bit her lower lip against a sudden surge of jealousy.

It was a delusion, of course. Something to do with the head injury. With Gria's fall out of bed.

*Howcan I envy you? You can't even feel my palms on your cheeks. What right do I have to be angry?*

"I'm sorry," Gria whispered. "I've upset you."

"What *happened* to you upset me." Zai dared not mention SandTail's name. She forced her voice to remain calm. "I want to help make you well again, not lose you." She peered at her former commander. "You'll tell me if you start to-pass through again."

"Yes." Gria swallowed. "Help me sit."

She was dead weight in Zai's arms. She was like the effigies, formed in the shape of Yata, on which the Masari hunters of Crossroads had once trained. Straw-filled burlap bags, their heart spot drawn clearly on the back.

When Ulik died he had walked placidly away from his killer toward passage into the afterlife, leaving Zai and their sons behind. He had given TripStone his blessing and trusted in her marksmanship. Her single, clean shot had sent him instantly and painlessly toward the gods.

Zai choked down a sob and hugged Gria to her chest, lifting. Limbs dangled. So many Yata had been sacrificed to the Covenant and now to war. It was no longer enough to grieve openly in the Soala for each death in the hunting grounds. Yata and Masari *knew* each other now. They no longer murdered strangers.

Sometimes the phantom hugs from Zai's dead husband were more distressing than comforting. Would a sojourn in the afterlife be any different? She cradled Gria's head as she would an infant's, could feel where gray-flecked black hair ended and the unsettling mass of white began. It was a portal in itself, an ethereal, frizzed passageway.

She positioned the older woman's legs and smoothed down the nightshirt. "I've brought a stew of mutton. Can you eat?" She noted the hesitant nod. "I will hold your fingers around the spoon again. I'll

guide your arm; you must feel the movement somewhere. Even if you swing wild I still want you to try."

Gria gave her a look of apologetic gratitude and tried to smile. "I've been messier than Evit, haven't I?"

"He's happy knowing he is neater than someone else."

Zai leaned forward and planted a kiss on a strangely unfurrowed brow. It almost didn't matter that Gria couldn't feel her lips.

## Chapter 9

### Crossroads

Once Piri had been the only one silent at the dinner table. Now everyone was. Never before had she wanted so fiercely to speak.

VineSong's kin continued to mourn weeks after his death. Earlier in the day his mother SnowMoth had entered the chicken coop without a word to the others. Piri had listened to confused, terrified squawks, the *thocks* of an axe biting the stump, brief flutters of feathers.

No matter where she went, something was being killed for meat. No matter what the creature, its yell of surprise remained the same.

Piri's spoon floated bits of blanched fowl cut into fine slivers that she guided around her mangled tongue. She swallowed a rich mixture of dissolved carrots and beets, strained greens and heady herbs. Goat's milk rimmed her drinking cup white. For a moment she let her legs dangle. She made small circles with her ankles, then again found the wooden footrest that had helped her onto her giant, Masari chair.

The dead boy's place remained empty, five seats down. Next to Piri, Ghost tore bread and dipped it into his stew. His dark gaze turned inward, not toward the lab but toward its companion structure, the morgue, where with prayers and curses he had cut his nephew into pieces for study.

Yata body parts were no longer his sole purview. Now he dismembered Masari as well, sliding their preserved remains beneath the lenses.

A sated TelZodo slept in his crib, the smallest member of the household. His cousins were all close to VineSong's age, each touching the cusp of adulthood.

*"I'm the youngest among my brothers and sisters." Ghost gestures in the air as they march through Alvav's meadows, leaving Promontory behind. HigherBrook's forces extend to either side of them, ahead and behind, mingling with the Yata army from Basc. "Those who married did so early. They thought for certain I'd follow."*

*Piri smiles up at him. Her fingers graze his arm, drumming, With TripStone.*

*He nods. "I think they were more disappointed we hadn't matched than that I'd gone away."*

*She glances behind, her eyebrows cocked. Your father's with us. You can ask him yourself.*

*"You'll have to teach me that." RootWing steps up beside them, wiggling his hand. His long arm drapes about Piri's shoulders, around her straw-colored braid and the baby strapped to her back. His leathery face crinkles, his grin so like his son's. "We wanted*

*happiness for him, Piri. We thought he might find it with TripStone. We're glad he found it with you."*

*RootWing's stories are as new to Ghost as they are to her; his son hasn't been home for six years. The farmer talks through their climb out of Alvav and down into Basc, past vast clusters of adobe huts. They watch as members of Gria's militia rush to embrace children or carry comrades home on stretchers.*

*HigherBrook's forces turn onto the newly-constructed paths connecting Basc to Crossroads and suddenly Piri is a single Yata in a sea of towering Masari. She takes cautious steps among them, looking back over her shoulder to glimpse bone-white huts receding. She zigzags down trails through dense pine stands, crosses the windbreak into the Grange, and is lost in so many embraces she could back at Destiny Farm.*

*But these are Masari hugging her, all of them clothed. Not wanting to mate but to welcome her and TelZodo into a bustling household and a farm whose livestock squawks and bleats-not robbed of speech but possessing speech of a different kind. Not drugged, but still slaughtered when necessary.*

*When she catches a glimpse of Ghost through the wall of bodies, the look on his face tells her that he is equally stunned.*

*A chair scraped across the wood floor. Across from the empty seat SnowMoth stood, her lavender hair cascading about her shoulders. All around the table Ghost's family stopped in mid-meal. Piri set down her spoon, looking up with the others at the statuesque Masari.*

*SnowMoth clasped her hands before her, turning first to her parents RootWing and DewLeaf; and then toward two brothers, one sister-in-*

law, one sister and brother-in-law, three cousins. Three surviving nephews, two nieces. SnowMoth's gaze rounded the table again, falling on her brother Ghost and then focusing on Piri.

"We were once twenty-four at this table," she said, softly. "Now we are eighteen." She held her spine straight, her gait stiff as she moved behind her chair to grip its backrest. She licked her lips before continuing in low, smoky flatness. "My husband had been the most recent among us to die, killed last winter during a raid on the Grange, after the massacre. He was retrieving Yata marauders shot by soldiers from Rudder, before we had learned to take up arms ourselves. We buried him in fallow ground according to custom."

SnowMoth's face pinched. She surveyed the bounty on the long, broad table with a dull gaze. "Much of Crossroads was buried in that field last winter."

She looked back up, her eyes watery as she tried to smile at Ghost. "Now my son is gone, sent to the gods with respect. And he is not feeding the soil for next year's plantings but nourishing the mind in your lab-and nourishing our hopes, too, yes?"

Ghost nodded with a shudder. "Always."

Her voice broke. "Then you will let me see him." SnowMoth held her chair tighter, against her brother's dismay. "I know he is scattered, Ghost. I might be sickened by what I see; I know that, too. But I cannot let go of him otherwise. You must let me come to the lab, and any one of us who wants to see as well what you are doing to him."

Ghost glanced around the table, avoiding eye contact. "Consider what you ask of me," he whispered. "There are children sitting here."

"Yes." Tears flowed into SnowMoth's lavender chops and dropped

down a furry crescent to her chin. "And VineSong, as accomplished as he was, was still a child, too."

Piri observed the others. The adolescents restrained their fidgeting; even the elders kept silent. This was SnowMoth's grief, the line of argument her prerogative.

"These children have seen half a village die." Ghost's sister bent forward, dragging her palms across moist cheeks. Her bluegreen eyes bore into his storm-colored ones. "We have lived through famine, occupation, and war. Do you think you're the only one among us who has known terrible things?" Her gaze darted to his side. "Piri, you have conducted this work with him. You understand my son's body in ways I never have."

Layers of muscle, folded like the canyon walls. Traceries of veins delicate as a Yata's. The mighty liver. A labyrinth of heart. Curious patterns of cartilage and lymph that bestowed on the Masari an internal, hidden armor. Piri met SnowMoth's calm challenge with a careful nod.

"Then I appeal to you as a sister to let us assist you in your research. We can endure it."

Ghost groaned, "You protect me like a hothouse flower and now you want to cause yourselves more pain."

Piri eased his hand between his bowl and hers and turned it palm-up. *Agree to her request.*

SnowMoth sat and spooned stew, her gaze downcast. The others left her alone, suspended in a bubble of silent anguish.

The Yata of Basc pounded the black walls of their Soala when they

grieved. They tore their hair and ripped their flesh. They exhausted themselves, howling to their demons, letting darkness swallow them whole in a room ablaze with perpetual torches.

A different flame burned in the Crossroads Masari. On the outside they were embers grown cold while a deep core remained stoked almost but never quite guttering out. More than the difference in size, more than the presence or absence of fur, the relationship to death set the two peoples apart. Even if Masari biology could change, could their temperament?

Piri didn't know. Ghost's hand lay inert beneath her fingers. She gently withdrew and lifted her spoon again.

Then she slammed it onto the table, ignoring the flinching around her. Stew jumped onto wood as she grasped Ghost's arm and drummed, *You want to join them in the hunting grounds, don't you?* He was the youngest of the five, the baby. The coddled one, literally in their shadow until his self-exile. *You don't want to hunt Yata, but you want to prove you can save Crossroads by suffering as much as the others have.*

Ghost glared into his bowl. His fingers jabbed upward, *Not here.*

And not in their bedroom, either, where his siblings were mercifully absent and forgettable. Not in the lab, where he was vigilant to chemical reactions; or in the fields, waiting for TelZodo to take his first steps. Not anywhere. Safer to have worried about his kin from a distance, where his outcast status was clear and his self-reliance assured.

If Ghost were not so frightened she would call him surly. *The more people who share in our research, the better our chances of ending*



*Masari dependence. They want what you want!*

*Yes, they want what I want,* Ghost answered with uneven pressure on her palm. He turned red-rimmed eyes to her. *Enough to risk their lives to keep me fed while I huddle over my beakers.*

She wanted to articulate, to scream across the long, silent table. No matter how hard she tried, her tongue would not obey her. Only her fingers could free her thoughts.

But was she any different from him? By escaping from Destiny Farm, Piri had missed the waves of culling, likely including her own. She had not seen hundreds of Yata gagging and twitching as they succumbed to poisoned Destiny, nor experienced the panicked confusion of those left alive.

Instead, like Ghost, she had been on the run, cradling TelZodo in her arms while those she'd left behind continued to have their babies wrested from them. At least, living free in the canyon now, they could keep their children. But they had lived through horrors about which she could only guess.

*Piri caressed Ghost's cheek. Huddling over your beakers could end the killing on both sides. Your brothers and sisters look to you for guidance now.*

Ghost cupped his hand around hers. His lips lingered on her palm. When he straightened, his shallow smile of capitulation belied a deeper, more quizzical worry. He responded to Piri's furrowed brow by barely shaking his head. If he had something to tell her, he wouldn't do it here.

Ghost cleared his throat and mumbled, "It's not that different from keeping track of breeding characteristics in the field." He winced at

collective breaths, at audible relief around the table. "I will teach you the record-keeping first. How to collect samples. Ways to observe. What to look for." His pupils wavered like those of a man trapped. "Clusters of traits. Outliers." He bent quickly to his stew.

SnowMoth looked from him to Piri and choked, "Thank you."

Ghost winced again. Through the rest of the meal his chops twitched. When Piri reached out to him, the look he shot her stopped her cold.

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Large, filigreed oil lamps hung from weighted chains, turning the Rotunda's air golden and soft. Around them, set safely back, thousands of Yata lineages and stories nestled into coffers. They ringed the giant dome's curved walls. The great books seemed to hold the granite up, not the reverse.

Ghost knelt on a tiny platform close to the oculus. Even on his knees he could almost touch it. He leaned back, looking through its black, windowed circle.

No stars breached the darkness. Just clouds.

Before him, delicate bones gleamed under glass inside a box of sturdy oak lined in red velvet. He turned aside and gazed beyond the high railing and spiraling staircases.

For eons the narratives below had detailed the lives only of Yata taken in the hunt. Only the tales of the gods had mattered. Only their bones had mattered, too, hanging on every wall in every Crossroads household, stippled with sacred symbols and riotous with color. They'd been constant reminders of Masari hunger, of his people's weakness.

Until, out of that same weakness, the starving citizens of Crossroads had sold their relics for food, reducing them to the status of trinkets.

He wasn't looking at Yata bones now. The bones before Ghost had belonged to a Masari girl. No scrimshaw decorated their surfaces, but stories screamed from their burnished planes.

He turned back to them and licked his lips, clearing his throat. He whispered, "Help me."

If BrokenThread couldn't hear him, then why did he avoid looking at her skull? Why talk to her bones at all?

"It's funny, you know." He couldn't help himself. "I never prayed to the Yata when they were gods, but I pray when I eat them now. I wish you were here to see it. You'd laugh at me." A sad smile crossed his lips. "But if you were still alive I'd be dead. Sometimes seeing you like this makes me wish I were."

He tried to dress the skeletal remains. Sometimes the young *yatani* appeared in sharp relief, standing on a wooden box to peer through his lenses. Bruised skin, wisps of orange fur drifting to the floor. Her defiant grin as she fasted, slowly wasting away.

Sometimes Ghost saw only a blur. "I came home a stranger and a hero in the same body, Thread. That was bad enough, but I didn't expect to find *you* here after we'd buried your remains on the ridge. To see you exhumed like this was a shock." His lips quirked. "You hated even the thought of this place. I wonder what you'd say if you knew you were enshrined here."

She didn't answer him. Her bones never did. All Ghost ever heard was the din of his own memories. Of wisdom too big for a child, the unapologetic assertions of a runaway. Of her dying wish, conveyed in

Piri's fingers shaking against his back. The smell from the pit. The taste.

Two cracked lenses sat beside narrow, delicate ribs. Ghost followed the trail his ruined tools made around the bones. Shattered beakers and blurred scribbles on torn parchment, rescued from his destroyed cabin and its hidden laboratory. His crimes and abominations attained the status of relics, themselves.

Heat flushed his face. Ghost's hands curled into tight fists against the glass. The sound of footsteps echoing up the stairs halted his yell as he tilted back on his heels.

HigherBrook knelt beside him, meditating on the remains. The governor was silent for a long time. Shadows performed placid dances beneath their breaths.

"She was remarkable, wasn't she?" HigherBrook's stiff jaw offset his measured speech. He had no problem looking at the skull.

Ghost nodded, his entreaties to the girl clamped down.

"You've been coming here every night since your nephew died. This is the first time I've heard you ask her for guidance."

Neck fur stiffened. Did the echoes in this place reverberate down to the Chamber offices? Did his whispers reach the dormitories? "You should be happy, HigherBrook. I must seem more like a believer to you now."

"You rely on empirical evidence, not faith." Light brown eyes scrutinized him. The governor shook his head. "More than grief for VineSong drives you here."

HigherBrook's studious face was less unnerving than the bones, but Ghost's skin still prickled. "Thread was an inspiration to me. She guided much of my research while she was alive. Coming here helps me think."

HigherBrook nodded. "Especially now."

Ghost rose. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get back to my work-"

"Ghost." Callused fingers touched his elbow. HigherBrook stood with the fluid movement born of muscled abdomen and thighs, a bureaucrat turned predator. "I am a man of faith but I rely on your evidence. I also smell your fear." Linen whispered as he withdrew his hand. "If you're afraid of me, let me assure you that nothing you do is taboo if it will save Masari lives."

"I understand the pardon."

"But you don't understand Crossroads."

"I understand that I must spare my family further pain." Ghost swallowed as he turned away and started down the stairs. "I have no conclusive evidence for you."

"Then I will accept your hypotheses." HigherBrook hastened after him and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I've read every word of Shabra's interrogation of you on the Cliff. Several times. Under other circumstances I would rejoice that you had grown to treasure the Covenant." He cornered Ghost against the rail, fixing the taller man with a look of discernment. "This valley has had to become as brutal as the rest of the region and it sickens me. I've gotten to know your kin. They're stronger than you think."

They continued downward. Boots echoed against metal. A circle of

lanterns rose above their heads.

Ghost hazarded a glance at neatly-trimmed chops and a modest goatee. At the hair-thin scar running forehead to cheek, across the bridge of HigherBrook's nose. "You're lucky you've kept your sight."

The face before him looked suddenly weary. HigherBrook regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Let's you and I talk some time about our devolution."



# Chapter 10

Basc



"This is *wrong*, Zai."

Gria would push her caretaker back if she could. Instead, she could only watch Zai fumble with yards of kaleidoscopic-patterned silks. Pictograms spiraled up and down inky vestments, glowing from tricks of the thread. They writhed across the fabric, belting Gria's waist and meandering across her sleeves. They spread across her high-necked collar, toward shoulders whose muscles melted away from disuse.

If the gods existed they would quake with hilarity. At least they had made Gria tall. She could still spy her toes and ankles. "I am the furthest thing from a priestess," she slurred.

"I'm not calling you a priestess."

*Oh, but you are. In the way you look at me. In the way you handle me.* Gria watched the younger woman's ministrations and said, plainly, "You are dressing me in Erta's robes."

"Erta gave you her hut and her station." Zai's voice was clipped, but she lifted Gria's arm as though blessing an idol. "Her clothes are yours as well." She maneuvered billowing cloth around a limb that could belong to a doll, a lifeless twig as far as Gria was concerned. The general couldn't feel a thing.



"Zai." Gria's speech floated in her mouth. Her tongue, teeth, and lips existed only because she could see them in a mirror. "I do not know what is happening to me. You seek to turn me into something I'm not, and I don't know what I am any more."

The portal to the afterlife shimmered all around her now, no longer a distant spot on the wall but a cloak in and of itself. Everything in the living world appeared through a gossamer haze.

Gria cursed herself for having spoken of it. If she had kept her silence, she would still be in a plain gray nightdress, left to her afflictions and buried in her straw-padded room.

One moment Zai held Gria's fingers around a spoon or positioned her over a chamber pot. The next moment the hut vanished. In its place, Gria walked freely at Promontory's canyon edge, through a battleground turned peaceful and lush. Dried scrub yielded to desert blooms. She felt muscle and bone again, the dance of articulating joints, crisp wind caressing her face. She clasped arms with dead comrades become whole-until the portal descended like a clanging metal gate and all that remained was Zai, explaining worriedly to Gria that her jaw had fallen slack and her eyes had glazed over.

Now rapt attention replaced worry. The dark eyes gazing into Gria's turned calm and expectant, almost joyful, awaiting word of her visions, certain that in time that the gods would convince Gria to speak them out.

*I cannot tell you.* Who could say whether this was a gift of the gods or the whimsy of a cracked skull? Who among them was equipped to make that judgment? *I walk with them. We speak of small things. What is there to tell?*

The warmth of the sun on her skin, the blossoms she could hold in her hand-*that* was the magic of the afterlife. How could the general explain that when she returned to the living she was dead? That she had been made backwards?

Zai took Gria's face in her hands. "Your people need to see you. They're beginning to wonder if you're really still alive. You can't hide from them forever."

Gria wanted to part the veil that made her caretaker look uncharacteristically soft, but what would she take hold of, brush aside? How could she move? "You know why I hide from them."

"Yes. You're not like that any more."

True. She had turned from a lust-possessed beast into a lump unable to bathe or dress herself. Either way, she was still helpless. "Regardless, you will not parade me before them like this."

Zai smoothed silk over her commander's shoulders. "Then at least allow me to walk you through the rooms. You need to rebuild your muscles."

And then what? Surely one did not need to wear vestments or be bathed in spice for a private stroll.

Gria's nostrils had filled that morning with the water's sweet astringency. She could tease out which roots and flowers had perfumed the room. She could count the swirls and eddies beneath Zai's hand, could hear the uneven chimes in trickles squeezed from the sponge.

But the sponge could not touch her. Gria had watched as Zai reverently lifted her breasts, following frothy tracks of honeyed soap

that she could scent but not feel. She had closed her eyes and listened to the echoes made by displaced liquid, trying to guess when Zai's movements traveled up her thigh and dipped about her labia. A slow *whoosh* had told Gria she was being lifted, another that she was being set back down. She could only guess her buttocks had been scrubbed.

This, then, was how Zai expected her to appear before the people of Basc: bodiless and inert, all but incoherent as she struggled to form words with a mouth she could not possibly possess. Positioned like delicate cordwood, held in place by voluminous cushions to keep her from bruising herself. And then, what could she say to them?

Distant reverberations echoed along the walls. Someone else had entered the hut, circling in toward the center. Gria mumbled, "I did not approve a visitor."

"No. But you have chosen to share governance with me and I have approved this visit."

Once that act would have been born of Zai's haughty, at times welcome insubordination. Now Gria saw deep solemnity instead of hunger for power. It would inspire mirth if it weren't so frightening.

The footfalls paused and resumed, at once self-assured and contemplative. Perhaps Gria's other senses were enhanced now. Perhaps she simply knew all too well the patterns of HigherBrook's meditations as he consulted the pictograms on the floor, walls, and ceiling, advancing from outer to inner chambers.

The pauses became pronounced; Crossroads' leader lingered by the scriptures for an inordinately long time. Gria would sigh if she could feel her own breaths. "You've told him."

"He's more familiar with spiritual matters than I." Zai rearranged pillows in an uncharacteristic show of decorum to keep Gria from listing to the side. She added, lamely, "It's better if two of us support you on your walk."

*Because I can tolerate his touch, now that I can't feel it at all.*

Zai's lips pressed into a line. Gria could read their unspoken hope. What were the chances that HigherBrook could bring her back from the realm of the dead into which SandTail had sent her, one Masari lifting the curse of another?

If Gria returned from that realm, healed and blessedly ordinary, would Zai still insist on dressing her in these robes?

The footfalls grew louder as Zai arranged velvet about Gria's waist, tying ceremonial knots and mouthing prayers. Ludicrous, this devotion; they were *soldiers*. Brutality, not piety, had thrust Gria into this state. *Listen to me, Zai! I did not destroy the Covenant only to become the focus of a cult!*

Her frustrations remained locked inside, her protests just as futile. The afterlife was more real than Gria's disembodiment among the living. She felt vital there. She felt dead here. It made no sense.

She looked up as HigherBrook called her name. Who controlled her neck muscles? She didn't know. He stood just inside the entrance, wearing an expression she couldn't read. It must be her attire.

She tried to smile. "I wear these robes under duress."

HigherBrook nodded, looking pensive. "I once wore my hunting tunic the same way." He moved to the pallet, his steps buoyed on straw. "Then one day I realized I barely felt the rifle on my back."

But he still *felt* it. Only the sight of him told Gria he slipped a linen-clad arm around her, balanced by Zai's actions on the other side. Her companions lifted a sack of grain between them, easing it forward.

Gria looked down as gravity swung her leg in a short arc, but her robe hid even that. Zai should have dressed her in pants. "What did Zai tell you?"

"As much as she could."

"And what do the Dirt People tell you?"

HigherBrook looked from Gria to her caretaker. "Nothing conclusive." Straw crunched underfoot. "I study the drawings to see which call my attention to them."

Zai said, curtly, "The gods speak that way, too."

The top of Gria's head reached the height of HigherBrook's shoulder, but what the Masari lacked in stature he made up for in quiet intensity. Gria watched as he and Zai took turns positioning her legs, easing them down. Her feet left depressions in the straw. She could be a pictogram herself, a stylized set of lines on a surface without depth.

Zai asked, "Can you move anything?"

Gria whispered, "I wouldn't know where to begin."

And yet her mouth moved. Her head turned.

For weeks the portal into the next room had been more distant than that into the afterlife. Now the trio passed beyond the threshold, away from padded surfaces. The figures on the walls shifted as readily as

those on the vestments. Nothing was solid any more.

HigherBrook adjusted his hold. "You once asked me if I still believed in the gods."

"Yes. After your first kill." Gria closed her eyes, floating.

"I've had to take more Yata since then." His soft tenor sounded submerged. "You knew I was capable of killing your kind. You helped prepare me for it." Sadness welled. "I've worked with some of them and I miss them. I've spoken with their families. I've presided over funerals where Yata who have killed my people came to praise them."

HigherBrook's dismay reflected off the walls. "We all wish we could walk with the dead, Gria. Whether you actually do or whether it's all a hallucination, we need your presence."

"If it's a hallucination," Zai pressed, "then the gods have granted you that, too."

Gria turned toward fervor. "How eagerly you give them credit for SandTail's atrocity." She frowned as Zai looked away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." The younger woman reached down to ease a lifeless leg forward. "It's not your fault. I misspoke." Her muscles stood out in cords as she repositioned her grip, nodding to HigherBrook as they lifted their host. The pictograms jumped.

How perverse could the gods be? If this were the afterlife, Gria could lift her arms. She could wrap them around Zai, could count the beats of their combined pulses. She could feel the palms that gently cradled her cheeks, the lips that brushed against her own, the smooth manipulations of her limbs to exercise muscle. The gentle lav

about whose intimacies she could only guess.

And it would all be an illusion, because it would mean at least one of them was dead.

## Chapter 11

### Promontory

*Shadows play across damp cavern walls, chasing lariats of reflected lamp light. One by one the Yata step up to a high stone platform, their faces blank, their minds empty.*

*BrushBurn has named them, known them when they could still think for themselves, but they no longer recognize him. Wren. Cactus. Tourmaline. Basalt. Sunrise. The naked adults become naked children again. Memories resurface of play beneath striped awnings, bell-clear.*

*No one plays now Each stands poised above a deep pool of gore, ready to dive. This is not Destiny Farm's slaughterhouse, and yet it is. The slaughterhouse had echoed with screams, but no one screams here. The Yata should be afraid, but instead they are docile and unaware and beautiful.*

*Each glides gracefully to the edge, ignorant of the arm that whips in from the side. A bare, fuzzy arm with a ruddy pelt cinches the waist of one and then another, and another, while the other hand slips a bright silver knife across a coppery throat.*

*The cavern echoes with gurgles. Steam rises before one body drops, before the next steps forward.*

*"Stop!" BrushBurn is always too late. The pool is always piled with corpses by the time he arrives and the knife is always in his hand, his knuckles white about the hilt. The blade crusts over with blood, but he can't relax his grip.*

*Where is he standing? He is never sure. Sometimes he is a bat on the ceiling. Sometimes he wades knee-deep below.*

*"There's been a mistake. They don't have to die!"*

*No matter where he is or how loudly he yells, no one ever believes him.*

BrushBurn jerked in his sleep. He was in a bed, not a cavern, but then the clarity of thought faded quickly. He should awaken at this point. He always has.

He and his father had ridden together to Promontory, but his father had gone into the canyon again and returned to the Farm. *That was a long time ago.*

Was it? Then why is he awe-struck by this skyline of metal and stone, this latticework of gravel roads?

*The diminutive SandTail strolls by his side, pointing. Explaining. "You're not here to learn how to keep accounts, BrushBurn. Your parents wrote to me about what you can do. You know more about figures than anyone I've met."*

Yata-sized himself, SandTail had looked the young BrushBurn up and down at their introduction, assessing not skills but the way in which the larger man had looked back. The hanging of BrushBurn's curly head, his pronounced slouch. The roughness of his skin where he



had shaved off his pelt repeatedly, the stubble of new growth a constant reminder of his pedigree.

*"Want to be a Yata, do you?" SandTail asks. "That's what your mother said. That's why your family sent you here." Hands shoved into his pockets, he looks intently at his new pupil. "Despite your bent back I can see you're not ashamed of that. I see defiance in you. You'll tell me if my eyes are lying."*

*BrushBurn clears his throat and deadpans, "It was thought I'd be of better use to my family serving them from Promontory."*

*"As a trader." Even years in the past, the smaller man is covered with scars, his arms a patchwork of pelt and skin below rolled-up sleeves. "You're here to learn how to handle product. To sell it, pass it hand to hand. To learn your customer's need and to control that need. For you, that product is Yata."*

Packages. Slabs. Like the boulders quarried from beyond the settlement. Like the timber hauled over the pass from Rudder's forests. Product like the chains and rifles molded in the foundries, like the Destiny that Skedge manufactured for the Farm.

*"Products are not alive, BrushBurn." SandTail isn't much older, but he struts with a magnate's self-confidence. The short Masari links his fingers behind thick ocher hair and leans back, gazing at a horizon swimming in black smoke. "You've never worked in a factory, have you?"*

*BrushBurn shakes his head, tasting metallic air. "No."*

*"Yes, you have." The sharp edge of SandTail's voice cuts across haze. "Destiny Farm is a factory for Yata. You manufacture dead*

*things there. You may think they're alive, but that's an illusion. When they are ready for sale they are wrapped and stacked like any other commodity, and that is what you will learn from me. I don't care that you're unable to kill them or even that you want to be them, but I will teach you how to sell them."*

*I'll learn anything. Already Destiny Farm fades into a dream. BrushBurn's embraces of live Yata become bittersweet memories nestled just beneath the skin. He must scrape them away as he had tried to scrape away his fur, turn himself off as though he were one of SandTail's machines. Gods help me, I'm ready to be dead.*

*~ ~ ~*

His first lessons had come from sitting on SandTail's overstuffed couch upholstered in Yata skin, from reading Promontory's history books bound in Yata leather. At night his mentor brought him a blanket and a snifter of goldberry brandy, and in time BrushBurn curled into the bronze-hued cushions and slept.

In the dream he swore that from a far distance his own blade opened Sunrise's jugular vein, then plunged into the mix-child in her arms. His wife, his daughter, and he barely a man...

*"Easy."*

*BrushBurn jerks awake, yelping at the feel of supple, dead skin on his palms. Bronze and copper skin, the color of the cavern walls. He struggles for breath, wheezing.*

*SandTail's lantern glows brightly, its wick high as the smaller man grips his young pupil's shoulders. "Tell me about the nightmare."*

BrushBurn barks a laugh. "It's the same one I've had for a year. You knowthat."

"Tell me anyway."

Again BrushBurn repeats the dream in sickening detail, fighting past the lump in his throat. Again SandTail listens, nodding, with a look of genuine concern rather than ridicule. That in itself is frightening.

"Sometimes I miss the jokes back at the Farm," BrushBurn blurts. "The teasing."

SandTail shakes his head. "You'll get none from me."

The young trader roars, "Why not?"

"It's undeserved." SandTail retrieves a kerchief from beside the couch. He dabs the cold sweat from his protégé's forehead. "You love the Yata; it's not unheard-of. I don't envy you." He aims a gentle smile at the couch. "In time the nightmare will fade away and you'll be able to handle your meat more easily."

All too briefly, SandTail's leather couch became the straw-filled pallet of home. Nothing spoke to BrushBurn but the slow rhythm beside him of TripStone's breaths. He inhaled the aromatics of her bath, her body and clothes scrubbed clean of blood from the hunt. *Stay awake.*

His nightmare was supposed to end there but it had grown, well-fed during its long absence. New carnage had revived it, made it more virulent. It had tracked him, waiting patiently for his moment of greatest vulnerability before striking again. He didn't recall closing his eyes.

*Again the blade whips in from the side—a flash of smooth-skinned knuckles this time, free of tufts, a graceful bronze arm wielding the knife. It pulls the larger bodies down, grabs the tails of bespattered tunics.*

*The Masari fall to their knees, Yata hands grasping their hair. The blade slices beneath neck fur. The cavern pool overflows.*

*BrushBurn clings to damp rock, tries to look away, and can't. The slaughtered Masari haven't changed since he left the Farm. It is he who has grown older, become an adult and then worldly, leaving the others behind.*

*It doesn't matter; they are still his kin. He tries to call out, but he has lost his voice as they drop one after the other. His mother. His father. His brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles. The butchers, the drivers, the veterinarians. Those who spilled gruel into the troughs, those who spirited the babies away, those who gave Yata children their first taste of Destiny, beginning anew the cycle of procreation. Those who culled the herd for meat, the murderers themselves murdered.*

*BrushBurn doesn't know who stands behind him, whose invisible palms press hard against his chops, holding his head firmly in place. Fingerpads force his eyes to remain open as he sways, gasping. Watch closely. The whisper echoes in his head, threatening to split him open. This is the future of the Masari. Your future.*

*The line leading to the high platform lengthens, stretching in a serpentine procession to a distant vanishing point. Now it is Promontory's citizens who are dispatched efficiently and*

*mercilessly, stepping to the edge innocent and unsuspecting. Customers and Chamber officials, bartenders and messengers, factory workers and hunters. Their faces blank, their cooperation mindless. TripStone steps calmly up to the edge, then FlitNettle...*

BrushBurn twitched hard and blinked, staring into the darkness. He waited for his ragged breaths to calm and listened for the others. He counted the seconds as his heart's pounding began to slow, then extended his fingers to graze TripStone's hair. Her slight shift on the pallet made him want to weep with relief.

His numb fear took several minutes to lift. BrushBurn stumbled from the bed. Metallic echoes traveled from the chamber pot hidden behind a curtain, the most wonderful sound in the world. The stream ended. Cloth rustled.

He listened to the soft slap of FlitNettle's feet as she moved about the kitchen. She couldn't sleep, either.

BrushBurn ducked behind the curtain to add his liquid to hers. He secured his nightclothes, then paused at the canvas. He smiled slightly at the sound of a fire being stoked, the teapot taken down from a shelf almost too high for his cousin to reach. Aggressive self-reliance in one so young. Thrilling and terrifying at once.

Sheets of parchment lay strewn on the kitchen table. FlitNettle called softly from the hearth, "You can look at them."

Her diary was a smattering of words and numbers, her own accounting of Yata taken in the hunt. She had dutifully recorded their branding numbers and added her own memories:

*Mated most often in the morning.*

*Birthmark shaped like a hand on his thigh.*

*Smiled at me from inside the pen.*

Her assessments were clinical and heartbreaking. Her own nightmares had been literal and straightforward, the last one she recorded no exception. In it she was punished again, locked up in her room and hearing the sounds of slaughter outside as Yata and Masari fell before each other's weapons.

Unlike BrushBurn's careful hand, her script wandered. *What if the Yata are moving because they're running out of food? What if it's more than just getting away from us?*

BrushBurn lifted the sheet, squinting at FlitNettle's questions. The Yata would not breed as readily in the canyon as in captivity, where their nutrition and fertility had both been enhanced. He murmured, "You've been there. Do you think they're running out of food?"

"Maybe not now, but they will in the winter." The girl lifted the pot off its hook; the smell of blackberry permeated the room. "*They* could starve, too."

He didn't want to talk about numbers. He cleared the papers and retrieved mugs as she hauled the pot doggedly to the table, favoring her injured arm. BrushBurn knew better than to offer assistance. "You haven't slept much."

"I asked TripStone if she has nightmares. She says she doesn't remember her dreams." FlitNettle poured. She sat, closing her eyes as she lifted the mug to her lips. When she opened them again they were wide with confusion. "Why don't I feel the way you do, BrushBurn?"

Her chestnut hair tumbled down her back. BrushBurn took her free hand in his. "Feel what way?"

"I killed someone." Her fingers rested quietly in his. "It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. She would have died anyway. But I remembered her, the way she was. I should feel *something*, shouldn't I?"

Her river-green eyes held no grief, no worry over their own chances of survival. Her quiet fright came from somewhere else. For all her strength she was still a child.

She whispered, "What is wrong with me?"

"Nothing." BrushBurn squeezed her hand. "I'm sure you feel something. It's just buried too deeply for you to reach right now."

"Is that what happened to you?"

His heart thumped. "I was buried for a very long time." He filled his mouth with tea, swallowing to keep his voice from breaking. "Willingly." He set the mug down and smiled. "You make a good brew."

*We'll get through this, cousin.* How easily the reassurance would spill from his lips. How eagerly he wanted to lie to her, tell her everything was going to be all right.

He knew she wouldn't believe him for a second.

## Chapter 12

### The Canyon

MudAdder huddled by a small firepit. Only a few thin cries echoed off cave walls dancing in shadow, but the persistent coughs drowning them out have worsened.

Across from him another Yata cleaned a rifle. Their ammunition was almost gone. The giant guns were good for little more than clubbing small game, and even then they were unwieldy.

How far had the herd run? MudAdder didn't know. But the more they retreated from the Masari, the more distant they became from Skedge Yata who might be trying to find them. Unless Skedge itself had been raided for meat.

The other man rested the gun in his lap. His arms caught firelight as he pantomimed that the hunters will come again, looking for more than just stragglers. Should the herd run farther, then, carrying the sick? Setting traps and fighting back became harder with each encounter.

Almost all the babies born since Destiny Farm's destruction have died. MudAdder smelled hunger outside the cave, a cloying animal musk. Predators other than Masari have lived here since time began, continuing to cull where the Masari had left off.

Masari had cared for MudAdder. They had named him, might even have loved him. No one else here knew what it was like to be an experimental subject, strapped into a restraining chair and aching for Destiny.

DamBuster and DevilChaser had apologized for what they were doing to him. They had freed MudAdder from the straps and massaged him, fed him at their table, made him a member of their household; but they had not understood. MudAdder *wanted* the Masari to know how to make Destiny. He had pressed himself into



the chair and eagerly swallowed one formulation after another, praying for it to grab hold of him. Every Destiny shortfall meant that more of the herd had to be culled.

*I know Ghost's been teaching you to read.*

DamBuster seemed to speak from the flames. The apothecary's enormous furred hand had shown MudAdder a slip of paper. For the first time, MudAdder had seen the numbers tattooed on the back of his neck. *This is what you are to the Farm.*

It didn't matter what he was. He loved.

MudAdder reached behind his head. The numbers were still there, but his fingertips told him nothing. Only the image of the paper informed him. That, and the tenderness of DamBuster's lips against his own.

Cries diminished, but coughing around the fire persisted, dry and explosive. MudAdder inhaled the mingled odors of mouse droppings and diarrhea. He scratched at an infected cut on his arm before a grunt from across the firepit stopped him.

Either way, they were being culled. To feed Masari or to feed wild beasts. And, based on what Ghost had taught him, to feed animalcules impossible to see. The babies were still being taken away, this time without a chance to grow to breeding age. So many mothers wailed through his dreams, without the succor of Destiny in which to drown their grief.

The man beside MudAdder had once believed himself to be a Little Masari. MudAdder had once believed he was nothing more than meat. They'd both had to learn they were Yata.

Whatever that meant.

## Chapter 13

### Promontory

The air turned thick with salt as the lake burned away. Bone-colored crystals rose from mud, their white waves petrified in mid-froth. If SandTail listened closely enough, he could hear them cracking in the night, when everything ached.

In the morning he reached for the rope hanging above his bed and pulled to lever himself upright. His hoops and blankets were gone and so was the deep freeze in his body. He was a puzzle now, dressed in patches of rebuilt skin beneath simple nightclothes with a smooth, brushed nap. No sense abrading away what all the curatives have worked so hard to regrow.

Twist. Slide short legs over the edge of a mattress placed low. That should be enough activity for the day, but it was only the beginning. Sweat streamed down SandTail's face as he clutched the rope, wheezing with parched laughter.

*You see what happens when you let me live? I recover to spite you.*

Crutches leaned against a corner of the pallet, cinched loosely in leather straps. SandTail wrapped the thick overhead rope around one hand and extended a mottled arm grown thin. Hanging and reaching, yelling as fire seared his veins.

Old friend pain, predictable and reliable, glued him together. So many boyhood accidents but, oh, the joys of running wild. *Try harder, devil. Is this the best that you can do?*

Pain didn't answer. It just was.

The rope swung wide, tossing shadows as his hand pulled free. Grasp the first crutch. Reach for the second. Simple directives. SandTail gritted his teeth to keep from pitching forward. No need to worry about biting his tongue, now that it was gone.

A faint silhouette stood behind the white curtain ringing his pallet. SandTail grinned. *Come on in and watch, BrushBurn. I've certainly done enough damage to you.*

No; his visitor was polite. No matter. BrushBurn would hear what he would rather not see. *Or do my struggles make you smile? You can showme that, too, you know.*

Only one shadow bled through today. TripStone must be off training her hunters. SandTail squinted at the unmistakable shape, the outline of elbows in profile, hands shoved into breech pockets. The rest was filling out. BrushBurn had broken his fast, then, stabilizing his body before he abstained from eating Yata again.

Edge forward. Steady on the crutches. Push.

The shadow no longer jolted at the sound of strangled cries. The curly head no longer dipped abjectly toward the floor. It turned toward the curtain instead, a hint of ears to either side. Pasting a face on the silhouette became a game. Was it pensive? Vindicated? Satisfied?

Disappointed?

*Anything but grieved, BrushBurn. I won't stand for that.* SandTail swayed on the crutches, shrieking as his skin throttled him. Someone had replaced his bones with molten steel and pinned his muscles

with red-hot darners. Spittle fell from his lips. He would chuckle if he weren't so nauseous.

He shuffled forward, howling. It was comical, really. SandTail wished he would simply shut up and get on with the day, but his complaints were beyond his control. Better to hide nothing. Be unapologetic.

The man behind the curtain remained patient. The hands rested easily in their pockets, the head cocked slightly to the side. SandTail blinked tears from his eyes between gasps. *Tell me you are at least entertained by this. I certainly am.*

His hands grasped the crutches more firmly; he would like nothing better than to slide to the floor. But his instructions were clear. Hobble to the table. Sit on the stool's damnably hard wood while still growing half his rump back. Squirt breakfast down and then keep it down. Refuse assistance except in case of emergency.

DevilChaser's last command had curled SandTail's lips. Factory orphans did not survive by being dependent. Charming, yes; that balanced out incorrigibility. You wheedled, you connived. You challenged when necessary.

Assistance offered with a smile was usually suspect. Of *course* you refused it. Assistance offered with a scowl tended to be the more honest sort. But what would a doctor know?

SandTail's arms quaked. He stood over the stool as though over a chamber pot, hanging off his crutches as gravity slowly took hold. Thirst stung his throat. More so even than food, his body craved water. Something to bathe the lumps of Yata bandages wrapping him. Something to dissolve the insult of them, make them Masari.

He dropped the last few inches onto his seat, settling what remained

of him onto his left buttock, the one that was still all his. In time his body calmed. SandTail gripped the crutches until he caught his breath, then eased them against the table. He glared at the curtain. *I used to whistle with my tongue, damn it. What do I have to do to get you in here?*

"Bub!" His speech might be severely curtailed, but at least it still existed. SandTail grabbed and lifted a simple pitcher that shook in his grip. Water splattered outside the mug as metal hooks slid.

"You were using both hands to do that a few days ago." BrushBurn cast a quick glance toward the table before pulling up another stool from beside the pallet. "And you've sounded worse."

SandTail gulped from the mug as he reached toward his protégé. He found the palm and drummed, *You've only grown used to it. You needn't wait for me to stop yelling.*

"I'd be tempted to help you." BrushBurn pursed his lips, his gaze traveling over deformations. "You've been improving steadily ever since you regained consciousness."

*Old habit.* The pitcher hovered again, setting SandTail's arm aflame. How quickly he tired. Water flooded his stomach again. Relief spread outward as though he were a formless sponge. This time his talking fingers shook. *You're looking well. How is our Crossroads representative?*

BrushBurn raised his eyebrows and offered a shallow smile. "Still sober."

*Has to be now, doesn't she?* SandTail patted his hand. *TripStone has some strength to her after all. So do you.*

He turned to a neat line of linen rolls, unwrapped one, and pulled out a syringe. DevilChaser still withheld his bowl and spoon. Spilled gruel was messier than spilled water. Beside him BrushBurn waited, watching, hands motionless in his lap.

Years ago, SandTail could read his pupil's emotions just by looking at him. BrushBurn had come to him shredded and raw. That openness, tempered by a ruthless detachment that had taken years to teach, had made the younger man into a consummate trader. Now that same detachment threw up a wall as concealing as the curtain had been.

SandTail reached beneath the table top to lift a food canister from a shelf. He struggled with the vacuum seal until the metal finally sprang open with a pop and a hiss. He inserted the syringe, pulling his breakfast into the glass tube. With a sigh he tilted his head back and slowly worked the plunger with both hands.

A Farm Yata would have scooped Destiny-laced gruel directly from a trough, feeding hand to mouth and swallowing around a tongue rendered useless. No one had ever told SandTail how much practice and coordination that required. If he could, he'd ask the Yata pulverized inside the syringe, the one he choked on now. He set the tube down and reached for more water.

"FlitNettle made an astute observation." BrushBurn's gravelly baritone sounded distant. Any anguish he might once have shown was gone. "She believes the escaped Yata also face a limited food supply. She wonders if the canyon can sustain them through the winter."

SandTail took his hand. *I don't see why it shouldn't. Yata lived in the canyon long before Destiny Farm was established.*

"Far fewer than the numbers living there now." BrushBurn slid a canister from the shelf. His steel blue gaze revealed nothing as he examined it. "And the Farm depleted the oasis that used to be their habitat. Much of that vegetation is gone and the wildlife along with it."

*It might return, now that the Farm's destroyed.* SandTail frowned at BrushBurn's silence, the thin press of the other's lips. *I'm grateful FlitNettle survived,* he added, quickly. *I do feel responsible for what happened to the rest of your family.*

The canister whispered back onto the shelf. BrushBurn deadpanned, "You're important to this town, otherwise you wouldn't still be alive."

SandTail nodded. It was as close to forgiveness as he was going to get. He lifted the syringe, tilted his head back again, and forced the gruel down a throat that kept closing up.

~ ~ ~

Breakfast took all morning. SandTail swallowed a brown-gray mash with the consistency of silt that tasted only fleetingly of meat. The rest was an elixir whose ingredients he could only guess. He pushed the plunger to its final resting point, satisfied simply to know he hadn't been poisoned.

At long last the tube lay empty on the table. SandTail's arms dangled by his sides as the burning in them began to fade. Old friend pain lunged inside him, defending its hard-won territory only to be pressed back by unknown forces. War cries faded to a low, ever-present grumble, an itch at the coccyx. Claws swiped only somewhat successfully at his spine.

Just taking a meal left him breathless, but with no small measure of triumph. SandTail had dropped nothing this day. He'd splintered no

crockery, shattered no glass.

BrushBurn checked the volume left in the canisters, making tidy notations on a pad. He poured water for them both, helping after all. No doubt saving the life of the pitcher. Just holding a mug now was enough to make SandTail tremor.

The younger man reviewed his figures, pushing rusty curls back from his forehead. His sips were maddeningly slow. "Do you feel able to travel?"

The question came as a complete surprise. SandTail guzzled, wondering if the astringent air made him so thirsty. He was a fish flopping on a hot, dry shore, one who would soon have to struggle to relieve himself. But his fingers were steadier. *As much as any man in pieces. Where are we going?*

"Your home is still standing." BrushBurn slipped the pad into a shirt pocket. "We've rebuilt your front posts and renewed the rest of the buttressing. The mud stopped just past your foyer. Damage was light overall." He refilled SandTail's cup. "AgatePool's been preparing your rooms. DevilChaser will release you if you're ready."

SandTail offered a wry smile. *Tell DevilChaser his hospital needs more piss buckets.* One by the table, one by the bed. A phalanx of pails salted throughout the room.

BrushBurn chortled. "Tell him yourself. He and DamBuster can understand you now." His steely eyes glinted. "I'll see what I can do."

SandTail reconsidered, shaking his head. *If I'm to travel I'm going to have to walk.* Relief was scant feet away; how hard could it be? He'd eaten. He could maneuver the crutches more easily now. He just needed to squeeze the dowels hard, brace his legs, keep the rubbery



muscles in his biceps taut...

Strong arms grabbed him as crutches clattered to the floor and the room spun. SandTail balled his hands into fists, clenching his jaw as his stomach roiled.

"Relax," BrushBurn said behind him. "Lean on me. I'll walk you there."

SandTail closed his eyes, but bloated white spots remained. He swallowed against rising bile and tapped weakly on a wrist, *I'm being a nuisance. Let me crawl.*

"Years ago you took care of me in the only way you knew how. I'm returning the favor."

SandTail's fingers busied themselves elsewhere as BrushBurn held him upright. Peeing was an excuse to keep from tapping. *Even if I still had a tongue, would I use it? Would you laugh or be insulted to know you're the closest I've ever had to a son?*

A ridiculous thought. They were almost the same age and BrushBurn was head and shoulders taller. SandTail blinked against vertigo, holding onto himself for support.

*The factory took care of me in the only way it knew how, my friend. Something good must have come of that. We've both survived.*

He reached up and found the wrist again. He hesitated. What could he say?

"DamBuster is preparing curatives for you to take home," BrushBurn murmured. "AgatePool knows what to do, and she's arranged to have help for when she's on shift. I'll help settle you in and stop by when I can."

A squeeze of thanks would have to do. SandTail paused and pressed, lightly, *I envy you.*

"That's to be expected." BrushBurn guided him back toward the stool. "You'll mend."

*That isn't what I meant. I've envied you from the day we met.*

The hold around him tightened, lowering him onto hard wood.

"I'll get DevilChaser." BrushBurn quirked an uneasy smile before turning away. "He'll want to examine you before we leave."

~ ~ ~

SandTail half-dozed amidst whirring sprockets and gears, chains making well-greased rounds as a runner coursed rhythmically over gravel roads. The runner had bowed low before strapping into his harness, unable to hide shock that could have meant anything. If not from the sight of SandTail's infirmities, then from the sight of one who should be hanged. Or revered. SandTail couldn't tell which.

Skedge had been a dark wall of mesa climbing into a pale blue sky. Thrust up from flatness, standing erect before Promontory, tantalizing and terrifying at once. In a single season its people had reverted back to being Yata, generations of cultural conditioning undone, the lie of the Little Masari exposed.

The runner turned a corner and began to decelerate. SandTail opened his eyes and winced against jostling. His malformed rump rested on cushions, his head pillowed on BrushBurn's arm. He breathed stale air, the noise of civilization digging like burrs beneath his restored skin.

They pulled into a shadow of Promontory's former self, filled with echoes left by everyone who was gone. Never before had the tang of sweat and acid been so weak. SandTail flared his nostrils, struggling to sit upright. He reached back, his tapping urgent. *Has AgatePool lived here all along?*

BrushBurn nodded. "She moved in after we dug the house out."

*How do the neighbors treat her?*

"Respectfully." BrushBurn sighed. "What neighbors are left. They recognize and appreciate hard work, especially now."

The wheels crunched on gravel and fell silent. SandTail leaned back against the headboard and listened to buckles released up front, leather sliding free. For years he and his protégé had smuggled rifles to the Yata militia outside Basc. Now a half-Yata woman lived in the heart of a city her forbears had raided. She helped run a factory her ancestors' ancestors had built, before the Masari took it away from them.

The passenger door opened from without. AgatePool said, "Give me the crutches."

Her smoky voice wrapped SandTail in silk. He turned a broad grin toward her black-tufted face, bursting with pride and scared half to death. When she enveloped him he planted tender lips on her shoulder, swimming in the ample fabric of her dress.

She nodded up at BrushBurn. "I'll take him from here if you want to unload the rest."

The house rose on a patchwork of wood and stone and burlap bags filled with tailings, as pieced back together as its owner. The

exquisite agony of climbing stairs left SandTail dripping as AgatePool hovered close by, ready to catch him if he fell.

His screams, bottled up inside, formed their own rigid scaffolding to hold him up.

Another voice, high-pitched and breathy and vaguely familiar, floated to him from the foyer. "Do you need help?"

"Not yet," AgatePool called back. "But stand by the door, just in case."

SandTail cocked his eyebrows at her. How long had a *full-blooded* Yata lived here? He wanted to ask, but he couldn't lessen his grip on even a single crutch. He was all but welded to them.

Pale bronze hands, light enough to look gilded, reached out from the threshold. Even stooped, SandTail looked down into dark, expectant eyes. The little one among little ones took a gentle but firm hold of his arm and guided him inside.

She was hard to forget, a blur darting into and out of Skedge machinery to effect repairs, masked heavily against the heady whiff of Destiny. Slipping between searing metal plates during the days of sabotage, coaxing the factory into running again until Gria's army and more than a few Little Masari had at last laid waste to it.

Her black hair remained close-cropped, as though she were still tending vats and conveyor belts, her figure compact as a boy's. Her lightweight tunic accentuated what little she had in the way of breasts and hips.

SandTail sank into his couch and touched a well-muscled arm. *CutterDrum.*

She made a shallow bow. "Brother Wanderer." The term of endearment lilted off her lips. "I haven't been CutterDrum since I learned I was Yata. Almost no Masari names are used on Skedge any more. I'm Jirado now."

*It fits you.* He tapped in Yata, smiling at her mild surprise. *You're far from home.*

"Not any more." Jirado reached past him to help AgatePool position cushions. Neither woman flinched at touching leather crafted from the skins of livestock butchered at the Farm. Admirable, to habituate so quickly to décor that made some Masari queasy. BrushBurn, for one.

"My kin were murdered during the riots." The words hardly sounded real, borne on Jirado's delicate voice. She set SandTail's crutches aside. "Many who were loyal to the factory died defending it against other Yata. Then we learned what we were really manufacturing, and why Promontory had suddenly demanded so much of it from us." She shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand."

"Many more would have died if it hadn't been for her." AgatePool sat on the couch beside him. Her coppery tones blended disturbingly well into the upholstery. "Jirado helped me bring many people to safety. I didn't know until recently how much she'd lost."

"I have to believe Skedge and Promontory can still coexist." The gauzy tunic flared around Jirado's tiny knees as she turned away. She padded past SandTail's desk with its piles of history books, many of them open. "The future is bleak for both our peoples otherwise, yes?"

SandTail's heart hammered as the Yata paused before his firearms display. The guns were unloaded and long obsolete, but the sight of

her so close to weaponry was still unsettling. Even before she moved, he knew what she would do.

Jirado eased the ancient musket off its hooks and cradled it in her arms. "I couldn't believe this was real the first time I touched it." Her fingers slid reverently over Yata pictograms embossed on steel. Silver-gray metal molded to her, complementing her proportions. "No wonder the Masari were so afraid they went to such great lengths to make us forget our culture. Compared to this weapon, you had nothing."

Chains lengthened outside; in a moment the cart rolled away. SandTail suppressed a wince of pain, turning toward the heavy tread of boots as AgatePool rounded the couch and opened the door.

Stacked boxes hid BrushBurn's face. A sweaty curl dipped toward his eyes as he lowered medicines to the floor. He straightened, wiping his forehead as the door bumped shut behind him. His breath caught when he looked up.

He gentled his voice, water over pebbles. "You can put the gun down. We won't hurt you."

"This is Jirado." AgatePool gestured as the Yata replaced the musket on its hooks. "She's one of my senior staff members. She only looks like a child."

"You must be BrushBurn." Jirado strode toward him, beaming broadly with amusement. Her greeting rose like dew. "I'm sorry to have missed your visits to Skedge. If there are more boxes outside, perhaps I could help you bring them in."

He hesitated, looking her up and down. "The lightest weighs fifteenspring."

"I've lifted twice that."

BrushBurn nodded uncertainly and eased the door open. He furrowed his brow at SandTail before following her out.

SandTail sank further into the couch, muzzy-headed with encroaching sleep. *Are you worried about me, or wondering if I'm worried about you?* Either thought was oddly comforting. At least SandTail would die at home if Jirado had come here to kill him.

It would be only fair. Not long ago his plans for Skedge had included shooting her. Either that, or she would have been hauled to the Farm, dosed with the Destiny she'd helped to make and had protected herself so skillfully against, and relegated to breeding.

And, not long ago, BrushBurn would have been spellbound by her. Her smoothness, her smallness. Her speech could be that of a trilling bird. If this were the Farm, she would be naked by nature and BrushBurn by choice. And she'd be unable to trill.

*You didn't look spellbound, my friend. You looked afraid.*

Pillows shifted. SandTail blinked bleary eyes at AgatePool, whose full lips touched, then pressed against his own. She would have to have a tongue for both of them.

*Welcome home.* Her words caressed his palm. If he weren't exhausted, he would slide that palm up her dress, tracing lines of pelt from her spine to her plentiful abdomen, following inky fuzz to where it blossomed into pectoral fur. He would cup her swelling breasts and begin to knead, hardening as she toyed with his breech ties.

A smoky chuckle buzzed against his mouth. *You should rest your*

*hands in your lap more often.* AgatePool's fingers slipped from his; she cupped his groin by way of explanation. He wasn't dead yet.

It would have to be a promise. At some point her lips withdrew and the warmth of her touch faded. At some point the door opened and the people around him talked, but oh, so softly. Words were too hard to tease out. Soon he couldn't tell smoky from gravelly from trills. Soon it didn't matter at all.

~ ~ ~

"I rode in with the angels." Jirado sipped sweetened tea, holding her mug with both hands. "It was a two-person team with a small cart. They moved the bodies to make room for me."

BrushBurn peered from SandTail's kitchen into the study, where his mentor remained collapsed on the couch. "How long ago?"

"Fourteen days."

In a moment he could see it clearly. "Rotted wood."

AgatePool said, "I beg your pardon?"

BrushBurn turned back to the petite table that made him into a giant. SandTail's study was built to accommodate full-sized Masari guests, but his kitchen was not. "Two bodies came into Promontory that day." He paused, poured. "No, three; there was a stillbirth. Of the adults, one died of natural causes and the other was an accident."

Honey caught the light. "Skedge has been building irrigation terraces and using ladders in addition to the trails." BrushBurn touched rust-colored fur beneath his chin. "A rung snapped. Broken neck."



"Our attempts at self-sufficiency haven't been easy." AgatePool scowled. "Crop yields are pitiful. We're trying to build and retrain at the same time." She added more honey to her cup. "Our accident rate is triple what it was at the factory."

BrushBurn looked at Jirado. "Did you know any of them?"

She shook her head. "Not well. Do the angels always tell you the cause of death?"

"I ask." BrushBurn sipped, leaning back carefully in a too-small chair. "Otherwise it's too easy to feel I'm just dealing with weights and measures. Not people any more."

Soon not bodies any more, either, save for those Yata hanging in the Warehouse. Even the slabs inked with Destiny Farm's branding had been recognizable. Back then BrushBurn could tell which cuts he sold to hungry Masari. On a level submerged to deep bedrock, he had still been able to connect with what he traded, though he had taken the steady supply for granted.

Now the Yata became unrecognizable morsels instead. Preserved in brine, held in barrels, ladled onto a plate when a Masari broke a fast. The pieces were not even meat any more but something miraculous, bullets that fused together rather than ripped apart. They spread inside the body like quicksilver. Ravishing organs, heating blood after their long absence.

*He pulls TripStone to him in the Lodge as she pushes a chunk into his mouth with one hand and eases a sheath onto his cock with the other. It doesn't matter what he grabs, both of them laughing and cursing and bare-bottomed. The plate empties and he dives for the next. TripStone plucks another sheath from her vest. When he can't possibly eat any more, she slowly withdraws, leaving him sprawled*

*on the floor as a scale softly clinks.*

*She murmurs as he rises to his knees, "Two percent."*

*BrushBurn steps up beside her to check for himself as his head fills with statistics. A two-percent decrease in Yata consumption from his last break means progress. But weaning is not linear, and not without plateaus.*

*He hugs her around her waist and whispers, "Damned addiction."*

*TripStone nods. "Ghost said that once."*

*"It's still true." His fingers dip toward her buttocks, trailing brine. "But two percent is reason to celebrate."*

*He washes his mouth out as TripStone, still fasting, returns the remaining Yata to its barrel. A pot of bitter tea brews on a small table. BrushBurn fills his cup.*

*When he is sure his breath is clean he sidles up to her. Her ribs are not yet sharp, but her weaning has already crossed into level four.*

*She tastes his mouth and lingers, her fingers fumbling with the laces on his shirt. Brine stains her vest pocket as BrushBurn reaches inside for another sheath.*

*He refilled Jirado's cup. "We've become weights and measures, too." Even SandTail's teapot felt like a toy. "It's gotten so we know each other by our numbers."*

*Jirado met his gaze. "Like the numbers tattooed on the Farm Yata."*

*He set the pot down quickly. "I suppose." The boyish hands across*

from him looked honeyed, like the tea. The question spilled out before BrushBurn could stop it. "Why you?"

"Here with SandTail, you mean?" She looked past him into the study. "We have some commonalities."

"They performed similar work." AgatePool stirred sweetness. "SandTail is small for a Masari. Jirado's small for a Yata. They both fit into tight places. Both started in the factories when they were children."

Jirado nodded. "We shared many of the same stories when he came to Skedge. I told AgatePool I thought my presence here might help convince him we can integrate Yata into Promontory's factories."

"It's the Chamber you need to convince."

Jirado took hold of BrushBurn's wrist. "We know. But SandTail's the one who needs care, and he also has a deep-seated fear of Yata like so many of your citizens. If we can change that, we'll have a better chance with the Chamber."

Warmth traveled up BrushBurn's arm. If he closed his eyes he would be a youth again, back under the awnings at Destiny Farm, touched by a girl not yet sent to the breeding pens. He eased his wrist free and took a deep draught of tea.

"You have a labor shortage," AgatePool added, pointedly.

He cradled the cup. "Yes. And more."

The awnings at the Farm were gone now, nothing more than frayed strips. The Yata who played beneath them hid in the canyon walls and moved farther out of reach, inexorably toward winter.

Yet they were here, too, these women never penned, leaning toward him from the opposite side of the table.

## **Chapter 14**

### **Crossroads**

The windbreak at the Grange was a passage to another world. It was a membrane, like those of the cells viewed beneath Ghost's lenses. A magical, dense swath neither Yata nor Masari, but hovering between the two. Perhaps that was where home lay.

Piri rested against a generous trunk and closed her eyes, inhaling aromatic air. An ant ventured from scratchy bark onto the white gauze of her tunic and then her arm, shivering her with a tickle before it retreated back into the wood. Crows squabbled high above, shushed by pine needles.

Behind her lay a complex of low, broad structures at once spacious and claustrophobic. Ghost's former cabin, demolished by nature and rotted into the hillside, could fit into his new laboratory eight times over. Beside the lab, his vast greenhouse dwarfed the open-air pharmacy that he had known at the Marsh. His morgue rivaled the one in Promontory's hospital.

Ghost had everything here, and nothing. After so much running, escaping from one refuge into the next, the Grange's safety and comfort have made his home the cruelest prison of all.

They had stood to either side of SnowMoth. Ghost had eased his eldest sibling onto a bench, calling for smelling salts. But VineSong's dissection had been a distraction. At last Piri glimpsed her husband's notes and recognized the animalcules swimming in the

dead boy's fluids, the knots of his biology.

She had once drawn pictures of them, herself. Concealed in the cabin's back room behind a Masari harvest tapestry, Piri had recorded the same data from the blood of her long-ago Masari "sister," the child who had died in her arms.

She did not contradict Ghost when he said he was preserving VineSong's body for further experimentation, because it was true. For weeks he had kept the knowledge to himself, sending Piri away to collect samples from the living and providing her with a tangled skein of traits to unravel. He'd had her escort SnowMoth back to the farmhouse. The tension had drained from his shoulders as they left him to his privacy.

Now, dusk sank the pines into shadow. The biting flies would be out soon. Piri straightened from the tree and brushed herself off.

*Compare your attributes with VineSong's. Her fingers punctuated the air. You are related to him, and that could confound your results. You need a second test subject.*

She rehearsed her message, hugging herself as she walked, fingertips pressing her sides, repeating. *DamBuster is doing his own research in Promontory. You might be able to get his cooperation, and he has the equipment to replicate your results...*

Her eyes blazed. *You should have told me!* She broke into a run, crashing through underbrush and emerging breathless into the clearing. A distant glow leaked from a single window in the lab. Ghost was still in his study; his door would be locked. As it had been for the past thirty-seven days, shutting her out.

Piri burst into the anteroom, racing past shelves filled with glass. The

bench on which SnowMoth had crumpled remained askew. A right turn led into the morgue.

The records of weight and volume were gone, but enough of the boy's body was already missing to inform Piri's educated eyes. Ghost must have preserved and postponed, examined and postponed again, testing every hypothesis until he could delay no more.

She lit a lamp in the growing dark and opened drawers, rummaging for clean parchment. She could find plenty of that; he'd hidden only the data. Piri squatted and reached for an iron ring bolted into the floor, pulling up steps that let her reach the table. She would have to record how much the body had diminished and standardize what they sent to Promontory.

*What level yatanii is DamBuster now? How would we weight the results? What is his rate of weaning? Would he even agree to such a request? Would DevilChaser?*

Ink spotted Piri's fingers as a nib shattered. Her nostrils flared from more than just the tang of preservatives.

*Howlong has it been, Ghost? What is your rate of consumption?*

Were they even looking at the right traits? The right combinations?

Blots stained scribbled columns. Black specs nestled in Piri's braid. Questions raced in circles.

Sheets drying on the wood floor fluttered as the door to the morgue opened. Piri's hands balled into fists as soon as she set down her pen.

Ghost said behind her, small-voiced, "I didn't expect to find you here."

She whirled on him, driving him back against the door as she pounded his chest. Gulping breaths, she yanked his hand toward her, driving her nails into his palm as she drummed, *Howdare you do this alone after what we've been through! Who granted BrokenThread her last request in spite of what it meant? Who carried her, who prepared her, who cooked her for you?*

She buried her head in his chest, moaning. His long arms wrapped around her as he shuddered.

His embrace was almost too gentle. "You don't know how much it pains me to do this." Ghost's warm breath against her ear could not hide the hollow ring in his voice. "We both loved BrokenThread, but she had come to my cabin a stranger. I held VineSong minutes after he was born." He gathered Piri more tightly to him. "His body is having the same effect on me as hers had. How can I possibly tell that to my family?"

Piri led him to a bench, touching her hand to his chops as they sat. He rested his fingers on hers and dropped his shoulders against the wall, staring at shiny metal tables covered in neat arrays of glassware, organs arranged alongside anonymous chunks taken out of context, flayed tufted skin. Even the labels had been coded, rendered mysterious.

Sheets still littered the floor. Piri gathered them unceremoniously and returned to the bench. She tapped on Ghost's cheek, *Read*.

He hunched over the parchments, head just above his knees, trying to disappear. But he studied her notes intently, nodding, sighing. His eyes gleamed when he glanced up at her. She angled her chin back toward the papers and could almost hear his thoughts.

*Your questions are the same as mine, Ghost. You want to know if it's age-related. BrokenThread and VineSong were both young. You want to know why it's in your family, and whether BrokenThread could have sustained someone else as she had sustained you. Is it hereditary or can it be transferred? Does one's yatanii level make any difference?*

Piri wanted to whisper to him, wanted her tongue whole so that she could grasp him securely about his shoulders without having to flutter her fingers. "BrokenThread was a miraculous girl," she wanted to say. "She saw herself as a liberator of Masari. Everyone in Crossroads knows that now. That you consumed her is not a secret. Why should *this* be?"

She could only sit beside him, waiting. Ghost's shirt was crisp beneath Piri's arm, his wine-colored curls drawn back and neatly secured, his pockmarked face filled out and healthy. When BrokenThread had died he'd been in a state of near-starvation and dressed in rags, his makeshift, illicit lab destroyed.

Ghost looked up from the sheets with a crooked smile. "I came here as soon as I noticed the light, but I must return to my desk. Stay with me." He added, almost inaudibly, "I won't lock you out any more."

Piri placed a tentative hand on his arm. *There is no shame in this.*

"I suppose not." He turned away as Piri retrieved her lamp. "HigherBrook tried to tell me the same thing. But I was looking to *end* Masari affliction, not support it."

*How fast was VineSong weaning?*

"Quickly." He shook his head. "No one else in the family shares Thread's blood characteristics. I've checked. TelZodo-" Nervous



laughter bubbled. "I was so busy worrying our son would be Yata-dependent that I hadn't stopped to consider his nutritional value. But he seems to be safe from-" Ghost blinked at her, looking dazed. "What *is* he safe from?"

They walked past a vast library of stoppered vials and vacuum pumps. Samples from Masari and Yata, living and dead. Solids and liquids, numbered and labeled. Branded. Piri's neck was branded with a number; she could be a sample herself. Were livestock and citizenry so different from each other?

There she was, high up on one of the Yata shelves, hidden in the fourth row. Two sets of numbers defined her now. The older, obsolete tattoo on the back of her neck delineated her age and pedigree, her maternal ancestry, the projected yield of her own flesh and her capacity to bear more of it. She wore the mark of a farm animal who had added seven more to the herd before her near-lethal flight to freedom.

The back of her eighth child's neck was tufted, not tattooed, and he babbled an extraordinary music her tongue could not possibly hold. The anticipation of hearing TelZodo's first word drove Piri to tears.

He, too, sat up on the shelves in numbered vials. So did Ghost, his father. Everyone in Crossroads and Basc was here. Everyone possessed an ongoing narrative of animalcules and cellular portraits persisting or changing over time. Like the sacred books girding the Rotunda, like Destiny Farm's thick volumes of gestation and disease records, culling dates and returns on sales. The data filling this laboratory reduced everyone to the same inescapable variables:

Who ate whom? Who fed whom?

She rubbed Ghost's back as he bent. She held her lantern by the lock

and listened for his key's soft click.

His Masari tapestry, still stained and tattered, hung cleaned and partially restored. The revels of a harvest dance, the farmer at his plow amidst piles of corn, had once concealed Ghost's experiments, hanging between the two rooms of his cabin before its destruction. Now it brightened a wall between proclamations penned in HigherBrook's large, illuminated calligraphy.

To the left, joyous script blazed within a border of Yata and Masari pictograms, welcoming into Crossroads every hybrid child regardless of appetite. To the right, a more regimented but equally glad decree detailed an end to the stigma of *yatanii* and tabulated the financial rewards of weaning from Yata meat.

Beneath that parchment hung Ghost's delicately-framed *yatanii* list, which HigherBrook had retrieved along with the tapestry before the decayed cabin roof had caved in. Shoved to the back of a low drawer, the list's concealment had saved it from destruction. Now its proud display made Piri smile, its small, tight handwriting so unlike Ghost's distracted scrawl. Nothing else had shown his fear so blatantly, his own gamble with death as he fasted.

It was the first document she had learned to read: a recitation of meats and bones, curatives and fetishes, everything pulled from Yata bodies and sanctified by the Covenant. Ghost's cabin, hidden in the woods at the edge of Crossroads, had dispensed with such sacred artifacts. Aside from dissections and experiments, the only Yata in that no-Yata zone had been Piri herself.

She hugged him around his waist. Her fingers pressed beneath his shirt, *I have missed this place. When you bolted the door connecting our offices I didn't know what to think.*

HigherBrook's proclamation exonerating Ghost of his crimes and granting him protection was less prominent. The record admitting Ghost's narratives into the Rotunda, the honor bestowed upon him for detailing Masari lives and the stories of Crossroads, lay buried beneath files. In the end he'd accepted the parchments only because TripStone had written from Promontory ordering him to do it.

Ghost handed his data to Piri, but she would not read the notes, not yet. They were meant to distract her from the earthenware dish resting atop the desk, its precise measurement of meat preserved in the same brine that filled the barrels at the Deliverance Inn. And the Milkweed Inn in Rudder, and the Lodge in Promontory.

Piri hung her lamp on a hook and moved behind Ghost as he sat. She rested her hands lightly on his shoulders, her fingers hesitating. *Do you think, she tapped, that VineSong would have been gratified to knowhe continues to provide?*

"That doesn't solve the problem, does it?" Ghost grumbled.

*It might, in time.*

He reached back and laced his fingers with hers. His free hand dipped into the dish and came up glistening. Piri could not tell by sight alone that the preserved and marinated morsels had come from a Masari instead of a Yata.

She watched the tension drain from Ghost's face as he shut his eyes and slowed his breathing. His prayers came from more than respect now. If the gods existed for him, he was calling to them, raising the remains of his nephew to his lips.

## Chapter 15

## The Fertile Lands: The Far Woods

*You can smell them behind the gunpowder. Six soldiers, four male, two female. Resin; their arrows are poisoned. They will swing behind, distract by laying down fire. They will have dug pits, set release traps. Don't be drawn out.*

The thoughts circled in HigherBrook's head. His fur stood on end, but the hunting grounds had never been so calm.

*It's an old trick. Don't fall for it.*

Every rock, every tree limb, every wildflower was a letter in a word, words memorized on a page. Everything that had been moved, replanted, or concealed screamed wrongness, shivering the base of his spine like a tic that wouldn't go away.

*Three of them are less-experienced. Scent the fear? Let them think they've got you.*

The three Masari with him were veterans. They had all functioned as a unit nonstop for days. Adrenalin spurt through eight arms, eight legs. Eight eyes darted. Eight nostrils flared. Eight hands remained stilled. No need to drum what you already knew. No need to think what you already felt.

One brain. One brain in four heads. Four against six.

He wasn't worried. Couldn't be.

*Don't try to decoy. They know where you are.*

Beside him, CatBird scanned the perimeter. Her roseate chops

twitched. Her breaths combined with others, tiny shifts in their cover of stripped bark. Odors of arousal, a collective state of readiness.

*They know where you are. Let them come to you.*

One brain. One wordless thought. One overriding hunger.

A leaf talked, pointing the way as scent circumscribed a line in the wind. Two lines. The Yata group had divided, making itself vulnerable. Its experienced fighters should know better. It was a gift of the gods they didn't.

Blood trickled into HigherBrook's eye. He blinked it away. Scrabbling tickled his pelt and moved on. Something bit. The sensations came from far away; he ignored them.

It was a beautiful day. He ignored that, too.

*Watch where they step, what they avoid.*

Wait too long and the Yata would have an advantage, spread thin but close, overpowering on two fronts. The other Masari hunters-the rest of him-felt it, too. HigherBrook's muscles began their slow contractions, flowing into position. The movements of the Yata in the next minute would determine who would be the first to shoot, who would provide cover. *This band prefers the bow Listen for wood and sinew to strain.*

Silence widened behind the shrill cry of a fledgling above and soft thumps on mulch below. Dust motes descended golden beams. HigherBrook's spine tingled; his throat pulsed. He made room, filtered out distraction. Distraction killed.

In the moment of greatest potential, the fever in the air before

lightning, he barely breathed.

CatBird's elbow slammed against him and he yelled, "West!" He swiveled as she fired, covering her as a poison-tipped arrow ripped the grass by her boot. They slid and lifted their shields from beneath, catching the sun. Sound traveled; he spun again. Shafts clattered above. Revolver fire dented metal.

Stones flew. Release mechanisms tripped. Projectiles gouged tree trunks and pits yawned beneath fallen sod. In a moment of confusion, a Yata newly come of age separated from the others, an easy target.

An elder sprang after her young charge and dove down, pulling him with her and throwing a shield over them both. Arms plunged through mulch.

Not an accidental separation but a hidden weapons cache. HigherBrook's StormCloud jerked in his hands as his shoulder met the ground. The air crackled around him as he rolled and fired. Bone splintered. The woman's face was gone, but the boy beside her remained triumphant. Pride gleamed in his eyes as he squeezed off a shot before taking a bullet in the head. His joyous challenge remained, frozen in place. HigherBrook's innards reeled.

He clamped his mouth shut to keep from calling aloud.

*Enough.*

He forced the thought away, had to remain animal to survive. He couldn't look at the boy. They were four Masari against four Yata and neither side was retreating.

The Yata should be. HigherBrook's unit needed only two kills; this battle was over. But their opponents blocked the way to the bodies,

leaving no way to get to the food. Instead they redoubled their attack.

None was a Preserver trained to hunt Masari, and they were not defending Yata lives any more. They had no right to do this.

Both sides fought over the bodies and the cache, stalemated. The Yata clustered together. Shots rang out; two Masari went down. HigherBrook swallowed his dread as CatBird's self-assured alto boomed, "Masks!"

A gas canister sailed overhead at her command. The Yata dispersed as HigherBrook whipped treated cloth over his nose and mouth. The advantage his people gained would last a single day, because from this day forward the rules have changed.

~ ~ ~

## **Crossroads**

"Frankly, I'm surprised the Yata didn't use the gas first." Ghost extracted a bullet from CatBird's thigh, then looked back up to HigherBrook. "They used it to breach Promontory's armory back in the spring. They were showing restraint with us."

Bloodied lead clinked into a dish as CatBird chomped down on a ragged yellow root.

"Trying to reclaim their dead was *not* showing restraint," HigherBrook said, heatedly. "It was a deliberate provocation that violates the rules of engagement." He fumed in a morgue turned part infirmary, part butchery, struggling to steady his hand against the rage flushing his face. His hunting clothes lay crumpled and filthy on the floor. Soon his red-spattered apron and gloves would join them.

The boy beneath his knife had broken no agreement. Neither had the Yata woman killed in the skirmish. HigherBrook had already reduced her to a smattering of parts: food, curatives, samples awaiting Ghost's study.

"Killing these people is hard enough without having the chance to pay proper respect to the dead." HigherBrook gritted his teeth and sliced. "The Covenant may be gone, but we still have protocols of warfare. Yata and Masari *saved* this valley together!" Exposed bone caught the light. "You weren't here. You wouldn't know."

The Yata had been ready to be taken if killed. Neither had asked to be dragged back by their comrades and used as bait to draw the Masari in further. Laid on a table beside their ripped armor, the notes pulled from their tunics detailed next of kin.

Ghost hunched over CatBird's wound, cleaning. His voice dropped. "Basc becomes more self-sufficient every day. It grows its own food and its industry is increasing. Eventually it won't need advisors from Crossroads any more. What did you expect?"

*I expected decency!* HigherBrook grimaced and cut. The words might not sound so ridiculous if he refrained from saying them aloud. There was nothing decent about his blade slipping across this boy's chest, either. Nothing decent about the Masari appetite that necessitated this war. They should have honored the bodies before dismembering them, but that has changed, too.

CatBird's eyes smoldered as Ghost dressed her wound. HigherBrook gave the young woman an encouraging smile, but couldn't stop her from being angry with herself. "You took action as soon as you saw what was happening," he reminded her. "We'd have had more wounded otherwise. Maybe worse."



She fished the root from her mouth, clutching it in her hand. "I'm fine, Sir. I'll be well enough for the next hunt." Her azure glare softened. "If you see Izzik before I do-"

"I'll tell him you've sustained a minor injury."

*Right there.* HigherBrook marveled at the relief washing over her heart-shaped face, her concern for the Yata soldier who worried about her. *That is where the decency lies.* Though at what cost, he feared to speculate. He bent back to the dead boy, who was only a bit younger than Izzik.

CatBird mouthed the root again with a heavy sigh. Decency lay, too, in the analgesic plant she chewed. The dagger root grew in the Marsh over in Alvav. New avenues of trade had opened up between Yata and Masari when they weren't trying to kill each other.

HigherBrook muttered, "We'll have to alter our training." Across from him, CatBird grunted assent as she rose to her feet, steadying herself on crutches. She looked ready to hobble into Basc right now, seeking out the man who would just as soon be her opponent in the hunting grounds as her husband inside the village.

*We're trusting the Yata of Basc with guns but they're trusting us to protect their children.* HigherBrook heard his voice ringing out across the market square a season earlier as he'd stood before the incredulous, thrilled, depleted citizens of Crossroads. His hunting tunic had been clean, then, darkening beneath a steady rain as he delivered his address from atop a captured and emptied meat cart.

His soldiers and Gria's had drilled together for the assault on Destiny Farm, otherwise Promontory would have conquered them both. Crossroads and Basc had benefited from an unparalleled alliance.

*An alliance subsidized by the Yata butchered at Destiny Farm.* HigherBrook gazed sadly at the corpse he dismembered. The boy's shoulder popped from its socket. For a moment the arm moved as though still alive. *Subsidized by stolen meat.*

He'd taken advantage of that abomination as surely as Promontory had, feeding on slabs whose past existence as people had been all too easy to forget.

"CatBird." HigherBrook called after a woman come of age before her time, the orphan who'd taught him to dissect and then to hunt. "Get your rest."

She beamed at him, her eyes still smarting with pain. He knew what it meant: *I will get my rest, Sir, but you did not specify where.* Already her stamina returned as she swung like a pendulum toward the door, the crutches a fluid extension of her arms. She had new scars to show off to Izzik, who likely had his own ready to reveal.

Where did it end? How soon before these small, random skirmishes over Yata flesh enlarged as each side called in reinforcements? How soon before the far woods burned down, nothing but a scarred battlefield as blackened as the old hunting grounds had become?

How soon before their "controlled war" crossed over into a settlement and the last of the controls dropped away?

HigherBrook laid down his knife. "CatBird!"

She halted at the door. Her voice slurred around the root. "Sir?"

"When you're in Basc, get a message to Zai that I want to meet with her."

"Immediately, Sir." She craned her neck back toward the surgical table, wincing. "Thanks, Ghost."

"Thank me by watching the leg."

HigherBrook drew a deep breath to fight growing panic as the crutches slipped from view. Across from him, Ghost's attentions turned back to research, betraying no emotion as he hovered over beakers and extractors, turning aside to regulate a flame. The taller man shrank under a bent back, hiding his lankiness.

HigherBrook resumed dissecting but soon his nostrils twitched, then flared. An odd sensation, to feel Ghost's gaze boring into him through the top of his head. He could swear his scalp felt warmer. But the change in the air informed him. A sense of urgency, of great sadness.

HigherBrook looked up, toward a figure straightened to full height. "We don't always agree, Ghost, but I would hope you can confide in me."

The look on Ghost's face was more quizzical than dismayed. "You're the leader of Crossroads. You're not required to hunt but you do. Why?"

He was asking a different question, but this one was easier to express. And more difficult to answer.

"I never thought of myself as a hunter." HigherBrook bent back to the corpse. "I'd never met a Yata except through stories the hunters dictated. Until the Covenant fell I'd never touched a gun."

He almost ignored the pieces now coming away in his hand, the layers he peeled back from bone. Still, a voice inside him chanted,

consecrating the meat. Praying to the dead boy who would help keep Crossroads' citizens alive.

HigherBrook cradled the head with its punctured skull and began separating its base from the spine. "TripStone knew I had a talent for it. So did Gria. So did CatBird, though I fought her teaching for as long as I could. Despite everything, the Yata are still sacred beings to me." His eyes blazed. "I hate what we have to do to them. For as long as I live I've got to stoke the flames of that hatred so I never forget what they mean to us. The hunt reminds me of what we do to survive."

He glanced at a scientist wrestling with himself. *Do you want me to tell you how it was in the beginning? How once we were safely back in Crossroads I shook so hard from the realization of what I'd done that I could barely stand upright? That I had to lean on my comrades while I carried my kill? Do you want me to tell you how ashamed I am that I don't shake any more?* "I've set an example by leaving the sheltered halls of the Rotunda."

Ghost nodded. "As I am sheltered here."

There. The unspoken question. "I am expendable, Ghost," HigherBrook said, firmly. "*You are not.* That remains true no matter how many friends and relatives you will have to lean over at these tables. And no matter what you've found." His voice softened. "We all carry our own guilt. That was true under the Covenant as well."

Ghost lifted a pipette from its bracket and bent toward a dish. He busied himself with the lenses. The tension in his shoulders remained. "The Covenant angered me," he muttered, "*because of the suffering it caused.* Experimenting on dead Yata was my way of fighting back, regardless of the risk. I'd never felt guilty about my work."

"Until now."

Ghost looked up, plum-colored neck fur lifting. His narrowed eyes told HigherBrook not to question further. Long fingers returned to the lenses, guiding them within slender scaffolding and sliding finely-polished glass into place.

## **Chapter 16**

### **Late Summer**

#### **Crossroads**

Cobblestone roads once meandered across this village, following gentle curves and whorls and dwindling to dirt paths. On one end the paths climbed a graceful slope toward the pass and into Rudder, or they zigzagged up to the ridge and dropped down into Alvav.

On the other end lay the long straightaway into the Grange and its fields. Land to one side of that road opened up into a market square once boisterous with wagons and lean-tos. That marketplace had turned desolate with BrushBurn's single cart of Destiny Farm meat, surrounded by starving Masari trading away whatever they possessed.

To the other side, smooth pavement spiraled in a broad walk toward the Rotunda, its hulking dome blending into foothills beside green-bearded mountains.

Now the Rotunda stored meat just like Promontory's Warehouse. The mountains began to look like Promontory's, gashed from mining and running silt where clear water once coursed. Gunfire crackled beyond the Grange's crops as hunters trained.

Once-separate cottages joined together to form private dormitories surrounding larger common rooms. The settlements of Crossroads no longer resembled leaves strung along vines. Now they looked like flowers with many petals radiating from a single center. Entire stone foundations had been moved, lines on a map redrawn as circles.

This had been a village of modest-sized families maintaining independent households before famine, disease, and war had ripped those families apart. Now the survivors clustered together, hanging onto each other and relocating again and again to fill the voids left by those killed. Except for the Hunt Guild children, who had always kept to themselves, Crossroads' citizens became nomads within their own borders.

Only the marketplace looked repopulated, with Yata traders bartering their wares beside Masari rivals.

HigherBrook pushed past the Deliverance Inn's double doors. Pictograms adorned the wood: stylized trees with interlocking branches, fancifully-plumed birds soaring between clouds. Those who read ancient Yata knew that they were prayers to the dead. Those who couldn't merely admired the artistry.

The prayers became more fervent inside, scripted in Masari now, begging the gods for liberation from dependence. Two floors of private rooms accommodated citizens breaking their Yata fasts, while slate boards above and around the meat counter chronicled rates of weaning.

Promontory's courier sat near the door, his lean body draped about the chair, his craggy chin hidden behind a mug of tea that he lowered beside the pot. He spotted HigherBrook and nodded. "I see you've dismantled another section of houses and put up communal huts.

Every time I come here, Crossroads looks more like Basc."

"DustClaw." HigherBrook clasped the messenger's hand, noting the gash healing on the other man's neck. A red scar puckered beside shaved skin and the stubble of blood-colored pelt. "Spear?"

"Rockfall." Earth-colored eyes glinted. "Slate is nasty when it shatters."

"I'm glad you're still with us."

"Someone's got to deliver the bad news." DustClaw flashed a mirthless grin. He reached into a worn vest and withdrew packets of parchment, separating two from the others. "Message to you from TripStone, and to Ghost from DamBuster." He held up the latter. "This would be of particular interest to you."

It was a respectful invitation, insofar as prying could be considered respectful. How many couriers read the letters entrusted to them? DustClaw admitted to the practice, but would he offer a different leader the same opportunity?

HigherBrook strode to the counter for a mug and a small tin of honey. He shrugged as he returned to the table, trying to dispel the itch from his shoulder. Each visit from DustClaw reanimated the reminder of an old wound. *Would you be so open with me if we hadn't shot each other and lived to become friends afterward?* "How long are you staying?"

"A couple of days." DustClaw filled the governor's mug and refilled his own. "You should know that Ghost is now using me exclusively to communicate with DamBuster. He's bypassing Crossroads' couriers."

HigherBrook nodded, keeping his face noncommittal. "He doesn't believe we're as tough as you are."

DustClaw smirked. "Are you?"

HigherBrook sipped. "You're the ones who thought you'd conquered us."

DustClaw leaned back in his chair and crossed a booted foot over his knee. His mug sat in his lap, warming his hands. The mail made little mountains on the table.

The tea was a strong infusion of berries and bark. HigherBrook should have asked for more honey. His mouth was awake, the bitter nip at his throat as pungent as brandy, but one that kept him sharpened rather than dulled.

He swallowed. "Give me TripStone's news first."

"She's still as idealistic as you, friend." The courier's eyes gleamed with more than idle interest. Pushed parchment whispered across the table. "The Farm Yata have moved deeper into the canyon and it's killing them faster than we can, though obviously that doesn't stop them from fighting back." DustClaw counted on his fingers. "Dehydration. Starvation. Predation. We found a dead child with a clawed head, dropped into a crevasse. Whatever wanted him had lost its grip. We've turned into scavengers and we're competing with scavengers who know the canyon much better than we do. If we're lucky, the half-eaten bodies we find are still fresh enough to be of any use." He drank deeply, smiling to himself. "TripStone thinks we can convince them to come to Promontory. Don't ask me why."

"Why not? The Skedge Yata want to come into Promontory."



"Yes, to reclaim the factories that once belonged to them. They'd give anything to obtain those skills again." Fingers interlaced around the mug. "You *do* realize that would be suicide for Promontory."

"So is losing your trade base. Your industries are already dying from labor shortages."

HigherBrook unfolded the parchment to read the details omitted from DustClaw's opinions. The letter's script was calm and unhurried. Whatever Promontory's hardships, TripStone bore them well.

He folded the note back up and slipped it into his vest pocket. "She writes that very few people on Skedge have taken any interest in the canyon Yata."

"*Farm* Yata, HigherBrook. They're escaped livestock."

"They include skilled workers captured from Skedge. And, as we've learned, despite their privations the canyon Yata are as intelligent as those on the mesa." HigherBrook frowned. "It's a battle for food either way. Do you want to fight Yata alone or Yata and vultures?" He poured more tea and scraped the remaining honey from the tin. "To be honest, I don't know how much longer our arrangement will work, either. Our hunts have become more dangerous. Some of our youth have turned reckless. They enter the hunting grounds alone, no backup."

"Suicidal."

HigherBrook nodded. "They're afraid they're going to starve. That's much more painful than a merciful death dealt by a Preserver."

DustClaw raised his eyebrows. "You must admit Destiny Farm made things much easier."

"So did the Covenant." HigherBrook sipped, grimacing as the tea set his teeth on edge. "Which you despised as much as we despised the Farm. You just saw fit to destroy our way of life first." He held up his hand. "Stemming from our ancient debt to you. I know."

The men drank in silence. HigherBrook leaned back, watching a pair of skeletal Masari climb the stairs to a private room. Muffled moans of ecstasy would follow soon. They might even be breaking their fasts together. "Our towns are consuming less Yata per person than before. That gives me hope that eventually we'll dispense with the need altogether."

DustClaw warned, voice low, "Be careful what you ask for."

"Believe me, I've been praying for that for a very long time." HigherBrook motioned toward the other parchment. "Tell me what Ghost and DamBuster are keeping from my couriers. Let's see how tough we are."

"They've gone without Yata for considerably longer than expected." A corner of the packet, thick with notes, tapped on wood. "But that's because they've been eating Masari."

HigherBrook pursed his lips in thought. "The gods will have to multiply in number, then, won't they?"

He drew little satisfaction from the look of bemused surprise on DustClaw's face.

## Chapter 17

**Basc**

Ghost looked out over the tops of Yata heads filling Basc's market square. Sometimes he spotted a traditional long braid, less common now among short, military styling.

Piri continued to grow her straw-colored hair. It stood out in the midst of black and brown, dropping a plumb line halfway down her back. She waited beside him, a small hammock tied to her, swaddling TelZodo.

They stood near the front of the crowd, in the shadow of a raised platform whose awning shaded a large, cushioned armchair. White cloth undulated in a scant breeze. Sweat beaded on Ghost's skin, trickling between and into swaths of pelt.

Around him the furless Yata perspired even more. Their scent carried. Their hearts beat faster than Masari's under normal circumstances, but Ghost could feel inordinate heat, elevated pulses in the undercurrent of adoration running through the crowd. The news of Gria's first public appearance since her injury inspired them to ecstasy if not open worship.

He forced himself to remain calm. *This is madness.*

Nothing Ghost could measure painted the general as a messenger to the gods. Gria had been brought screaming from the battlefield, bound in ropes by her own order. Her soldiers had carried her up into Skedge, rushed her into one of AgatePool's guest cottages, and summoned Ghost from the main house.

By the time he reached Gria, she was unconscious. The back of her skull had been fractured. One more blow from SandTail slamming her head against granite could have driven bone into her brain and put her in the afterlife for real. A more thorough, post-surgical examination of her pelvis had revealed lacerations in places where

none should have existed.

*If that is supposed to make her a messenger to the gods, then the gods cannot possibly exist.* Ghost scanned the radiant faces around him, then looked away as a fresh wave of anger rose. *Not my gods.*

One of those expectant faces was Piri's, who of all people should know the crippling power of Destiny. But here in Basc that poison had been sacred. Many of the Yata chanting and singing in this square had once enjoyed its effects, choosing to imbibe it under the Covenant as a form of orgiastic piety.

Inundated with Destiny in their food and drink, the Farm Yata had been given no choice. Neither had Piri, penned with the rest of them.

Gria had been trained to make the very drug that almost killed her. *She* had been given no choice, dosed to levels of toxicity that stymied even the Skedge medics. They had treated Destiny overexposure in factory workers, but never this kind of assault.

Ghost scowled up at the chair. *Rip my body away from me and I'd communicate with the dead, too.*

The faithful included several Masari rising head and shoulders above Basc citizens. They stuck out, ruddy-haired and fuzzy, weeds rising from loam. Several bent forward to converse with Yata face to face, but the air crackled with anticipation well beyond the buzz of gossip.

Someone brushed against Ghost's leg. He looked down to where Zai's younger son Evit peeked around his knee. A tiny child, but typical for a Yata his age. He wasn't much bigger than TelZodo, the baby he came to visit. The sight of rumpled and dirty play clothes and short, spiky hair drove away the acid taste in Ghost's mouth. "Are you hiding from your brother again?"

"No." The boy giggled. His dimpled cheeks were still pudgy where Abri's had already become lean. Evit grinned upward, craning his neck. "You make me laugh when you talk."

"I learned Yata in Alvav. They speak it differently there."

"I know that!" Arms wrapped around Ghost's thigh as though it were a tree. "I have friends from Alvav," Evit said archly, his voice high enough to squeak. "You still sound funny. TelZodo! Can you talk yet?"

Piri smiled at Ghost and knelt. She reached out to the boy's cheek. *Not yet, she drummed, but he babbles.*

"I talked when I was his age!"

*You talked when you were his size. He is still too young.*

Ghost watched closely, following the movement of her fingers. "TelZodo knows who you are now," he added. "He knows you like him."

"He always knew *that*." Evit ran a finger lightly along the baby's violet chops and was rewarded with a squeal of delight. The children beheld each other with eyes that couldn't possibly grow any wider. For minutes they were silent together.

Loud murmurs closer to the stage broke their concentration. Evit kissed TelZodo's coppery forehead and whispered, "I have to go." By the time Piri rose to her feet he had disappeared.

*You see? Piri laid a tender touch on Ghost's arm. That is why I brought TelZodo. Evit asks for him every time I come here.*

*But you know TelZodo hates crowds.*

She flashed him a triumphant grin. *Is he crying now?*

Ghost squeezed Piri's shoulder. Evit was a pretense and she knew it. For all her astuteness in the lab, she still believed Gria had become a magical being, a creature straddling the worlds of life and death. Yata and Masari who shared that belief packed the marketplace to bursting.

How could one be in the presence of magic and not be touched by it?

More believers continued to arrive. Stragglers spilled in from Crossroads, the tall Masari easy to spot in the crowd. Ghost's sister SnowMoth stood among them.

She noticed him, too. He nodded in her direction, steeling himself against turning away.

*Easy to turn to faith when the science is so damnable.*

Beside him Piri opened her shirt and fed their son.

A collective gasp drowned out the sound of TelZodo's suckling as a black-robed figure ascended the stairs. No one carried Gria, but she wasn't moving on her own. Instead, ceremonial cloth bound her to the leaders at her sides. Zai and HigherBrook held the general upright, pulling on strips of leather bound about their wrists. Working her legs like those of a puppet.

"They should have dressed her in light-colored vestments," Ghost grumbled. "Or do they think she's too divine for heat stroke?"

At least she would sit beneath the awning. Her attendants wore plain

but lighter-colored hunting tunics, stone-faced against exertion as they literally pulled Gria to the stage. She stared straight ahead, unable to turn and face the crowd.

Unable or unwilling to, until Zai and HigherBrook positioned her on the cushioned chair, lowered her bindings, and stepped aside. Her head moved in hesitant increments, her face disturbingly blank. She blinked in the light, surveying the crowd. She took a deep breath, furrowing her brow in concentration as though struggling to remember how to inhale.

"I cannot speak well." Gria's chest heaved, her voice carrying with loud authority. She grimaced, pushing past slurred words. "So I will speak slowly. I have missed you all so much."

The marketplace tried to breathe for her, hushed, remembering a time when Gria could not bear the sound of another voice. Soft weeping punctuated the quiet.

Ghost looked into Piri's rapturous eyes. He held her shoulder more securely, watching TelZodo still hungry at her breast.

Above him, Gria blurted, "I do not know why I was chosen for this."

She forced the words from her lungs. She could be crying out from the middle of a dream. Ghost looked back up, his skin prickling as Gria caught her breath. Her lips and chest moved, her eyes blinked, but the rest of her remained motionless beneath embroidered black cloth dripping onto wood slats.

A tear tracked down her cheek. "The afterlife is a beautiful place," she said, thickly. "The dead are whole, there. They are restored, and happy. Yata and Masari-all of them."

The crowd strained forward. Who among them wouldn't be moved by the promise of peaceful coexistence in a world where all appetites had ceased? Everyone here had lost someone to the hunt, a sorrow once the sole prerogative of the Yata. Everyone wanted the dead to live again.

Surrounding Ghost were Masari who had killed for food, side by side with the survivors of their prey. Yata stood beside kin of the Masari they had executed, all of them equally fervent.

Blue tattoos marking the elite Preservers appeared scattered throughout the crowd. Ghost traced the forehead lines to Izzik. The comely Yata's arm tightened about CatBird's waist as she hugged him back.

Who could say which madness was preferable to another? Ghost frowned down at Piri's radiant profile. *Once you and I were thought impossible.* The existence of TelZodo, made of their mingled blood, had once been dismissed by the very woman struggling on the stage.

Now the dead thrived in Gria's questionable visions, in her descriptions of a paradise that fed everyone's hunger. Ghost's stomach roiled with the remains of his nephew as he listened. Surely VineSong would give him a sign if he were something more than pieces. Something more than a thin chemical soup keeping his uncle's flesh intact.

Surely BrokenThread, who knew exactly what she was doing when she told Piri to cook her, would have come forward if she had any spirit left. *You'd have shaken me out of my nightmares, Thread. You'd be here with us all now, telling me what an idiot I am.*

Ghost swallowed hard. *Prove me wrong, then. I'm waiting. Please.*



He drove the urge away, wiping a linen sleeve across his face. It must be the heat.

Gria's mouth hung open, sucking in air. "I am whole when I am in the afterlife. But *you* are dearer to me. Never forget that."

The general slumped forward; Zai hastened to catch her. The corners of Gria's lips ticced up, gratefully or sardonically; Ghost couldn't tell. He saw only exhaustion.

Zai's sons stood at the far end of the stage. Abri was already a little soldier, his hunting tunic a miniature version of his mother's, his small body stiff with attention.

"The dead are at peace and they are here for us." Color drained from Gria's cheeks as Zai held her upright. "That is all I can tell you."

Abri's younger brother leaned forward, almost slouching, as curious as the older boy was vigilant. Ghost smiled at Evit's inquisitiveness. How much did the child believe?

Long fingers caressed Piri's shoulder. *I wonder if Evit wants to learn about the lenses.*

Piri stared openly at Ghost, her face flushed, then quickly looked away.

*I know,* he drummed. *This is not the place to bring it up. But still-*

She cradled TelZodo more securely and poked with her free hand, *Leave the lab in the lab!*

The pinch between her eyes deepened as she turned from him, sadness behind anger. They were in Basc, now, not the Grange. Piri

came here to be with her people, but ultimately she was as much a stranger among Yata as among Masari. Ghost's fingers found her cheek to drum an apology.

HigherBrook stepped up to the armchair to help Zai move pillows and secure cloth. With a start Ghost realized they were tying Gria into position. He bristled, rage rising as he glared at the stage. *Is she your test subject now? Next you'll strap her into a restraining chair, just as DamBuster did with MudAdder. But MudAdder was afforded dignity!*

He should look away, turn his back on this humiliation rather than be another of its willing voyeurs. Before him, alarmingly slack, her muscles wasting away, sat the woman who had first led her militia against Crossroads and then helped to save it.

They'd both been outlaws under the Covenant. Exiles. Now what were they? The throng around Ghost venerated Gria as a living myth. A non-person. Holy in her powerlessness.

At first his arm was too numb to feel Piri's soft touch. His wife pressed more firmly. *Gria is assenting to this.*

He jabbed back, *What choice does she have?*

*Look at her.*

Ghost lifted his head. Gria met his gaze as she became beribboned, bound to her chair with silken knots. He thought dust had blown into her eye before he realized she bestowed on him a slow, uncoordinated wink.

Then her face changed sharply. Her eyes widened before she turned limp.

~ ~ ~

Gria howled in frustration as her fist pummeled thin soil. She screamed at the heavens, "How can I reassure my people when you pluck me away from them?"

She had looked upon Piri's open rapture and Ghost's uneasy scowl before whiteness swept the marketplace. Gauze wrapped her vision before the portal to the afterlife shut about her like a trap. It spirited her into the canyon where she lay on her back, staring up at cottonwood canopies. "Whatever you are," she snarled, "*put me back.*"

What brought her here, the gods or her own brain? Gria didn't know. She tried to peer past the facade of wilderness, but saw only trees and birds and sun-baked rock. She tasted sweetness in the air, heard cool water trickling through the oasis.

"This doesn't exist. I am still in Basc, tied to my chair in the marketplace."

Was anyone touching her? Were her people's misdirected reverence turning into waves of panic?

"This dirt isn't real. These succulents aren't real. If this is the afterlife, then everything is *dead* and I don't belong here!"

But grit edged under her nails. Chalk smeared her palms. A breeze kissed her skin. If Gria was trapped inside an illusion, she had come into it naked.

Her hands cupped her breasts and squeezed. Pleasure warmed her loins. Her arms fell back to her sides as she choked down a sob.

"Tell me why I must come *here* to feel alive, while I barely exist in the real world. If you *are* the gods, you owe me that much."

If the gods existed, perhaps her blasphemy would get their attention.

"Curious." The voice in Gria's ear was a Yata's high tenor, but the language was Masari. "I see you aroused and feel nothing from it. Whoever the gods are, they have blessed me."

A man squatted beside her, as bare as she. A faint slur marred his speech. Gria looked into large brown eyes, close-cropped black hair, full lips bent in a shy smile. He was not a soldier, no one she'd seen before. His bronze skin had turned ruddy from the sun.

Gria glared up at him. "I am *not dead*. I should *not be here*. Put me back."

He shook his head. "I don't know how."

"Who are you?"

"One in the herd," he said, mildly. "Two years butchered."

Gria sat abruptly as cold shivered her spine. She stared into the face of the Destiny Farm dead. "If that is true, then how can you speak to me?"

He opened his mouth and touched a fingertip to his mended tongue.

No houses surrounded them, no fences. No pens. Only lushness, the oasis untouched.

Memories rose unbidden: her hands steeped in dark brown mash, kneading. The bowl's foul smell. Her student Watu standing across the table from her, grinding carapaces with a mortar and pestle. The

room fermenting. In the next hut Destiny reduced to powder, gaining strength, ready to fill large burlap sacks. Watu delivered the sacks to Masari and returned with rifles.

Crossroads' Masari had worshiped Yata. The existence of a farm that bred them for meat had been unthinkable. Gria hadn't cared where the aphrodisiac went.

She whispered, "You can't be real."

The naked, nameless man pursed his lips. "*I feel* real." He pointed toward a rise, ripples in the limestone to either side of a thick grove. His branding blazed from the back of his neck as he turned. "We live over there."

"I can't stay." Pebbles dropped from Gria's back as she sprang to her feet. She brushed herself down, waving the man back as he approached to assist. Words caught in her throat. "I am sitting in Basc-on a platform in the marketplace, tied to my chair. I am imprisoned in a trance. You and this place are nothing but a part of that trance."

Dead hawks screamed swooping after dead squirrels who bolted to safety, their tracks beside the footprints of dead lizards. Dead leaves shushed on dead branches. Dead clouds scudded. Dead wind whistled. Gria's blood roared inside her skull. "I must get back to my people."

He said, softly, "*We* are your people, Gria."

Goosebumps prickled her skin as a fresh chill iced her veins.

She whispered, "You're not."

Then why did she look away from him? Why did her voice quaver?

His hand rested on her arm. A warm, gentle touch from unbroken skin, no sign he had been hacked to pieces. His torso glistened in the heat.

"You are my guilt." She whirled from him, pacing. Hot stone burned the soles of her feet as the rest of her body shivered. "My guilt exists, but you do not. I don't believe in you."

He appraised her silently as her breathing turned ragged.

Gria jerked her head toward the trees, the clouds. She reached toward the back of her head, nestling her fingertips into the crinkly patch of white hair that now marked her. "My own mind constructed this."

How many of her victims awaited her behind the trees? Amassing her arsenal had taken years. How many sacks of her Destiny had filled the feeding troughs during that time? How many minds had she helped destroy?

"You're crying."

"Do you know what I did to you?" He couldn't know. He wasn't real. He was an invention, an imaginary man. Incorporeal. They all were.

"I know." Two words. Two tiny words. They ripped her apart. "We are all right, now."

"You are *dead* now! I helped *kill* you!" When had she collapsed against him? Gria's sweat ran; her skin stuck to his. "The Skedge Yata didn't know what they were making, but I did," she moaned. Her hands clutched at his back. "I wanted the Covenant gone. I wanted

my people free. I was content to get the guns no matter how Promontory used the drug."

He caressed her back, tender and neuter. She should do as Masari hunters once did and kneel before him. Prostrate herself. Beg forgiveness.

"Come with me."

Gria whispered, "I can't."

When his grip tightened she shut out the birds, the breeze, the trickling water. She ignored the heat of the stones, the warmth of his arms.

Somewhere out there a crowd called to her. She was cinched by ropes she couldn't feel, in a shell of a body that only kept her guilty soul alive. The Destiny she'd gleefully traded away had filled and split her. *That* was her reality now.

Easier to face that world than this one.

Gria shook against his chest. "Let me go."

She welcomed the descending gauze, sighing with relief when his body became mist. She would again be dead among the living, drained beneath a pale awning that fluttered between her and the sky.

The man vanished in smoke. The portal between life and afterlife hemmed her in, resisting her will like a thick lead door. She pushed, pushed harder. "Help me."

"Honorable One!" Excited voices reached her ears. Gria blinked and

focused. Blurs turned into bedlam.

"Move back!" HigherBrook boomed. "Give her air!" How long had she been away?

Too many faces surrounded Gria for her to make sense of them all. Ghost knelt by her side, holding her hand and jotting furious notes, muttering that her fingers had lost circulation. Piri smiled teary-eyed above her squalling baby.

Zai's face filled Gria's field of vision. Their lips might have touched. Gria couldn't tell.

Ghost asked, "Are your eyes burning?"

Zai's face withdrew. Gria slowly shook her head.

He scribbled. "You haven't blinked."

Zai said, reverently, "You *glowed*, Honorable One."

The title rattled her. Gria whispered, "I am not honorable."

"You are."

"I'm going to wet you down, Gria." Ghost's large Masari hands dipped a thick towel into a bucket. He wrung it out. "It's the time of day and the light quality under this awning. Stare at anything long enough and it glows." He draped the towel over Gria's face before she could smile at him.

The cloth blinded her, settling her into a comforting darkness. Voices flocked about her head, chirping of miracles. Love showered Gria until she swore she swallowed blood. Parchment pieces whispered, letters to loved ones on the other side. Did they actually believe she



could deliver them?

How eagerly they begged her to go back. How desperately they wanted their messages ferried, believing their own prayers useless. *Don't you understand?* She would yell if she weren't so weak. *I am fighting to stay here. I don't want to go back.*

She listened to silken folds sliding, could only guess she was being unbound and lifted from her chair, tied again to her escorts. Slipped feet shushed on wooden steps.

For once her numbness felt sweet, her helplessness a fitting perversion. Gria drowned placidly in towel-moistened air. She teetered between life and death, unable to decide which horrified her more.

Those thronging the marketplace cried out with foolish joy to The Honorable One, while beyond the portal the Destiny Farm dead, Gria's people, waited to receive her.

## **Chapter 18**

### **Promontory**

Scattered papers sprawled on SandTail's spacious desk. Jirado leaned over the piles, her girl-sized face pinched from hours of reading. So much history. So many letters. The man saved everything.

Good. His obsession with his Masari past might guarantee a Yata future.

She rubbed her eyes. How easily lies had rolled off the tongue he

used to have. Now they lifted off hers as well. They flitted from her mouth, seeking Promontory's polluted air.

*It doesn't matter, SandTail. We've both lost our families.* She narrowed her eyes at the man draped senseless on his couch of skins. *I'm here to get mine back.* If her kin have died, she could rescue the others before they starved in the far pockets of the canyon or were shot to death.

SandTail's snores were choked with pain. Jirado closed her eyes and listened to them, meditating into calm.

She had to establish trust among the Masari first. Find a way inside their hearts. *You charmed us into servitude, SandTail. Teach me how to turn that around.*

His papers would tell her. All the Masari's fears resided here, all their desires. She held gold in her hands.

She had to hold iron in her soul.

*I should have destroyed the machines instead of fixed them!* At least no Yata would churn out poison any more. No one would make "bed snuff," believing the drug helped their pitied larger cousins conceive, all the while ignorant of the Yata breeding helplessly inside the canyon. Loins perpetually swollen, brains all but snuffed out, waiting only for the slaughterhouse to finish the job. Jirado's generation had been the last of the hoodwinked Little Masari. CutterDrum, her Masari-named past life, had died with the factory.

She stayed her hand from murdering SandTail in his sleep. She glanced at him, knowing he expected her to try. He wanted her to become like her ancestors, wanted a reason to hate her. It would be so easy.

*You are my teacher, Brother Wanderer. Not my target.*

Jirado stretched. She craned her neck toward the door, beyond the couch and its crippled occupant. Muffled voices called to each other outside. The bustle of shift change announced that Promontory was still a factory town, though one that limped badly. Those workers still alive did not begrudge the extra hours they spent away from home, doing the jobs of dead comrades.

An admirable people. She almost wanted to join them, her hands used to tools. Jirado sighed and returned to her reading.

She had not retreated from tools-had only become one again.

Promontory was a machine. A broken and vulnerable one ever since its beginnings. Held together first by Destiny and now by its hunters. Break the hunters and the machinery will fail absolutely.

How many Skedge Yata have survived, how many were hiding in the canyon? Given enough time, she could learn how many Masari predators have trained to pump bullets into her kin. Everything and everyone had a weakness.

Breaking SandTail would not stop the machine. She had to grease him with friendship instead, slide past him into deeper recesses. Find the buried switches to flip, grind everything to a halt.

Jirado's tiny, callused hands gathered a sheaf of correspondence. Neatly-penned parchment, letters from a Masari woman anxious about her son's health. How easily the Farm matron had killed Yata, yet how deep her concern for a boy who loved them. Jirado smiled sadly as she read.

The woman was dead now, of no concern. The boy was now a man and married to a Masari. *Some day I'll understand how you could mate with a hunter, BrushBurn. For now I can only be thankful that you did.*

They would have to be tools together.

She set the letters down at the sound of SandTail's yelp. No need to hide the papers; he knew she went through his library. Encouraged it, in fact. Now that the Yata knew who they were, they should know everything. *How evil we were. How much we deserved to die.*

She watched him struggle on the coppery couch. The skins of her people squeaked in protest. The same leathers stretched across her chair, across the book bindings her hands caressed.

She glided over to SandTail and helped him sit. "Good morning, Brother Wanderer."

His palm sweated onto her arm as he drummed, *Have you found a way to destroy us yet?*

She rewarded him with a gracious smile. The gleam in his eyes showed he was joking. But nervously, trying hard to dismiss well-deserved fear. "No, SandTail," she chirped. "I'm leaving that to the big people."

He laughed explosively, then gasped in pain. His fingers jabbed at her. *Demon.*

"That was the highlight of your visits, you know." Jirado turned from the couch, pulling glass canisters from low shelves against the wall. "Making fun of the big people, yours and mine. We knew where the real power lay, didn't we?"

She opened a jar and frowned at its contents. The real power lay in the bandages she held of preserved Yata skin, but she didn't need to tell him that. He knew.

She looked back at his tight-shut eyes, his gritted teeth. "I hear you screaming in your sleep, SandTail. Go ahead and yell. You have nothing to hide from me."

He opened his eyes and narrowed them at her.

"I understand. Truly." She held up a syringe. "Pain shot?"

He shook his head.

"Just the dressings, then."

He wouldn't take relief from AgatePool, either, or from BrushBurn. *Afraid to be seen as weak. And yet you let me undress you and count the scars on your body.* "Stubborn man."

He flashed her an agonized grin. She smiled back.

~ ~ ~

DustClaw stepped into the Lodge and looked toward its balcony as his balls tightened. All the pillows in the world could not muffle the sweet rage above his head. A more distant room yielded a paltry echo; one other Masari was breaking a fast. But the fainter moans of meat-induced sex could not compete with the Yata worshipers. The air around DustClaw shimmered as TripStone hurled curses at the gods from behind closed doors, screaming with her mouth full of Yata. Begging BrushBurn to fuck her dependence out of her.

And, oh, he tried.

"You make a better tart than you do a drunk," the messenger had chided earlier that day. "I never thought those stuffy Covenant teachings would yield such a good show."

TripStone had patted his shoulder and cocked her eyebrow. "You eat Yata without a second thought, DustClaw. For every mouthful I take I see someone I've shot." She had drained her tea in a quieter Lodge, shrugging off tics of discomfort. She had looked past him toward the numbers chalked on the walls. "That bullet embarrasses me far more than anything I do here."

She had added, voice clipped. "Almost everyone in Promontory knew me when I was a drunk. I'm quite happy to have turned the tart instead."

Now almost everyone in Promontory knew when TripStone broke. Citizens off shift spilled down the gravel roads and congregated in the Lodge. Tea flowed like spirits as customers wagered how much she'll eat, how quickly she'll wean, how many sheaths will slip inside her. How long BrushBurn will hobble afterward.

Compared to the tortured skeleton stumbling past the tavern's piss buckets, brandy cradled to her chest and carrying her secrets like cancers, the foul-mouthed creature overhead was an honored warrior. The Lodge's patrons looked up and grinned, impressed by TripStone's release as much as by her fasting, two sides of the same coin of fortitude. The less frequent the show, the better it played, the larger the crowd. Shouts of encouragement spurted from below.

The courier found his table and shrugged off a tattered leather pack. He should distribute the mail first, then check the statistics on the wall to learn how soon he should prepare for the next hunt. How soon until TripStone must embarrass herself with bullets again, delivering death

so that she could sound so lively.

Shadows fell across the table; several had managed to turn their attention away from the noise. DustClaw spotted forest-green eyes, a crimson shock of hair and fur. He raised his voice above the din. "Any good news from the angels, WoodFoam?"

The younger man shook his head. "Skedge hasn't registered a death in weeks."

No corpses from the mesa meant an earlier hunt. "We're in trouble."

"I've heard."

DevilChaser's thin voice piped up from behind. "The Warehouse isn't empty yet, WoodFoam," the doctor said, pointedly. "Far from it."

"No, but it will be by late winter. DustClaw's right. We're running out of food." He reached for the courier's proffered package. "From Rudder?"

DustClaw nodded. "From your friends at the Milkweed. Don't go away yet. There's one for you from Crossroads, too." He rummaged through folded, sealed parchments, careful not to confuse the letters from Ghost. To WoodFoam the scientist sent personal notes, augmented with TelZodo's dirty handprints, one father of a mix-child to another. Except that WoodFoam's daughter and Yata wife were dead.

Like BrushBurn's. For all that they had in common, the trader and the angel avoided each other outside of business. DustClaw suppressed a sigh as he pulled out a thicker missive, his long fingers tanned and leathery as his pack.

He slid it toward DevilChaser. "This is for DamBuster if you want to take it home to him."

"He's here." DevilChaser pointed toward the counter, where his big-boned partner leaned forward with others under the balcony, serenading. The doctor glanced worriedly at the parchment before turning his gaze back toward the din.

DustClaw lowered his voice. "It can wait until after the performance."

The crowd grew around his table, hands reaching out for letters. Most of the aid workers from Crossroads had left friendships behind after they'd helped dig Promontory out of the mud. Yata-worshippers and Yata-haters had gotten to know each other for the first time.

DustClaw glanced toward the balcony. Two sides of the same coin there, too.

The hubbub began to ease. TripStone had chewed and swallowed her last mouthful, unable to take another bite of Yata. DustClaw didn't know who took the platter to the scale to weigh the remaining meat. But BrushBurn would wield the chalk after they washed the brine from their hands and the stickiness from their thighs. He would change the statistics on the wall and copy the figures into his book. TripStone's eyes would be red-rimmed, though she would deny she'd cried. And the crowd, eager to see who had won their wagers, would see neither her pain nor his.

DustClaw's breeches began to strain. *I can make the pain go away.* He quirked a smile and snorted. New moans rose in earnest from the far room, where Yata continued to be consumed. Barely weaning, that one.

DevilChaser joined his partner by the balcony, waiting for the near



door to open. The letter from Ghost to DamBuster remained behind, instructions telling the apothecary what to test for. The reaction of a blotter in a beaker.

DustClaw had read Ghost's scrawl by lamp light in the privacy of his wagon. Parchments littered with formulae and scatterplots. Graphs like targets, bullet-riddled by a soused shooter aiming wild.

The bull's eye, where most of the black dots congregated, was not the target. The dot labeled as Ghost's had been part of that mass. The dot representing TelZodo hovered just outside the others; but so did the readings for HigherBrook and Ghost's sister SnowMoth, neither of whom weaned quickly.

Ghost's penmanship had been rushed and nervous, words straining forward as though trying to break into a run. He'd enclosed a blotter contaminated with the day's dust, useful only as a visual aid. On it, chemical traces left by Piri's graceful, tapered fingers translated into a rogue dot on the scatterplot. The target reading, the indication that one was food. All the other dots added up to starvation.

WoodFoam sprawled at the next table, reading the letter from his friend in Crossroads. Did the angel know TelZodo's dirty handprint was more than just a game?

*HigherBrook is arguing for full disclosure, but I have told him we need more data. Here Ghost's nib had hesitated, his script uncharacteristically thick. He has obtained permission for me to test the citizens of Rudder and Alvav, but he is losing patience.*

DustClaw turned his head as whoops erupted by the balcony. BrushBurn and TripStone trod down the stairs in rumpled clothes, their arms around each other's waists. BrushBurn grasped a stick of chalk. TripStone moved slowly, leaning against the banister.

Someone sprinted past them to count the sheaths left behind. BrushBurn's assistant laughed behind a selection of teas, taking bets.

DevilChaser and DamBuster stood close to the couple like bodyguards, escorting their friends toward the wall of statistics.

"Won't you go congratulate them?"

In this place of gluttony, the breathy voice by DustClaw's shoulder sounded like someone newly-risen from the meat pot. Even Masari children spoke with a deeper timbre. Startled, the courier turned from the clot of backslapping patrons.

Beside his table, the Yata woman observed the boisterous throng with calm detachment.

He asked, "Would you?"

"I'm here to convey SandTail's regards. He wanted to see this." Even standing beside DustClaw's chair, Jirado was head to head with him. She nodded toward TripStone. "Any decreased hunger for us deserves praise, yes?"

Jirado leaned her elbows against the tabletop as she would a high counter. The messenger studied her compact, angular body, the muscles showing beneath simple clothes. Enough letters had spread the news about a Yata living in Promontory. DustClaw knew who she was, but her presence in the midst of so much meat was unsettling.

"I distribute the mail from here," he said, matter-of-factly. "I will congratulate them when they come to my table."

The buzz of conversation swelled as BrushBurn's hand rose to

inscribe numbers on the wall. Were it not for Jirado standing by his side, DustClaw would close his eyes in order to hear better.

She broke his concentration. "What level *yatanii* are you?"

"Two. Like BrushBurn." Without thinking, he drew his satchel closer to his body.

"Do I tempt you, standing here?"

Her small hands rested easily on the wood, relaxed. DustClaw looked from them to her high cheekbones and found only curiosity. He would hunt her down, once the escaped livestock were gone.

"I broke not long ago," he said, drily. "I won't need Yata for a while."

She nodded, moving closer to him and leaning her head toward the voices at the wall.

*Level four.* Frustration and joy rose from the crowd. The Lodge patrons could be discussing a mineshaft that TripStone dug one laborious inch at a time. A steady but slow and exhausting descent, Masari against nature.

She enjoyed a bittersweet victory, then. Her weaning continued, but at a maddeningly slow pace after an early, easier slide. DustClaw frowned.

Those leaving the Lodge stared openly at the Yata on their way out. Jirado gazed steadily back at them, eyebrows raised.

BrushBurn eased up to the mail, his arm coiled more firmly around TripStone. The hunter sat down hard, her creamy complexion turned as ruddy as her chops. She took slow, deep breaths, her gray eyes

darkening as the trader lowered himself beside her.

"You shouldn't be here, Jirado." BrushBurn's voice flattened out, his face expressionless. He didn't look at her. Perhaps he was only spent. "I've got eight people who are only a few days from breaking. Fortunately, they're on shift now."

The Yata actually looked surprised. What did she expect?

Her nervous laugh made BrushBurn grimace, but both recovered quickly. "I'm here on behalf of SandTail. He wanted to offer his-"

"Did he send you here?"

"No, but-"

"Then leave."

TripStone looked across the table at Jirado, squinting. "Thank SandTail for us." Her husky voice scratched. "Tell him BrushBurn will deliver the numbers in the morning."

The trader still looked away as DustClaw emptied his satchel. A crowd gathered around them, reaching for mail.

Jirado glided smoothly toward the Lodge's thick oak doors. Masari parted before her as though she were contagion, her head barely as high as their waists.

## **Chapter 19**

### **Early Autumn**

### **Promontory**

A north wind spilled over the mountainside, clearing haze from the night sky and blowing through the open window. TripStone wrinkled her nose as she filled her lungs with chilled air. What she breathed had flowed through Rudder, but before that it had come from Crossroads.

She might be only imagining the smells of home, the fragrance of the people she'd left behind. Stronger still was the dry perfume of the girl beside her, and the tender musk of the man on the pallet.

She listened to the high-pitched whisper of FlitNettle's knife as thick, crimson hair floated to the floor of BrushBurn's kitchen. In the center of the table a chestnut pile shorn from the girl curled in on itself like a small, sleeping animal stirring in the breeze.

TripStone released her breath. "We should have done this a long time ago."

"This way he'll have something of us when we leave."

"I should have done this back in Crossroads." TripStone's sheared tresses could be blood pooling on the wood slats underfoot. A lump swelled in her throat as thick clumps dropped.

Cutting each other's hair had been the child's suggestion. FlitNettle pulled gently. The ripping by TripStone's ear sounded like a blade slicing through flesh.

Silly. It was only hair. But it was also the Covenant, when the hunt meant wrapping a ritual kerchief about one's head. No one worried about getting snagged on a tree limb or about a hand reaching out from nowhere, grabbing the locks. To hunt unshorn after the Covenant fell had been reckless at best. "He'll have to get used to us this way."

"It grows back." A child's confidence.

*It grows back.* TripStone tried to smile. *But what it represents is gone.* With a start she realized they had all lost their families to Yata aggression. How was that possible?

FlitNettle turned her head as a faint moan from the next room broke her rhythm. "It's starting again." Long fingers cupped the hunter's cheeks. "I'm still cutting. Hold still."

"I'm sorry. I usually sleep through his nightmares."

"You sleep very deeply here."

"I don't know why."

"You never sleep on the hunt."

TripStone opened her mouth to protest, but stopped as covers shifted on the pallet she shared with BrushBurn. "I should go to him."

"There's time."

Hair tickled TripStone's arm on the way down. Between swaths of neck fur her exposed skin shrank from the desert night. She tried not to worry about how many days they would spend in the canyon this time, returning only after killing enough Yata to hold Promontory until the next hunt.

And then what?

*Winter.*

TripStone listened to the knife. The last time she had uttered

Covenant prayers seemed so long ago. "I am becoming ice," she whispered.

"I'll stoke the hearth."

"It's not that."

The bedclothes shifted again and another moan carried. FlitNettle's blade quickened. TripStone closed her eyes as the Covenant fell away from her. "What about your nightmares?"

"They don't bother me as much." The child's voice tightened as steel sang past TripStone's ear. "There." FlitNettle brushed wayward strands away. "You can go to him now. I'll gather your hair."

In the next room BrushBurn began to thrash. TripStone did not remember standing up or lighting a second lantern in the predawn dark. Whose throats did he see being slit before him? Those of his parents? The farm hands? FlitNettle's? Hers?

*Don't wake him before the dream runs its course or his trauma will last for hours.* She remembered the feel of SandTail's fingertips on her arm before their meaning. *Let him endure it on his own.*

The small Masari didn't offer TripStone goldberry brandy or a history lesson any more, only advice when she and BrushBurn visited his study. SandTail had leaned half-collapsed against AgatePool on his copper-skin couch, while Jirado sat at his desk and pored over the same volumes that once had driven TripStone further into drink. BrushBurn had busied himself making tea, treating SandTail's nurse courteously. Distantly.

*He's afraid of Jirado.* SandTail had nodded at the Yata. *More even than I am.*

TripStone looked into hard, hazel eyes. *You worry about him.*

*Yes, I do. And you should.*

She'd been unable to meet his gaze and instead studied the patches of flesh blending into and healing his own.

He was an invalid now. What more could he do to her?

TripStone rubbed her arms. FlitNettle brewed more tea, feeding the fire while BrushBurn twisted on the pallet below. The hunter dropped to her knees and waited.

She might not remember her dreams, but SandTail's house had become one. The man who hated and feared Yata housed a mixed-blood lover and a full-blood Yata nurse. He cared about a protégé still tortured by love for the people whose bodies he had once peddled across the region.

BrushBurn's arm flailed. Cold sweat dripped into his eyes. TripStone caught his hand in her own as he awakened with a loud grunt.

"I'm here," she whispered, plucking a kerchief from her vest pocket. She dabbed his forehead. "We're still alive." The smell of fennel wafted in from the kitchen.

BrushBurn pulled her down to the bed, drawing her scent deep into his lungs. TripStone listened to scraping sounds coming from the next room as FlitNettle busied herself. Their rifles rested in a far corner, a pair of ebony StormClouds sandwiched between stained packs.

"I'll be all right." BrushBurn's gravelly voice rose from sleep. His fingers probed the air by her head before settling finally on her scalp.



"We're leaving our hair behind." It sounded suddenly funny. She snuggled more closely against him as he massaged her scalp.

"How long before you go?"

"Long enough to share a meal first." Long enough for worries to remain unsaid. For them all to retreat into preparations before BrushBurn walked with them to the canyon rim.

TripStone watched her husband's retreating back after he crawled out of bed. She waited for his anxieties to drain into the chamber pot. On the kitchen table lay plates of snake meat and rabbit, a steaming teapot, and two clubs of bound tresses. "Thank you, FlitNettle."

The girl looked toward the privacy curtain. "He'll be all right." Too calm.

*Promontory stoicism.* SandTail's voice echoed in TripStone's head as though the man were still able to speak. *We all have it.*

With a shudder TripStone wondered if the sound of pissing was the closest she would ever again get to tears.

~ ~ ~

*Twenty-six.*

BrushBurn advanced down a leather-clad line at the canyon rim, checking off names on his notepad. Fifteen men, eleven women. Those already accounted for broke away and repaired to their packs. They double-checked rations, cleaned rifles, sharpened knives. They embraced the kin who filled the clearing and who would go back home alone. Dozens of lanterns dotted the scrub, sending up a

collective glow while the rest of Promontory slept.

They'd once been thirty-three. Four were still hospitalized. Two had not weaned enough from Yata to endure the lengthening hunts. One had been an empty shell borne back to Promontory and burned by his kin.

BrushBurn slipped the pad into his pocket. No matter what he did, he was pursued by numbers.

He helped a shopkeeper on with her pack. "I thank you for this hunt, TallowWinch."

She quirked a smile. Graying hair kinked out from beneath her broad-brimmed hat. "You *pay* me for this hunt." She gestured toward the trail. "When I wake up in the morning I'll be in my own bed. You'll be knocking on my door, ready to trundle in a cart full of choice cuts. That *is* how we used to live, isn't it?"

"As I recall." BrushBurn reached for his pad again. "Will you have enough help at the store while you're gone?"

"We'll operate out of the quarry. That's where most of my customers are spending their time now." The square-jawed woman finished tying her bulk into place and hoisted her StormCloud over her shoulder. "The workers on break are happy to barter assistance for dry goods." She wagged a finger at him. "We haven't had one theft."

BrushBurn traced a bright patch of stars down to the canyon's inky void, to where the Sheep prepared to set. Had the Masari lived this way when the Yata were in control? Improvising, tightly-knit. Making do. The further Promontory's economy collapsed, the faster it shored itself up.

He shook his head. "I've spent too long on the road."

"You're a trader. That's what traders do." TallowWinch pointed toward seven figures kneeling at the rock wall's edge. "They're about to begin."

BrushBurn squeezed her shoulder and turned away.

Most of the hunters he passed were occupied with preparations or shared last moments with family. Several paced, huffing, glancing impatiently toward the trail. A few joked uneasily amongst themselves.

TripStone's soft voice reached him over the banter. "Bless our mission, children of Promontory, for we are killers and must do what you demand of us..."

"You must admit, she prays to the right gods now." DustClaw's hungry scent cleaved the air. The lanky courier glided to BrushBurn's side. "You should join us some time."

BrushBurn suppressed a wry smile. "I should think your stay in the canyon provides enough of a challenge."

"You're a lucky man. She misses you."

His relaxed stance didn't fool BrushBurn for a minute. Another man's display might have fluffed the trader's neck fur. Curiously, this one's did not.

"Look around you, DustClaw. We all miss each other. There's hardly anyone here without some scrap of cloth from someone departing or being left behind."

*You, for example.* No mementos adorned the other man's vest, lifting in the night breeze. The smell around the courier was wholly his own and abundantly clear.

"Have mercy on your descendants." Pleading edged TripStone's meditations. "Let us honor you with our aim." Her voice dropped to a whisper, too light and distant for BrushBurn to hear. He knew what she said. *Let us honor our prey and send them to you peaceably.*

She dared not ask the ancient victims for forgiveness aloud. It would insult too many citizens whose ancestors had died, most of them horribly, at the hands of Yata.

DustClaw murmured, "Wasted piety on such an accomplished shot."

"I used to think so."

DustClaw grinned. "You never thought so."

BrushBurn looked upon hard angles, an engaging glint. His rival tightened a shoulder strap, feigning nonchalance. Exuding solitude as much as desire.

What kind of man lived in his wagon, subsisting on other people's mail until called into the canyon? Did knowing his comrades' secrets make him a better hunter?

DustClaw was too proud a Masari to have learned Yata. BrushBurn was thankful his letters remained intact. *I'm glad you're with TripStone. She maintains her alertness with you around.* An odd but comforting thought.

The trader cleared his throat. "Promontory is indebted to you." It sounded like an empty accolade. A dismissive epitaph. "So am I."

A sharp tang rode the breeze. "We'll get you your livestock back."

The answer smelled of subtle insolence, unapologetic yet nonthreatening. BrushBurn's eyebrow lifted above a tiny smile as he nodded. "Good hunting, DustClaw."

FlitNettle took up the meditation. Her untroubled voice reached BrushBurn as he ambled toward her. The child made simple requests, detailing visions of happy, breeding Yata with plenty to eat on the run. Enough to provide Promontory with the unlucky ones killed in skirmishes that ended quickly.

She sounded deceptively innocent, the worries in her diary unsaid.

Pebbles pressed against BrushBurn's knees as he lowered himself at the edge. TripStone's hand sought out and found his own. He grasped hers and squeezed.

*Stay alive.* His fingerpads caressed her palm, drumming. *Do what you have to, but come back.*

She lifted her hand from his and slipped it beneath his shirt. *I love you.*

She couldn't promise him anything and petted his abdominal fur instead. Her touch meandered from pelt to bare skin and back.

He couldn't reciprocate; she was too heavily outfitted. He settled for stroking her neck fur, her chops, and the short hair that brought her gray eyes into startlingly sharp relief.

Beside her FlitNettle fell silent. The third petitioner began to sing a camp song from the time of the frontier wars. Voices farther back from the edge joined in chorus. DustClaw stood straight-backed to

the side, at full attention, his sharp baritone ringing across the crowd.

BrushBurn pushed back from the abyss and returned to sturdier ground. When his family joined him he wrapped his arms around his wife and then his ward. His fingers brushed against stained canvas and cold steel. He inhaled their musk, the worn tones of leather pressing against his chest.

He whispered, "May the gods protect you both."

"And you, too." FlitNettle touched her chops to his. "Try not to miss us too much."

"I can't help myself."

"And be careful."

The girl was risking her life to feed him and she told him to be careful. BrushBurn hugged her closer. "I'll be careful, cousin. Don't worry about me."

FlitNettle keened her ear toward a boisterous refrain crowed from across the clearing. "The camp songs are not kind."

"No." He sighed. "But they instill courage."

He looked over FlitNettle's head and into TripStone's pensive gaze. The woman from Crossroads held a rolled-up map inked with new trails, narrow creeks, vegetative oases. Heavily annotated cave networks and booby traps.

A copy sat in the Chamber offices in case the one in her hand didn't make it back to the rim.

She'd almost slipped from BrushBurn's grasp once. Then, suddenly,

he had a family of his own. A Covenant fanatic and a young misfit had both plumbed his soul and filled his heart to bursting. Every time the canyon swallowed them up, his back and sides, his shoulders ached for days.

The hunters clustered at the trailhead, separating from kin. Come morning, Promontory would drown its dread in feverish productivity. No one would complain. Instead, the sick and weary would reflect on the party beginning its descent. What were a few bodily complaints compared to the perilous battle underway for meat?

The chorus intensified. BrushBurn clutched his family a last time and forced himself to let go. He stood with other citizens, deceptively dry-eyed, watching until the last lantern dimmed and disappeared, eclipsed by rock.





# Chapter 20

## The Canyon



MudAdder didn't hear the retching at first, it had become so frequent. One stench of many. More than the sound or the smell, he hated that it made him think.

He squinted through the fire, wondering if the man leaning half-asleep on the cave wall missed being livestock. The man's chest was sunken and his ribs showed, but so did MudAdder's.

That one had been a citizen of Skedge before the Farm captured him. His differentness became apparent once the Destiny was out of them all, after they had rushed the gates and battled their way to freedom. The Skedge Yata organized the others and assigned them duties, making them into a factory for survival. Without them the herd would have died off that much sooner.

Did MudAdder's companion miss his life of freedom on the mesa? Even here in the open it was hard to imagine being outside the breeding pens.

MudAdder curled tighter, nauseous. How extraordinary it must have been for those Yata who had been living gods in Crossroads. Killed for meat like everyone else, but every mouthful revered.

*I would ask to be able to buy your remains. DamBuster's love*

blanketed him, words echoing off the laboratory walls. *I would be honored to be nourished by you. Just once, I'd like to be able to do that. I want to see what it's like, instead of just eating you without a second thought.*

For a moment the restraining chair had been immaterial as the apothecary wiped tears from MudAdder's cheeks. Now nothing strapped MudAdder down. Nothing cinched him in place, but his arms felt paralyzed. The leather of sadness bound him as he cried into the dust.

The man from Skedge watched him, concerned. MudAdder pantomimed that he was all right, then struggled to his feet and rounded the pit. He held out his hand, palm up, waiting for the other to do the same.

Only a few people taken from the mesa knew touch-speech. Those who didn't were too busy fighting to survive. Except for MudAdder, those born on the Farm couldn't read and no one could sound out the words. Pieces of shale dotted the cave floor. They were teaching tools bearing letters of the Masari alphabet, crudely scratched with sharp stones.

MudAdder's companion, badly bruised and missing part of his ear, was still healthy. How soon before animalcules from the others rode in on the air and devoured them all from the inside, leaving them defenseless so that larger beasts could finish the job?

Numbness coated MudAdder's fingertips as he drummed, *I will go out to meet the hunters when they come.*

The man stared back. He shook his head emphatically. *They'll kill you.*

*It doesn't matter any more, SilverLode. We are dying.*

He couldn't look around the cave any more. All he saw were jutting bones and open sores. He had barely enough meat to feed DamBuster or anyone else. His skin pulled along his ribs when he breathed. His joints hurt.

The former factory worker scowled, adamant. *Skedge will come for us.*

Which of them was more delusional? MudAdder didn't know-only that their delusions probably kept them alive, too.

*I will not disclose our location,* he tapped quickly. *If they kill me, they will need one less from the rest of you.*

*Until they come again.*

MudAdder nodded.

Several unmarked chips lay scattered with the rest. MudAdder searched for one large enough to bear a message. His hands shook as he pressed down. Stone slipped from his fingers. He lifted the shale again and blew on the writing to disperse powder. Began anew.

There was his identity. One digit, another. The back of his neck burned, but that couldn't be; he was not pricking his skin. He closed his eyes, trying to remember the letters of DamBuster's name. The one he was promised to, whom he would be honored to feed.

What must it be like to turn and walk away from a reverent Masari hunter, toward a shimmering portal to the afterlife? To feel relaxed and happy, forever unaware that one had been shot cleanly through

the heart?

## Chapter 21

### Alvav: The Cliff

Ghost tried to ignore the women's spirited voices behind him, one Yata, the other Masari. He counted off seconds as he held the palm of a mixed-blood man against treated parchment. Once he obtained his reading from Yucof, he would have to talk through his numbness.

"Done." He coughed and peeled the sheet away. He tapped white powder into a bottle while the smaller, bronze-skinned man bent to a basin to scrub off residue.

Yucof's carrotty braid, the only hint of his Masari bloodline, draped over his shoulder. Not long ago he would have been executed if he'd set foot on the Cliff. Instead, he and his Masari wife served as Ghost's guides through a valley altered along with the rest of the region.

Ghost rolled the parchment, slipped it into its bottle, and sealed the glass. It would join the other samples in his cart, gathered throughout the central valley.

He turned as laughter erupted from a creature he never wanted to see again.

"I wouldn't have believed I could read *you*, BubbleCreek." Shabra's narrow, coppery face crinkled with delight. "I can smell your dismay without even trying. Your cards must be terrible."

"That's why I left the Games." The Masari warrior shifted on a too-

small chair, rubbing ruddy chops. She grunted beneath her pregnancy, her grin forced. "This child won't let me hide anything."

Yucof looked in her direction. "Do you need a rest, Bubbles?"

"No, sweetie. I'm fine."

Ghost avoided her gaze; she was anything but fine. She looked as awful now as when he'd met her at the Milkweed.

"I've been ravenous for Yata." The broad-shouldered woman had pulled him close, whispering into his ear. Her brow was pinched, her amber eyes bloodshot. "It's got to be the baby. I haven't said anything to Yucof."

"You used to be at level six," Ghost whispered back. "What are you now?"

BubbleCreek choked down a sob. "I can't even reach the Threshold again. I feel hungry every time I look at him."

She'd been listless as they journeyed to rendezvous with Yucof on the bridge into Alvav. Ghost wondered how much Yata she had eaten to prepare for this trip, to maintain the illusion of weaning.

He turned back to Yucof as Shabra lifted a marbled cup, rattling lozenge-shaped alabaster "bones" that skittered across the tabletop.

That rattling had followed Ghost everywhere in the central valley. He shook his head. "I can't believe what's happened here."

"You and Piri are to blame for that, you know." Shabra's clipped voice sailed above the cards. She sighed with exasperation. "We used to have such a tidy little world."

This time Yucof laughed. "Come now, Shabra. If it weren't for the Change, you wouldn't have gotten so proficient at playing Death."

Ghost bristled. "That's because she's played it for real. You know that." He left his tiny chair and towered over the Cliff's deputy. "How many of your own people have you executed, Shabra? You'd killed two just to feed me, as I recall. You were going to kill Piri when you learned she was pregnant with mixed blood."

Shabra's voice turned mild. "I've ordered no executions since the Change. Not that I haven't wanted to." Her eyes twinkled. "Yucof tells me you have a cult of the afterlife now. What's that like?"

"Ask someone else. You're not interrogating me any more."

"Pity. Especially since your dictation-*stolen from me, I might add*-has made you such a celebrity back in Crossroads."

At first glance her office appeared no different than before. Crime statistics still hung on the whitewashed wall behind Shabra's desk. Ozal's "Ballad of the Trees"-a long, rambling poem of uneven meter-still wove its golden calligraphy threads inside a framed pastoral scene beside plain parchment listing the latest petty thefts.

Ghost's eyes widened. "Your murder rate has plummeted."

"Obviously." Shabra laid down a trio of cards and flashed a challenging smile across the table. "You can't have a slave rebellion without slaves, can you? Do you see anyone here proffering food and drink?" She nodded at the basin. "I set that up, myself. When you go around examining my people, you'll have to make your own preparations."

"Gladly."

His host exhibited no bitterness, despite her rumpled uniform with its tarnished pendant seal and the uneven black braid snaking past her shoulders. Instead, she was engrossed in play.

Ghost smiled at the odd marble bones and their intricate patterns, at the engravings on the cups. "Your artisans work for a living now."

"Someone had to improve on the Marsh." Shabra held up her remaining cards, their symbols hidden against her palm. "Our prisoners invented Death. Wooden cups, painted pebbles. Pictograms scrawled on rough parchment. It was hideous. It wouldn't have caught on if we hadn't fixed it."

Yucof dried his hands and quipped, "It was *authentic*." He leaned toward Ghost. "Masari and Yata play against each other before they meet in actual battle. Some use Death to try to foretell the actual outcome of the Games."

Ghost tried not to stare at him. "Aren't the Games bad enough? You and I were both prisoners, Yucof. You remember what that was like."

The smaller man laughed. "Do you want to know what your antidote to Rudder's smoke bombs did, Ghost?" His finger punctuated the air. "*Nothing*. Except that we did away with our safe rooms because the bombs aren't used any more. The prisoners-pardon me, citizens-are healthier, their industry is booming, their population is growing naturally, and the warriors among them still stride out into the clearing to fight Masari. Better armed than before, I might add. It's an honorable profession. Like your-" He paused. The finger bobbed uncertainly.

"Preservers," Ghost said, dully.

Yucof nodded. "Our fighters don't *have* to be smoked out. I don't think

they ever did."

BubbleCreek lifted and rattled her cup. Yucof stepped behind her as the bones spilled. He glanced quickly at her cards, his expression neutral, before he squeezed her shoulders and returned to his seat.

BubbleCreek flashed him an apologetic smile. "Don't look at my hand any more, sweetie. It makes me nervous."

Shabra pursed her lips. "That bad?" She jerked her thumb at Yucof. "Imagine my surprise, Ghost, when I learned that this man was smuggling our servants *into* the Marsh, not out of it. *That's* what ruined our economy. We had no choice but to legitimize the black market and make the prison a full partner." She grinned. "I'd have killed him if he weren't such a good trader."

"After everything I've brought you?" Yucof leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. "Your culture was stagnant, Shabra. Even you must have noticed. Every song composed on the Cliff was the same as every other song. Every painting looked like a copy of every other painting. No wonder you needed the Games for your entertainment." He exhaled a happy sigh. "We lived on the edge in the Marsh, but we *lived*. Your people are only starting to learn what that means. Manufacturing and exporting this little card game is only the beginning."

"It's been awful, Ghost." The lilt in Shabra's voice told him otherwise. "We had no choice but to free our prisoners during the battle in Promontory. All of us defended the border together. It gave everyone a chance to talk to each other." She shook her head as she spilled her bones on the table and fished more cards from her deck. "Ever since our servants learned that life in the Marsh wasn't so bad in-between the Games, we've had to find ways of keeping them here on



the Cliff."

"Life in the prison was better," Yucof said. "It still is."

Shabra snorted explosively. "We granted full citizenship to everyone, but that hasn't stemmed the exodus. The Games keep us alive up here because we offer the best view." She smirked. "HigherBrook paid me handsomely for that view not long ago."

BubbleCreek grimaced, her hand on her belly. "Excuse me," she gasped. "I must tend to some private matters."

She shot Ghost a glance. It told him that more than kicking drove her from the table. He hurried to her side and helped her to her feet.

Behind him, Yucof murmured, "Now I wish I were your size."

"After all the times you've helped me, this is the least that I can do."

BubbleCreek gulped air as Ghost led her out the door and down the long hallway of Shabra's compound. "Chamber pot," she whispered. "Let me at least pretend I have to go." She clenched and unclenched her hands, blinking back tears. "I thought I could last through this trip, but it comes on me so quickly now." Her shoulders began to shake. "I'm carrying a monster."

Ghost tightened his hold as they rushed toward a far room. "You're carrying a Yata-dependent child. If that's a monster, then we all are."

"Aren't we?" She ducked inside and dug into deep pockets, fishing out a chunk of jerky. "I'll be all right. Go back to them. Tell them I'm fine."

Ghost shook his head. "When I first met Yucof I didn't want to eat Yata

in front of him, either. He told me he considered his own lack of dependence to be just luck."

BubbleCreek whirled on him. "You're not *mated* to Yucof! We're not like you and Piri. My weaning has kept us together as much as anything else, and now I've *lost* that." Her fist mashed the meat as she turned away. "Go. Please."

Ghost squeezed her arm. Her teeth gnashed behind him as he left.

He squinted at the walls on his way back to Shabra's office. He had paced this hallway hundreds of times as a detainee, a caged animal. Bas-relief heads had followed him, all of them wearing the same insipid smile. The Cliff's slaves had possessed that same smile, passing silently from one duty to the next.

Now the sculpted eyes were hollowed out and the hair sanded down to nothing, each smile replaced by a skull's rictus grin. The Cliff's placid murals of forests and waterfalls had turned garish, painted over with body parts. Bladders wielded swords against gun-toting intestines. The once-gentle harps fell silent, replaced by dissonant songs rising from the terraces, their lyrics raunchy.

Ghost took a deep breath before ducking inside Shabra's office, only to find the deputy rifling through BubbleCreek's cards. He squinted at Yucof, who shrugged.

"You'll have to explain this to me, Yucof." Shabra examined the pictures as though puzzling out an illusion. "Your wife's had a winning hand all along. I don't understand why she's so upset."

"I don't have to explain anything, Shabra." Yucof crossed his ankle over his knee. "To be honest, I'm not surprised." He frowned. "Just keep your mouth shut and let her throw the game."

## Chapter 22

### Basc

Gria stared helplessly, unable to move her head. Piri sat behind her, out of sight and silent. Before them a granite box cut its sharp profile in a room still padded in dun-colored straw.

Useless straw. Gria couldn't feel her own bruises. Pain didn't matter any more.

Even insensate, she knew the Destiny Farm escapee watched her. Gria struggled to speak. "You should not have brought that here."

Parchment rustled. A nib scratched.

"I hurt you, too." The words sounded less ominous slurred.

The Farm Yata meat inside the box had to be completely desiccated by now. Its reality still came as a shock, just as much as when TripStone had dumped it in Gria's proud and ignorant lap. Whatever maggots it harbored had long ago been sealed inside to die.

Were they in the afterlife now? Had they become equally dead flies?

Gria had driven her visions back ever since the day her trance whisked her into the canyon. Instead she screamed in her head at the gods and became increasingly inert inside the living world. The Destiny Farm dead permeated her dreams.

"You cannot push the portal away, Honorable One." Zai had been frantic. "Refusing a sacred gift will kill you."

"My name is Gria." The sentence had taken her breath away. How much longer before she couldn't speak at all? Zai's young boys boiled water and prepared food, waiting outside as their mother performed other ministrations. Worst of all, Gria couldn't tell where her caregiver ended and her worshiper began.

Erta's spirit must be shrieking with laughter. *Honorable One!* That woman had worn the title with respect, but now it only showcased Gria's disgrace.

Desperate, Zai had granted Piri a private audience. Piri had carried the box from the hut's inner chamber, cradling it like an infant. She'd set it tenderly on the straw.

More soft scratching, oddly repetitive. The former livestock was taking her time with the pen.

*I once wrote manifestos on those sheets. Now I can't move my fingers.*

The nib's unhurried glide remained painfully sweet as the room began to shimmer.

At first Gria barely noticed the change. Then her heart thumped. "No."

The nib hesitated, resumed. Stopped again. Piri held still, barely breathing. Denying sensory input, forcing the general to be pulled in.

She must have planned this, herself unable to speak, her touch-talk useless on Gria's unfeeling skin. Had she been writing at all or just dragging her pen across the page?

From nowhere came the descending trill of a canyon wren. Everything around the granite box sparkled, blinding. Frost squeezed

Gria's heart until she couldn't breathe, turning her limbs from lead to ice.

*Am I dying, finally? Is that what this is?*

Ghost should receive her remains. She had sacrificed herself enough to religion; now she would sacrifice herself to science. He could examine her brain and establish that the afterlife was nothing but scars tangling the pulp inside her skull.

*Give him my body.* But how could she tell anyone?

She lifted a chalk-covered cheek from the ground. Her palms were white, and her arms, her breasts and thighs, the tips of her toes. She *looked* like a spirit. Desert sun kissed her bare back and buttocks.

She rolled over and shivered. "I'm freezing."

Voices surrounded her, too many to understand. Gria sat back on her heels in the middle of the oasis. Cottonwoods eclipsed lean-tos. Smoke curled up from extinguished cook fires. The chalk between her fingertips was a fine powder, almost slippery.

She tried to rub the goosebumps from her arms. "Why am I so cold?"

"You're afraid."

She heard the slur of a mangled tongue mended in death. A freckled girl stood before her, light-skinned for a Yata, almost golden. Dark brown eyes matched close-cropped hair.

Gria suppressed a gasp when she saw the infant at the child's breast.

"They sent me to you because I have never tasted Destiny. You never

hurt me at all. Does that surprise you?"

The general rose to her feet, steadying herself against a sandstone wall as the trees tilted. Everyone around her was naked as before, but the gold-skinned baby also wore a pelt.

Gria pointed to the suckling daughter and wheezed, "*That* surprises me."

"Other mix-children have been born at the Farm." The girl beamed down at her child and smoothed soft, rust-colored curls. "We were both killed before I reached the breeding pens. The farmers didn't know I was fertile so soon." A gentle hand supported the tiny head. "She's little. Until I gave birth, the Masari didn't know whether the father was Yata or one of them."

The baby turned from a nipple and opened startling, steel blue eyes.

Gria stammered, "You're Sunrise."

"Yes." The girl appraised her, eyebrows lifted. "BrushBurn named me. You must know him." She eased the baby against her shoulder and massaged a furry spine. Longing glistened in her eyes. "How is he?"

Gria struggled to breathe. "Living in Promontory with a Masari wife."

Sunrise whispered, "That's good."

Gria rubbed the girl's arm before she could think. Skin yielded beneath her fingers, impossibly warm and supple as Sunrise pressed her lips into a pensive line. Nothing seemed more real.

"TripStone saved his life by telling me about you." Gria gazed down

at the baby, dead with Sunrise for how many years? Fifteen? Twenty? "After BrushBurn's parents killed you they sent him to SandTail, who made him into a meat trader."

Her words tumbled out. "I knew nothing about the Farm. I didn't know our attack on Crossroads would leave our entire valley vulnerable to Promontory. All I wanted was to free my people." She coughed as another chill blanketed her heart. "BrushBurn smuggled rifles to me in return for Destiny. He and I share a similar guilt."

Sunrise stepped beside Gria and leaned back against the rock. "I suppose if you had killed him, he would be with us. I could see him again. But he's not a boy any more, is he?"

"No."

"He wanted so badly to be Yata. So many times we pretended he was." Sunrise sighed. "I miss him. I'm glad he's still alive."

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"This could be my camp in the far woods." Gria scrutinized one face after another as sparks crackled against a dark blue dusk. Was the rabbit she ate twice dead? Did it rematerialize after its consumption, its spirit as immaterial as the rest of the landscape? "I used to dine with my troops this way, moving from circle to circle as we prepared for battle."

Bare hands held chunks of meat in the flames and came away unsigned. How could these people possibly exist? But their attention around the fire was real, and the unending stream of questions about the living. Sunrise sat with her daughter beside Gria, knotting her to the afterlife with sturdy, incorporeal strands.

Gria eased her hand into the heat, turning it this way and that. Flames licked her fingers but could not melt the frost inside her. "We believed in what we were doing. We didn't learn about Destiny Farm until after the Covenant fell. I had no idea what I had supported here."

A man half in shadow said, "We are not judging you. We wouldn't know how."

"That makes things worse."

"The Farm was functioning long before you were born." His high tenor rang across the pit. "Sunrise and her daughter died years before you ever negotiated Destiny for arms."

"*Then why am I so cold?*" Gria plunged her other hand into the fire and pushed in up to her elbows. She stared at her freezing palms. Flames bathed her face as her teeth chattered. "We were *gods* in Basc." Tears burned off her cheeks, leaving ice behind. "Yata were gods, and look what I did to you." She backed away from the fire as a laugh burred out. "Now my own people are trying to make a god out of *me*. I can't comfort them. I can't even find my own dead countrymen."

"You keep thinking of us instead."

Gria muttered, "You are part of my imagination."

"I am *with* you." The man leaned further into the light.

Sunrise said, softly, "He's in your box."

"He is my mind playing tricks on me, and so are you." Nakedness filled Gria's field of vision, bronzed and coppery and golden. Warm bodies. "I could have invented all of this. Piri *taught* me about the



Farm. She is sitting next to my bed even as I am talking to you."

The air crackled. Wood remained unconsumed. Was the Destiny inside Gria unconsumed as well? Did it still ravage her, exhausting her senses and rendering them null? Was that why she couldn't feel anything out in the world?

Better to be dead.

Gria turned at a touch on her arm. Sunrise held out her baby. Mixed traits, so like Piri's and Ghost's child, but TelZodo was alive. Gria held the infant gingerly. She lowered her ear to the tiny chest and listened to silence.

"She has no tattoo," Sunrise offered. "But I do. Has anybody ever told you what it was?"

Who would know the girl's branding number other than BrushBurn, if he remembered it at all? "No."

"You're sure."

"I know only your name and what the trader shared with you." The infant's skin glowed in the firelight, deceptively warm. "And how much he loved Yata."

"Tell this to BrushBurn, then." Sunrise bent forward at the waist, exposing the back of her neck.

The numbers seared Gria's eyes as she bolted up in bed. Piri enfolded her, but the sensation of touch fled in an instant along with the canyon, the fire, the dead. Only walls padded with pallet straw remained, and the stone box.

Gria croaked dictation, her throat desert dry. Old numbers, their

pattern of identification the same as Piri's. Projected yield, poundage, pedigree. Had Sunrise lived, the code on her neck would have grown to reflect her own fertility, her disease records, her eventual culling date.

But Sunrise was a dead child. There wasn't much to record.

Heat flushed Gria's cheeks. She cried out as the sensation of molten needles shot from her fingertips to her elbows. Her hands and forearms reddened as the rest of her shook.

Piri hurried to wrap her in a blanket before holding up the parchment. The numbers were correct. Below them a quick scrawl asked, *What do I do?*

*Get the numbers to BrushBurn.* Gria's fingers wanted to move, but they remained frozen. The message dropped from her lips as she stuttered with cold.

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## Crossroads

*I do not mean to alarm you.* The words felt like lies spilling across the page. How could BrushBurn not be alarmed? *I myself took Gria's dictation. I can think of no way to tell you except directly.*

Piri dipped her pen into its stone inkwell and tried to picture the man. BrushBurn had been bound, blindfolded, and gagged the only time they met. He had twisted in agony as she drummed into his chest what it meant to be raised as meat.

*Destiny Farm meant death to both of us, BrushBurn. No one here*

*knows what you and I know, so I feel I can be clear with you. That is Sunrise's branding number, yes? I must have been very young when she had her child with you.*

He might have seen Piri when she herself was nothing more than a number. He might even have held her. Or he might have been in too much of his own pain to touch her.

*BrushBurn, I will tell you what Gria tells me only if you want to know I do not want to hurt you unnecessarily. I only hope this news can comfort you as it comforts me, because I know now that the people I love are safe. Everyone dies and yet no one dies. Does that make sense to you?*

She set her pen down on a blotter. Ghost and HigherBrook spoke in hushed tones in the study next to hers, where TelZodo's giggles ricocheted off the walls. Evit rolled imperfect lenses on the floor and stopped TelZodo from putting the thick glass pieces in his mouth.

She didn't need to watch them to know what they were doing. She'd seen and heard it all before. Deduction was easy.

How did one deduce the afterlife?

Stacks of parchment adorned Piri's desk and shelves; she and BrushBurn had both dedicated their lives to numbers. His were body counts. Hers were counts of what lay inside the body. In the end they added up to the same struggle for survival.

*Nothing really dies, she wanted to tell him, but neither is there growth in the afterlife. Your baby has no name. I don't think she ever will. Her tongue is whole and un-mutilated, but she will never be old enough to speak. Sunrise is still a young girl and she still thinks of*

*you as a young boy. They are forever unchanging.*

*If the dead are gods, are they powerless gods? And yet their very existence means more to me than I can express. Perhaps that is all the divinity they need.*

Her pen hovered above the page. Her fingers ached. Except for FlitNettle, BrushBurn's family was also dead. What corner of the afterlife did they populate? Or did attentiveness and faith call the dead back into being?

Piri had written down Gria's tortured recitations, gripping her pen until numbness engulfed her palm and then her wrist. The more Piri's hand lost feeling, the looser Gria's tongue became, her speech thawing. The general had choked around her words, boulders in her throat.

The voices outside Piri's study grew louder. She stood and stretched, then secured the lid of her inkwell and eased between modest shelves built for her height. Beyond the wall lay a room filled with giant furniture tailored to Ghost's proportions. She retrieved one of her own stools from a corner and knocked on the door she shared with his office.

"It's unlocked!" Ghost's reply rang with forced jollity. His face had been haunted when he returned from the central valley, harnessed to a wagon filled with labeled crates. Piri had set about studying the endless vials after he collapsed into bed. She'd waited until morning to give him her notes of Gria's vision.

"Piri!" Evit rushed her as she opened the door. Zai's son thrust a scratched lens toward her face. "I can see *veins* in his eyes! Look!"

She gave him a broad smile as she lowered the stool. *Some of those might be the scratches*, she tapped on his arm. TelZodo's

dark eyes would show no veins except under the more powerful lenses. And those would have to be perfectly ground.

"They're not scratches. They're veins!" Evit planted his feet wide apart on the wood floor and fixed Piri with a defiant look as she took the glass from him.

TelZodo leaned on HigherBrook's knee, trying mightily to steady himself on long, pudgy legs. Ghost, whose knee was still too high for his son to reach, shuffled through Gria's dictation, his lips tight. He murmured, "You used two lenses in combination, Evit. They might have shown you something."

"When do I get to play with the good ones?"

Piri handed the glass back. *You don't play with the good ones, Evit. You use them carefully.*

"Nonsense." HigherBrook leaned to the side, the better to see her finger movements. His hand grazed TelZodo's plum-tufted back. "Ghost 'plays' with his lenses all the time."

"Yes," Ghost countered. "*Carefully.*" He laid the parchment back on his desk. "For all I know, this branding number is a scratch, too. We think we see one thing when we really see another."

"Unless Gria holds the second lens," HigherBrook said, plainly.

"That number has not yet been confirmed." Ghost motioned Piri over. "Have you finished your letter?"

Piri shook her head and set her stool by Ghost's desk. She smiled as TelZodo struggled to turn around, her arms out to catch him as he teetered. Eventually he'd have to fall and learn to get up again, but not

yet. She watched her son crawl back to Evit and tapped onto HigherBrook's knee, *Thank you for having short legs.*

"One of my better traits, I'm sure." The Chamber leader smiled, but the slight flare of his nostrils told Piri more. When had he last broken his fast?

He turned back to her husband. "Let's say the branding *is* confirmed. I'm thinking of Crossroads, Ghost. If the afterlife does exist-and I see no reason why it shouldn't-that in itself gives us hope."

"Hope for what? Entropy? You're talking about an environment in which nothing ever changes. What kind of hope is that?" Ghost leaned on his elbows and massaged his temples. His bound hair fell over his shoulder, a wine-colored club brushing the edge of the desk.

More thick glass rolled on the floor, tiny pockmarked wheels magnifying and distorting the wood as they spun and toppled. Piri reached toward Ghost's arm, leaving her hand in full view. *Animalcules were once thought impossible.*

HigherBrook murmured, "Animalcules were once not thought of at all."

"I have *evidence* of them." Ghost looked from HigherBrook to Piri with the wary frown of a man outnumbered. "I can replicate that evidence. Another witness can confirm it."

His frown deepened. Piri could almost read his mind: *Show me the spirit of BrokenThread. Let me talk to her and maybe then I'll believe.*

BrokenThread was once thought impossible. Who was to say whether her faith in her ability to change the world had played a role

in her biology?

"Evit," Ghost said, keeping his voice neutral, "what do you think?"

"I think you can find the afterlife if you use enough lenses." The boy held his up to the light. "I see my Daddy sometimes, but he doesn't talk. Maybe there's a lens for talking."

What if all the books in the Rotunda, all the life stories of Yata killed in the Covenant's sacrificial hunts, could serve as a point of focus? And the stippled bones that still remained, safeguarded in Crossroads-what if they proved a catalyst for contacting the dead? Piri looked around the table at Ghost's near-grimace, HigherBrook's calm desperation.

What must it be like to fear your people will starve? To see young Masari blunder into the hunting grounds, sacrificing themselves almost eagerly in hopes of a quick death? What then did one believe in? Hunger already built inside the leader of Crossroads. He held himself more stiffly than usual, his restraint still strong.

Ghost reached across the desk to tap on HigherBrook's palm, making sure that Piri's body blocked the sight of his fingers from Evit. *You know that the more popular Gria's cult becomes, the more palatable eating Sustainer Masari will be. They will live on in the afterlife, just as the Yata do. Do you truly believe in all this, or are you looking for ways to sway public opinion toward our own cannibalism?*

HigherBrook said, mildly, "That would have to be both."

A voice piped up from the far side of the room. "Both what?"

"Both lenses, Evit."

"Gria herself did not fully believe in the afterlife," Ghost pointed out.

*Until now, Piri's fingers informed his wrist. Destiny Farm changed her.*

*"Destiny changed her. Her brain injury changed her."*

*It focused her.*

HigherBrook squeezed Piri's shoulder, his touch too gentle. The light caught hair-thin scars around his chops as he stood, tiny white lines overshadowed by neatly-trimmed hair. Close calls in the hunting grounds. Around his neck, visible against fine linen, the governor still wore small, braided strips of Yata and Masari skin as an emblem of shared sacrifice. "I'm not asking you to prove or disprove my beliefs. The gods know those have changed significantly and faster than I'd care to contemplate." He gave Ghost a hard look. "All I ask is that you keep doing what you do best. And that you keep in mind what is best for Crossroads. Evit!" He called over his shoulder. "It's time for me to return you to your mother. Put the glass away."

Piri stood, level with his chest. Reverence brimmed in his eyes when he looked down at her. She found his palm. *You still miss the Covenant.*

He gave her a wistful smile and tapped back, *If nothing ever really dies, then the Covenant still exists. We need only find it again. Let it evolve among the living, yes?*

This time the forced jollity was his.

## Chapter 23



## Promontory

*My dear Piri, you have not alarmed me.*

BrushBurn laid down his pen. The desert's evening chill edged through his open window, toward the hearth.

He leaned back in his plain pine chair and laced his fingers together, resting his chin on his hands. What could he tell her?

Yes, the number in her missive was a young child's brand. Simple and succinct, with room for possibilities. Yes, it was old and dated. Plausible.

Had it belonged to Sunrise? He didn't remember. FlitNettle had memorized all those lineages. She probably knew them better than he did, even the old ones.

BrushBurn looked past Piri's streamlined Yata script, past his brown earthenware teapot, toward the two braids that remained where his family had left them. TripStone's, bright and blood-red, kinked even in Promontory's dry air. His young cousin's hair was longer, smoother. From the non-curly side of the clan.

The dead clan.

*No. There are two of us left.* Provided his loved ones returned safely from the hunt.

BrushBurn leaned forward and lifted the pen. Writing in Yata kept him in practice, freeing his hand from Masari strictures. The graceful letters comforted his wrist.

*I wish I could give you and Gria a more precise answer, but I cannot.*

*I had attached those numbers to yields and to sales figures. To flesh. Never to faces. I loved them all, Piri. I never wanted to know*  
A smile ticced the corners of his lips. *That's why I had given them all names instead.*

But she wanted more. They all did in that sweet valley where the afterlife ran rampant.

SandTail had laughed himself into a fit of agony at the news of Gria's cult. "B-Bub!" He'd reached convulsively for BrushBurn's hand, tapping sweat-slicked through a new onslaught of cramps. *How touching!* His grin was a rictus, tears of mirth nestling in his eyes. *And I suppose our afterlife is filled with all the savages who mowed our ancestors down. All the torturers and all their victims, generation after generation. Ask my dear butcher whatever became of them the next time she floats away in one of her trances!* His howls could have been from hilarity or from anguish, or both.

BrushBurn couldn't tell. He'd held his coughing mentor, sending Jirado for water.

*Piri, you are a miracle to me. I do not want to do anything to hurt you, either.* His memory of the numbers on Piri's neck had faded as well. Only the brand's angry glare remained, her smooth skin interrupted by ink. Her braid, unusually light for her people, hiding her origin. *Tell me what you wish about Gria's visions. But let me know about the living, too. About your son, and Ghost, and life on that other farm.*

*Tell Ghost that TripStone's hair is short, now She is more beautiful than ever.*

His pen hesitated. No sense writing that the house was empty of

everyone but him. Until the hunt ended he had no news to deliver, good or bad. And the hunt had been getting longer.

The scent of fennel tickled his nose as he lifted his mug to his lips. He warmed his palms around it, cradling the tea to him as he stretched his legs and walked around the kitchen. He passed an old Covenant relic, a stippled ilium bone hung on the wall. TripStone's property. Beside it draped a post-Covenant kerchief woven by the newly-industrialized Yata of Basc.

FlitNettle's pallet lay across from the hearth, in a largely empty corner. Had she inherited his sense of sparseness or was her life outside the house more important? When not training for the hunt, she accompanied TripStone to the Lodge, the marketplace, and the tavern, talking to people.

Only her diary lay beside the bed, a sheaf of parchment weighted down by a broken geode taken from her old room at Destiny Farm. Her tools and weaponry traveled with her now, joining medicines and sturdy clothes. BrushBurn gave the sheets a sad smile and turned away.

His tea was growing cold. Steam rose from the pot as he poured and sat, elbows on the hardwood table. Piri's words shone up at him, beseeching.

*You are right when you say that no one dies, Piri. My memories are all the afterlife I've known. As for the gods-*

The Masari in Crossroads and the Yata in Basc prayed before they entered their hunting grounds. They prayed again after they killed each other.

BrushBurn had hugged his wife and ward tightly, asking the gods to

protect them before they descended into the canyon. But whom was he invoking?

*As for the gods, he wrote, I cannot be sure.*

The Destiny Farm dead were another matter, but those Yata had stopped eying him from his empty walls. Only his nightmares showed him the children beneath the awnings and the adults whom he had embraced within the great pens. The faces staring from the whitewash were all Masari now. His spilled bloodline.

He mused aloud, "They are the Destiny Farm dead, too. You and I share that, Piri."

A dry gust worried the hearth fire. BrushBurn closed his kitchen window and locked it down. After a moment he tossed sand on the flames, lit a lantern while waiting for the embers to dull, and pulled on a woolen coat. His fingers slipped into black gloves against the cold that followed him to SandTail.

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AgatePool answered the door, looking haggard.

"Trouble at the factory?" BrushBurn asked, voice low.

She nodded. "No injuries this time. No sabotage of my people's workstations. I believe we're making progress."

He hugged her across plump shoulders. "I'll cook dinner if you haven't eaten yet."

Relief washed over her laughter. "Where did SandTail find you?"

"In a very dark corner. Curled up into a tight ball."

"Bub!" The small man's call sailed out from the study, followed by barely intelligible fragments.

"Yes, it's me."

DamBuster's barrel chest rose beyond SandTail's couch. "You're just in time, BrushBurn. Don't go into the kitchen yet."

"I wouldn't dream of it," BrushBurn answered, smoothly. "You're a much better cook."

"I agree, but that's not why I'm here." The apothecary squatted by a low table where parchment curled inside three cloudy bottles. He reached into his leather satchel and removed a fourth. "I'm performing another test. No sense explaining it until I've gotten enough readings." He motioned BrushBurn to kneel beside the table and slipped a blade beneath a gasket. The bottle lid popped free with a sucking sound. Astringency filled the air. "Nothing painful this time. Take off your gloves."

His manner was uncommonly brusque. BrushBurn raised his eyebrows at SandTail, who shrugged and shook his head. Couch skins squeaked as AgatePool sat.

The parchment under BrushBurn's palm felt like oiled wax, but a dry hand held his down. He squinted at DamBuster's stiff, efficient movements. The numbers in the Lodge showed that the apothecary's consumption of Yata had halved. Such quick weaning merited congratulations, but behind the chemical tang lay the sharper scent of the man's discomfort.

More bottles sat in the bag. The chemist had other places to go.

Cloth rustled by BrushBurn's shoulder. Jirado stood over him, cradling a metal basin in one arm and grasping a pitcher of water in the other. She watched DamBuster's lips count off soundlessly.

"That's all." The larger man released his hold. The paper stuck to BrushBurn's skin.

DamBuster peeled it away and lifted a small flask from the table. He tapped powder into the bottle. "I promise you I will explain these tests soon."

The vanishing handprint followed. A tiny fog climbed the glass as DamBuster sealed it shut. With a start BrushBurn realized his hand was still held down, this time in water as Jirado's tapered fingers scrubbed his clean.

SandTail tapped AgatePool's arm. She translated, "Can you tell which of us is sterile?"

"That's not what I'm testing for." The apothecary re-filled his satchel and turned away from the table, neck fur puffed.

"DamBuster." AgatePool called after him, "I know how SandTail treated you. Now I know how he had treated me. Let's put it behind us."

"I have no complaints, madam." He bowed slightly toward the couch and reached for his coat. His broad palm rested on BrushBurn's shoulder before he strode out the door, woolens swirling under his leather bag.

Jirado dropped to her knees. She looked up at BrushBurn, easing cloth across his tufted knuckles. "I know what it's like to be forced to make Destiny. I would be angry, too. Healing takes time." Translucent

globules floated in the water as she wiped between his fingers, her grip firm. "SandTail still doesn't trust me in spite of my caretaking. I don't think he ever will."

BrushBurn eased his fingers from hers. "I suppose not." His mentor smiled back at them, bright-eyed and attentive. "He's trying to warn me about you even now."

"That is because he knows I've read all his correspondence."

AgatePool bristled. "You're a bit blunt, Jirado."

"I believe in being honest," Jirado said, lightly. "SandTail would have told him eventually." Muscles stood out on her arms as she lifted the full basin. "I was learning the Masari side of our shared history and came across the letters about you, BrushBurn. I've invaded your privacy, and I apologize for that." She bent toward the pitcher.

BrushBurn reached past her and snatched it up. Her hold on the basin tightened before he could do more. His neck fur felt as fuzzed as DamBuster's. "Follow me."

SandTail's kitchen was claustrophobically small. The shelves were too low, the utensils tiny.

"The Farm Yata swung full-sized hatchets after they rushed the gate," BrushBurn muttered. "They cut my family's throats with full-sized knives." He dropped the pitcher onto wood and reached for a strainer. It felt like a toy. "If SandTail is so damned Masari, then why the hell does he use Yata tools?"

He stopped, realizing he had spoken aloud. His cheeks flushed.

The basin scraped on the table behind him. "I'm not offended,

BrushBurn." Jirado's sweet, clear tones made his ears tingle. "You and I have both lost kin. This is hard for me, too."

"So." A dainty blade fluttered in his hands, threatening to slip. Which vegetables in his hands came from Rudder? Which from Crossroads-or Basc, for that matter? Whose charity produced this meal? BrushBurn chopped roots into small, even pieces. The more he looked at them, the less he'd be tempted to look at her. "You know about my family. I know nothing about yours."

Jirado stepped beside him and sliced strips from a block of cheese. "My husband and I had no children." She turned away to stoke the hearth. "We were too devoted to the factory for anything else, especially when the troubles on Skedge began and our production schedule kept accelerating." She straightened, narrowing her eyes at him. "Let's be clear about something. I am not Sunrise, and you are not SilverLode. You don't look the least bit like him. I regret that I look anything like her."

She returned to the hearth. BrushBurn stared after her, watching her golden hands busy themselves with invented tasks.

"I'm sorry."

"So am I." She held her palms out to the flames, gazing into the fire. "He never knew he was Yata. Neither had my brother and sister. They were all still Little Masari when they died." She licked her lips and whispered, "At the hands of other Yata. Whatever DamBuster is doing, I hope he puts an end to your appetites soon."

Her shoulders hunched. Even kneeling by the hearth, BrushBurn towered over her. Fear rode on her scent, or was that his own? He breathed it in, teasing it out. "It must be difficult," he surmised, "living in a city full of Masari."



"We all take risks. Especially now."

He wiped his hands and touched her arm. Light freckles clustered at her wrist.

"I would value your friendship, BrushBurn." She still stared into the hearth. "You loved the Yata at Destiny Farm in the only way you knew how. How can I find fault with that?"

"SandTail is right to be concerned." His palm rested against the back of her smooth, unmarked neck. His hands blanketed her shoulders and began to massage. "I still know how to help Yata relax. Lean back." Knots bunched the muscles beneath his fingertips. Soon they began to melt, but her undercurrent of nervousness remained.

She edged away. "Dinner." The cold from her fingertips traveled through his chops, to his cheek. She jerked to her feet. "Tell me about TripStone while we cook."

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*You're not touching your food, Jirado.* SandTail's fingers tapped her arm, his hazel eyes twinkling, his gestures in full view of the others. *I wonder why. It doesn't seem to be poisoned.*

*How would you know?* her hand danced back. *You're not eating it, either.*

AgatePool snorted. "If you've poisoned him, he's better for it. He tells me he ate no Yata at all this morning."

BrushBurn leaned forward in his chair. "You're still not well, SandTail. Have you cleared this with DevilChaser?"

*I have cleared this with my conscience.* The answer sank into the trader's proffered palm. *I refuse to drain Promontory of any more resources. I feel well enough to ration.*

"You can barely stand."

*A minor inconvenience.* SandTail accepted softened cheese from AgatePool's hand. He guided it to the back of his mouth and swallowed it whole, then drained a mug of water to keep from gagging.

Jirado held her plate on her lap, moving vegetables around with her spoon. More attention paid to Brother Wanderer meant less was aimed at her. She hazarded a glance at BrushBurn, who had left his seat to take inventory of SandTail's cabinet with its canisters of pulverized flesh.

*Another hunt is underway.* The trader's words pressed like lead into her stomach. For as long as she pretended her kin were dead, she would have to believe it, herself.

When would her comrades on Skedge pause long enough from their rebuilding to send out a search party? That would make them targets as well, outside the protection of the mesa.

She met SandTail's appraising gaze. "I was just thinking, Brother Wanderer, that if you had captured me for the Farm I would be huddled in a cave right now, or mashed in one of those canisters you are currently avoiding. It's unsettling."

The expression on his face disturbed her more. Jirado looked away from useless pity. "You've made your point," she grumbled. "We are both stronger than that."

AgatePool rocked forward off the couch and knelt by Jirado's chair. "We all know the canyon is intolerable right now, not just for Yata but for Masari, too." The mixed-blood features that had once seemed admirable were suddenly frightening, the woman on the floor a corpulent creature of light and dark. One who was neither cannibal nor food. "I want to get our citizens back as much as you do, but I don't see how we can."

BrushBurn turned away from the cabinet. "We've got to try, even if it means establishing a controlled war here. The canyon Yata are dying from too many other causes now and winter will make things worse. Our weaning is not enough, and the hunts are not sustainable."

Jirado bristled. "Are you willing to sacrifice Masari, then?"

SandTail reached toward the table, his fingers slow and deliberate atop its burnished grain. *Masari are no strangers to sacrifice. This town was built on it. You know that.*

"I know your people sacrificed their own kind to gain control of us. This is different."

They'd repeated the argument so often it dripped down the walls. It became hypothetical, a conundrum removed from reality, not about people any more.

Jirado shifted in her seat. All the better to maintain its momentum, then. Let it be a puzzle box. A distraction.

BrushBurn returned to his chair and jotted down notes, his expression a practiced blank. No hypotheses in him, either. Just longing for his missing mate. Jirado nodded knowingly in his direction, then looked away.

AgatePool was back on the couch, picking at her vegetables.

Jirado pitched her voice low. "I mean no insult, BrushBurn, but I am glad your wife does not want to bear a Masari child."

His gravelly answer rode a thin line of tension. "I trust *that* sacrifice is acceptable to you."

Jirado gazed into blue eyes swallowing the light, the need behind them so great it blotted out everything else. She whispered, "It will have to be."

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BrushBurn's gloves remained in his pockets as he trudged toward home, his naked palms slick with sweat. His coat yawned open, its collar turned down. He gulped cold air and woodsmoke, trying to ignore the messages carried on his own scent.

Lanterns glowed from inside windows, casting crazed shadows on the road. Some patches underfoot already bore traces of frost. He'd slip if he wasn't careful.

At least the pens had been warm before the Farm was destroyed. Fires raged in barrels, tended in shifts by the farm hands. The herd gleamed at night, most Yata piled together, sharing each other's body heat. Those still awake kept rutting. Their moans and gasps rode atop snores and crackling tinder. Others sighed in their dreams, stimulated in their sleep.

Sometimes even the dreamers had taken him into their arms.

*Stop.* BrushBurn shucked off his coat and slung it over his elbow. Campfires outside the hunters' tents would keep the Masari warm.

Caves would protect the Yata from the cold. It took several days' journey, now, for one to reach the other.

Days out, days back. TripStone's maps uncovered more and more of the canyon, its topography rising from blankness. BrushBurn tried to picture the line of advance, Promontory's rugged citizens hauling packs and blazing trails, tracking, leaving the ruins of Destiny Farm far behind.

*He is a boy again, fingers curled around chain links, peering into the unknown. Crags and fissures float beyond, so distant they waver in blue shadow. Cool breezes beneath the awnings have stiffened with the promise of snow, but his pelt keeps him from shivering. He has no need of clothes.*

*Sunrise sprints laughing from the children's barn and hugs him from behind. BrushBurn lets go of the fence and scoops her up, running her piggy-back inside the farmhouse. Breasts beginning to strain away from flatness press against him; her fingers nestle in his pectoral fur. In less than a year he has grown another handspan, while she has remained small.*

*Sneaking her into his bedroom for the night becomes a game, worth any punishment his parents might inflict. If he can't sleep with her in the children's barn, then he will sleep with her some other way.*

*She knows to be quiet, but her bare feet kiss his thighs. Her musk envelopes his spine.*

"Dear gods, don't think of this now." BrushBurn threw his coat back on. Even fully clothed he felt exposed. He craned his neck and beseeched the stars, "If you are there, dear child, as Piri has said,

then please help me."

He flushed with embarrassment. He ducked his head back down and hurried on.

Footfalls echoed behind him. A high-pitched voice called his name, freezing him in place.

*"You are stronger than your love."*

*He steps into Promontory's market for the first time, his head ringing from SandTail's pronouncement. BrushBurn's mentor leads him to the butchery. "Surely you've watched your animals dismembered at the Farm, haven't you? This place is sedate in comparison."*

*BrushBurn chokes, "That's the problem."*

*It is all antiseptic, each cut of Yata neatly stacked and stamped. Here is the large chest of preservatives. There are the wrappings hanging in rolls. Citizens in factory coveralls trade gossip with the butcher, lay coin on the counter, heft anonymous packages.*

*The sounds and smells of the breeding pens are gone, and the stink of the slaughterhouse, and the cool relieving wash of canyon air.*

*SandTail pulls his young pupil to the counter. "This is BrushBurn, up from the Farm. He's a salesman in training." He offers the boy a proud, encouraging grin. "Show us how fast you can rattle off the names of the cuts."*

Jirado's insistent call drove the memory away. BrushBurn turned

toward her on leaden feet. Her boots flew against the gravel, her skirt snapping behind. The darkness hid her face, but her voice sounded urgent.

"Slow down!" His hands enclosed her shoulders. She was barely winded. "What happened? Is it SandTail?"

She shook her head. "SandTail and AgatePool are sharing private time. Walk with me." She eased out of his grasp and took his arm, her shoulder level with his elbow. "Unless you'd rather not."

"I'll walk with you, but you make me uncomfortable."

"I make every Masari in Promontory uncomfortable." Jirado glanced up at him. "Your discomfort is different, and I'm thankful for that." Her hand brushed his waist, her breathy voice shivering him through wool. "You're worried about your people and I'm worried about mine. This isn't easy for either of us."

BrushBurn stared straight ahead. "I don't know what the answer is. I wish I did."

"We must go beyond wishing if we're to solve this problem." Jirado looked from one yellowed window to the next. "Where do you live?"

"Not far."

"I'd like to warm up a bit. Might I come in?"

He swallowed sourness. "You'll excuse me if I clear away some private letters before our tea."

"BrushBurn, SandTail *wanted* me to read his papers." Her exasperation seared him. "How was I to know the correspondence

about you wasn't part of Promontory's history? Which, frankly, it is, just as much as the wars." She shrugged. "Lock everything away if you feel you must."

"Moving them out of the way will be enough." He eased a tentative arm across her back. "I correspond with a-a former Farm Yata. Our letters can be very personal."

Jirado nodded. "I promise I'll respect your privacy. I told you I value our friendship. I'm glad you can be close with another Yata."

Then why was the woman beside him so threatening? BrushBurn led Jirado to a small wood-frame structure buttressed by sacks of tailings. Her skirt pulled against her legs as she navigated Masari-sized stairs.

*Sunrise slips from his back and darts inside his room. BrushBurn closes and bolts the door. He watches, a smile playing across his lips, as she moves from his bureau to his desk, a little sprite flitting against giant furniture.*

*She reaches high and lifts a green geode from beside the bed. She points, pantomimes. BrushBurn shakes his head; no, that's not special. Pretty stones are plentiful in the canyon. He points to her instead, lays his hand on his heart.*

*Speaking aloud might reveal her presence to anyone outside the door. Better to pretend his tongue has been mangled as well.*

"You live plainly." Jirado's mild surprise followed BrushBurn as he lit the lamps. "I wasn't expecting that."

"I've seen enough on the road. I don't need it here."



He stepped into the kitchen, stacked and straightened the parchment on his table. He set the letters by FlitNettle's diary, moving her braid and TripStone's atop the pages, and covered everything with a blanket.

Jirado squatted beside him, before the hearth. "I was a sickly baby," she offered, softly. "The youngest of three. No one expected me to live." She watched a flame catch. Soon her narrow face glowed in firelight. "I've learned about your life. I thought you should know about mine."

"I appreciate that."

"You don't sound pleased."

"I'm pleased you lived." BrushBurn jumped to his feet. He rummaged for a small kettle and filled it from a barrel in the back room. He hung it above the flames. "What tea do you prefer?"

"Whatever you drink." She took her time moving about the room, examining blankness. "I'd offer to help, but I can't reach anything here."

*Sunrise dips her golden hand into a black-painted washbowl level with her chin. A straight-edge razor lies beside the bowl, next to an aloe plant. She turns toward BrushBurn and glides her wetted palm up her arm, eyebrows questioning.*

*BrushBurn nods. Yes, this is where he changes himself, much to his family's shame. He sits at the bureau and pulls the girl onto his lap, shows her. First the razor cuts a piece of aloe. He rubs the aloe on a strip of pelt, squeezing and massaging until its juice reaches his skin.*

*He dips the razor in water, slides the blade. Short, careful strokes. Rusty bits of fur, many tiny curls, drift to the floor. When he is finished he has cleared a long thatch from his arm. Narrow islands of naturally-bare skin, the places where he sweats, meld with his new bare spot.*

*He hands the aloe to Sunrise, sighing happily as she works its balm into redness. It takes hours, he gestures, to shave all the places he can reach.*

*His breath catches when she lifts the razor. The blade is enormous in her dainty hands, but her grip is steady as she takes hold of the bureau's leather and strops. She won't do anything more unless he lets her.*

*They have played together for years. When her fingers reach around and toy with the fur on BrushBurn's back he answers her open gaze with tears in his eyes.*

*It doesn't matter that his father will whip him afterward. Sunrise caresses his back, standing behind him as he straddles the chair, scraping him clean.*

BrushBurn inhaled fennel scent with a shaky breath as tea steeped. Jirado frowned at a stippled bone hanging on the kitchen's far wall.

"It's TripStone's." He stood stiffly by the table. "She told me she moved all her family's relics to safety before she came here. AgatePool gave her that."

"Everybody I knew on Skedge bought at least one of those." Jirado shook her head. "I never understood why. I think they're ghoulish."

BrushBurn poured tea. "I didn't understand them, either, until I could see TripStone's bones just by looking at her. She almost starved to death refusing meat from Destiny Farm."

"Odd behavior for a hunter."

"Not odd at all. She once worshiped Yata." He sat down and huddled over his cup. "I spent last winter in Crossroads, selling Farm meat to her people after the Covenant fell. They gave me their relics for food." He sipped. "When TripStone helped me haul those bones away from Crossroads it tore her apart. She knew I was selling them to Skedge for more Destiny."

Jirado climbed into the chair opposite him, her legs dangling. She took hold of her oversized cup with both hands, her eyes downcast at the tea. "I think I would like her if she didn't kill so easily."

"She has to."

"*You* don't have to."

"I don't have the skill for it." He shook his head. "Or the stomach." Sweetness wafted upward, steam curling. "What I did was worse."

She looked up. "The selling."

"The selling."

*The trading cart is a labyrinth of compartments. Meat, preservatives, dry goods, a place to stash the tent, a miniature office. It sits on a cataract of smooth rock, near the trailhead. Chalk dust rises in an advancing plume below.*

*BrushBurn hangs onto a handle nailed to the dry goods door,*

controlling his nausea. "I can't do this."

SandTail pats his arm. "I've heard that from you before."

"Howmuch Yata did you say they were bringing up?"

"You saw the order." The smaller man holds his palms up, spaces them wide. "Eight hundredspring." He grins. "Pulling that weight across the mountains will burn the fat off you. Mark my words, some day you'll be hauling it all the way to Crossroads."

BrushBurn chortles in spite of his fear. "Hardly."

"Their piety can't last forever, my friend. Even Rudder has a bad Games sometimes. They know to come to us." SandTail looks up, his smile unusually shy. "I've written your family about your progress here. They're very proud of you. So am I."

Proud that he has successfully killed himself and remained alive. BrushBurn watches the transport approaching, knows this transaction will hack off another piece of his soul. He sighs. "Whatever it takes."

"Trust me when I say you possess an enviable sensitivity." SandTail's voice is the gentlest BrushBurn has heard since his arrival in the city. "It will make you an excellent trader."

Jirado's fingers fidgeted on the tabletop. "It galls me that I was once proud of my work. I kept the Destiny machines running on Skedge, positive I was helping *your* people conceive. For everything Promontory gave us, we had one commodity that you needed very, very badly." She blinked back tears. "We were so ignorant."

BrushBurn whispered, "It wasn't your fault. We kept you that way." He sighed. "I was proud of my job, too, and I knew exactly what I was doing."

"I started at the factory when I was a kid." Jirado leaned back and drank. Large swallows. "Playing, really. Nobody else could fit into those spaces between the gears and know what they were doing, but I had a knack for it. I could repair anything." She tilted her head toward the window. "Promontory's first plants were built by the ancient Yata. Your factories could use somebody like me after SandTail recovers."

BrushBurn laughed. "They're afraid you'll take over."

"True." She gave him a hard look. "You're not."

He rubbed his chops, forcing himself to meet her gaze. "I've spent much of my life being afraid of the wrong things."

She whispered, "Like me."

She leaned half her body across the table, her hand on his wrist. BrushBurn closed his eyes.

*He must lift Sunrise onto his raised pallet, she is so small. Her palms graze his shaved back, his smoothed buttocks, skin against skin. He has never trembled so much in his life. Her fingers make love to every inch of him.*

*BrushBurn groans against her mouth. He wants to repair her tongue with his, close the rifts that have killed her speech. Her tiny breasts swell against his hands.*

*He knows how to enter her; he has, before. But they had been on*

*dusty ground, with pebbles grinding against his spine as he cushioned her. Now he braces himself on elbows and knees, easing himself forward, waiting for Sunrise to open further. She sighs contentedly as linen rises around her, as the straw beneath them swallows her up.*

*He breaks his vow of silence and whispers into her ear, "Don't ever leave me." Knowing that she must, when the breeding pens claim her. Later he will wish they had.*

BrushBurn opened his eyes. The freckles on Jirado's wrist vanished inside her sleeve, but he was sure they extended up her arm and over her shoulder. A few adorned the bridge of her nose. He shook his head. "You bear an uncanny resemblance to her. Of course I'm afraid of you."

"Sunrise was a child," Jirado reminded him. "I'm almost three times her age."

He couldn't keep a smile from his lips. "That makes things worse."

"I'm not here to break up your marriage." She squeezed his arm and returned to her tea. "I don't have many friends here, BrushBurn. I left many people behind in Skedge, including my brother's and sister's children. I wouldn't have put myself through that if I didn't believe I could make a difference in Promontory."

Warmth poured from the hearth, rising and eddying about the room. BrushBurn rubbed his arms and felt his pelt beneath his shirt, his curls thickening for winter.

Jirado's eyebrows quirked. "Your neck fur's just stiffened."

Was her sense of smell as acute as her sight? BrushBurn coughed

into his fist. "You'll excuse me if I continue to be a little afraid."

She replied, barely audible. "You'll get over it."

His legs carried him to the hearth before he knew he'd left his chair. He threw sand onto the flames. "SandTail must be expecting you back. I'll walk you home."

## Chapter 24

### Mid-Autumn

### Crossroads

Work songs floated through a lantern-lit night. Behind HigherBrook an old Masari harvest ballad echoed among the corn and around squeaky protests of ears pulled away. Closer, a ribald stanza rose from lusty Yata mouths. Their high voices could be a sweet boys' choir rising from the squash patch.

The Grange teemed with the valley's tribes. Once only Masari labored here, when Crossroads was healthy and vital and had enough workers to gather all the bounty. Carts had piled high with tithes for delivery to Basc. Outside the hunt the Yata had wanted for nothing.

*No, that's not true.* HigherBrook secured his ladder against another tree and climbed. Heady apple scent covered the musk of Yata flesh almost completely. He focused his glands, drawing sweetness into his lungs. *They had wanted this.*

Masari had once set foot inside Basc only on the mid-season Thanksgivings, predators in the midst of prey. That ritual had died

with the Covenant. Now HigherBrook had trouble telling where one village ended and the other began, especially during Lacuna. Zai had named the new tradition, as though these enforced days of peace represented an absence, a void.

She had been skeptical. So had he.

"We close the hunting grounds for however long the harvest takes, and anything else requiring our combined labor." HigherBrook had sketched his plan on parchment on a visit to Basc. Maps of the battlefields gleamed off adobe walls to either side of him, their twins nailed to wood beams in Crossroads. He had shadowed a small table, writing unhurriedly in Yata script and glancing up at Zai's pensive frown. "We'll have at least a few days with no killing on either side. For once no one has to worry about losing kin."

Zai had murmured, "A nice illusion, I'll grant you that."

"*A potential*, Zai. We survived without needing you, once."

"A long, long time ago. Maybe that was a myth, too." She had pushed her chair back and gone to study one of the walls, meditating on the war zone they shared. For a moment she looked like Gria trying to tease meaning from Dirt People pictograms.

HigherBrook spoke softly to her back, "Our peoples go to each other's markets now. My citizens come here when Gria speaks. Both sides have exercised restraint inside the villages. But we are both depleted, Zai, and winter is coming. We need all the hands we can get before what's left rots on the vine."

Now HigherBrook's pelt rose in the chilly dark. Red apples tumbled from his hands in yellow lamp light. Baskets passed to waiting arms below. His mouth watered, but not from the fruit.



What was Gria so fond of saying? *The gods are perverse.*

For five days and nights their citizens had kept close quarters, crammed against each other in the fields and retiring to makeshift lean-tos on fallow ground. And that was just the Grange. Liberty Farm was also coming to fruition, and the Masari onslaught on Basc would be as tumultuous as the Yata invasion here.

"Hey!" A high tenor called up to him, light-hearted. "Daydreamer!"

He should impose strict controls before they set foot on Yata land, making sure no Masari went there hungry. HigherBrook laughed to cover his jitters. He buried his nose in the leaves and held scent in his lungs, picking faster. The rustling, magnified a thousandfold in the grove, hurt his ears. Soon he would have to rush to the Deliverance Inn to break his own fast.

Did all the bodies, all the sweat perfuming the Grange, caress his stomach? Or was his glacial weaning from Yata meat to blame? HigherBrook passed his basket down and tried not to groan as a supple bronzed arm brushed against his fur.

The face below his glowed, its blue tattoo clearly visible. "You look hungry, Governor."

Embarrassment flushed his face. "I know, *Izzik*," he growled. My body is abysmal."

"Don't be ashamed. I've seen it in CatBird."

"CatBird is a level three *yatanii*. I'm barely past the Threshold! If it weren't for my station you'd have killed me by now."

"You know you're more than that to me, Sir."

*Sir.* Coming from Izzik it was a term of affection. Finally the youth's beard was growing in, the down on his chin a boyish contrast to the forehead markings of an elite killer who in spite of everything was still family. The Yata turned and whistled over his shoulder.

HigherBrook recognized the call for his replacement and edged back into the tree, reaching. His fingertips prickled; the apple slipped from his grasp and *thunked* into waiting hands below. He seethed, "This is not the time for me to be *useless!*"

"In that case you'd better come down now." Ghost's broad hand rested on the governor's dirt-brushed trousers and steadied the ladder. "You'll come back later. I promise." The voice dropped. "Step back a bit, Izzik."

HigherBrook leaned into the wood. "You'd better tell Piri to keep her distance from me, too."

"She knows." Amusement tinged Ghost's voice. "Believe me, HigherBrook, she can tell."

HigherBrook filled his lungs with apple scent and held his breath as he descended. His neck fur still puffed as a shiver rippled across his skin. More than his nose registered the presence of food. "You were imprisoned together. How did you stand it?"

Ghost quirked a smile. "Love is a powerful force." He took a firm hold of HigherBrook's arm and led with his lantern. "You worked closely with the Yata when everyone here was starving. That couldn't have been easy."

"That was different. We wouldn't have survived any other way."

"BrushBurn was here with a Destiny Farm meat cart; of *course* you would have survived. Your love of culture saved you instead." Ghost called to the Yata, "The next shift will be here soon. Thank you, Izzik."

The warrior nodded. "I'll tell CatBird you're taking care of him."

HigherBrook wanted to turn around but thought better of it. "I'm mildly incapacitated," he said through gritted teeth. "Not helpless." He rubbed his palms on his tunic, trying to get feeling back. He whispered, "I'm breaking too soon."

"You're right on time." Ghost guided him away from clusters of Yata, toward Masari pulling carts down wide dirt paths. "You're immersed in Yata right now. It just feels like it's too soon."

"Said smugly by a level five."

"Not so smugly. My weaning is artificially inflated."

Melons tumbled from baskets, gentle thuds on wood slats. HigherBrook keened his ear to the shouts and laughter around him. How many Yata were here, harvesting peacefully, who had raided and razed this land not so long ago? During the Lacuna he'd seen no outbreaks of violence, no recriminations from either side. Even Ghost's precautions, guiding approaching Yata to an adjoining path by jerking his thumb to the side, were meant to maintain harmony.

HigherBrook's senses weren't fooled for a minute; the tang of meat still called. He'd labored through a twitching stomach for days, heat at the base of his spine. The Lacuna had been more important, a social experiment to be seen through because spoilage didn't wait.

His shoulders rounded before he could stop them, itching at the absence of his StormCloud. "I hadn't realized just how big the Grange

really is. I thought we'd be closer to town by now."

"I'm not taking you to the Deliverance. I'm taking you to the lab." Ghost tightened his hold. "You'll eat there."

Nausea flared, but the pull of HigherBrook's hunger was stronger. He whispered, "I thought I'd be better prepared for this."

"You can refuse."

"No, I can't."

Ghost nodded. "You took up hunting because you wanted to be an example to Crossroads in its time of need. TripStone told me what that was like for you, joining a caste whose work you hated." The scientist stared ahead. "Now you want to change Crossroads again."

"You were against that change, as I recall."

"I was against disclosing my findings too soon. You're coming with me to provide more evidence."

The sharp, dirt-streaked face in profile showed more resignation than anger. Voices dropped away as they left the crops behind, cloying invitations of Yata still carrying on the wind. Low buildings glowed at the end of a long dirt path leading toward the windbreak.

HigherBrook cleared his throat, stumbling beside his host on leaden legs. Laughter bubbled up. How much farther must he descend? And yet would BrokenThread have called eating their own kind descent? Did Ghost? "At least tell me what to expect."

"Expect nothing. I'm not going to bias you." Ghost offered a wry smile. "You're going to tell *me* what's happening, not the other way around."

He puffed out his chest and whistled, a long, low tone.

A far room brightened. "Is that Piri's office?"

"Yes. I've let her know we're coming. She's locking herself and TelZodo in."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. She understands you. And she has seen much worse." His grip relaxed. "I look forward to your input. I have DamBuster's notes on his reactions, but I can't talk with him face to face. It will be good to share-" Ghost's gaze trained upward. "Whatever we share."

HigherBrook's hand closed around his talisman. No sense trying to tell the skins apart. He couldn't feel them.

They passed into an anteroom of glass-front cabinets filled with labeled vials, then into the lab with its ring of tables and shelves. HigherBrook's legs shook as he sat, his innards lurching. It wouldn't be such an insult if he could point to a result. Advance to level two, show that he was actually weaning.

The other man rummaged in a desk. "Can you write?"

"I think so." He pressed his fingerpads together. Kinesthetic memory alone should be enough.

Ghost set pen and parchment before him. "Give me your symptoms. Numbness, headaches, cramps. Anything. I'll prepare your meal."

~ ~ ~

Ghost tallied the weight of the plate on his scale. Across from him the leader of Crossroads labored over sheets, his eyes hooded, nostrils

twitching.

*I am making disclosure before the winter, Ghost, no matter what happens in Crossroads.* DamBuster's large letters had flown across the page. *Our people deserve to know what I'm testing them for.*

DamBuster had fallen eagerly to his task, eating Sustainer Masari instead of Yata and sending back copious notes. Ghost had shaken his head, only slightly surprised. The arid lands were not given to sentimentality. Food was food.

Funny how one could feel homesick for such hardness. Ghost removed the plate from its scale and carried brine-soaked chunks to the table. He watched HigherBrook try to rub feeling back into his hands. "If I were ready to break I would join you," he offered, sympathetically.

"Then join me in prayer instead." The pained dignity in HigherBrook's face belied a body trembling with need as he addressed the gods. Verses that had consecrated Yata for eons twisted around the room, but now they extolled *Masari* divinity.

Even on Ghost's heretical tongue it felt sacrilegious. More than once he glanced at the other man's face and saw only conviction. He mouthed the words as the fur on his neck rose, the blessings extending to BrokenThread, to VineSong.

*He struggles out of his wrecked cabin, past shards of broken glass, the air around him pungent with spilled preservatives. Smoke rises in the distance as he staggers down a trail of flattened grass. Piri collapses against him, exhausted and disheveled, telling him she has placed the underage, runaway yatanii inside the cooking pit. To keep my promise.*

*Ghost retches into the grass. The next day he eases the dead child's flesh into his mouth with a reverence he has never felt for any Yata.*

Piri's fingers had caressed his arm. *She thought she was magical. Blessed.*

And now she was. Tears leaked from Ghost's eyes as they had then, nestling into his chops.

HigherBrook looked up from the meat. "Who is this?"

"I can't tell you." Ghost wiped wetness from his cheeks. "The family doesn't know what I've done with the body. My own doesn't know about my nephew."

"All the more reason for full disclosure. They should learn how sacred these Masari are. Though I admit I find this difficult." HigherBrook reached gingerly into the brine and lifted a neat cube. Its surfaces glistened in the lamp light. "How do I proceed?"

"As you would in the Deliverance." Ghost coughed against hoarseness as he gathered parchment. He looked into eyes bright with longing. "Eat until you're sated."

HigherBrook slipped the morsel into his mouth. A light flush crept across his face as his muscles began to relax. He sighed and reached for another chunk.

Ghost mused, "You've made peace with this better than I have."

"Crossroads will die if we can't change. I've had to make peace with that first."

"How do you feel?"

"Lightheaded. Nowhere near as euphoric as when I eat Yata." HigherBrook slouched over his plate and stared at the food. "Other than that, I can't tell the difference."

"We're less potent than they are."

"Potent." His fingers dipped again into the dish. "I feel as though I've just quaffed a good ale. Two, perhaps." He sighed again, more happily. "It feels good going down."

Ghost nodded. "DamBuster felt the same way."

"Did he? I'm glad." HigherBrook's fingers trailed over the flesh. "It's good you haven't told me who this is. I can feel my tongue loosening." He plucked another piece and popped it between his teeth. "I've got this entire village on my shoulders. I could use a good ale. I hadn't realized I'd be eating it." Brine soaked into linen as he loosened his shirt. "Did DamBuster feel warm, too?"

"Yes."

"Did you?"

Ghost shook his head. "I was too upset to notice. Ashamed."

"I felt that way, too, once. Often." He began to laugh. "You, Ghost? Ashamed?" Fingers reached into the meat. "There's hope for you yet." His hand made lazy circles in the air. "Yata bursts me wide open when I break. This is more... more..."

"Mellow."

"Exactly!" HigherBrook's eyes pleaded. "It's been so long since I've



known what mellow is, Ghost."

The leader of Crossroads reclined in his chair and took another bite. Another. The volume on the plate steadily decreased. Ghost pursed his lips as he wrote.

"I was a scribe."

Ghost looked up from the page. "I know."

"Most wonderful work in the world." HigherBrook smiled crookedly at him. "All those stories about all those magical people we ate. The books in the Rotunda go on forever. And then the hunters and the Covenant got killed, and I became the head of the Chamber." His stomach shook with laughter. "How did that happen?"

Light brown eyes twinkled, hiding layers of nightmare. HigherBrook slipped another piece past his lips, grimacing with reverence and revulsion.

Ghost tried to tease them apart and couldn't. "TripStone told me you sought out CatBird almost immediately. She was the only trained hunter you could find."

"She was a *girl*, Ghost." HigherBrook held up brine-stained hands. "Not even come of age. She taught me how to butcher right after the massacre because I knew I'd have to do it. So much Yata had already spoiled that day." He waved aimlessly toward the wall. "It was like a harvest, like what we're doing outside now, but with people. All I knew was that I had to give orders or we'd all die. I was a junior member of the Chamber. I didn't know what I was doing."

Ghost scribbled, raising an eyebrow. "You were being a leader."

HigherBrook's sudden guffaw almost shook him from his seat. The other man swallowed more meat, gasping for breath. "Next you'll be telling me I saved Crossroads."

"Didn't you?"

"I'm *nothing*. I'm a scribe and I can't wean from Yata worth a damn." He twirled a morsel between his fingers, pressing indentations into the flesh. "TripStone pushed me. CatBird pushed me. Gria pushed me. Now you're pushing me. *That's* what's been saving Crossroads." Unfocused eyes blinked. "I'm glad I can say that now." Brick-colored chops rested against the table as HigherBrook's breathing slowed. A chunk of Masari flesh rested loosely in his fist.

Ghost studied the man who would have executed him under Covenant law and marveled. Whose idea had it been to mortgage this village to Promontory? Who had plotted to steal Destiny Farm's meat while Gria's army ranged toward the arid lands? Who had admitted, candidly and with no excuses, to Crossroads' indifference to all the cries for help during the ancient wars?

Who had turned Crossroads into a sanctuary for mix-children, in which TelZodo played unafraid? Who was trying even now to rebuild the region?

The visionary slumped on the table began to snore. Ghost lifted the dish and replaced it on the scale. He recorded the baseline when the needle stilled, then retrieved a tourniquet and a syringe and nudged HigherBrook's shoulder. "I'm sorry to wake you, but I need to perform some tests."

"Of course." He struggled to sit upright.

"Are you sure you're sated?"

HigherBrook offered an engaging grin. "Sleepy."

"Take off your shirt."

"Certainly. Pants?"

"No need."

"Why not?" The grin broadened, challenging. "Why not look at seed through the lenses, too?"

"Seed is too small, even magnified." Ghost wrapped Yata sinew around HigherBrook's arm and tightened. He followed a strip of bare skin to a vein. "I wouldn't know what to look for."

"How much do you know what to look for now?"

Blood filled glass.

"I don't." Ghost tried to keep the growl from his voice. "I only *think* I'm working with the right variables, but I could be completely wrong. Frankly, we should eat *every* Masari that dies, not just the ones we believe are Sustainers. See which of our people can replace the Yata and how well and then try to find out why. And where do you start? How do you measure the weaning process when you're ingesting different kinds of flesh?"

"All the more reason to look at seed. You're already looking at everything else." HigherBrook barked a laugh. "Maybe part of me is good for something. *You* haven't passed on your dependence."

"We don't know that yet." Ghost forced his hands to remain steady as he loosened the tourniquet. "TelZodo is still nursing."

The man before him relaxed in his chair, eyes closed. "I suppose I'll keep serving as an example to Crossroads. It's the one thing I'm good at."

For the first time the leader of the Chamber looked his age. The creases in his forehead lightened, his eyelashes uncharacteristically long. Behind the battering from war he seemed almost boyish, a creature from another time.

"You're CatBird's guardian." Ghost carried the warm vial to his table. "She looks up to you. She loves you, and so does Izzik. I can't think of a better thing to be good at."

"You're too kind."

Ghost concentrated on preserving the sample as the voice behind him cracked.

## Chapter 25

### Basc

Zai thrust a shovel into yielding soil and tried to drive nervousness from her voice. "Citizens of Crossroads, welcome to Liberty Farm!"

The gods have spared her; she will not have to speak long. Too much has ripened too quickly. They have all barely rested from harvesting the Grange; everyone knew what to do. Many of the Masari here had helped her people establish this farm in the first place.

Evit held tightly to her hip as Abri ran to fetch a cart for her to stand on. Soon Zai's eldest son bounded back along the path, hauling his prize.

Even from a distance the Masari towered over her. With a start Zai realized that HigherBrook, standing at the forefront, was not particularly tall for his kind. Standing on the cart had been his suggestion.

Abri positioned it and hopped onto its bed, offering her a hand up. He was too young to look like a man so soon. She grinned as Evit clambered over a large spoked wheel, then widened her stance as the cart shifted beneath their collective weight.

*You'll do fine, Zai.* Gria's voice, less slurred now, rang in her head. The true leader of Basc had looked pale and spent after her most recent sojourn in the afterlife. *This is still a war and you will still be rousing warriors. The harvest is only another kind of battle.*

Zai was used to rousing Yata, not Masari. She cleared her throat, wishing the cock crow would go away. The rising sun warmed her back.

She rolled up the sleeves of her work shirt and held muscled arms high, waiting for the buzz of conversation to die down. "As you can see," she called, "I still have the Grange's dirt in my pores. I haven't been able to wash you out of me, no matter how hard I try."

She lowered her arms and wondered briefly what to do with them. Finally she clasped them before her waist. "Not long ago I had hated each and every one of you. Beside me stand my sons, the only blood kin I have left. Except for my brother Ila, who died in Promontory defending our valley, I have lost everyone else to the Covenant's so-called sacred hunts."

No one flinched. No one accused her of killing their own kin, which she had. They were all familiar with her crimes and now her

sanctioned murders since the massacre. Zai drew a shaky breath and tried to out-yell the rooster. "Never had I thought I would become close with so many of you in so short a time."

Her boots resounded sharply on wood as she stepped forward. Her arms dropped to her sides. "My son Abri has brought me a small cart to stand on. I remember much larger carts that some of you had pulled here from Crossroads, piled high with food. I remember how you fed us as we fed you with our lives, before you taught us to farm for ourselves. *From nourishment are we born, and to nourishment we return.* Wasn't that what the Covenant taught us? *As we preserve the Masari, so do the Masari preserve us.*"

She tried to still the shaking in her knees, blinking back a tear as Evit moved before her in an attempt to cover her fear. "I did not know, until I had worked at the Grange, that you bury your dead in its fallow fields. Your ancestors, your kin, were in the very food you had grown for us. I honor them with the harvest we are about to undertake."

Almost all the faces before her were familiar. They had gathered in Basc to hear Gria speak of the afterlife. Nonbelievers, even Ghost, still admitted that bodies were reborn no matter where their spirits went. Reborn as compost, as humus, as corn and peppers and pears.

She spotted him easily in the crowd, his tall physique and plum-colored hair alongside his family of farmers. That gap next to him had to be Piri, dwarfed by the others.

Zai's palms found Evit's shoulders. She felt his hands on hers, and the quiet warmth radiating from Abri's stiff-backed attention. "I bring you The Honorable One's blessings. She would be here if she could. Her dream has wrought this farm, our hard-won independence." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "This gift of partnership with

Crossroads."

She would not say that Gria lay burning in her bed. No one knew, not even HigherBrook, not even Zai's own sons, that the general woke screaming from her trances now, no longer insensate but inflamed. Zai had bandaged blistering skin, her lightest touch enough to elicit yelps.

*I walk naked through the flames, Zai.* The older woman had gasped, her eyes still trained on a portal no one else could see. *I relive what we have done. I cross the old hunting grounds as they are destroyed and everything is swept up in cinders. I am cooked in a pit with the Destiny Farm dead.* Cracked lips bled. Gria's cheeks had twitched, finally feeling the drops. *I cannot be out among our people, Zai. I must peel myself clean before I can come back to the living.*

No gun hung off Zai's shoulders. She almost fell forward, so used to compensating for its bulk. Elevated on the cart, she felt strangely weightless.

For as far as she could see, there were no guns anywhere. Dizzying, how they could all lay down their arms so readily.

And then pick them back up again.

"May our new covenant preserve us." The rooster had paused in its recitations; Zai's voice rang out above Masari heads. "May we find a way to nourish each other without the suffering we have undergone for so long. I give thanks for these brief days of peace between our peoples." Yellow light bathed the fields. Zai hugged her boys to her, gathering the shout in her lungs. "To work!"

~ ~ ~

"To the Lacuna!"

HigherBrook added his shout and raised his mug of cider with dozens of others. Fur-covered hands. Smooth-skinned hands. He couldn't wipe the grin from his face. His weary limbs sank into yielding straw as a low sun shot gold through open barn doors. Sweat-stained shirts and breeches added tangled aromas to the hay.

Gria should be here. Better yet, she should be with the smelters. Their great fires weren't tempering weapons this time but boiling pulp, reducing fruits to jellies. HigherBrook's soldiers and hers had left their guns behind and instead were canning for the winter. He flexed shoulders rubbed raw from the straps of produce baskets instead of his StormCloud.

His rifle would hang off those shoulders soon enough. No sense thinking about that now. Yata and Masari had spared each other during the harvest. Zai smiled at him from across the barn, her face painted with berry juice. Her sons' artistry.

Her joy alone, a moment's trust, was an admission he never thought he'd see. HigherBrook tipped more cider past his lips. Reluctantly, he set his mug back down and reached for his lantern.

The barn emptied slowly, the hunters among the first to leave. HigherBrook struggled to his feet, still dizzy from backslaps and embraces. He stepped over bodies, bronze-skinned and cream-skinned. Warm and breathing. Happy.

Suddenly his own smile felt forced and bittersweet.

With knowledge spreading of Gria's time in the afterlife, more Yata had come forward to confess their roles in the massacre. More than



a year had passed since that slaughter. The memory still hurt.

HigherBrook squinted into a landscape grown suddenly flat. He caught his breath, swallowing the lump in his throat. His boots clumped on the path, muffled by dirt.

The route to Crossroads lay behind. The path ahead led away from the center of Basc, first to the Soala and then to outlying, now deserted communities. Dozens of adobe huts sat empty and overgrown with weeds, just like their counterparts in Crossroads. Warfare had shrunk both villages.

HigherBrook kept walking. The Lacuna had succeeded beyond anyone's expectations; he should be happy. The gods had sprung no accidents, tendered no sickness. Magically, no one had touched a gun for days.

*Not magically.* HigherBrook huddled against the autumn chill. *We did this together. We made this real.*

*And that's what makes tomorrow so hard.*

For once, the Soala was silent. HigherBrook passed its black walls and heard only crickets singing in the encroaching dusk. No Yata had entered the hut-of-need to grieve and rage, just as no Masari mourned in Crossroads. Instead the entire valley had been joyous. The Lacuna itself had been a portal, a glimpse into another world, offered not just to visionaries but to everyone.

The abandoned houses to either side of him were equally real. After the Covenant had fallen, even during the ensuing famine, they had still been occupied. Before then, they'd burst with children born of procreation held sacred. All to feed worshipful, ravenous Masari.

So many children had been produced only to be sacrificed. Now the whole valley sacrificed its people, and not just from attrition. When was the last time he'd heard about a birth, of either Yata or Masari?

A gentle slope rose ahead, flanked by vegetation near the border. HigherBrook could see around it into the far woods, the killing fields. One step over the line would make him a target.

A complex of low buildings peeked above the summit, beginning to dim. He stopped walking and stared at his lengthening shadow. Time to light the lantern.

Yata entered the battlefield through their military camp now. Only HigherBrook's footfalls thudded on densely-packed ground. He moved furtively, beginning to climb. His neck prickled, his fur beginning to rise. If the gods existed, they must be spying on him.

He almost missed the boulder by the side of the path, but its faded colors caught lantern light. Twisting ideograms paled against the rock, scoured away by weather and blotted out by lichen.

HigherBrook squatted beside them and ran his fingers over the forms, smiling at what they told him. He glanced up at the summit, the fabled Meethouse and its darkening huts.

The Rotunda's volumes teemed with accounts from the days when Destiny had been a gift of the gods. Large, serpent-imprinted pots in almost every home had held the brown powder, filling the air with blood-heating sweetness. But the best tales had come from the complex up above.

Promontory had perverted the drug for its own purposes, but the Yata of Basc had embraced it as their own.

*Most Yata.* HigherBrook stared at a legend made manifest. *Not Zai. Certainly not Gria.*

Did his pulse quicken from physical exertion or from the memory of stories repeated by Covenant-trained hunters? Almost every Yata survivor had told of congregants panting and exulting inside this place of hallowed lust.

*You always remember your first.* Which classmate had whispered that truth to him in the Rotunda's dormitories? The thought alone made HigherBrook's writing hand tingle.

Even now, after so long, he could retrace the words he had recorded as a boy, his practiced penmanship ruined by adolescent excitement, broken nibs skipping across the page. The exhausted hunter, eyes red-rimmed, had smiled at him from across the table, slowing her dictation until HigherBrook had regained enough composure to continue his task.

The Rotunda's books revealed eons of the same rite of passage. Without reading a jot, HigherBrook could point to the precise inscription that had marked every young scribe's coming of age. Each had suffered an inebriated pen, but how marvelous the suffering! Playful tussles with Masari girlfriends had been no match for tales of the Meethouse, of living gods cavorting in ways unimaginable to ordinary Masari mortals.

No scribes remained to learn the old skills because the old skills had been rendered useless. Why did he even live in the Rotunda any more? Its dormitories were all but empty now. What was he hanging onto? A young boy's dreams?

"Oh, my." HigherBrook worried his goatee, laughter burbling past his lips. Obviously the Meethouse had died with the rest of the Covenant,

but the complex still stood. It would be a shame not to see it at last.  
*Might as well, before somebody shoots me.*

The thought was startlingly hilarious. Did they have orgies in the afterlife? Couldn't procreate there, but why have a reason at all? Reason had fled the living. Why should it be any different among the dead?

The huts grew nearer, blotting out early stars. HigherBrook hurried uphill, his tread lightened. He had no right to be so happy, chasing a dead fantasy.

*We have no right to be killing each other, either. So who is to judge?*

Not him. He was done judging, at least until the Crossroads Chamber met again. And when they did, it would not be here.

Vines snaked across adobe but stopped at the main hut's broad wood door. It opened with surprising ease, but more dazzling were the faded draperies springing into view. HigherBrook raised his wick.

Even moth-eaten, the fabrics lining the walls remained richly textured; he could only imagine how bright they must have been. The large room was awash in the ghosts of purple and gold, blues and greens, yellows and reds. More drapes billowed from the ceiling. Several, loosened from their moorings, dripped tassels past his shoulders.

He eased them aside, stepping around cushions scattered across the floor. His nostrils twitched with old remnants of scent he'd found revolting not long ago.

*That was different. You were sniffing loincloths taken off dead Yata, learning how to track the others.*

Learning to hunt had been brutal. Bestial. Somewhere in his training, teasing out the smells of sex had become routine, as much puzzle and challenge as the rest. Mild when compared with actually murdering someone.

His boots left large tracks beside smaller imprints, but his attention turned to the bar and the rooms behind it. Any Destiny here would have long turned stale. The grains of brown powder on the counter were as dusty as the rest.

HigherBrook gathered a pinch between his fingers and held it up to his nose, his lips curled back. It yielded only a shadow that did nothing. Yet how potent it once had been, both blessing and curse. Quickening so much life and wreaking so much destruction. He stared at the dregs in his hand before shaking them back onto the counter.

Mugs still lined the shelves behind the bar, along with cloth bags awaiting Destiny to fill them. HigherBrook edged into a hallway. To either side of him rested mortars and pestles, corks and casks, bottles and bubbles and bags. He guided his larger Masari bones through Yata-sized spaces.

The place was a relic now, left to the elements. The Destiny was gone, its loss celebrated by some and grieved by others. He walked through a dream.

He almost didn't notice the hallway brightening. HigherBrook lowered his wick and set his lantern on the floor, but the illumination was still wrong. He faced back toward the bar, confirming a second source of light in the main room. He opened his mouth and closed his eyes, composing a picture inside his lungs.

Yata.

Female.

A flush climbed his chest and he smiled to himself; the Meethouse had not been completely abandoned after all. But what good was it now? Oh, to be a boy again-what tales he could lord over his peers!

Dead peers.

He drove a heavy sigh against the floor, raising more dust as he retrieved his lamp and returned to the bar. The new light shone to his left, brightening tattered drapes. The Yata woman standing beside them studied the wall as though lost in thought. Her odor was stronger now, laced with the smells of newly-turned loam. She'd been planting winter rye. Dirt still streaked her face, nestling in her short black hair. She reached up and scratched her scalp absent-mindedly. Her perspiration cooled, an appealing taste on the air.

Then her fingers stopped moving and she turned, eyes widening.

*I meant no disrespect.* HigherBrook opened his mouth to apologize, but the woman lowered her finger to her lips. She blinked in the light and inched toward the bar, her hand before her mouth, chuckling. She glanced toward the billowing ceiling with eyebrows raised, as though sharing a punchline with the gods.

HigherBrook rounded the counter as she loosened the ties on her dun shirt, her scent unmistakable now. But so was his. Hurriedly he scanned the room. They were alone.

He reeled beneath the memory of breathless boys clustered on a pallet around multiple tomes. They read aloud the notes penned by their ancestors, whooping, wiping an occasional drop of drool off the

parchment.

He guffawed when she touched his arm; she echoed his laughter. *Absurd!* He pulled off his tunic. Her bare breasts hung before him by the time he freed his head from coarse linen.

*Why not?* He laughed again, trying to remember. Who was she? He had worked with so many Yata, planting beside them in the fields before hunting them down. What was this wordless tryst compared to that kind of madness?

*Glorious fantasy.*

She tilted her face upward. He grinned, then groaned as he bent and covered her lips with his own. They slid to the floor, coughing as their bodies raised a thick puff of dust, laughing harder.

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Morning light streamed through cracks in the walls. HigherBrook bolted upright and rubbed gooseflesh, blinking sleep away. He flared his nostrils, squinting at the cushions and then at his nakedness. The colors around him were still faded but brighter. Slowly he registered two sets of clothing strewn across the floor, wetness matting his brick-colored pelt, a pleasant soreness in his loins.

The Yata woman sleeping beside him was equally naked and tightly curled. Furless. She must be freezing. HigherBrook sank back onto pillows and eased his body next to hers, marveling as she unfolded against him. He held a goddess in his arms.

*Don't laugh.* He swallowed hard against the urge. *You'll wake her.*

Too late. She rolled over, yawning, face to face with him. They

pressed together closer, but not from lust.

"Wait here." Where would she go? HigherBrook sprang to his feet and snatched his tunic, folding it around her. He grabbed a curtain already half off the wall and ripped the rest of it down. Biting chill awakened him more as he sprinted through the door to shake the drapery out.

He warmed it against his torso as he stepped back inside. She was still there, still real. She welcomed him back into her arms as he pulled the curtain around them both, willing himself to generate body heat for two.

A giggle escaped him, a sudden bout of shyness. "Hello." A boyish smile broadened his lips. "I'm HigherBrook."

She kissed his nose. "I know who you are. We all do."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage."

Not entirely. She spoke with an Alvav accent. She had not been a goddess but a slave. HigherBrook rested his palm against her broad cheek and gazed into the eyes of one who had never known worship. Until now.

"I'm Kova." She snuggled more closely against him.

He enfolded her, happy to feel her flesh warming. "Kova." He swallowed a cough. "What happened here?"

She grinned, her chin dimpling. "Don't you remember?"

"Believe me, I remember it all. But *what*-" HigherBrook shook his head. How could he explain that the gods had taken him by the scruff



of his neck and thrown him into another world? "I didn't plan this," he stammered. "Did you?"

"I didn't know you were here until you came out of the back rooms. And then-" Her fingers twined in his back fur. She chortled. "I'd been asking the gods for guidance, but I admit their answer was a little unexpected."

"A little." He choked with mirth. "I never thought-" He gathered her in his arms. "You're the only thing in this world that makes sense, Kova."

She laughed against his shoulder. "I always knew I was different."

He crowed with delight. "Nothing else does, you know."

"I know."

"It's preposterous. In a few hours I'll be hunting."

"Me, too."

"I've eaten *Masari* now, for heaven's sake!"

"So have I."

They gasped against each other, shaking with hysterics.

HigherBrook wiped wetness from her eyes. He held up his finger. "But *you* haven't eaten Yata."

"That's true." She brushed his own tears away. "I haven't had to."

"I've had to." He rolled onto his back. His chest heaved beneath the curtain. "*That's* the problem."

Kova's palm explored his stomach as though trying to decipher it. In a moment she straddled him again, the tattered drapes and his tunic fallen away. Daylight revealed a harsh scar running from her left shoulder to her navel, ragged white puckering against bronze.

He touched it gingerly. "I'm glad you're good at hand-to-hand combat."

"I was lucky."

He nodded. "Me, too."

"I can see that."

She swiveled her hips, lowering herself further. Her breaths became heavy, her eyes closing.

*You came here looking for the Covenant.* HigherBrook arched his neck as she cinched him. *Let me prove to you that we haven't lost it completely.*

He would pray to her with his flesh. Words left him as his hips began to thrust. He grasped her waist and followed ravaged skin to her nipples, answering her sigh and then her yells with his own.

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"I belonged to a man named Crayer."

Kova strolled beside HigherBrook as they descended the hill. "He used to drink with an old Masari who visited from Rudder after the Games. They shared brandy and goose from the Marsh and spent the day comparing the results of their wagers." She tugged at the edge of her rumpled shirt. "I was his only servant."

HigherBrook eased his arm across her back. "Your family?"

"Crayer sent them to the Marsh when I was young. They've been dead for years."

"I'm sorry." The stories of Yata condemning their own kind still seemed impossible to grasp, no matter how many times he'd heard them. HigherBrook held Kova more securely, observing her pensive, pug-nosed profile. "How did you survive?"

"He preferred me."

"That's not what I meant."

She tried to smile. "Not for sex; he never touched me. It's hard to hate someone when you're his nursemaid." They passed to level ground and the first empty huts. "I dressed him, undressed him. I emptied and cleaned his chamber pot, listened to his troubles."

"*His* troubles!" HigherBrook spluttered, bristling. His hand covered hers as she reached toward his fur to smooth it down. "He should have dropped down on his *knees* before you, Kova. You have no idea."

"You're right. I don't. Not even when you do it." She brought his fingers down to her lips and planted a kiss on tufted knuckles. "You're a sweet man, Brook."

He hugged her to him. *Brook*. No one had called him by his shortname for a lifetime. A simple name, a youth's name. Free to burble over smooth stones. No expectations. No responsibilities. Nothing to worry about. No one to govern but himself.

No one to hunt down.

Kova released his hand and moved on, studying the ground. "For years, Crayer was the only companion I had. I couldn't kill him. I escaped when I got the chance." She shook her head. "You'd think I would be less lonely, living with the other Yata here. I'm used to taking care of people, but I didn't know everything would crowd in at once. The Meethouse is as far away as I can get. I can find my own thoughts there."

He glanced sideways at her. "You know what it was used for."

"Yes!" Her lips curled up. "That's why I was surprised to see you. Why were you there?"

"Curiosity." HigherBrook tried to flatten a crease in his tunic before abandoning the attempt. "I grew up hearing about it. Reading about it." His brown eyes brightened. "It formed the more titillating part of my training. The other boys and I were not so reverent as you might assume."

"That's good." The Soala loomed up ahead, still silent. Still peaceful, empty of mourners. "You always seemed so serious. Even during the Lacuna."

"I wasn't lonely until I became head of the Chamber."

"After the massacre." Kova took his arm. "You were grieving."

They strolled past black adobe and still-burning torches. Voices reached them from a distance. Sounds of bustling. Soon they would reach the road leading back to Crossroads.

HigherBrook caressed her small bronze forearm, her hairless skin. He shrugged. "I should be living in a cottage with my own people, now that the dormitories are empty. But I can't bring myself to move

out of the Rotunda."

The voices grew louder. Yata crossed his field of vision, rifles strapped to their backs, mirroring the Masari in Crossroads preparing for battle.

Did CatBird and Izzik stand like this before crossing from one reality into another? Or was this splitting simply a way of life for them?

Beside him, Kova whispered, "Stay alive, Brook."

He released her arm and wrapped his own around her. "Stay alive, Kova." He bent and opened his mouth to hers. His hand slid beneath her shirt and caressed her scar before he reluctantly pulled away. "The gods have a reason for everything, yes?"

She nodded. "Let's hope so."

His callused fingers held hers until they slipped from him. As Kova headed to the huts he turned to cross the meadow, toward the great coffered dome, where his weapon awaited.

## **Chapter 26**

### **Crossroads**

"Dear gods."

Ghost staggered past one Masari, and another, stretched out on a fringe of winter rye. Limp bodies faced up, eyes closed. Dozens of them, dressed in coarse linen, lay scattered unevenly across the Grange's fallow fields.

Dust motes illuminated by the dawn settled on their limbs. Dirt

crumbled in their hair. Insects crawled on their chops. They could be dead, the clear morning an aftermath of battle. Felled by a sudden, vicious attack or taken by plague.

But their chops twitched. Their lungs filled, slowly and deeply as the lines faded from their brows, their faces radiating an eerie calm.

Ghost turned back, decreasing the distance between himself and his son.

TelZodo toddled beside the bodies, not touching them. Crops were special things, not meant to be pulled out of the ground. Even this young, he seemed to know that already. Maybe he thought people grew out of the ground, too. Even those who held him, who counted his fingers and toes aloud. Who looked and smelled, at least a little bit, like his father.

The child fell on his knees and laughed. He bounced upright again and ran barefoot on the cushion of rye. His coppery skin glistened, its deep violet down matching the darkness fading in the west.

Piri padded behind TelZodo in a slow stroll past stilled limbs, thoughtful.

Ghost grasped her arm when she reached him, his fingers working. *This has to stop.*

She smiled at their son. *This frightens you more than it frightens him.*

Yes! Ghost jabbed, *Tell me that their giving up like this doesn't scare you.*

Piri had explained it to him time and again: this was how Masari

communized with the afterlife. Where better to do so than here, above so many layers of past generations?

The Grange had been built on Masari bones. Masari flesh and blood decomposed beneath them. The food grown here had been nourished by Ghost's ancestors and those of everyone who now lay supine and peaceful to either side of him.

The seeds delivered to Gria, the genesis of Liberty Farm, contained energies distilled from Crossroads' citizens. Masari fed upon Yata flesh, but the Yata fed on Masari as well.

*I understand this, Ghost. I've walked with death from the time I could breathe.* Piri nodded toward SnowMoth, whose long fingers clutched the ground. *They're not giving up. Gria's visions have given them hope.* Her hand touched his cheek. *You've flirted with death yourself, out of a sense of hope.*

*Yes, but I took action that meant something. I almost died the first time I fasted.* Ghost's face soured. *I did not engage in this type of pretending.*

*They're not pretending. They're preparing.*

TelZodo ran ahead. He stopped and squatted, peering at the faces.

Ghost called out, "They're playing a game, TelZodo."

The child raced in a circle, flattening young rye. It sprang back beneath his kicks. Soon he returned, wrapping his arms around his father's leg, looking up with his mother's wide brown eyes.

Not long ago TelZodo could barely stand. His motor patterns were developing like a Masari's, but his rate of development was Yata.

Even now his baby fat was melting, his teething so rapid it was almost painless. Soon he'd be eating solid food.

Did the tears tracking down SnowMoth's cheeks come from the strong light of morning or from TelZodo's innocent giggles? The baby she had once held, her child, was gone.

Or did she cry because she was seeing VineSong in a vision? Did she feel his death as her own, hear ancient blood thrumming beneath the plantings?

Or was this only a manifestation of post-harvest exhaustion? They'd all picked the Grange clean, plowing dried, dead stems and stalks underground in a mass vegetative grave. Compared to its bustling canneries and noisy barns, the farm's fields stretched flat and bland toward the windbreak. Crossroads' citizens, including most of Ghost's kin, could just be taking a nap.

The first of them stirred and begin to rise. Silhouettes wobbled in the distance. Ghost squatted beside his sister. SnowMoth's face was a mask of serenity, but her hands were claws digging into the dirt. Her eyes remained closed. Her nose wrinkled as she took a long, deep breath and held it.

She sighed it out. "Is that you, Ghost?"

He frowned. "Yes. It's me."

"Lie down beside me."

He touched her hair. "Trust me, I wouldn't make a good corpse."

"I'm not asking you to." Her fingers flexed convulsively. "I just want to talk." She curled her lips back and inhaled again, sharply. "Alone."



Ghost glanced up at Piri, who nodded and took TelZodo by the hand. She barely needed to bend down.

Even softened by rye, the ground prepared to harden. Its summer heat dissipated. The weeds retreated, conserving their strength.

For a moment he was a boy again, placing his full length against the earth. Listening for scrabbling, wondering if he could hear buried seeds in mid-sprout. Trying to identify whatever crawled beneath his shirt and bent the hairs of his back fur. A child's fascination.

He stretched out beside SnowMoth, suppressing a shudder.

She whispered, "Close your eyes."

He opened his mouth to protest.

She laid her hand on his. "I am your older sister, SunDog. I diapered you and I wiped your runny nose. Whatever things you have done, you are still my baby brother. Close your eyes."

He complied, unable to keep a nervous smile from his lips. If SnowMoth was trying to be a corpse, she was doing a blessedly poor job of it. Hearing his birth name and her scold felt good.

She laced their fingers together. "You remember when we used to lie in the fields like this? Watching the clouds?"

The earth seemed to recall his contours. "And the stars at night." Ghost gentled his voice. "Our eyes were open then."

She sighed. "Yes, they were." Her smoky alto turned hoarse. "I've read your narratives. All of us have."

"I know."

"You had happy memories here."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry I've been-" He leaned into the rye.  
"Absent."

More light breached his eyelids as the sun climbed. Soft reverberations reached him as more people left the field, headed toward chores.

"My son." Curiosity edged around grief. "What was he like?"

Ghost's fingers jerked. SnowMoth gripped them.

He mumbled, "I knew VineSong for only a short time after I came back. We didn't talk much."

"*Ghost*." His sister's voice rang from the ground. "You were a level three *yatanii* before VineSong died. After he was killed you quickly became a level five. We did not bury him and he is no longer in the morgue."

Sweat oozed from Ghost's palm. SnowMoth's hand grasped his more firmly, slipping a bit.

She whispered, "Was he as powerful as BrokenThread?"

Ghost let out a tiny cry. He shut his eyes more tightly, trying not to gulp air. If the gods existed, the earth should swallow him up.

"Your narratives speak very reverently of her." His sister's voice turned calm and measured. Ghost should be comforting her, not the reverse. "You said she saved your life. You said that she was much braver and much older than her years."

Ghost groaned, "SnowMoth, I didn't want to hurt you."

She petted his knuckles. "VineSong was also much braver and much older than his years. Did you pray over him?"

He croaked past a throat closing up. "Yes."

"Then you have not hurt me." SnowMoth grasped her brother's wrist. "You have not hurt any of us. Not when you have honored him." Her voice dropped. "Whom else has he fed?"

"DamBuster, over in Promontory." Ghost turned his head. Tiny sprouts tickled his cheek. His body was shapeless, limp. "We wanted to see if VineSong could sustain someone outside the family."

"Did he?"

"Yes."

She rubbed his arm. "That's good."

"Have you-" Ghost bit his lip, squelching a nervous titter. "When you're doing this-here, in the field-" He tried to smile. "I don't even know what you do in the field. Do you try to contact him? Do you walk into the afterlife? What happens?"

Her shoulders brushed his as she shrugged. "It's different for each of us, I suppose. Mostly I lie here and remember him. I remember his father. I imagine seeing them if I am ever taken in the hunting grounds. Ghost-"

SnowMoth's hand moved to his chops. Ghost opened his eyes and looked into unwavering bluegreen.

"If I am lost," she said, softly, "I want you to use my remains however

you can."

He couldn't move his limbs. Could only stare at SnowMoth's tear-streaked face. "Who else feels this way?"

"We all do." She brushed Ghost's hair from his face, tucking curls behind his ears. "All of Crossroads does." She tried to smile. "You grew to appreciate the Covenant, Ghost, but you were never a believer. Frankly, I'm not sure I am. But how powerful my son must have been that he could grant you life. What Masari would not be awed by such potential?"

Her face blurred. Ghost blinked. His tears beaded up on grass.

"The other sustainers," she continued. "Tell me who they are, so that their kin can bless them."

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. He would have to tell her when he could speak again.

"And come to the house tonight. You and Piri and TelZodo. We'll listen to anything you have to say."

Sunlight edged down her lavender chops, setting the field to glistening. The others had all gone.

Ghost could only watch as SnowMoth struggled to her knees and planted a kiss on his forehead. She ran her fingers through his curls again, easing wayward strands into place.

"Welcome back into the family, baby brother."

She rose to her feet and brushed dirt from her clothes, her hair. Holding her shoulders straight, she walked dreamily toward the

cannery, leaving Ghost with limbs like lead. He sank into the rye, staring at cirrus clouds stretched like sinews across the sky.

## **Chapter 27**

### **The Canyon**

The night brought frigid rock. The heavens glittered, a great breath pulling heat out of the ground. Then the morning came, and the frost dwindled in dark recesses. The hunters followed promises of water, crawling on hands and knees and bending their mouths to succulents.

By midday they descended into a furnace in a long, narrow line. They pressed against a searing gray wall, clutching limestone. TripStone's palms wept serum as patches of her skin burned away. The box canyon shimmered as far as she could see and the light cast needles into her eyes, with nowhere to escape the sun.

She found and clung to a handhold, edging further and guiding her body and diminished pack along a narrow ledge. From ahead she heard FlitNettle's terse command, "Don't look down."

A man called out from behind, "Don't tell me it gets narrower from here."

TripStone suppressed irritation. It was too hot and too dry to waste words. HammerLake should save his saliva. He was a bartender. He should be used to listening.

The only water during the past two days had come with the insects and lizards they could catch, rodents blundering into their traps, and half-hidden plants. Few spoke, saving their strength to keep from falling over the edge.

TripStone hesitated to think where they'd be if it weren't for the sure-footed girl in their midst.

"There's a trickle up ahead." FlitNettle eased forward. Even her smaller feet extended past the uneven layer, booted toes hanging over the abyss. "I can smell it."

Black metal scraped against the rock. The StormCloud strapped to TripStone's back burned through her vest and shirt. Sweat blossomed where her pelt yielded to skin and just as quickly evaporated before she could catch it on her fingers.

DustClaw's voice rose from farther back. "Minerals."

"Halt," FlitNettle answered.

*Good. Somebody's thinking.* TripStone wished she were. She stopped and pressed harder into the rock.

Blistered fingers all around her dipped into crusty pockets and fished out diminished crystals. TripStone pushed hers into her mouth and nearly gagged on its hard angles, its dryness. It felt five times too big. She waited for drops of spit to form, the air she breathed a steady stream of flame licking her throat.

In time her mouth produced enough liquid to create a slow dissolve, easing stomach cramps she hadn't realized she had. Her legs became less rubbery. TripStone pulled relief into her body, counting her swallows. Reluctantly she spit the crystal into her hand and shoved it back into her pocket.

They would have missed the signs for Yata except for FlitNettle. More than once the girl had surprised them all, calling a halt to their maddeningly slow advance before she pressed her nose and lips to

the ground or to a vein of sediment. Other than that, their only accomplishment had been to help keep each other alive.

The trickle materialized as promised, dripping inside a cave around a bend. The hunters chiseled its opening wider and squeezed in one at a time. The first dozen slurped water from cupped hands. Loud groans of ecstasy echoed in the cramped space. A woman joked, "This sounds like a Yata feast at the Lodge."

"Gods, don't make me hungry," the man beside her blurted.

"Hey, Trippy!" HammerLake called gamely from the rivulets. "Have a drink?"

TripStone collapsed in cool shade and croaked, "I've swallowed enough fire outside, thank you."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. The bartender didn't seem disappointed for having lost a customer, now that TripStone had relinquished her seat at the tavern. She'd almost forgotten the numbness of her cheek against the long wood counter. Could barely remember the taste of the goldberry brandy in which she'd almost drowned.

Their thirst slaked at the wall, the first to drink curled their lips back, taking sharp sniffs.

"Stinks of Yata," one said.

"Yeah, but they haven't been here for a while."

"Four days." FlitNettle raised her hands to her mouth for another swallow. She waited for a round of curses to finish. "Don't worry, we're gaining on them."

"They must be slowing down, then."

FlitNettle nodded. "They're sick." She sat beside TripStone and angled her chin toward the water. "Your turn."

Soon the cave stank of Masari, too. The canyon's spring torrents were long gone, leaving a dry riverbed in their place and little rain. TripStone exulted as she drank, as noisy as the others and chortling at the teasing from behind.

"Hump something else," she called back, grinning. "My clothes are too sticky to peel off." She unlatched limp water bladders from her belt and angled them beneath the flow.

The splash against her face drove her to rapture. TripStone sluiced the sting from her eyes and washed away the dirt matting her chops. Between swatches of pelt she had turned to leather.

To her left TallowWinch sighed open-mouthed, shirt open down the front. The shopkeeper dragged a soaked rag across graying pectoral fur and around sagging breasts.

DustClaw had stripped down entirely and was scrubbing his midsection. He challenged TripStone with an exaggerated leer. The sharp outline of ribs showed through his pelt.

She arched her eyebrows at him before shucking her clothes, which came off after all. She didn't care how much of her he saw. Their debates were more flirtatious than this poor showing of broiled and puckered skin.

HammerLake lay naked against the rocks, half-asleep, his knees raised to make room for the others. "Why the hell would the Yata leave a place like this?"



"Better yet," DustClaw murmured, wiping between his legs, "why didn't they booby-trap it before they left?" He glanced back at the girl.

FlitNettle shrugged. "I don't know. Something drove them away."

DustClaw stepped aside for the next bedraggled hunter. "Must have been fast."

"That means we're in a race with it." The man beside the courier pulled off his shirt. He tipped water past his lips. "Gods, this is good."

TripStone picked at her neck fur and crushed a carapace with her thumbnail. She crunched it between her teeth. "PickGrate, how much oil do we have left?"

The whore grown muscular didn't have to look. "Two nights worth."

"Better use it now," DustClaw said.

"I agree." TripStone spilled water on her hair and gathered up her clothes, ready to scrub them against the walls if she had to. The heat should dry them before the party traveled in the cold. "Get your rest, everybody. We're not rationing for this meal." It didn't matter. They were almost out of food. "And from now on, keep an eye out for whatever we can burn."

~ ~ ~

"Wider up ahead." DustClaw raised his lamp. Gravel crunched underfoot as they advanced. "Leveling out."

A thin creek whispered to their left. The courier craned his neck and called behind, "Flit, which smells stronger to you? The water or the Yata?"

"It changes." More than shadows creased the girl's face. She was as roughened as the rest. "The Yata follow the water."

"*Everything* follows the water," TallowWinch murmured from farther back.

"Yeah," DustClaw said, "but *she* smells it a hell of a lot sooner than we do."

TripStone broadened her stride until she walked beside him. "That's because you've been breathing Promontory smog for too long."

"Really." He cast a sideways glance. "I haven't seen Crossroads' superlative hunter doing much better, for all your fertile forests and pristine air."

"I've been away from my fertile forests and pristine air, in case you haven't noticed." TripStone jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "FlitNettle grew up on Destiny Farm. Yata's been in her nose much more than it's been in mine."

FlitNettle called forward, "The smog doesn't get that far into the canyon."

DustClaw laughed. "And if it did, it couldn't get past all that sex in the air." He grinned back at her. "How did you stand it?"

The girl shrugged. "It was normal."

The courier nodded. "Yeah." Bitterness edged his voice. "Promontory was normal, once."

TripStone opened her mouth to retort, then shut it. Crossroads had been normal once, too.

They marched through a blanket of chill. It draped around TripStone's shoulders, gripping her through breeches and vest. Dried mutton sat like lead in her stomach.

She didn't need to draw BrushBurn's neatly-penned numbers from her pocket; she could picture them. No one in the group was close to breaking under normal circumstances, but many would be near their limit of Yata abstinence by the time they all got back. *Seven at level two, thirteen at level three, six at level four.* "No matter what happens," she murmured, "we'll have to turn around in three days."

"No, we won't." DustClaw stared straight ahead. "Promontory needs that Yata more than we do. What gives, gives."

He was still only at level two. TripStone shook her head. "Promontory needs its hunters."

"You'll train more." DustClaw adjusted the strap of his StormCloud and straightened his pack. "You may have been away from *pristine*, but you're still soft."

TripStone smirked. "Said by a man who knew only how to *shoot* before he met me. Now you know how to *hunt*."

HammerLake piped up from behind, "Be nice if we could use those lessons soon."

"You're using them now." Water bladders sloshed against her hips. "Tracking takes more than herding your food from a pen into a slaughterhouse."

A blast of anger reached her nose. TripStone looked back to see FlitNettle's neck fur standing on end. The girl's river-green eyes

glinted. Time to change the subject.

She faced forward again. "Think of it this way, DustClaw. After this excursion, your mail runs will be a stroll."

"What makes you think they haven't been?" He grinned at her. "I've got room in my wagon. You can come with me some time. Visit your little forests again."

TripStone laughed. "My little forests are killing fields."

"Visit your little people, then."

"I'm sure my paying a social call is the last thing on your mind." She forced lightness into her voice, past a growing ache in her breastbone. She drew her leather vest tighter.

A hard lump almost escaped her notice, blending into the rock. "Halt."

FlitNettle called out, "I see it."

The line of widely-spaced lights swung to a standstill. Silhouettes faded as the hunters lowered wicks to conserve fuel.

TripStone squatted by the lump, her lips curled back. She took the clod in her hand and rolled crumbles between her fingers. Wrinkled her nose at the strangeness in the stench. She handed over the lump as FlitNettle crouched beside her.

From above them DustClaw asked, "Yata scat?"

"No." FlitNettle held it up. "But Yata are *in* the scat. Look at the hair."

"That's what we're racing against." TripStone straightened. "Get that

smell into your glands and pass it back." She narrowed her eyes at DustClaw. "That was too big to have come from a Yata. You know that."

He offered her a contrite smile. "Must have been wishful thinking."

"Wishful thinking can get you killed. It's easy to do when you're soft. She turned away from him, hiding her triumph. "Flit, have you ever smelled anything like that?"

The girl shook her head. "They didn't come as far as the Farm." She remained down on the ground, holding her light close to the rocks. She grazed them with her fingertips and laid her cheek against them. "No tracks. No scratch marks." Her stomach distended. She waited, exhaled. "No scent marks."

A light brightened down the line and rose above the others, then lowered and dimmed again. "There are ledges up above."

"Bastards."

"Hone the anger, PickGrate." TripStone examined the canyon wall. "We know they're omnivores, larger than Yata, probably slightly smaller than we are, and they attack from above."

"And they're carrion eaters," FlitNettle added. "They're very well adapted." She stood and unslung her StormCloud, reaching for the cocking lever.

TripStone laid a hand on her arm. "That's old spoor. They'd be closer to the Yata by now."

The girl blinked. "You're right." She shouldered the rifle and tightened the strap. Twitched. "Something's bothering me." Her eyes were hard

again.

"It's bothering all of us. Try to relax." TripStone gazed back through the shadows, waiting for the signal to proceed. She stiffened when DustClaw's hand clapped her shoulder.

His fingers searched for a place to drum and settled by her cheek. *She's not bothered, TripStone. She's enraged. And I don't think it's at the beasts.*

She found his wrist. *Why not? They're healthy and this is their habitat. We're going to have to fight them for food.*

*They didn't murder her family.* His long sigh warmed TripStone's hair. *I don't care if Flit used to like the Yata. I guarantee you she doesn't like them any more.*

## Chapter 28

Morning reduced to a bright blue trickle high overhead. Shadow still cooled the canyon floor. Somewhere the sun rose, hidden behind a vault of stone.

FlitNettle strode on a layer of silt by a tiny stream. Her nostrils flared. "Dried blood. We're getting closer." She tilted her head and scanned the walls. "No place to perch here. They don't always attack from above."

TripStone followed the child's gaze down the narrow gorge that had closed in on them overnight. They traveled down a deep blade edge where eons of water eviscerated the rock. Striations broke across sheer drop. Sedimentary layers-red, white, green, gray-folded into each other, fingers clasped.

Compaction? Earthquake? She didn't know. TripStone looked up through layers of time and quickly down again, her pelt stiffening. She breathed deeply to calm down.

It wasn't the canyon that spooked her.

"I just got a strong whiff of musk." DustClaw held his mouth open, teasing the air. "Very sharp. Not Yata."

TripStone nodded. "Estrus. There's a den nearby."

She could find it with her eyes closed. Behind her the cadence of footfalls changed. Movements became quieter and more sinuous. TripStone's spine answered, smooth as the silt, uncoiling.

The air turned dense around the swivel of her hips. It led the hunters away from the water and into a crease. The crease opened up into lozenges of open space draped in woody tendrils and dark leaves, humid. Moisture percolated from one level to the next.

An oasis. Murmurs rippled up and down the line.

FlitNettle shrugged. "The Farm was built in an oasis." But she was wide-eyed, too, pulled in deeper by the rope of scent. Her pace quickened.

DustClaw fell in step beside her. "If there's a den nearby, then where are the Yata?"

"Not far." She winced. "They can't move. That's why the den is here."

She lengthened her stride, beginning to jog. She whipped her StormCloud off her back as others did the same.

Cocking levers snapped back, forward. Foliage blew back with the speed of their passage.

The chambers opened up into a bowl with blinding sky and taller trees. Beneath craggy rocks the ground turned uneven. Silt and chalk, leavings of past floods. Dislodged monoliths bridged the walls, angling above the hunters' heads.

Their boots pounded past the signs. Drag marks. Fresh scat. Crimson smears drawn out in the dust, pointing the way.

The musk crested and fell as they reached and left the den behind. TripStone opened her mouth and tasted stronger smells of gore and vomit, diarrhea and fever, flesh decaying in the growing heat.

Twenty-six Masari against how many Yata, how many beasts? The hunters' legs thought for them, running harder and faster.

Snarls answered. High-pitched yells, growls, cries cut short, teeth gnashing against bone. A bonfire crackled. Steel flashed amidst the flames and smoke, jabbing out of a cave toward massive claws swiping in from the other side.

The hunters erupted with a roar. Bullets ripped through mottled fur and the beasts turned, leaping onto the walls and down again. Shale thundered in a rain of shrapnel, too deliberate to have come from a natural formation. The Yata were sick, but they still set traps.

HammerLake snatched up a silenced gun, screaming. PickGrate blasted away the massive head that had sliced its fangs into her thigh and taken her down.

TripStone limped toward the cave, her breeches ripped, her legs running red. Blood pooled in her boots. She shot a beast struggling



past the fire and saw two emaciated Yata pull the dead animal inside. They crouched behind the corpse, using it as a shield.

No time to go in after them. She pushed toward a black cloud of flies to recover half-eaten Yata, killing the devils trying to steal them away. DustClaw joined her, laying down fire before spiriting the body parts to TallowWinch.

Ripped-open Masari lay scattered on the ground. TripStone hobbled, carrying them one at a time to a niche beneath an overhang.

*Secure the meat first. Tend the injured later.*

She looked helplessly at glazed faces and gaping wounds, then turned away and struggled to her feet, spitting bile into the dust.

More of the beasts were down now, lips drawn back and glassy-eyed. TripStone squatted and examined double-jointed legs and backs supple as whips. Their fur was striped like the walls, red-brown and gray, short and bristled. Long club tails. Paws flexed for traction.

A vulture's shadow dropped onto her as she stood before the fire, back to back with FlitNettle, squeezing off shots. Dribbles flowed from FlitNettle's hair onto TripStone's arm, but the girl was alert. A superficial wound, then. Limp fur still blocked the cave entrance, strangling airflow. It must be awful inside.

The view across slippery ground was just as bad. DustClaw stood guard over TallowWinch, whose hands flew into open-mouthed packs, drawing out preservatives. Dead Yata were piled in pieces about her, mangled and unrecognizable.

The last beast fell. Eight battered Masari raced back toward the den. Two bent over the wounded. Distant gunshot crackled as TripStone

and FlitNettle beat the bonfire into ash.

TripStone rubbed her shoulders, swaying on her feet. She squinted at whip-backed creatures torn on the ground, her ears filled with buzzing. Muffled groans sounded from behind the dead animal still stuck in the cave mouth.

For a moment she was back at Destiny Farm-its pens inexplicably emptied, the Masari who ran it butchered and bloated. Beside her, FlitNettle's eyes were spectral, the child's pupils shrunk into pinpoints.

The girl's filthy hand smoothed back sticky hair and pelt. Her fingers reached behind and slid along the black barrel, shifting her StormCloud closer to readiness. Her flat voice asked, "Ready?"

FlitNettle did not look half as sick as TripStone felt, but something about her was worse. "No, but let's do it."

Together they grabbed the stiff fur and yanked it from the cave entrance.

They reeled under a blast of putrefaction. TripStone staggered inside and jumped as a loud report and then another echoed off the walls. Two Yata slumped forward open-mouthed, seated in their own waste, splashing blood on a stain-encrusted wall.

DustClaw rushed inside as a third crack blasted intestines. "Flit!" he called, breathlessly. "Mind the contamination!"

"They were contaminated anyway."

"At least let me grab them for preservation!"

The child nodded, trembling with restraint. She snarled at TripStone's

hand on her barrel, "Don't."

"Or *what*?" Acid bathed TripStone's mouth, burning her throat as she swallowed. "Look at them, FlitNettle," she choked. "They can't do anything now. They're half gone."

DustClaw murmured as he hauled the dead, "Let her shoot."

"It's a waste of ammunition!" TripStone's body jerked under another explosion. Tears streamed from her eyes as she heard DustClaw gulping air outside the cave entrance. She grabbed his arm when he returned. "I'm going in deeper. Watch her."

"I don't have to. She knows what she's doing." He turned to the girl. "Prove me right."

"Maximum meat, minimum loss." FlitNettle pulled the cocking lever again, took careful aim, and gauged the splatter. "Better?"

"Good girl."

"What meat there is," she said, plainly, shrugging as he bounded ahead.

TripStone fled into the next recess, her hand over her mouth. She stumbled over a body as a thin blur resolved into a shaft of sunlight. Her eyes adjusted, tracing the shaft to a natural ventilation hole above a dead firepit.

Her vision cleared further. She sank to her knees, moaning.

Dozens of Yata lined the walls and floor, sicker than the others. They were little more than skeletons.

*How?* She wanted to cry out through a throat closed up. *How did this happen?*

Eyes too big for their heads followed her movements. They didn't react to the shots ringing out or when TripStone stiffened in response.

If only she could plug her nose and ears. If only she could close her eyes.

"You know you're going to die." She held her stomach, forcing the words up and the rest down. "I can help you pass without pain or we can wait for her."

Several blinked back. The others stared, dry-eyed. All she could do was approach them, offer a blessing, and snap their necks. *It's time to join the gods, dear ones.* She staggered past the noise ricocheting outside. *Quickly.*

She gathered up the first in her arms and hugged the stink to her. She cradled the bony head and twisted, whispering to the departing spirit before she laid limpness back down. Her fingertips brushed tenderly against matted hair and caressed sunken cheeks. She swept maggots away. Wept.

Bits of shale scattered beneath her boots. They seemed out of place, too fragile to be tools, too blunt to be weapons, and too unlike the surrounding rock to have originated in the cave. They could be some kind of game, or a form of prayer. The cavern became eerily silent, broken by the soft, rhythmic clicks of FlitNettle reloading.

TripStone's heart rocked as she counted. Nine bullets. Ten. She still had a little time.

Three Yata lay crumpled. The fourth was a mass of unhealed bruises. Part of his ear was missing and he reeked of infection, but he was still well enough to appraise her with rheumy eyes. He slapped TripStone's hand away when she reached out to touch his cheek.

She flinched when his bony arm swung up and cold fingers drummed against her chops, *Go to hell.*

She stared at his hand, but recovered quickly and whispered, "We're already there." She looked around the room and offered her palm. "Is everyone here all that's left?"

He folded his arms against his body, his gaze smoldering, cracked lips pressed into a thin line. Waiting.

"All right, then. I'm sorry."

She broke his neck. His sigh decayed as she moved on, driven by the clicks. Twenty-three bullets. Twenty-four. Dust motes danced above the firepit.

It must be a butchery outside the cave, every hunter slicing away spoilage and preserving the rest as the sun beat down. They should have dissection tables and buckets, and carts to spirit away the wastes.

*She stumbles past the line of furniture pulled out of people's homes and toward the front. Dining tables, sacrificial tables, raised bed pallets, it doesn't matter. They are all slippery with Yata cut apart and dripping gore down the sides of wood and stippled bone. Dozens of soldiers continue to be carried in, hideously painted with red clay, their armor tossed into one pile and their weapons into another.*

*These are the gods who have murdered her people. TripStone hears no prayers said over them. No consecrations.*

*The only hunters she sees are those she has ridden in with from Rudder, come to defend the border. Their StormClouds deafen her, repeating and repeating until all she can hear is gunshot.*

*The day she left Crossroads everything been so peaceful...*

Another crack echoed beneath her hands. Another pair of eyes dulled. "Dear gods, this has to stop." TripStone edged closer to the light and took another Yata into her arms. "Tell the gods, when you go to them. Tell them this has got to stop."

Small fingers trembled against her. Yes. A piece of shale pressed against her chest.

TripStone backed away. She took the thin piece from him and read scratches. Her breaths quickened as she found his palm. *You're DamBuster's test subject.*

He nodded.

*I know you only wanted to save the herd. Her fingers flew against him. Is anyone else out there? Can we can get them back to Promontory and try something else, nowthat the Farm is gone?*

He turned his head toward the ventilation hole, his face working. His hand lay stiffly in hers.

TripStone wanted to shout with relief. She drummed, *I'm from Crossroads, MudAdder. I know things can be better than this. Tell me what to do.*

*Give my body to DamBuster.*

*I will. I promise. Now tell me what I need to know.*

He slumped further against the wall, his fingers agonizingly slow. *The stronger ones left. We stayed behind.*

Thirty-one bullets. Thirty-two. The heavy cartridge slid into the buttstock.

The fingers against TripStone flinched at the blast. *I don't know where they are.*

She pressed into his palm, *How many are left?*

He turned from the light, searching her face as another shot echoed. *Many.*

She caressed his cheek. *Thank you.* She laid her palm against his heart. *I will remember you to DamBuster. And to BrushBurn.*

The joy in his eyes was almost too much to bear.

"Get away from him, TripStone. He's not yours."

TripStone pocketed the shale without turning around. "Not this one, FlitNettle."

A muzzle nudged her back. "*This one.*"

TripStone straightened her spine and rested on her heels. "Shoot if you have to. You're not getting past me."

"Don't test her, friend." DustClaw's voice floated to her from the

threshold. "I've seen what she can do."

"Then you can carry me back to BrushBurn, yourself."

*No. It is all right.* MudAdder's eyes were wide open, his touches urgent against her palm. He stared past TripStone's shoulder, up at the child. *She thought she was helping me save the herd.*

The muzzle traveled across leather and came to rest, pressing in closer. TripStone heard a bullet click into the breech.

So this was how it felt to have her heart spot centered in someone's sights. To be prey in the days of civilized sacrifice. TripStone sat quietly, bodiless, letting a soft wind whistle through her.

Had the Yata who'd sacrificed themselves to her felt like this? Had her muzzle been against them as they'd walked away from her, stepping through the portal and into the afterlife? Had their faces been as peaceful as MudAdder's looked now? As hers was?

She'd have to thank FlitNettle for the experience some day. If she lived.

"I appreciate your courtesy, FlitNettle." TripStone's hands rested easily in her lap, holding MudAdder's. "You are offering me a painless death. Will you do the same for him?"

Most of the labored breathing around her came from the Yata. After a moment the muzzle withdrew. TripStone nodded. She squeezed MudAdder's hands and let them go.

Neither the girl nor the test subject watched her as she rocked to her feet and shouldered her way past DustClaw. "I'll be outside," she said, drily. "Cutting."



She left the befouled cave behind, ducking out into blinding sun as FlitNettle squeezed the trigger.

~ ~ ~

A loud pop sent sparks flying into the night. TripStone turned her head toward grease dripping into cook fires as she and DustClaw brought up the rear, a makeshift stretcher between them. "Almost there."

A faint moan answered.

DustClaw sniffed the air. "Roasted whipback, I believe." He called forward to TripStone. "That made her smile."

"I'm glad you're still with us, PickGrate." She nodded toward others in the camp and looked for a spot to set down.

"I'm glad ~~we're~~ still with us." DustClaw angled toward a bare patch of rock. He called out into the dark, "Blankets!"

They waited as others piled the furs. The whipbacks' pelts were short and bristly, but they insulated well against the cold. The skin tied over TripStone's vest warmed her back. Another covered PickGrate, hiding the deep rents on her arms, legs, and torso, obscuring festering wounds.

"There." TripStone winked back at her as they set the stretcher down. "That climb wasn't so bad." Her muscles still spasmed from inching along the ledge, white-knuckled from gripping poles. "Saved us from having to cook dinner at the camp."

DustClaw squatted and eased his hands beneath PickGrate's shoulders. "Ready to lift?"

"I think so. I've gotten enough practice." TripStone smiled down at the stretcher. "You're too light, PickGrate; I had to hold you *down* so we wouldn't blow over the edge. Think you can take some food tonight?"

No answer.

Others gathered around. Several helped position the limp woman onto the furs.

"This is the closest we could get to your bed, Grate." HammerLake adjusted the skins around her. "How long since you've had this many hands on you?"

She grinned back at him, eyes half-lidded.

"Any way we can do you, that isn't too painful to touch?" He slipped his hand beneath the blanket. "You've still got those wonderful fingers that make me so happy. Tell my palm what you want, sweetheart."

PickGrate closed her eyes. HammerLake gazed down at her, thoughtful. Nodding.

"Somebody build a fire," he said. "NailBit is after me. DustClaw, you'll come later."

The courier laughed. "I bet I will."

"Then GravelCup." HammerLake watched knuckles moving beneath the fur. "Tell GravelCup to bring her water bladder. The special one. That won't tire you out too much, sweetheart?"

PickGrate opened her eyes and gave him a mock glare.

"WestCarriage is next." He waited a moment, then patted her hand.

"That's it."

TripStone asked, "Privacy curtain?"

"No. Whoever wants to watch can watch. And keep the fire going." He called over his shoulder. "Flit! Free lessons if you want 'em!"

The girl turned from a large, canvas-covered mound anchored to the side of the trail. "No, thank you." She turned back.

DustClaw murmured, "Not her calling."

TripStone squeezed his shoulder and gave PickGrate a reassuring smile, then made her way to the haul.

FlitNettle stood straight, whipback skin wrapped around her. She held it close to her chest, her sight trained on lumps beneath the cloth. She didn't move as TripStone stepped up to the mass.

"You've been staring at that every night since you killed them." TripStone studied a profile that seemed deceptively benign. "I'm not angry with you, FlitNettle. I'm here if you want to talk."

"I know."

*I come here, too. Alone, during the night watch. When no one else is looking.* TripStone kept the thought to herself, her arms folded against the cold. The piled Yata formed a great boulder of cold, stacked bodies. Peaceful.

The girl narrowed her eyes. She said, voice low, "You pray to them, don't you?"

"That's not your concern."

Soft laughter reached them. Sounds of encouragement and delight. More tinder crackled.

FlitNettle looked back, toward a gathering crowd. "They're pleasuring her, this time."

TripStone nodded. "They're saying goodbye to her. She's dying."

"I know."

DustClaw stepped up to the mound, gnawing on a bone, a charred slab in his other hand. He held it out to TripStone. "Talk later. Your muscles are screaming for food."

"I hadn't noticed." She took the meat from him. Whipback blood ran down her chin. She caught it on her finger. A glance at FlitNettle's face told her the girl had eaten.

DustClaw breathed easily at her side. TripStone raised her eyebrows; they were all meditating by the bodies. "The gods only know where the other Yata have gone," she said. "We'll have to establish a base camp. A permanent presence in the canyon, with supply lines."

DustClaw wiped his mouth. "I agree. Whatever it takes."

TripStone squinted at his inward gaze, then saw the longing in his eyes. "How far along are you?"

"Early stages of deprivation." He flashed a grin. "I'm glad we took that little climb before I started getting woozy. But I've had all the whipback my stomach can hold and I can tell it isn't enough." He angled his chin toward a campfire. "TallowWinch has been feeling a little numb, too."

"We won't reach the rim for another eight days." TripStone shook her

head and gnawed off another bite. "This isn't good."

"Understatement, my hearty level four." His finger jabbed toward the bodies. "Just remember that those are for Promontory. Not for us."

"You and TallowWinch *are* Promontory, DustClaw, just like everybody else."

"Everybody else has their jobs to do. We have ours. Cut into that haul and I'll shoot you."

*Not if you can't feel the trigger.*

But his face was serious. TripStone read the warning in his eyes and its reflection in FlitNettle's. Most of the other hunters here would make the same threat and would carry it out without fail.

"There are ways to ease the symptoms. I fasted recklessly once, but I learned how to trick my body into thinking it was strong."

DustClaw smiled at her. "I was hoping you'd say that." He touched her cheek as the air filled with applause. "If you need me, I'll be having dessert over at PickGrate."

TripStone worried gristle, watching as he turned and loped toward the crowd.

She swallowed the last of the whipback and cleaned her hands in chalk. Several hunters lay exhausted in their tents, uninterested in the show. They grasped remnants of home in their hands, dreaming of kin.

DustClaw was on his hands and knees, half-hidden and with his haunches in the air. Furs rose to either side of his head. His rump

must be freezing.

No, GravelCup squatted behind him, covering his buttocks. She reached between his legs as he cradled PickGrate's thighs, pushing his face further. He sucked harder, moaning in reply as PickGrate rewarded him with long, contented sighs.

HammerLake knelt at the dying woman's head, wiping sweat from a brow grown increasingly blanched. NailBit stood off to the side, still dribbling, his eyes wistful.

The crowd made room as TripStone stepped among them. PickGrate's lips were darkened but her skin was pasty, pale where she wasn't engorged.

Whipback pelt shifted as DustClaw massaged breasts, squeezing nipples. His hands traveled beneath the furs. He grunted under the pressure of GravelCup's grip, buried too deeply to see PickGrate's gaze begin to drift.

Her sudden twitch alerted him. He backed out of the blanket, deflating, his face pinched in pain. GravelCup patted his ass and took his place.

The courier pulled his breeches back on, ignoring his boots. He wiped his mouth and moved TripStone aside, his breathing labored as they leaned against the rock. She waited while he stared into the flames. His eyes focused on the fire, then grew vacant again.

"I'll miss her, too," she offered.

He shook his head.

TripStone saw him grimace. "What, then?"

DustClaw gazed up at the stars, at places where the rim blotted them out high overhead. "She won't last the night."

"No." She looked back toward the crowd. Calls of encouragement turned gentle. Comforting. "The oasis gave us enough wood for a pyre."

He shook his head again.

"She has no family to receive her back home."

"No, you don't understand." He fixed TripStone with an intense gaze. "Cook her."

The words jolted her. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, TripStone. Cook her." He gulped chilled air. "Your friend Ghost has been eating Masari. So has DamBuster. It's their latest research. That's what all their poking and prodding around town has been about. They're looking for-" His brow furrowed. "They call them Sustainer Masari. It all started with someone named BrokenThread." He leaned further into the rock, tilting his face again toward the sky. "I open the mail. It's how I pass the time on those long strolls."

TripStone clenched and unclenched her hands, rubbing her arms. The tents floated before her, straining against their rigging. Her stomach lurched once, then settled.

"I knew BrokenThread." Jagged edges pressed into her back. "How can they tell who's a sustainer?"

"They can't. Every time I do my runs they've come up with a new test." DustClaw barked a laugh. "Sometimes it works, sometimes it

doesn't. Stabs in the dark."

GravelCup backed out of the blanket. WestCarriage squatted by PickGrate, lifting the fur.

TripStone tried to smile. "That's the last one."

"She knew how much to ask for." DustClaw sighed with admiration. "She always knew her capacity."

They watched. The action to the side sped up, slowed. More hunters knelt. Hands reached out, stroking. Faces turned tear-streaked.

TripStone whispered, "I don't know how the others will react to this."

"You're in Promontory now. Don't worry about sensibilities." He nodded toward the group. "Most of us will be honored to eat her twice."

~ ~ ~

"I want to thank all of you for helping PickGrate pass the way she wanted to."

HammerLake stood before a blaze dying down, his hands twisting. The heat blew hair into his reddened eyes. He brushed it back. "Including those of you who were resting in your tents. She didn't want to see anyone napping at the show."

Soft laughter ringed the campfires. People wiped their cheeks. Above them the brightest stars remained, beginning to fade.

TripStone's fingers laced with FlitNettle's. DustClaw sat on the child's other side, his touch light.



"This is our fourth death since the canyon hunts first began." The bartender gazed out over the gathering. His lips ticked up. "And the first orgy. That's the way PickGrate wanted us to remember her." His eyes gleamed. "She wanted to have as many notches on her gun as on her bedpost. When that was no longer possible, she brought her bedpost along."

Bladders and flasks rose together.

WestCarriage called out, "To the finest whore ever to grace Promontory's sheets."

TripStone held her water aloft as whoops of assent died down. "To a woman who knew how to aim."

"And who welcomed everyone else's!" shouted NailBit.

"Hear, hear!"

TripStone looked from HammerLake to the long board raised beside him. Her shoulders ached from cutting and chopping, slicing infections away, cleaning cavities. There should be a scale to measure the poundage of flesh, but there wasn't. They would have to dispense with numbers.

"Breakfast will be a little different this morning." HammerLake winced, smiled. "Frankly, I think PickGrate would have liked the idea. She always thought everyone deserved a piece of her." He shook his head at the board. "Gods, I miss her."

He gestured toward a neat pile of slices and rising steam. "My friends, some of you were not awake to help us with our preparations. Believe me, they weren't easy." He took a deep breath and shook off a shudder. "But there's a reason for them. DustClaw here tells me

that some Masari can sustain us the way the Yata do. There's no telling who can and who can't and for whom. I say we try them all and find out."

TallowWinch called, "Do we get to *die* first?"

HammerLake gave a small bow. "I'm sorry for that omission, TallowWinch. Yes, you get to die first. But stay with us for as long as you can, please. It's hard on the digestion if you go too soon." He angled his chin. "Now get your plates up here. Level twos first. Isn't that right, Trippy?"

TripStone swallowed around a lump in her throat and nodded. "Level twos."

"That means you, TallowWinch. And GravelCup, NailBit, DustClaw, ShatterBeak, BladePull, and FlitNettle."

"I'm almost at level three."

"Doesn't matter, Flit. You get to go in the first group. And don't stint." HammerLake rested his palm on the board. "I'm at level three, like PickGrate, and I'm going to take her into me the way she's taken me into her. I want you all to do the same."

He unlatched his flask from his belt, held it high, and barked, "And I hereby offer my body up for Promontory's consumption when I die. Take everything; I won't need it any more. *Who's with me?*"

Shouts erupted. Hunters jumped to their feet, drinks raised.

"You look a little dizzy, TripStone." HammerLake smiled at her. "Are you sure you don't need to go along with the twos?"

TripStone laughed a little, swaying. Her eyes swam as she gazed over the bruised and the bandaged, at the flasks and bladders around her own, pointing at a brightening sky. FlitNettle and DustClaw cradled tin plates. "I'll be fine," she croaked.

"That's not brandy in your bladder, is it?"

"No."

"Trippy did most of the cutting last night. She's allowed to look wasted this morning." HammerLake motioned the first hunters forward. He tilted his head back and gulped from his flask.

TripStone sat back down, drawing her knees to her chest. Rock walls tilted as she laid her cheek on her breeches. Stories of sexual exploits buzzed around her. Lurid jokes, promises of choice cuts. Explosive laughter. She closed her eyes.

She lifted her head at the sound of clattering. The level threes, reduced to twelve, formed a line beside the board. Jokes diminished to half-hearted banter. DustClaw and FlitNettle sat to either side of her, chewing, their expressions thoughtful.

She mumbled, "I should write to Ghost."

"You should talk to DamBuster." DustClaw lifted another slice. "He's been keeping this precious little secret to himself."

"We don't know if this precious little secret works."

"All the more reason to spread it around town."

She watched him bite down. "You'll tell me if you feel any different."

DustClaw smirked. "Carry me if I don't."

HammerLake sat up front, his head on GravelCup's shoulder, his eyes tight shut. She rubbed his arm as he eased a morsel into his mouth. He unstopped his flask and washed it down quickly, nuzzling GravelCup's neck fur.

Campfires dwindled as the sun rose. The large cookpit died down to embers. TripStone looked up into shadow.

WestCarriage handed her a plate. "You did good work up there. I couldn't recognize a thing."

"Thank you." She shook her head. "That's probably because I was cutting half-blind."

She stared at the slices after he left and listened to the quiet in the camp.

*This is me.*

The tin plate brightened, becoming a mirror. TripStone lifted the meat and held it tentatively against her lips. *This is me in somebody else's mouth.*

Her lips parted; she inhaled. The flesh in her hand could be anything. Whipback, mutton, Yata. Nothing gave its identity away.

And everything did.

It yielded, tender between her teeth. Juice squirted.

## Chapter 29

Late Autumn

## Promontory

The crowd stood to either side of the trailhead, day and night, in rain, in frost, keeping watch as they had for days.

They paid no attention to Jirado, who peered over the edge of the rim along with them. She smelled lubricant on one set of coveralls, quarry dust on another. Promontory's citizens departed one shift only to begin another, each vigil relieving the last.

Twilight spread behind Skedge. The sun set; the stars had yet to come out. Several Masari cleared brush away and spread blankets on the ground, huddling in woolens.

No one mentioned the hunters. Instead they engaged in small talk if they talked at all. Mostly they remained silent. Praying, perhaps; Jirado didn't know. Their friends, neighbors, loved ones had never been gone for so long.

BrushBurn stepped up beside her. Early evening augmented the dark circles under his eyes. His face was as sallow as the others', his brow pinched. "I thought I saw you the other night. Have you been coming here all along?"

Jirado nodded.

"Not for the same reasons as the rest of us."

"No."

"We can't comfort each other, then."

Jirado tightened the wrap of her shawl, holding herself across her

chest. "It's strange, you know. When you think about it, our stomachs all feel the same." She choked a laugh. "We keep coming here, getting sicker by the minute."

When did she lean into his coat and pillow her head on his torso? When did he put his arm around her? If the hunters were dead, she could comfort him. If they were still alive, he could not comfort her.

Wraith-like figures passed them in the dusk, some arriving, others leaving. One lantern flared to life and then another as the stars came out. It was like a conflagration, fire jumping from wick to wick, the rim beginning to blaze like a beacon. BrushBurn tightened his grip on her shoulder.

*My husband is down there.* But no. SilverLode, CloudHook, and MeadowDoor were supposed to have died in the riots. She was supposed to be alone, with no strong ties to the canyon Yata. No personal motive for her own hunt.

He whispered, "This is not a good place for you to be."

Jirado snuggled against him. "I've seen death."

"Not like this. It still disturbs me." BrushBurn shook his head. "But after this long, every Masari here will be faint with joy when we see them."

The unspoken *if* hung in the air between them.

AgatePool didn't come here. Neither did the mixed-blood workers fighting for acceptance in Promontory's factories. To them their fellow citizens captured by the Farm were already long dead. The living had given up and moved on.

Jirado closed her eyes and tried to picture a line of Yata holding vigil on the mesa, standing along its southern edge and gazing out across the salt pan. Watching the landscape darken, the slit of the canyon a black line against gray, the string of lamps igniting.

Or no one could be there. Instead her people worked past sundown, chiseling holes into the rock, hammering in stakes and boards. They turned broken marble into building materials for more stairs and more planting terraces. They tried to irrigate the desert and grow their own food, creating their own industry. They tried to wean themselves from the Masari.

BrushBurn's arm enfolded her. "You're shuddering."

"I know." Jirado swallowed. "I can't leave here."

His voice caught. "Neither can I."

Cold knifed through her shawl and nipped at her ear. For a moment she envied the Masari their fur. Then the feeling dulled, until only the smells of wool and worry remained. An island of warmth against her cheek, another stretched across her back.

*A hand reaches into the gearing and touches hers. The surprised shout reaches her from outside metal. "Someone's still in here!" Sienna eyes stare into hers, widening. "It's a girl!"*

*She shouts back, "I've worked here for fourteen years, bucko. I'm older than you are!"*

*The hand reaches in further. She smacks it away and grabs an idle piston, hauling herself over scrapers and sifters. They are both masked and gloved, but the sight of him shivers the pit of her stomach with delight. It must be the bed snuff.*

*He extends his palm. "SilverLode."*

*She grasps it. "CutterDrum. Didn't anybody tell these fools I was in here working?"*

*His eyes crinkle. "You're hard to detect."*

*"I'm hard to miss." The woman who will become Jirado, who is still a Little Masari, smiles at the man swathed in an apron that extends to his ankles. "You're here from the vats." The mask stretches around her smile. "Anything there need fixing?"*

*"Yes." SilverLode touches the sleeve of her brown-powdered coveralls. His gaze immobilizes her. "Me."*

Jirado stirred at the sounds of shouting. She straightened her neck and blinked her eyes open. "How long was I asleep?"

"Almost two hours." The voice from above sounded breathless.

Masari around them cried with relief. Lanterns crowded together by the rim. Nausea formed a hard ball in her throat.

"More lights below!" Excited voices reached them. "Torches. They must have run out of oil!"

"They must have run out of a *lot* of things!"

"Can you see anyone?"

"No, still too distant! Anybody got a clarifier?"

Long tubes passed hand to hand.



BrushBurn squeezed Jirado's shoulder. "I've got to get closer." His blue eyes wavered. "Leave, Jirado. This will be difficult for you."

She shook her head and mouthed, Go.

The look he gave her was terrifying for its tenderness. Jirado's knees buckled as he left her side, already reaching for his notepad as he pressed toward the edge.

He was right; she couldn't stay here. She had to get to the Warehouse. Ahead of the others, ducking into tight spaces, able to see the bodies brought in.

*This is reconnaissance.* Jirado scooted toward hulking marble, her shawl held tightly around her head. She could slip into the Warehouse and down to its armory as Gria's forces had, emerging with her finger jerking the trigger.

No. She'd be one against the mob.

She had to study the monsters first. The hunters would be tired. Their weaknesses would be most apparent in their time of triumph. Jirado became smaller. She slipped past distracted and happy guards, climbed to her perch, and bent her shape into a recess. She tied herself into place with the shawl.

Blankness lay beyond the advancing lights. Torches blotted out the stars in a pool of yellow haze and smoke as the party wormed its way up and across the switchbacks. The haze ended in a bottomless drop, where the Yata were.

The remaining Yata.

Jirado closed her eyes against the cheering below, but opened them

as her cramps worsened. She had to watch the Masari receive their providers and their food. BrushBurn was among the first past the trailhead, keeping his balance on thick legs as he careened down a chalky slope.

Basc had welcomed its Yata home. What of Skedge?

*Don't forget them!* She ached to yell back at the mesa. *You've already forgotten so much!*

How many of her people were still Little Masari in spite of all that had happened? They had learned their ancestral language and had taken Yata names, but did they know what it *meant*? Did she?

To be a Yata in the arid lands was to be alone.

Jirado busied herself with the shawl, knotting herself in tighter. She was a chick in a nest, hidden in fluff. She wanted to cry out, but the scent of death below was too strong. She had to be silent and helpless if she wanted to live.

Below her the guards strained from their stations, tethered by duty. Beyond them the trail flooded with people, too thick for Jirado to see the hunters. Light obliterated silhouettes. The canyon smoked. She could only wait, her heart beating terrified wings. Preservative carried on the wind.

*She is pinned beneath a fallen winch, half-blinded in the brown haze of ignited Destiny. The powder melts and congeals, its properties unraveling. The factory stinks, but she must keep breathing.*

*Jirado-she knows her name now-pushes against searing heat. Her palms blister, but the Masari will hear her if she screams. Blood*

drips down her back and between her legs, but it isn't hers. She turns away from a head half flesh and bone, half splintered marble.

The Yata will hear her if she screams, too. She doesn't know whose side she's on any more, only that there are no Little Masari, no bed snuff, no trade with Promontory, no treasure any more. There is no Skedge any more. It is all a mirage, a fairy tale risen from the horrors of war a long, long time ago.

The Yata who don't know that yet, who don't know who and what they really are, will kill her if they find her.

Jirado pushes harder. She grasps a thick cable that comes loose. It crashes to the floor in a pile of scorched metal, but another one holds. Skin sloughs off her hands as she pulls. She can manage a few inches of movement, but she cannot free the rest.

Laughter carries amidst roaring flames and the sounds of agony. It begins at a distance, moving closer. Laughter and sighs, moans cresting and quickening.

Her husband grunts with a joy so fierce it freezes Jirado's blood. It can't be SilverLode, but it is. She can pick out his climax among the others. Her body shakes as he begins again, barely spent, impossibly virile as the walls around them begin to collapse. Impossibly naked when he enters her field of view, plumbing a perfect stranger from behind. Five bodies writhe, stumbling forward, glued together.

The laughing Masari drive them on. Two men from the Farm, one pushing, the other steering. "Let's go, you stupid meat. Don't want to get crushed grinding sausage, do you?" They glance furtively

about, herding the humping mass away from structural weaknesses. They reach into the bodies to stroke, to tweak, laughing harder at rekindled lust. "Ooh, you're going to pay for what you did here."

They could mean the attack on the factory or the poisoned Destiny. They could mean the tortures of their ancestors. Jirado doesn't know. It doesn't matter. She quakes as she watches in disbelief, her last sight of SilverLode reduced to a hideous open-mouthed grin, his mindless ecstasy as he comes and comes and comes.

A scream builds through her entire body and both the scream and the body can go nowhere.

By the time she witnesses her besotted brother and sister being led away, Jirado has forgotten her name. She has forgotten everything.

Now those men from the Farm were dead and the Destiny was gone. The Yata captured or born as livestock survived. Jirado wheezed inside her knotted cocoon, trying to rub the chill from her arms.

The hunters approached the rim. BrushBurn stepped back over the lip, cradling a corpse in his arms. Joy warred with grief in the flickering light. He looked awful.

He called to a spectator, his voice stricken, "Get DamBuster."

A youngster stepped up close behind him, took the dead man, and slung him over her shoulder. She was the same size as the corpse, rocking under its weight. A terrible light reflected in her eyes. She and BrushBurn exchanged tense words as he reached for his pad again.

He positioned himself by a doorway, recording the names of the hunters who passed him, the numbers tattooed on the corpses they

carried, and the spring weights as bodies dropped onto a scale. Many were barely bodies at all. Jirado tried to still her twitching as she counted the dead in a line extending beyond the rim.

A half-eaten thing carried on poles appeared, not Yata. Preserved body parts from something else stuck out from a satchel. Tufts fringing slabs of flesh. Masari.

The crowd pressed in toward the hunters, closer to but not touching them, waiting for the meat to be unloaded. Shouts of excitement melded with alarm. White spots swam before Jirado's eyes. The dead Yata were all so *thin*. They were like matchsticks.

Their killers were not much better off. Everyone was in tatters, moving as though stunned. She looked toward the canyon again, her chest heaving.

"We have to go back down." A woman's voice cut through the din, lined with exhaustion. "We've got to convince the Chamber to give us the resources for a base camp. And I need to train people who will *stay* there."

BrushBurn shook his head, his eyes glazed as another body dropped onto the scale. "If they're all like this it won't buy us any time."

"They're not all like this. The survivors are gaining ground every day. We couldn't stay away any longer and make it back here ourselves."

He touched his chops to hers and Jirado realized the seamed face was TripStone's.

"Record this one so I can put him down." TripStone shifted position. She grasped the dead buttocks more firmly, easing her free hand through the man's hair and pulling up the head. One ear was partly

gone. A face, slack-jawed and dun, lifted off her pack.

BrushBurn cursed as he wrote. "That's a recent tattoo."

"I know. FlitNettle told me."

The shawl above them jerked uncontrollably from side to side. Fibers struggled to hold still, rocking to a halt. They broke, a shuttle careening off its loom as SilverLode's limp body hit the scale.

Jirado's nails dug into her palms as she clutched the knots, otherwise she would throw herself onto the tray with him. Her lips stretched into one soundless cry after another, tears streaming into the weave.



# Chapter 30



In the dark SandTail swore he lay next to a Masari. AgatePool's pelt tickled his skin where his own fur began to grow back, stubbly and stiff, as though he were in a constant state of surprise or alarm.

But it was *his* skin, mended and Masari at last. Scratched by the woolen blanket he pulled over his shoulders. Pressed by lumps of straw beneath the linen covering their pallet.

With triumphant joy SandTail had shoved the remaining canisters of pickled Yata skin into BrushBurn's hands for return to the hospital. Once again that precious, terrible resource was the property of Promontory.

About time. He'd taken more than enough from this city's good people.

He eased his belly against the small of AgatePool's back, wanting to do more. She would awaken soon, before the sun rose. Her coveralls hung over a straight-backed chair, her boots ready by the door. SandTail listened to her steady breaths, her bulk rising and falling.

She needed nothing to wake her up for the factory. Her body knew.

*He walks inside tons of marble and steel, broad-brimmed hat in his hands. If he focuses on the wood boards angled against the walls, and the nailed-up production schedules and personnel lists, he can*



pretend he is elsewhere. Back home, smelling familiar grease and hearing different, less ominous pumps.

SandTail can't feel his fingers. If he's not careful he'll drop the hat, which is no way to make a good impression. He can't ignore the design engraved and repeated overhead, running the length of the hallway. The ancient Yata symbol for Destiny is everywhere.

He reminds himself that nobody here knows what it means except for him. He is not here to be tortured, mangled, and dumped over the mesa's edge. He has not been captured and hauled up here. He has come of his own free will in service to Promontory. These are Little Masari he's dealing with. They are his friends. They think they're his cousins.

Yata in blue coveralls stare, then grin at SandTail as they pass. He grins back at them and bites down fear. They stare because of his size, that's all. He doesn't have to duck past the doors the way his colleagues do. The workers don't have to crane their necks when they speak with him.

He is the perfect agent for Destiny Farm. Someone they can identify with. Someone they think they know.

He reaches the manager's office and raps on the door.

"It's open!"

SandTail startles at her smoky voice. Did he remember wrong? Is a Masari in charge of the factory? But no, that can't be. The formula for Destiny has always been the Yata's best-kept secret.

He pushes his way inside and hears the soft thunk of his brim hitting

*the floor. But she is wide-eyed, too.*

*Then she laughs, black chops riding her cheeks above luxuriant neck fur. She rounds her desk and strides to meet him, furred hand outstretched. "I'm AgatePool. You must be SandTail." Dark Yata eyes twinkle beneath her copper-colored brow. Frizzed black curls frame her broad face. "I must say I expected someone taller, but I'm glad you dropped your hat and not bumped your head. Welcome to Skedge."*

Her Masari-textured hair slid through SandTail's fingers. Her musk smelled more of Promontory than of Skedge. He'd breathed it in for eighteen years. They'd helped build their cities together. Sweet delusion.

Too much had happened between them. He couldn't fear her now.

His breath caught as the front door opened. Dim light reached the bedroom through his study and then the kitchen. SandTail grabbed his cane and levered himself out of bed. Damned legs still wouldn't do what they were supposed to, but they were learning again.

He probably needed Yata meat. Too bad. Promontory needed it more.

Whispers reached him, too soft to understand as he stumbled past his dining table. The pallet set up in the kitchen's far corner was empty. His nurse had been out all night.

A voice gone too long sailed in from the study. "He's up, BrushBurn. You'd better go to him."

SandTail leaned heavily in the doorway as the trader approached. Tongue or no tongue, he still had enough teeth to split his face into a

grin. One hunter, at least, was still alive.

He grasped his protégé's arm. *Tell TripStone I am very glad to hear her. When did they get back?*

"Five hours ago." BrushBurn's body blocked SandTail's view of the couch. "We brought Jirado here as soon as we could."

*You're telling me she was there for the haul.*

BrushBurn answered on his palm, *I tried to get her to leave, but she refused. We don't know how much she saw, but we found her wandering around the clearing after the take was processed. TripStone and I cleaned her up, but she's in shock.*

SandTail nodded. *How is your cousin?*

*FlitNettle's at home asleep.*

She couldn't be well, either, from the worry in his eyes. SandTail pushed off the doorpost and hobbled to his desk, letting gravity drop him into his chair.

Jirado sat on the couch, curled into a shawl so torn and filthy he couldn't tell its color. Lacerations covered what he could see of her face, arms, and legs. She stared at him, dry-eyed. TripStone sat farther away from the Yata than usual, looking sick. SandTail motioned her over.

The hunter pulled a chair beside the desk. BrushBurn sat next to Jirado, who fell limp against his side.

*If you're feeling well enough and don't need her any more, we should send her back to Skedge.* TripStone gave SandTail a

searching look as she drummed, *I'm beginning to think you're right. I don't know how well we'd be able to integrate Yata here.*

SandTail patted her hand. *My dear, I believe you are finally becoming a citizen of Promontory.*

*Don't insult me.*

It was a half-hearted retort and she knew it. Whatever she had learned in Crossroads, she was steadily unlearning it here.

He aimed his chin toward the couch. *Look at them. Do you see how he has his arm around her? I don't know what she's up to, but it's better she goes back home.*

*That's called comfort, SandTail. We brought up some terrible-looking people.*

His eyes flashed. *She's been after him ever since she read his mother's letters to me, TripStone. Don't tell me it's just because he's sympathetic toward the Yata.*

She offered a strained smile. "In case you haven't noticed, the frontier wars have been over for a very long time."

Sounds of dressing came from the bedroom. SandTail turned, squinting at the confusion in AgatePool's face. A squeak from the couch made him turn back.

Jirado sat straight-backed, her hands balled into fists, her eyes wild. Veins stood out among the cuts.

"It's all right, Jirado." AgatePool took uncertain steps past the desk. "Whatever has happened-"

"It's not all right," BrushBurn interrupted. "She was at the trailhead when the hunters returned. No Yata should see that."

Jirado grabbed his arm as though hanging off a cliff. She hissed when AgatePool moved forward, "Stay away from me."

*You'll tell me about the hunt later.* SandTail squeezed TripStone's arm. *After Jirado's gone.* He motioned AgatePool over and pressed her palm. *Take your breakfast with you today.*

"I'm not leaving her like this."

*She wants nothing to do with you right now It's best you leave her alone.*

SandTail nodded at his lover's troubled gaze before AgatePool returned to the kitchen. She wanted only to care for her worker. Under different circumstances, he would have done the same.

And Jirado was no ordinary worker. What Yata attended a Masari hunter's homecoming, willingly courting that torture? Something was odd.

"BrushBurn." AgatePool emerged with a cloth bag under her arm. She edged past the couch, reaching for her boots and coat. "You'll watch over her?"

"You have my word."

Relief washed over Jirado's face as the door slammed shut. Her eyes became disturbingly blank when she looked from BrushBurn to TripStone.

*She hates AgatePool more than she hates you right now* SandTail

danced his fingers on a still-dusty wrist. *And you've just spent days killing her people. I find that curious.*

*I'm tired, SandTail, and I've got a lot to do. Bother me with your theories after I've rested.*

He shook his head. *I know that look on her, TripStone. I remember when you had it.*

*Then maybe plying her with drink will help ease your suspicions.*

SandTail raised his eyebrow. *That didn't work with you.*

"I'm sorry, Brother Wanderer." Jirado struggled to her feet, wincing. "I did not expect to react the way I did."

The old term of endearment was stranger still. SandTail watched the Yata peel off her shawl. Her dress was just as ruined. She must have thrown herself onto the ground, beating brush and thorns.

"Basc at least has the Soala," TripStone offered. "Yata gather there after a hunt to grieve together."

Jirado looked away. "That's because they care in Basc. I don't think they care any more in Skedge."

"Basc has lived with the hunts for a very long time. This is all new to Skedge."

Jirado began to cry. "They don't want to know."

The look on TripStone's face was almost as frightening as the one on Jirado's. The hunter even seemed happy. SandTail's concern turned to alarm as TripStone stood and unlaced her vest.

She offered him a little smile. "Look if you must, SandTail, or look away. I really don't care. But know that I am not yet a citizen of Promontory." She dropped the vest on the floor and unwrapped her shirt. "And even though the Covenant is gone and we no longer practice Atonement as we once did, we still respect the lives we take and the Yata we leave behind."

Her breasts were still sweat-encrusted, her pectoral fur white with chalk.

BrushBurn leaned forward on the couch. SandTail couldn't tell whether he was worshiping his wife or Jirado. Probably both. This couldn't be good.

TripStone pulled off her boots and set them aside. "I would have brought you food, Jirado. And I wouldn't have been in my hunting clothes, but would have come to you barefoot and in a plain tunic." She tugged at the laces on her breeches, slid them off, and laid them atop her vest. "You would have received me in the visitor's hut, where I would have disrobed like this."

*You would not have had quite so many scars, my dear.* SandTail would tell her if he could reach her.

"I would have been weaponless, dependent on your forgiveness. My life would be yours."

TripStone sank to her knees before Jirado. The hunter bent forward at the waist, her arms at her sides, palms facing back and up. Her forehead touched the floor.

Jirado blinked and swallowed. Her shawl trailed from a shaky hand. She moved half-dazed, settling it lightly across TripStone's fur-matted shoulders before she stepped back, clutching her stomach.

If SandTail were a Yata he would be enraged. This was not Basc. It was certainly not Crossroads. And no matter how long ago the wars here ended, that Masari on the floor was still a murderer no matter how contrite. *Be careful whom you pray to, TripStone.*

Jirado managed to whisper, "What happens next?"

TripStone sat back on her heels. She drew off the shawl and set it in her lap. "Normally I would describe the hunt, but that would not be appropriate here. Then I would listen to you, memorizing whatever you wanted to tell me about the person you knew, who had self-sacrificed to me." She frowned. "In those days I took only one Yata, who would have blessed me before dying. I used a single-shot rifle. I shot my prey through the heart, so that death came instantly and without pain." She shook her head. "That hasn't happened for over a year now, even in my valley."

"But Yata and Masari work together."

TripStone nodded. "Ironically, we have Promontory to thank for that." She looked over her shoulder. "Though I'm sure that's not what SandTail had in mind when he proposed arming Gria's militia in return for Destiny."

SandTail met gray eyes and their calm challenge. He gave TripStone a wan smile.

She returned it, then faced Jirado again. "You said your family died in the riots on Skedge. I offer to remember them for you."

Jirado struggled forward and laid her fingers on the hunter's head. Her eyes wavered as she whispered, "Not here."



From behind her BrushBurn said, "Our house is open to you." He helped her back onto coppery leather while TripStone returned to her clothes and dressed unceremoniously.

SandTail waited until the hunter straightened her vest and settled back in the chair beside him, Jirado's shawl again in her lap. TripStone sighed contentedly, her face slack with weariness, her eyes half-lidded, all but oblivious to the Yata half-collapsed against her husband.

*TripStone.* SandTail spelled out a slow fingerpress on the back of her hand. *You were naked before me many times under the brandy. Believe me when I say that right now you are equally drunk.*

She ignored him. Opposite them, the exhausted BrushBurn and Jirado both slept on SandTail's couch of skins.

## Chapter 31

TripStone settled wood boards around Jirado's chair and slipped a pillow against its back. A typical Yata's legs would dangle off the seat. Someone as compact as the woman standing and staring into the hearth needed even more assistance.

Lamps lit from the fire surrounded them, their wicks low. TripStone had whispered prayers as she watched the flames catch.

Her hunting clothes soaked in a wash basin out behind the kitchen. The tub where she took her ritual bath was cold, its aromatics dissipated in the water. She had scrubbed the canyon from her skin, but she might never be clean. She padded barefoot to the storage room for another board, breathing easily in a plain tunic.

Long shadows flickered across blank walls. BrushBurn knelt by the hearth with a rag in his hand to retrieve the teakettle. He didn't look up when FlitNettle passed him.

The girl was head and shoulders taller than Jirado. She paused by the Yata before stretching against BrushBurn's cabinet, standing on tiptoe to reach the tea. Wordlessly she held the canister before Jirado, who nodded without looking at it.

BrushBurn lifted the kettle. The strong scent of blackberry filled the room.

TripStone touched FlitNettle's arm as the girl brought the teapot to the table. "You'll be all right?"

"She's from Skedge." The young hunter spoke low, her face expressionless. "She says Yata killed her family, too. I'll be all right."

TripStone watched FlitNettle's retreating back. She tried to read BrushBurn as he handed his cousin a pair of cups and took more down from the shelf. The two had hardly spoken to each other since the night his ward had stepped up to him on the canyon trail, battered and spent. FlitNettle had shoved MudAdder's body into his arms and declared flatly, "Our kin are avenged."

BrushBurn eased Jirado away from the hearth and led her to the table. She blinked as if stunned and seemed to have trouble remembering where she was. He helped her climb into the chair as FlitNettle poured.

TripStone took his hand in hers as he sat.

He found her palm. *I've never watched you do a Remembrance.*

*I've listened to stories in the tavern and the Lodge, TripStone tapped. You've seen me there.*

*Not like this.*

No, not like this. Not with deep calm flooding her body as she rose from the table, glided to the kitchen's far wall, and took down the kerchief from Basc. TripStone knotted it about her shorn hair, feeling the breath of the gods.

Her mother ShadowGrass floated by her left elbow, beside her father NightShout. TripStone saw the blessings in their eyes, their quiet contentment. She looked through them, blinking back tears when she spotted FeatherFly. Her younger brother's spirit flashed an impish grin.

They were all whole and happy. Beyond pain.

TripStone moved through mist. More Masari walked with her, fading in around and behind her: the hunters who had knelt before their prey, the artisans who had stippled the bones, the scribes who had written the stories she had carried home from Basc. The census takers, priests, carpenters, weavers. The children who had once run down cobbled streets.

Crossroads' dead filled the room. TripStone drew the mist deep into her lungs as the shades passed through her skin, melding. Consecrating Promontory.

She would have to ask BrushBurn what he saw. He looked at her so strangely.

She didn't remember sitting down. Across the table, Jirado remained motionless and preoccupied.

TripStone's voice echoed from a well. "May we nourish you as you have nourished us, Jirado." Whitewash filled with scripture; she could almost feel the parchment beneath her hands. "May the dead live again in our remembrance, every word a seed, every memory a star. For we are all food of the gods, mortal and immortal, now and forever." The old mnemonics clustered inside her, vessels waiting to be filled. She whispered, "Let nothing and no one be forgotten."

FlitNettle sat to TripStone's left. The child's hands rested lightly against her teacup, but her nostrils still twitched with the smell of blood. BrushBurn sat opposite his ward, looking like a man adrift.

TripStone reached across the table to brush a tear from Jirado's cheek. She whispered, "Whenever you're ready."

Jirado blinked up at her. "I don't know what to say."

"Say anything."

The Yata's hands shook as she lifted the tea to her lips.

"I am the youngest of three," she began. She squinted first at one hunter, then the other. "And the smallest." She shook her head. "No one expected me to survive. But they're gone. My brother CloudHook. My sister MeadowDoor." Jirado's teeth began to chatter. "My husband SilverLode."

She set the tea down and laid her head on the table, gulping air.

"I'm sorry," TripStone stammered. "I didn't mean for this to hurt so much."

Jirado whispered, "Tell me what happens in Basc."

"Happened." TripStone gazed at tears leaking onto the wood. "The last time I performed an Atonement before now-what the Basc Yata call a Remembrance-was over a year ago."

If this were Basc, the woman before her would be seated in a fine robe, her head high, her bearing stoic and proud. The stories would flow from her, unstoppable. Nothing else in the room would exist.

"I sat on the floor before Zai." TripStone's own shudder surprised her. "I had taken her husband Ulik in the hunting grounds three days earlier. I spent those three days consecrating his body and praying to him." She swallowed. "Thanking him. Asking for his guidance."

She wanted to lift the woman collapsed on the table and cradle Jirado in her arms. "Where I come from the Yata have always lived with death. We gave them everything we could in return for a controlled quota of lives, but that still took a toll on both our peoples. Sometimes I resented the Covenant for what it made me do." TripStone winced, sipping lukewarm tea. "That was nothing compared with what I have to do now."

She could feel the ice melting inside, caught between agony and rapture. "Now the Yata in my valley are independent and we hunt each other. But we still hold remembrances. We've been able to preserve some of the old traditions."

Jirado whispered, "No one goes missing."

TripStone shook her head. "We pay proper respect to the dead. Both Yata and Masari."

That was only partly true. She should write back to HigherBrook, asking if any further violations have occurred, how much hard-won trust has been lost. Only a few Yata had broken the rules of

engagement and heightened the level of warfare, but that tiny minority had shaken the valley. TripStone drove the memory of HigherBrook's scratchy pictograms from her mind.

Jirado pushed herself up and leaned back in her chair. Her face drained into shadow. "I haven't lived every day with death. No one in Skedge has. We were too busy making what quickened life." Her hand jerked against BrushBurn. "Your precious 'bed snuff.' We didn't know what we made. We didn't care. You gave us such pretty things in return."

He covered her fingers with his own. His hand remained outstretched after Jirado slid hers away.

The Yata took convulsive sips of tea. "I don't think Promontory can ever be like Crossroads. I used to think nothing of sitting at a table with three Masari, the way I'm doing with you. What did I have to be afraid of? I wasn't your meat, I was your colleague."

TripStone swallowed around a hard lump. She rounded the table, arms limp at her sides, forcing herself past hoarseness. "I have just come back from such a terrible place, Jirado. I thought I'd lost the Covenant forever, but you bring it back to me. How can I convince you that when I look at you I do not-*cannot*-see meat?"

Her heart strained against her breastbone as the tiny woman struggled from the chair. TripStone knelt, blinking back tears as Jirado fell into her arms, howling. Small fists pummeled her sides.

"Let it out," she whispered, holding the Yata closer. "Do whatever you have to do. I promise I won't hurt you." These people had no Soala. No place to expend their grief. "Even if your family died at the factory I know you're worried about the ones in the canyon. I understand your rage, Jirado. Zai wanted to kill me once. Part of her probably still

does."

The howls intensified. Jirado's nails flew at TripStone's face, scratching her cheeks.

As though the deaths were still fresh. *Weren't they?* FlitNettle's fury against the escaped Farm Yata had emerged fullblown more than a season after they'd killed her family. BrushBurn's face reflected his own quiet despair.

The woman in TripStone's arms quieted to moans. She murmured, too soft to hear. TripStone leaned closer.

"We need more than memories." Jirado blinked, unfocused. "Our peoples can't go on like this." Fingertips trembled against TripStone's chops. "Help me."

"I will. Tell me how."

Jirado staggered away from her. She grasped her dress, drew it over her head, and dropped it on the floor. Her golden skin shone in the lamp light. Her voice shook as she drew off her boots. "Tell your husband to look at me, please."

BrushBurn faced away, his eyes tight shut. His breaths were too steady, his shoulders a rigid frame. His scent reached TripStone from a great depth, as naked and tangled as the Yata's.

She looked back at Jirado, her brow pinched. "Why?"

Jirado stumbled about the room, raising the wicks, choking. "Because I am not the child he loved as a boy, TripStone. I may sound like a girl but I have wrinkles on my skin. I am marked with burns and calluses and I must be permanently stained with grease."

The light around her became blinding, throwing the kitchen into sharp relief. "When I met my husband I had been making Destiny for longer than Sunrise was alive. I am not her spirit."

She stepped before FlitNettle, swaying. "You've seen many naked Yata, haven't you? Every day, peering into those cages." Her small breasts heaved. "Do I look like I come from the Farm? Do I sound like I come from the Farm?"

FlitNettle looked her up and down. "You have no stretch marks."

"And no tattoo." Jirado circled the table. "No branding." She passed behind BrushBurn and climbed back onto her chair as TripStone stood. "You know as well as I do what your husband sees when he looks at me. When he looks at AgatePool he sees a mixed-blood woman. She once was a mixed-blood child. She's never had to eat Yata. I have to believe people like her can be our future." Jirado leaned toward BrushBurn and gentled her voice. Tapered fingers pressed against tufted knuckles. "AgatePool is thirty-eight. How old would your daughter be if she had lived?"

He replied without hesitating, "Twenty-three." His head was still averted, his eyes still shut.

Jirado whispered, "And you became a father at twelve."

She turned back to TripStone. "You heard FlitNettle. I have no stretch marks. SilverLode and I chose not to have children because we were devoted to our work. You chose not to have them because you don't want to bring a Yata-dependent baby into the world." Her eyes pleaded. "TripStone, we've already sacrificed ourselves."

The hunter looked down at Jirado's wrist, following the spray of freckles up to her shoulder. The eyes gazing back were placid,



patient. Jirado's scent hung before her, a loose weave of undecipherable patterns.

TripStone asked, "Why are you doing this?"

FlitNettle said, plainly, "She wants to have a child with him."

Jirado shook her head. "If that were all I wanted, I wouldn't be here with all of you. I won't break up a family." She climbed back onto her chair and reached for the tea. Her voice came from far away. "I used to think I was a Little Masari. I've worked since I was very young. Now that job is gone. My caretaking of SandTail is almost finished and Promontory's factories won't accept a full-blood Yata. I have nothing to go back to. Skedge has all but forgotten its citizens lost in the canyon."

Steam curled as Jirado poured. She gripped her cup. "I have no one. When you and the other hunters came back-" She set the tea down quickly and shook spilled drops from her hand. Tears flowed from her. "Your husband's right. No Yata should ever have to see what I saw that night."

BrushBurn opened his eyes and stared at the wall. "TripStone."

His wife heard his moan amidst the gravel.

Jirado turned toward his averted gaze. "I never thought that a hunter, someone who has been harvesting my people, would treat me with such reverence. I never would have expected such a thing in Promontory."

"Jirado, the answer is no." BrushBurn heaved a shaky sigh. "Dear gods, it's far too dangerous."

TripStone stepped behind him and massaged his shoulders. She leaned over the back of his chair, settling her head on his shoulder. *It's all right, BrushBurn. I know how long you've wanted a mix-child.*

She didn't need to drum; his scent was obvious. TripStone's lips curled back as she nuzzled his neck fur. BrushBurn enfolded her wrists, drawing her arms across his chest.

She loosened his shirt ties and slipped her fingers inside. His pelt had thickened for the winter. She could get lost in the thatch of his chest.

*I love you*, she pressed through his pectoral fur. *You have my permission.*

Jirado climbed down from her chair and moved away, her steps unsteady. She huddled before the hearth. "I will go back to Skedge if you think it best. I am offering you both the only thing I can, short of my flesh on a plate."

"There's no guarantee that a child would be free of dependence." BrushBurn's grip was steel around TripStone's arms. "You know that, TripStone. There's no guarantee of anything."

"Except the hunt." His wife kissed the top of his head, breathing in the worry beneath his curls. "There's no guarantee there, either."

FlitNettle refilled her cup. The girl looked long at the hearth, then back to her cousin. "After the hunt, I think there's very little left to be afraid of."

He answered, bleary-eyed, "I don't love her."

Jirado's agonized moan lifted from the fire. "You don't have to." She

stepped, more sure-footed now, back to the table. Sweat dripped between her breasts, running in rivulets down her smooth, golden skin and ducking between her legs.

She moved before BrushBurn, her eyes meeting TripStone's. "Please tell him to look at me."

TripStone's shoulders began to shake. She bent her lips to his ear. "I can never give you what she can, BrushBurn. No matter how much I want to." How many sheaths had come between them? How long had she and FlitNettle, his family, been away? How often, how torturous the uncertainty about their return? "Tell me you don't want this and I'll send her home."

Jirado closed her eyes. TripStone could take the Yata's pulse by sight alone.

BrushBurn pushed back the sleeves of TripStone's tunic. He ran his palms absently along her pelt as his scent began to calm.

His wife followed the direction of his gaze, his slow relinquishment. "It can be like Basc," she offered, trying to sound lighthearted. "You'd have co-wives. The child would belong to all of us." She added, fiercely, "We'll show what Promontory can become. Prove SandTail wrong."

BrushBurn kissed TripStone's palms, her fingertips. He turned his head. His lips against hers were a furnace, his hands hot as they caressed her chops.

"I love you," he gasped between breaths. "Never forget that, TripStone. Never forget how much you mean to me."

"I won't forget."

"Don't leave me."

"I won't leave you."

"Good." He turned from her, his shoulders slumped. "Jirado."

The Yata opened her eyes.

BrushBurn offered a shy smile. "We'll prepare you a place to stay."

Jirado nodded. She wheezed, "Thank you," then moved to retrieve her clothes.

TripStone remained behind BrushBurn, taking slow, deep breaths. Numbness settled about her as tension drained from the room.

The wicks were too high. All the shadows were gone and the light hurt her eyes.

She couldn't step back from behind the chair, couldn't feel her feet. The gods had made her weightless.

~ ~ ~

*This is for you, CloudHook. This is for you, MeadowDoor.*

Jirado chewed a peppery mash and swallowed. She waited for the heat on her cheeks to cool, the burning in her stomach to ease. After so many years of use, she had not felt her skin prickle under the contraceptive until now.

It had to be the Promontory air. Or the absence of Destiny and its subtle percolation of pleasure throughout the factory.

Or the sharpness of the salt pan as a northwest wind flowed over the

mountains and the mesa, driving her dun skirt back.

Jirado cinched her pouch. She dropped it back into her pocket and quickened her pace, clutching a cloth bag under her coat. Yields from the canyon rim weighed it down, making her list slightly to the side. Dried brush crinkled beneath her boots.

She looked to her left, across the salt, where a distant dot advanced amidst sculpted, wintry white. Angels, no doubt, delivering more dead from Skedge to Promontory. Kind Masari. They had covered the bodies when they brought her here. She had ridden with lumps under canvas.

Sheltered from reality.

The salt glittered so brightly it could be snow, spiky and hard. Behind it the black tower of her home cut a hole in the sky.

*This is for you, Tylie. And for you, Adalora. For you, Ladav.*

Jirado tried to shake them from her head. She promised herself she wouldn't think of the children. It hurt too much, they were so far away.

*And this is for you, SilverLode.*

He was farther away, still. It hurt more.

But he was beyond her worry now. Better to think of the children. She looked back toward the mountains.

The chameleon's trade route lay ahead, skirting the edge of the salt pan and angling away from Promontory's rebuilt roads. It climbed the mountain, zigzagging through recesses and overhangs. It shot across a narrow plateau before descending into the Yata territory of Alvav. It

ducked through thickets and across meadows, past the opulent Cliff and the walled-in Marsh, before reaching gentler hills, rounded and green. There it meandered back up, past the treeline to bald granite, before it eased down lush foothills and ended on the other side of the world, facing the adobe huts of Basc.

The black marketers had done well for themselves. With their recent expansion into the far valley, they were doing better still.

Jirado's cramps unclenched, a metal vise opening. The wind cooled her cheeks.

*I kept myself barren for you, SilverLode. You were going to come back to me.* She tilted her face up, feeling sweat lift. *Now you have no body any more, and neither will I.*

She found the path trampled into brush and walked toward the mountains. Tall peaks walled off the arid lands and curved in a hook toward the canyon, around the bowl first settled by her people. Her ancestors, hunted down in Basc and then in Alvav.

The Masari had not come this far in the beginning because nothing had been here for them. Until the Yata. And the Masari would keep coming for the Yata, down into the canyon, one settlement after another. Chasing their hunger.

The buildings of Promontory dropped behind. Fingers of black schist extended a giant hand beyond the foothills. The path jogged there, leading Jirado into a maze of broken foothills. She rounded a dollop of quartzite to find a black-cloaked Yata sitting on a rounded rock, taking tea. The chameleon's hood was thrown back, his harness on the ground. His tanned bronze skin matched the mountain. The muscles in his thighs still bulged from running the cart.

They nodded to each other as Jirado passed him, striding past chains and derailleurs. The cart was weathered but well-greased. She could still feel the heat from its gears.

She snatched a rag from the ground and bent toward a tripod above an extinguished cook fire. The kettle still steamed, half-full. She brought it to the back of the cart and handed it up to another Yata, who set it aside and helped her into the wagon.

Jirado slipped her bag from her shoulders, swallowing her apprehension. She had been inside this cart dozens of times. Only the commodity of interest had changed. The man who welcomed her was a mass of wrinkles, his coppery skin glowing from years traversing the region. Even when Jirado had been a girl, his hair had been shot through with gray.

They sat on stools to either side of an empty, upturned crate. Jirado's nostrils quivered in the wagon's cramped space as he poured the tea. Light streamed through ventilation holes that only partly dispersed the odor of barter. She smelled butchered waterfowl delivered from the Marsh to the Cliff and the herbs passed from Rudder to Crossroads. Stacked boxes lined the walls, lashed to support boards.

She peered past the chameleon, looking for hers.

He followed her gaze and chortled. "It's nothing so large as that, Jirado. Not like what we used to trade."

She sipped. "I wouldn't know. I remember the crates you stacked in Skedge."

"I still stack crates in Skedge, but now it's fertilizer from Basc, not raw materials for Destiny." He snorted. "All those years we thought we

were selling you medicinals." Callused fingers twined about the cup. "But this time you know exactly what you're trading for."

Jirado barked a nervous laugh. "If I did I wouldn't be looking for a crate, Edin."

"The Preservers don't carry crates into the hunting grounds." He pointed. "Tea first." Steam rose from his cup. "Those who agreed to meet with me remember the battle in the canyon. They know they almost ended up as farm animals and they don't want to see that happen here again."

"I'll settle for allies in Basc. I certainly don't have any here."

Edin pursed his lips. "But you have poisons here."

"Local poisons have local antidotes." Jirado gulped tea. "I don't want to take that chance."

"Then you should know what you'll be working with."

He reached into his cloak and withdrew a square tin. It fit in the palm of his hand.

Jirado balked. "Is that all?"

"That's all you need." His finger traced a line of dark wax around the cover. "Wear gloves when you break the seal."

The tin was surprisingly light in Jirado's hand. She turned it over, listening for contents shifting, but the substance inside was solid. She didn't know when she would use it, or how. Her only certainty was a guarantee that it would kill Masari.

She brought the tin to her nose and sniffed. Nothing but the odor of



wax. The metal was unmarked on all sides, with nothing to indicate its origin.

"When used full strength and injected into muscle it kills instantly. I'll give you a table of dilution strengths before you go." Edin pulled Jirado's bag closer. He lifted a crystal, turning it over in his hands. "They'll like these. The weather's more temperate over there, but this will give them more stamina."

Jirado raised her eyebrows. "And they're the *hunters*, you said?"

"Their job is to hunt down Masari, yes."

"And the Masari don't try to eliminate them."

"They do in the killing fields." Edin spilled more crystals from the bag, examining them one at a time. "Not in the villages. This is quite a nice selection."

"I mined them from the rim. I wanted to make sure I had enough to trade with." Jirado peered more closely at the metal in her hand. "Nobody saw me, or if they did they were too worried to care. The hunters were gone in the canyon a long time."

Edin looked up from the bag. "And were successful, from the look of it. You've just turned pale."

"I don't want to talk about it." Jirado drained her tea and poured another cup. "I'm living with a hunter now." She held up her fingers. "Two hunters." She laughed. "Now *you've* turned pale."

Edin coughed. "You work quickly."

"I've always been efficient." She tried to drive the bitterness from her

voice. "I saw an opportunity and took it."

Crystals dropped back into the bag. "I'm on my way to Skedge. Do you want me to deliver any news?"

"Just tell my niece and nephews that I'm all right. And that I miss them very much." Jirado shook her head. "That's all."

He tilted his chin toward the tin in her hand. "Be careful."

Jirado gazed around the wagon. "Tell the Preservers I wish them good hunting. And thank them for me."

Edin poured more tea. Only light showed through the ventilation holes. They could be on Skedge, parked outside the Destiny factory, sharing gossip the way they always had. At the end of the day she had gone home to a marble-walled house, traversing mosaic walks inlaid with semi-precious stones. She believed the Masari had laid those stones down, their patterns ornamental rather than ancient Yata. She'd been CutterDrum then. She'd never heard of Yata.

Instead, Jirado would return to SandTail's house raised on wood poles and bags of tailings. She would breeze through his studio of Yata-skin furniture and gather her meager bag of possessions. She would smile graciously at SandTail's obvious discomfort when she called him Brother Wanderer again. *You see?* she would tell him. *I have not killed you after all.* When AgatePool hugged Jirado goodbye, she would try not to flinch.

She would walk across town, negotiating cobblestones as big as her thighs. The smell of fennel would reach her before she finished climbing BrushBurn's stairs, and the door would be open. Her new pallet of fresh straw and clean linen would await her behind a festive curtain taken from BrushBurn's tent, from the days when he had sold

Yata meat across the region.

She would step into his home and look up into shy, steel blue eyes. They would guide her to her target.

Edin called to his runner and cleared off the crate. Jirado listened to the sounds of cookware being put away and leather buckles being adjusted. No one spoke when the chameleon grasped her hands and held them in a firm farewell.

She slipped the heart-willow resin and instructions into her skirt pocket before he helped her down from the wagon. Walking through the brush without a body was easier than Jirado had thought. The tin gave her weight and substance. It defined her. It was part of her toolkit now. Above all, she had to collect and maintain the proper tools.

From behind she could hear chains lengthen and wheels groan, and the rhythm of pounding feet. The cart passed into the crystalline salt pan with a sound like breaking glass.

## **Chapter 32**

### **Crossroads**

*"Ghost!"*

Someone was pounding on the outer door to the lab and yelling. High-pitched, shrill. Hard raps on the wood, the kind that bruised knuckles. The noise drifted down through layers of sleep until the pallet moved and TelZodo began to wail.

*"Ghost! Piri!"*

"I'm awake." Ghost rolled over and pictured himself getting out of bed. It seemed sufficient.

Piri's fingers jabbed his shoulder. *That's Izzik's voice.*

His eyes sprang open. He levered himself up, shaking the dreams from his head. The yells at his door were panic-tinged in the middle of the night. "He must have found her."

No time to grab a robe from the sound of things. Ghost lit a lamp and sprinted from the bedroom and through the kitchen, past the morgue, into the lab. TelZodo's protests followed him from a distance. Around his office and Piri's, down the shelf-lined hallway.

"*Ghost! Piri!*"

"I'm coming!"

He set the lamp on his table, fumbled the door open, and grabbed the sheet-swathed mass from quivering arms. The shape felt wrong. But he was holding CatBird and she still breathed. Izzik must have carried her all the way from Basc and she was one-fifth larger than he was.

The Yata collapsed against the open doorway, eyes glazed, gulping air. His rifle must have been biting into his back.

Ghost lowered CatBird onto a raised pallet. He brought the light closer and added another lamp. Her breathing was slow, her face slack, lips slightly parted. Most of the linen around her was clean but its ends were filthy, dragged along the ground from one village to the other. Stumbles in the dark.

Ghost glanced back at Izzik. "Water?"

The young man shook his head. He clutched the door post, trying to hold himself upright, focused on the pallet.

He was dehydrated but CatBird needed attention more. Ghost bent over her, unwrapping, setting cloth aside. "Do you know what she was drugged with?"

The head shook again.

She was naked beneath the sheet. Ghost wrinkled his nose at the tang of sex. "Your seed, Izzik?"

The head shook again. Ghost tried not to stare back at him.

Her right leg was severed above the knee. A clean dressing wrapped the stump beneath Ghost's hands. Except for semen her body had been washed, her injuries treated and disinfected. "Izzik, as soon as you can I want you to tell me everything."

A moan rose from the doorway. Assent or grief or both.

From across the room came Piri's soft hum and a further brightening from a far counter as she set down her lamp. Ghost didn't know when his child had stopped crying, or when the door to the lab had opened. Piri's robe was belted loosely around her waist. She dropped Ghost's tunic on a chair and crossed to Izzik, a towel draped over her arm, water pitcher in one hand and a mug in the other. She eased the youth aside. The outer door whispered shut.

Ghost dressed quickly and washed his hands. He pulled fresh bandages from cabinets. "Her medical care looks good, Izzik, but I'm going to check the wound."

No answer. Ghost snatched tweezers. He eased a woolen cap from

the stump and examined pledgets of lint. Fine linen covered what remained of her leg muscles. The body beneath him didn't move except for CatBird's chest, rising and falling with reassuring regularity. Her lungs and heart were still strong. Moisture glistened on her roseate abdominal fur, ending on her sternum at the lower limit of her pectoral fur. No perspiration showed where her pelt yielded to skin.

*Someone else's sweat.*

Ghost heard Izzik gulping from the mug.

"This amputation is several days old. Her wound is clean. No sign of infection." He ignored the fresh liquid at her crotch and focused on his first priority. "Whoever tended to her was very careful."

Izzik drained the mug. His voice scratched. "They wanted her alive."

"Who did?"

"Because of me." The disheveled head rolled to the side and dropped onto Piri's shoulder.

Ghost brought a basin and more towels to the door, watching as Izzik struggled to lift and drag one across a grimy face. "You need to rebuild your strength. We have a bit of dried mutton here, but not enough."

*There's more at the farmhouse.* Piri's touch skittered on his arm. *I'll get it. And he needs bread.*

"I'll be all right." Izzik shifted position and grimaced, pressing himself against the wall.

"You're far from all right." Ghost returned to CatBird's side as Piri glided out the door. "I'm going to examine her more thoroughly, Izzik, and collect samples. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The young man nodded.

"She can't have consented to this unless she agreed to being drugged first. Knowing CatBird, I would say that's highly unlikely."

"We had talked about having a child." Izzik slouched down the wall, trying to keep his eyes open. "We used-protective measures. We were going to wait."

"You're both young."

Izzik shook his head. "I came of age years before the Covenant was destroyed. I have two wives and a co-husband; we had three children. I'm sure one of them was mine. The babies all died last winter." Bleary eyes blinked at the pallet. "CatBird planned to join my household permanently. After."

The small man across from Ghost barely had a beard. Ghost looked from the stubby chin to the dirt-smeared forehead tattoo. "After what?"

"After your appetites changed." Izzik drew his legs up and rested his head on his knees. "Because we have faith that they will. Until then, we would keep doing our jobs."

"Hunting." Ghost probed, extracted. Measured. His nostrils twitched. A Masari with more tracking experience would know better, but the scents seemed too complex to have come from a single individual. "Do you know how badly her leg was injured before it was amputated?"

Izzik choked, "It wasn't."

Ghost sighed. CatBird was an expert killer among the Masari, one of the last Covenant-trained hunters. Her skills were almost on a par with TripStone's. With a bit more maturity and experience, they would have been.

Izzik whispered, "We knew the risks when we mated."

"Did you?" Ghost eased back swatches of pelt and checked skin. "I find no genital bruises, Izzik. But she *was* raped. Multiple times."

"*Don't you think I know that?*" Bronze cheeks purpled. Eyes blazed in Ghost's direction as the Yata struggled to sit upright, his voice haggard. "HigherBrook's party came under a gas attack. That's how CatBird got separated from the others. You know that much."

"Yes. I'd never seen him so unhinged." Ghost looked into CatBird's calm, sleeping face. He studied the antiseptic treatment of abrasions, signs of dragging. "He kept spouting rules of engagement. That Masari bodies were to be returned to Crossroads. He was sure she'd been killed."

"So was I, when he told me she was gone. But nobody found a body. After a couple of days I began my own search."

Ghost glanced sharply at Izzik. "You knew where to look."

"Only vaguely. Or I'd have found her sooner."

"Then you know the men who did this." He watched the heaving of Izzik's chest, the tight lips pressed together. Acid rose in his throat. "And you're protecting them."



"I was ready to *kill* them!" Izzik slammed his head back against the wall. His stare at the ceiling turned blank. "Not only men. Men and women. The women-stimulated."

The door whispered open. Piri stepped out of the dark, away from the well-worn path to the farmhouse. Food spilled from her arms onto the floor.

Ghost said through gritted teeth, "Don't feed him yet." He frowned at her raised eyebrows. "Izzik will tell me if I'm right if he wants to eat. He found CatBird only because he knows where the Preservers-or an offshoot of them-have separate, secret headquarters. There are enough abandoned buildings in this valley, now; it could be anywhere. How am I doing so far, Izzik?"

The other man closed his eyes, head still tilted back.

Ghost rounded the pallet and stood before the youth, arms folded. "Izzik's a Preserver. Those Yata are his *comrades*. He is loyal to them, but they are also loyal to him-which is why, when they captured CatBird, they drugged her instead of killed her. But she is a major threat in the hunting grounds, and like it or not we are at war, yes? They wanted to kill the hunter but spare the woman." He squatted by Izzik and lowered his voice. "Because she is your wife, now, and part of your family structure. So they cut off her leg to hobble her and raped her in the hope of getting her pregnant."

Izzik shut his eyes tighter. "You know nothing, Woolie."

Ghost's lips curled into a grim smile. "In Promontory they whisper worse epithets than that in the crib." He lifted his head toward Piri's thoughtful face, her scrutiny of the soldier. "My wife spends more time in Basc than I do, Izzik. She's taught me about your culture. If CatBird is pregnant, then all the men involved would share the responsibility

of paternity. And you, as her husband, share it as well. And that is why, when you saw how they cared for her *after they had violated her*, you chose to protect them."

"*What would you have done in my place?*" The youth lunged forward, wild-eyed. "When I burst through that door they were all naked. Someone was still inside her. His wife was behind him, urging him on. I could have squeezed the trigger and finished them both with a single shot, but they stopped and let me take CatBird away." His sweaty hands bunched Ghost's tunic. "Did you think they *enjoyed* what they were doing beyond the physical? They were trying to save *her*, save *me*, and save other Yata lives." He wheezed, "It was a military operation."

Ghost peeled Izzik's hands away. "Ordered by whom?"

Piri's fingers pressed his shoulder. He nodded. "Piri just said my father is on his way to the Rotunda to wake HigherBrook and tell him his adopted daughter has been found. I don't have to tell you what to expect."

Izzik reached for the bread. Crumbs scattered on the floor.

After a long time the Preserver swallowed and murmured, "I wonder what Foro and VineSong would think, looking down on us."

Ghost flinched and flushed with heat. "This is not about my nephew killing your brother, Izzik."

"Not specifically, no." The other man's eyes were downcast. He groped for his mug and took a deep draught. Narrow fingers squeezed earthenware. "There's peace in the afterlife. But no one gets born there. Sometimes it's hard to know which is the better place."

Piri squatted beside Ghost and took his arm. *Ask Izzik if he knows how many of CatBird's attackers have lost kin to her.*

The question slammed like a lead ball into his chest. "Forcing her to bear life because she has taken it is not the answer."

*Maybe it's the closest thing they had to one.*

Ghost scrambled to his feet. "Those drugs are going to wear off eventually. I've got to monitor her." He glared at Izzik. "When she comes to, I don't want you here unless she calls for you. Do I make myself clear?"

Izzik's eyes blazed. "She's my wife, Ghost."

"And you're Yata. She's just been savaged by Yata. I want no one but Masari in here when she awakens." He caught Piri's eye and saw the nod. "My wife is Yata and she understands. In case you've forgotten, we kept every Masari, including me, away from Gria when *she* regained consciousness."

He couldn't look at either of them. He listened to CatBird's slow, even breaths, wondering if the young woman knew anything of what had happened to her.

~ ~ ~

CatBird smelled strong astringent. Fire built along the length of her leg.

"Her breathing's changed." Ghost's voice. The astringency parted to admit an earthy, bitter odor. CatBird opened her mouth, then ground her teeth into dagger root. She could tell she took it from

HigherBrook's hand before her eyes focused. The fire subsided, but barely.

Chemicals permeated the clean sheet draped around her. They overrode everything else, making her nose blind. She squinted first at one man and then the other, trying to read them through sight. CatBird freed an arm from the sheet and saw that it was bare. She tipped her hand in a drinking motion.

Water passed from Ghost to HigherBrook, who lifted her up and eased a mug against her lips. CatBird shunted the root to her cheek as she swallowed. She tapped on his wrist, *Who rescued me?*

"Izzik brought you here."

It was a strange answer, but HigherBrook's voice was odd, too.

*I was captured. Izzik could not have taken me from his own people in the hunting grounds. They were within their rights to kill me.* She swallowed again and coughed, wincing around the root. She tried again, forcing her words out. "Who saved me?"

"Rest, CatBird."

She could not smell his alarm but it was there, layers down in his throat. "Sir?"

HigherBrook's face became a mask. CatBird gasped involuntarily before she could puzzle it out.

Ghost examined her farther down. "Where does it hurt?"

"Toes." She bit down harder on the root, swallowing more juice. "Right foot."

"Try to wiggle them."

She choked on a scream as her muscles rebelled.

Ghost's face hung over hers. He wiped fresh tears from her chops. "I'd give you something stronger, but it's too dangerous right now."

"Why?" CatBird took the mug from HigherBrook's hand and watched earthenware wobble. She strained to hold it steady as she sipped. Some of her pain came from thirst and hunger. She croaked, "How long since I was captured?"

"Five days."

Ghost's expression revealed nothing. His voice was more controlled than HigherBrook's, but the shadows beneath his eyes were deeper than usual.

"Five days here." She floated. Dark shapes hovered briefly before her, indistinct. Something moved her breast. She blinked the sensations away, trying to smile at Ghost. "You worked hard to save my life."

Cold sweat beaded on her forehead. Ghost turned from her to snatch a cloth. Opposite him, HigherBrook leaned heavily against the pallet.

She touched his arm. "I am alive, Sir. I am badly hurt but I will recover." Her breath caught. She struggled to move her toes again as lightning seared through numbness. Cloth rested upon her brow as nausea rose. "We all knew the risks."

HigherBrook took the mug from her before she turned away. Water rushed back up, splattering in a basin. Dry heaves wracked her through fog.

He held her while her stomach quieted. His pulse galloped in his neck; she wanted to comfort him. She heard the distant chop of Ghost cutting another root. CatBird's left leg rested against a heavily-banded end of something that vanished beneath waves of flame. She heaved again.

HigherBrook's closely-trimmed chops touched hers. He enveloped her with strong arms. Those arms had once been flaccid instead of muscled, shrinking from the touch of a gun, but they conveyed the same distress now as they had then.

"You'll be safe here, CatBird."

She clutched the back of his shirt, chiding past hoarseness. "No place is safe, Sir. Must I teach you that again?"

They still hadn't told her why she was alive. She took the root from Ghost this time, mashing it in her mouth, and tried to think. She was badly injured but they were being too careful with her, too secretive. "Where is Izzik now?"

HigherBrook's hold contracted, startling her. His sharp scent of anger overrode even the smelly sheet. It confused her further. Hadn't Izzik brought her here?

Her guardian said, thickly, "Leave us."

"I want Ghost to stay." CatBird pulled back from the man who was at once her student and her mentor, who worried about her too much. White spots danced between them. *HigherBrook, what's wrong?* She tried to peer through her vertigo, but he was still hard to look at. She tried to speak, tried to drum, swayed instead.

He lowered her back to the pallet. From above, Ghost said, "Izzik is

here, in another room. I told him he could see you if you asked for him."

She managed a nod. Her tongue felt three times too big.

Beside her HigherBrook snapped, "That's not wise."

"That's her *choice*." The word hung in the air between them.

CatBird fought through a blur. Her leg filled the room, a torturous mass making everything else tremble. The light hurt. She heard curtains being drawn, windows covered. The odd sensation at her breast returned, and indistinct voices. They came to her from inside her head, as if from the bottom of a pond. Wavering, disappearing. Resurfacing.

Ghost was back, wiping her brow again. "Better?"

It would be better if HigherBrook were not seething beside her. She whispered, "Izzik."

Ghost straightened and sent a long, low whistle toward the rear door. A latch unlocked.

If CatBird could she would throw off the sheet, no matter whom she exposed herself to. It crippled her sense of smell. It did nothing for her wounds. The men were masking their feelings on purpose, but they couldn't hide everything. The room was a taut sinew ready to snap at the sound of her mate's footsteps.

The Yata was agitated, too, leaning over the pallet and taking her hand in both of his. A tremor began in her stomach, beginning to spread even as she cried out with relief. She had to look beyond the spots, had to see Izzik's face or the tremors worsened.

She nestled her fingers into his palm. *They are keeping things from me.*

Izzik's other hand answered, Yes.

*Will you tell me what happened?*

Yes. His fingertips were cold. *We must be alone, but they will listen only to you.*

So very strange. Izzik was family, but the air around her shimmered with hostility. Her right foot screamed. She mouthed, *More root*, and heard Ghost's hurried response.

She couldn't look away from Izzik. She released his hands and reached blindly for the plant, cramming its yellow fibers into her mouth. When enough of its juice calmed her, when she stopped panting, she expelled in a rough breath, "Leave me alone with Izzik."

Spluttering beside her. "No. Absolutely not."

"She is of age, HigherBrook." Ghost's measured tenor sailed across the pallet. "It's her decision." When he rounded the bed his shadow made her shiver. "Let's go. CatBird, we'll be just outside if you change your mind."

The men departed in close lockstep, arguing with each other, their voices low and menacing. CatBird closed her eyes as the door latched shut and nearly strangled on her fear. She had to keep looking at Izzik, had to hold his face before her or die. The feel of his palm against her cheek made her tremble. It made no sense.

The tension in the room began to dissipate, replaced by something less coherent. She bunched the sheet in her hand, drawing it down an



inch at a time. She whispered, "Take it off me."

Even her beloved, who knew her body, looked doubtful as he obeyed. The astringent odor faded, replaced by the scent of immense sadness. The strange feeling at her breast returned and she gasped again. "What happened to me, Izzik? I was captured. Who saved me?"

"Your captors."

His touch was too gentle, but it was also too much. CatBird grasped his hands, but her body still floated. "Why? They were within their rights to kill me."

"Tell me what you remember."

Shouting, an incoming gas canister. Her mask slapped around her face. "A net dropped around me." The whole forest white. Yells receding. "They were dragging me away from the fighting. I tried to cut my way free, but something stung my neck. And my chest."

Her body turned calm. Numb. She couldn't feel Izzik's fingers. "I knew it was poison. I saw the thorns fall away. We were fighting Preservers; it was *supposed* to be heart-willow resin." CatBird searched Izzik's face and found somber attentiveness in his dark eyes. "I felt ready to die as I lost consciousness. I thought I saw the portal waiting..."

She licked her lips. When Izzik bent to retrieve her mug she began to shake. "Look at me!" she pleaded. Her hands rushed to his cheeks. She turned his head back until their gazes locked. His smooth skin made her shiver.

"I'm here." He wetted his palm and spilled drops of water into her

open mouth. "I won't go away."

"Izzik, I feel so terrible."

"I know."

"I've been hurt before, but not like this."

He nodded. "They drugged you. And they kept you drugged."

"For five days."

"Yes."

Her heart began to race. "What happened to my foot?"

He blinked red-rimmed eyes. "It's gone. They took most of your leg."

Ridiculous. Part of her wanted to laugh. "Why not my arms, Izzik? They're what hold the gun."

He whispered, "They wanted your arms to hold other things."

CatBird lurched up. White spots swept her under as she fell back on the pallet. She was gelatinous, formless. Her eyes tried to focus as the shadows moved in.

She fought the spots as words tumbled. "I heard them. I dreamt them. Sometimes they got louder and then I felt a pinch and everything faded again. I couldn't understand why my leg felt so strange and something round and hard kept pushing against my breast. Like the top of somebody's head-"

Her breath fled her. She couldn't move, could only watch the tears track down Izzik's cheeks. "You've always stood on a box with me."

She couldn't hear herself; had she said anything at all? His anguished nod answered.

His chest against her chest. His lips against her lips. She hadn't needed to bend down. A plain wooden box had equalized their height. A crate, simple construction, found anywhere.

He wasn't standing on a box now. More of HigherBrook's body had leaned over her raised pallet, more still of Ghost's. She couldn't see Izzik below his armpits.

CatBird winced. Between her legs was no memory, no pain. Only the oddity of her foot and her burning, absent toes. The rhythmic movement of a skull, the fading sound of grunts.

Otherwise, nothing.

She whispered, "How many men were there?"

"Six." He could barely speak. "When I found you."

Time slowed. Her fingers took forever to reach his. She pulled them toward her, pressed them against her nipples, and settled them into her pectoral fur. "Izzik." She couldn't stop her chest from heaving. Her entire body quaked, as though it belonged to someone else. When her non-foot, non-toes crackled she tongued the dagger-root from her cheek and bit down on it hard. "Touch me."

She nodded encouragingly as he petted her rose-colored fur, curling wisps of her pelt. His eyes asked her permission again and again. She guided him down to her navel, up to her clavicle. She followed the movements of his hairless knuckles. Her arms wavered before she grasped his shoulders, wheezing. "Did they touch me like that?"

"No."

His answer was a cool stream. CatBird bathed in it, breathing more easily. *No*. Beautiful sound.

She pulled Izzik's head down, opened her mouth, and spit the root onto the pallet. She didn't need to see his face as his lips covered hers. She could smell him, taste his tongue around bitter remnants, feel him respond. Exult in his relief.

She broke from him long enough to whisper, "Did they kiss me?"

"No."

*Glorious* word! Her shaking increased; it was someone else. CatBird asked, pointedly, "Did they love me?"

Izzik shook his head. His voice was flat with exhaustion. "No."

Tremors climbed into her throat. "Then this child inside me is not theirs."

He held her face, brushing tears from her chops. "CatBird, we don't know for certain that you're pregnant."

She nodded. Her belly liquefied as she guided his hand there. "Make certain."

He twitched against her, his eyes glinting with worry. "You're still in shock."

"Yes."

Six men. Five days. Her leg gone. It became a litany racing around her brain. So many plantings. Surely something grew. She was filled

with loam.

She reached convulsively for the root. Izzik guided it past her lips as she took hold of his shirt. Fabric strained. Her leg had no beginning and no end, and neither did the rest of her. None of them did.

"Now, Izzik."

Desire and fear played across his face. "You're shaking."

"Yes." She smelled his arousal and almost cried out. He wanted her. She struggled against dizziness and pulled harder on his shirt, hearing it rip. "You're afraid HigherBrook will come in here and kill you," she gasped. "He won't, Izzik. Ghost won't let him."

He wiped slick hair back from her forehead. "That's not what I'm afraid of."

"You're afraid of me, then."

"You're not like this, CatBird."

So much of him was still out of reach.

"I'm your *mate*." She clutched him to keep from falling; they swayed together. "This child is yours. Be the seventh man, Izzik." She couldn't keep the ache from her voice. "Make it yours."

Sweat beaded up from his tattoo. He was almost with her, but the shadows were closing in, too. Their child would be another child of hunters, just as she had been. A lullaby of bones. Smells of milk and gunpowder-

She reeled, grabbing at air and falling back onto the bed. Izzik vanished for an agonizing moment, but then returned with more

dagger root. The fire in her leg was nothing. It was a boulder anchoring her to the straw. The rest of her was in shreds.

On the day the Covenant died her parents and two older brothers had been with her one moment and gone the next. The air had been tattered with too much gunshot repeating too quickly. Before she knew what was happening she'd been cutting dead Yata apart, side by side with other underage, surviving Hunt Guild children, while smoke billowed up from the old killing fields.

A gate inside her had clanged shut so that she could cut cleanly and quickly, before the meat spoiled.

"Come here." She bit down hard to keep from wailing aloud.

He was so exhausted. She saw it in his face, in the unsteadiness of his hands as he climbed onto the pallet. His breath was short, like hers. He looked away from her only long enough to avoid the boulder of dressings, her fortress of lopped-off bone and muscle.

"Izzik, I will never be the same."

"Neither will I." His lips brushed her chops, warming her ear. "I love you, CatBird. That will never change."

He touched her navel, resting his palm on her abdominal fur. He stretched his arm further, hesitating. Nervousness glinted off deep brown pools.

She sighed as his fingers navigated one thatch of pelt and then another. He backed down on the pallet to ease his hand between her legs. She contracted her muscles around him, would expel her attackers' seed if she could. Her breath came in gulps. "Cleanse me."

Their gazes locked. She let Izzik's fingers withdraw and waited, listening to laces being untied, breeches sliding. It took nothing for him to push inside her. He moved slowly and nervously at first, as though their sizes were reversed. As though he could damage her.

She tightened and gripped his swelling, listening for his sharp intake of breath. Her right thigh burned. Izzik's limbs were taut against hers, stretching his body length, trying to grow into Masari proportions.

"Relax." Tears streamed into her chops. She held his head against her breast. "I love you, Izzik. Be a Yata."

She gnashed the root, crying softly, her nipple riding his cheek as he rocked against her.

## **Chapter 33**

### **Basc**

"You knew about this." HigherBrook leaned across Zai's diminutive desk, bent almost double, his nose inches from hers.

She didn't flinch. "I assure you, HigherBrook, I did not."

"It was a military operation, Zai. Someone gave them the order to take CatBird as a hostage and-" His chest tightened. His fist slammed against the wood. "I will hunt them all down personally, Zai. I guarantee you I will rip each and every one of them apart."

An empty threat. HigherBrook didn't know who any of them were.

He dwarfed the commander when they both stood. Seated she was even more compact, almost lost against the maps and drill schedules

pasted to the wall behind her. HigherBrook squinted at them: the far woods, the training grounds, the Basc roads. There was the clot of abandoned huts near the trail leading up to the Meethouse. Only, not all of them had been abandoned after all.

He should blaze in with a detachment. Scour the area, find the rogue Preservers. Hack them apart where they stood and haul their meat back to Crossroads.

And that would completely destroy the peace between the villages.

He looked down and met her gaze. "You know who they are."

Zai nodded. "Izzik has informed me who they are."

"He has not told *me*." HigherBrook fought to keep the pain from his voice. "He may be CatBird's husband, but she is my *daughter*. I deserve to know who did this to her."

Zai turned away and plucked a sheet of fresh parchment from the stack at her elbow. She reached calmly for pen and ink. "I agree with you, HigherBrook. They acted rashly and outside the chain of command. Trust me, they will be disciplined."

"*Disciplined!*" He lunged across the table; ink wobbled. "You will prosecute them *fully*, Zai. Nothing less is acceptable."

"You don't give orders here." She gave him a cursory glance, her lips pressed tight shut. What she wrote seemed to have nothing to do with the case. "The crime occurred in Basc, and Basc is not within your jurisdiction."

In one swift blast of rage he was ready pull her from her chair. Shove her against the maps, rip off her tunic, tear off his trousers. Show her



what pain, what jurisdiction was.

Instead he whirled from her bent head, steadying himself.

Zai's voice was hard-edged behind him. "Would you rather they'd have killed her?"

He turned back, fuming. "That is not the point and you know it."

"It *is* the point." She stood and walked up to him, her steps slow and deliberate. Tension sang from her shoulders. "Is CatBird completely weaned from Yata? She is not. The Preservers are charged with taking Masari lives in order to keep our populations balanced, nothing more. They abandoned that responsibility, and as a result we still have another Masari mouth to feed. *That* was their crime."

HigherBrook grasped her shoulders and looked into equally furious eyes. "Your soldiers *kidnapped and raped* CatBird *inside* Basc's borders, where we have an agreement of non-aggression."

"Yes," Zai said, evenly. "But if they had done their jobs, they would have been raping a corpse. Their crime was in not making her one."

HigherBrook drew no satisfaction from the wavering in her gaze, the slight hint of concern. She was the same demon now as she had been when she led her troops on raids into Crossroads, stealing and butchering whom and what they could. Smeared in red dye, shrieking her hatred of the Woolies. Not this smartly-attired official disguised behind a shield of decorum, clipped black hair her only helmet.

"Obviously, atrocities visited on the *living* are none of your concern," he growled, shoving her away and turning to leave. "I'm wasting my time."

Zai called after him, "You may not fathom this, HigherBrook, but my soldiers have shirked one responsibility only to take on another if a child issues from this. No matter *what* that child's cravings. They have made your ward a citizen of Basc."

He whirled back, his face purpling. "A *citizen*?"

Zai's eyes blazed. "A *respected* citizen."

HigherBrook could not drive the tremor from his fists. They remained at his sides, hammering his legs. Menace deepened his voice. "I have read the histories of your people, Zai, through *dozens* of generations. I have found not one incident like this. No rapes. No amputations. No women drugged unconscious and then violated over the course of days, time and time again. Don't tell me this is your way of conferring *citizenship*."

"Citizenship," Zai said, hotly, "conferred by shared paternity." A bitter laugh escaped her. "You may find this hard to believe, but CatBird will be accorded more respect than I had been in the days of the Covenant. Mating with Izzik has already given her his co-husband, should she decide to mate with Tedeo as well. Now, like it or not, she has six more husbands, and *all* of them will take responsibility for this child. Even if they must do it secretly."

"I promise you they will *not* be kept a secret from me. As for respect for *you*-" He towered over her, his pulse racing. "Right now my respect for Gria and for our agreement is the *only* thing stopping me from hacking you to pieces."

"For the gods' sakes, HigherBrook, CatBird is *still alive*!" Zai's hands clawed his shirt front. Spittle flew from her lips. "I had *one* husband! He died an honorable Covenant death. On better days I can

remember what he felt like. I can hear his sweet voice whispering in my ear. I can see him playing with my sons. And they are the *worst* days because it *still* tears me apart." Her black eyes watered as words rushed from her. "He was all I wanted, all I needed, and that made me an outcast. Then TripStone killed him in the *honorable* way. One day he was with me and the next he was gone."

HigherBrook's jaw ached. "And in the *dishonorable* way, your militia took away CatBird's parents and her brothers when you slaughtered the Covenant."

Zai released bunched linen. Her hands fell limp at her sides as she turned away. "I understand your rage, HigherBrook. You have my sympathies. But you do *not* have my cooperation. And if The Honorable One were standing here, you would not have hers, either."

She sat again at her desk, offering him a weary appraisal. "CatBird was one of your best killers, and one of your most respectful ones. She has sent many of my people into the afterlife, but despite The Honorable One's visions I doubt that their survivors are comforted much. Yet we have all gotten to know CatBird here in the village. I barely understand it, myself, but in the eyes of my people she is one of us." She lifted her pen again and rolled it between her fingers. "We are done here."

"I strongly doubt that."

Zai looked up from parchment, eyes narrowed. "Retaliate anywhere but the hunting grounds and you will start a full-scale war."

Despite himself, HigherBrook smiled at what he hoped was only posturing. He steadied his breathing and offered a slight bow before he turned and exited her offices. He strode past the armed sentries at Zai's door. They stood at attention, their backs straight, their gaze

forward, toward an imaginary vanishing point.

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The lamps gulped air, flames lashing like the tails of wary cats. Everything grew into sharp relief. If Gria tried hard enough, she could make out individual bits of straw on the pallets still padding the walls.

She squinted at plainness, could feel her lungs fill and empty. She knew her lips were bleeding again because of the drop tickling her chin. Her bandaged hand came up to wipe it away.

Her unwrapped skin was spidery with burst blood vessels. Gria blinked at the back of her hand. Everything hurt.

She let her arm drop, sank further into her pallet, and silently thanked the gods.

By the door a high voice, oddly mature, said, "I'll get my mom."

"No, Abri. It's all right." Her words still slewed into each other, sounding like dry tinder. She coughed. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"Since mom posted guards at the border."

Two-and-a-half days, then. Gria shifted on her bed and grimaced. Her body threatened to shatter. She was hastily-fired crockery, untempered. Porous and seeping.

Abri stood at attention, smartly dressed in his military tunic and pants. His father's knife gleamed from his belt.

Gria smiled. "Thank you for protecting me."

He blushed. "The real soldiers are outside the hut."

The boy's face was painfully earnest. Gria cleared her throat. "Abri, training and experience are the only things that separate you from a real soldier. And a couple of growth spurts." She coughed again. Croaked, "Water."

Zai's eldest son hastened to a pitcher at a far table, placed well out of reach of Gria's past flailing. The general pushed herself upright, ignoring her searing flesh. Bits of bedding stuck to her wounds.

Each reclaiming of her body had opened her up from the inside-out. She was a mass of fissures on the surface, while inside her heart thumped and her stomach gurgled and her muscles twitched back to life. Gria had watched in wonder as the portal to the afterlife rose above her. It had contracted, curling into itself like burning parchment, floating farther away. It became a knot, a lens, a pinhole.

Before it vanished altogether it had spit the dregs of her out.

She took her cup from Abri with both hands, amazed that she sprang no leaks as a cool torrent coursed down her throat. The boy held his palms near her face, ready to steady her hold if she faltered.

How long had he and his brother looked upon her brokenness? At her scars and bandages? In all her sufferings she had not once seen them turn away.

Gria's fingertips were blissfully alive. She knew how much pressure to apply to the cup. She smarted when its edge touched her cracked lips. Even the water's paltry weight pulled on her upper arms, her shoulders. She tired so easily.

But she could *feel* the weariness in her muscles. They were beaten

and shriveled, but they had returned to her.

She swallowed. "Have Zai and HigherBrook spoken to each other at all since the border was closed?"

Abri shook his head.

"Is anyone let through?"

He nodded. "They have to be approved."

It was better than nothing. Gria drank more deeply, stopping before cramps set in. "What do you think of all this?"

Abri took the cup from her and studied it as though it could tell him the answer. Gria watched his eyes darken. He knew she'd asked him a leadership question.

"Use your instinct," she prompted.

He frowned for a while before looking up. "Do we love CatBird?" he asked. "Or do we hate her?"

He could well be asking about all the Crossroads Masari. "That's a good question, Abri. How do *you* feel about CatBird?"

He screwed up his face, thinking hard.

"I wish there were another way we could have gotten her to stop killing us," he finally said. "Made her *want* to have the baby instead."

Gria gave him a thoughtful nod. "And how would we have changed her mind?"

Abri set the cup down by its pitcher and sat, his face in his hands.

Perhaps he was still too young. But he was trying to be a grownup, not backing down from the puzzle, so unlike his mother in his meditation. He shared Zai's bravado, but there was more to him.

He strove for rightness, as confusing as rightness was. Perhaps this was his inheritance from Ulik, just as much as the knife he wore. A longing to trim the fat off the world and find its muscle.

Abri sighed into his hands, shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

"I think," he said, hesitating, "we wanted to love her but we couldn't. But maybe now we can."

"Maybe." Gria licked her lips. "But what if she hates *us* now?"

The boy blinked back tears. "We have to give her a reason not to."

Gria leaned back against linen-covered straw. She would draw her knees up to her chest if she could. Her legs were a mass of tangled veins, jolting her at every heartbeat. For now they remained unbent, a light weave covering their disfigurement.

The general smiled at Abri. "Tell me about her." Remembering past the battle in Promontory was hard. Nightmare separated before and after. "I last saw CatBird as my army was leaving this valley. I know she and HigherBrook were in charge of watching over you and the other children." Gria nodded toward the far wall. "Get your chair and sit beside the bed."

Abri brought the pitcher along with its table, a sign he believed the flailing had gone for good. Gria watched his careful movements, his neatness with the furniture. He was already becoming sculpted like his mother, and robust as his father once was.

"She played with us." His hands dangled between his knees. "We cried a lot at first."

"All your parents were gone. It must have been a very scary time."

"It was so *quiet*." He wiped at his cheeks. "There was nobody but the Masari and some old and sick people. When she visited she let us play war. We made believe we were the army."

"The way you played war with your parents, before they left." Gria spied the small nod. "You know that wasn't just for the battle, don't you? You know your parents were also training you for the hunting grounds." Another nod. "Did CatBird do that, too?"

"Yeah."

"Was she part of your army?"

Abri shook his head. "She played the enemy. She hugged us when we beat her, even though she let us win." He looked at Gria with searching eyes. "I don't know why she let us win."

"I think it was so you could imagine that your parents were winning, too."

Abri shrugged, his mouth working. He looked away. "We were just playing."

Gria whispered, "She liked you a lot, didn't she?"

The boy began to cry.

Gria tried to picture the young woman and her many charges. Of the training grounds filled with children drilling on maneuvers, practicing their tracking, toting whittled wooden guns. Hunting their quarry with



single-minded seriousness, bent on victory.

The other Masari caretakers had told the children to be brave. CatBird had shown them how.

Abri choked, "I wish she were Yata." He grabbed his cup and gulped. "We all wanted her to be Yata but she said no, she couldn't be. No matter how much she loved us or Izzik. She said some day the Masari won't have to eat Yata any more, and then no one will want to be anybody else." He hung his head. "When she told us she was leaving we tried to tie her up so she wouldn't go."

A single Crossroads hunter against hundreds. Gria let out a low whistle and wiped blood from her mouth. CatBird must have been using all her strength to elude capture and still leave the youngsters unharmed. How highly skilled the adult Preservers who had finally trapped her must have been. "She was coming to help us, Abri."

Dejection. "I know."

"She couldn't have let you win that one." Gria closed her eyes. "You know who trained CatBird after her parents died, don't you?"

His voice became small. "TripStone."

"The Masari who killed your father." She took a deep breath. "Not everybody's parents went off to war, Abri. Some of them were killed by CatBird. Did those children play with her, too?"

"They enjoyed beating her the most. She trained them the hardest."

Gria opened her eyes and fixed Abri with a stare. "They didn't hate her?"

He shook his head.

"Just like you don't hate TripStone."

He whispered, "Not any more."

CatBird's life had been spared not only because of Izzik. She'd been spared because of the children. Gria reached for her cup, thankful when the boy guided it into her hand. Her arm was a furnace. They both sipped in silence.

Abri, the little soldier beside her, had still been nursing at Zai's breast when Ulik died to feed the Masari. Half a year later the boy had slashed his father's knife into TripStone's leg, carving out a piece of her for what she had done. The Covenant had fallen by that time and they were all starving. He'd needed food as much as he'd wanted vengeance.

When Zai had abandoned him and his brother, she had left a soft and plump widow and returned a hard and wiry soldier. Abri had watched his mother endure imprisonment and hard labor for her atrocities. He had seen her freed and reformed, guiding troops loyal under her command. She had returned from Promontory a hero, the effective leader of Basc.

Now he navigated their tangled Yata-Masari relationship like everybody else. No Covenant guided them now, no formalized strictures of worship. The children knew only that the Masari dispensed love in the village and death in the hunting grounds, just as Yata did to the people of Crossroads in return.

Gria sighed into her cup. "Abri, do the children know what happened to CatBird?"

He nodded.

"All of it?"

He stared at the padded wall. "The ones who can understand."

"Then I want each of them to write CatBird a letter or draw her a picture." Gria worried the patch of white hair at the back of her head. She could feel its crinkles now, her fingers passing back and forth across its warp. A mark of divinity to some, including Zai. "Even the ones who don't understand everything. They all see that the border's been closed and they all hear her name in the streets."

Abri looked at Gria. "Me, too?"

*"Especially you."*

He swallowed. "What do I write?"

"Write how much she means to you. How sad you are that she's been hurt. How much you miss her. The children who have lost family to her should tell her everything they feel, even if they're angry. Hide nothing."

Heat spread from the back of Gria's head through her palm. Maybe the white patch was a portal after all. Maybe the gods really *did* send her messages.

*Scolding me for my hubris, I'm sure.*

Gria dropped her hand back to her cup. Her people already called her The Honorable One. It was time she did something honorable.

"Spare no parchment. What you and every other child does will be very important." She tipped more water down her throat, into a body

burned clean. "When all the letters are written I want you to collect them-yes, Abri, you-and take them to Izzik. Not to your mother. Tell Izzik to give them directly to CatBird."

Abri whispered, "But Izzik's in *Crossroads*."

"I know, sweetheart." If she concentrated hard enough she could swing her legs over the edge of the pallet. "That is why I'm going to write *you* a letter, now that I can handle a pen again. At least I think I can. Go get my materials."

She waited until he left the room. Gria's thighs screamed as she pulled herself into position. *And to be without a leg? How would that feel?*

She pulled her covering around her and wiped seepage from her face and arms. She'd probably stain the parchment. That blood could be useful, since the very fact of her handwriting might be disbelieved.

The border had to open again. Without peace and free commerce between the villages, hunting would become the only thing left. Zai knew that. HigherBrook knew it. But they were at a standstill before each other. Powerless against their own pain.

Abri returned with his arms full. He laid a thick sheaf of parchment aside before moving the table closer to Gria's pallet. He set the pitcher and cups on the floor and started preparing a makeshift workspace. A deft and efficient secretary.

"You've done this for your mother."

He nodded without looking up.

A thrill shivered Gria as she closed her fingers around the pen. After

so many manifestos, perhaps the most crucial ones were about to be composed. "Abri, I'm going to write an order giving you safe passage through Crossroads and back to Basc. You're a messenger on a mission from me. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

She heard the worry in his voice. "I'm not trying to take away your loyalty to Zai. I'm trying to help her. If she tries to stop your mission I want you to show her this note and send her here. But I want you to get all those letters written and delivered as soon as you can."

Her writing was stiff and uncoordinated. Gria lightened her touch as the nib bent. "If HigherBrook or his agents ask to see the letters, *don't give them over*. Show my note. They are to go *only* to Izzik. He will make sure they get to CatBird."

Zai would be furious at Gria for not assigning the boy an escort. For sending a Yata child armed only with his father's knife into a hostile Masari village. "Does this frighten you? Be truthful."

"Yes."

Abri stood at stiff attention, trying to look brave.

Gria nodded. "You'll enter Crossroads through the windbreak and onto the Grange. Seek out Ghost or Piri if you want someone at your back."

He watched her pen skip. "What will the letters do?"

"To be honest, I don't know." She had trouble telling where ink ended and blood began. "But you are the future of this valley. No matter what you and the other children write, those letters will be asking for

forgiveness."

Gria's words skewed across the page, her penmanship savaged but recognizable. She hesitated, then frowned and drew a series of pictograms around the text. "Do you know how to read these yet?"

Abri shook his head. "Only a little."

"HigherBrook won't be able to ignore them." Gria sighed. "Neither will your mother. They proclaim me the spiritual leader of Basc and a messenger to the gods. They say my word is inviolable." She laughed a little. "Gods help me if I'm mistaken."

She lifted and blew on the page before handing it to him. "I am petitioning the dead for your protection as well. I'm sure that Ulik especially has heard my prayer." She nodded at the paper. "Put that under your pillow when you go to sleep tonight."

Abri held the letter to his heart in salute. He leaned forward to plant a shy kiss on her purpled cheek.

When he gathered up the sheaf and turned to leave, she called, "And have someone remove the pallets from these walls. If the gods are going to talk to me, I need to see what the Dirt People have to say, too." Even now the hidden pictograms seemed to swim up to her, through layers of straw. Gria couldn't hide a smirk. "The Honorable One needs all the help she can get."

## **Chapter 34**

### **Promontory**

DamBuster pushed up his sleeves and took one heave from his

barrel chest. He laid gloved fingers on limp hair fanned out on a metal dissection table. "I argued with MudAdder that he would only die if he went back to the Farm. He was ready to live out his days there, drugged and happy. I'm beginning to see his wisdom."

The body beneath the apothecary's hands has been scrubbed clean, bronze dulled to gray. TripStone looked down at sunken cheeks and jutting hips. Skin stretched over ribs and clavicle, torn and puckered around the neat hole from FlitNettle's bullet. "He expected to find the herd drugged and happy, but they were being culled too quickly."

"Do you want to hear my fantasy?" DamBuster eased in a syringe and drew out dark, viscous fluid. Punctures up and down the body marked where other needles had been. "I was going to be an old man, TripStone. MudAdder would have spent the rest of his life in that massive embrace he kept trying to make me understand. One non-ending, glorious fuck. That's all he ever wanted. And then, one day, it would simply be his turn to be meat."

He transferred the liquid to a vial. "A farm hand, probably one of BrushBurn's distant cousins, would bring him up with the rest. But I had asked specifically to buy MudAdder's remains because I *knew* him. And I loved him, for that short, terrible time he was here."

He eased open the wrinkled mouth and inserted treated cloth, lingering by the cut tongue. "BrushBurn would have gray in his hair, you'd have gray in yours. DevilChaser would probably be bald. We'd sit at the table together and recite those delicate Covenant prayers. And I'd start to understand what you go through." The apothecary withdrew the cloth and slipped it into a bottle. He touched MudAdder's closed lips and frowned. "He had all his teeth when he was here."

FlitNettle stepped away from a row of bottle-filled shelves, her hands

clasped behind her back. The child paced around the laboratory, peering at samples.

"Sometimes I ask myself why I resisted him so much." DamBuster lifted the body to him, nodding as TripStone grasped bony ankles. They positioned the Yata face down and spread his legs.

DamBuster caressed a buttock. "You didn't see him when he was healthy, TripStone. Muscular. He was so beautiful. I spurned his advances." He reached for a scraper. "Why did I do that?"

"You're a married man, DamBuster."

"DevilChaser wouldn't have cared! He loved MudAdder as much as I did." He separated cheeks and inserted the scraper, wincing. "I rejected him because I didn't believe in his kind of love. Mindless press of flesh. I did that once. I know what it's like not to be able to tell one body from the next." The scraper dropped into a tube that suctioned shut. "But that's not the way they did it at Destiny Farm. That herd was a *single entity*. Seeing them culled like that, it was like part of his body had been taken away."

FlitNettle turned from the shelves, her voice edgy. "You weren't there."

TripStone glanced at her folded arms. "I'm sorry, Flit. We'll stop."

"I'm a big girl, TripStone. Keep talking." She stepped up to the body and lifted the Yata's hair, pointing to numbers inked underneath. "He was six years older than me and he fathered at least fifty-six children. They think. It's harder to tell paternity. I played with some of them. I'm sure I shot two of them this last hunt." She shrugged. "They were just as skinny."

She dropped the hair and returned to the shelves. Straight-backed,



as though the rifle still hung off her shoulder.

TripStone watched her for a moment, then returned to MudAdder. She blinked as DamBuster's fingers moved against the Yata's back. They pressed slowly, compensating for the thickness of the glove.

*No, DamBuster. I think it's good for her to see him like this. TripStone drummed on his forearm. I don't think either of them realized what weaning the herd from Destiny would do. They both just wanted it to last longer so the culling would stop.*

*I could have made that drug faster than I did. I should have.* DamBuster gritted his teeth. *I resisted that, too.*

"And then what?" TripStone reached for gloves. "Promontory would be enslaving Yata across the entire region if SandTail had succeeded. Skedge and Basc would be gone and Crossroads would be bankrupt. It would be only a matter of time before Alvav fell and then Rudder. You were following your conscience." She held up a knife. "There are Covenant prayers for dissection, before MudAdder goes to the Lodge. I can teach you those."

DamBuster nodded, gazing down at the body. "DevilChaser should be here. He's been seeing patients almost nonstop since the hunt."

FlitNettle called from the lab counter, "I'll get him." Boot heels clicked on wood.

TripStone waited until the door closed. Her voice dropped. "Don't expect her back for the prayers. She'll be visiting DustClaw and TallowWinch. Have they improved any?"

"They're recovering." The apothecary shook his head. "I don't know whether eating PickGrate retarded their deprivation effects or not."

She certainly wasn't a sustainer." His broad hand swept toward the shelves. "I thought finding the formula for Destiny was a chore. Now I've got a hospital full of the prettiest collection of innards you've ever seen and I don't have a clue as to what I'm doing." His voice turned fierce. "But thank the gods Promontory now *knows* what I'm doing."

He turned the blade over in his hands. "I couldn't have recreated Destiny without BrushBurn's help. I understand the chemical structures, but his body is a finely-tuned instrument. What I know would be like another set of statistics to him. If we can combine that knowledge with his instincts, we might just get somewhere."

"I'll tell him you're looking for a lab assistant."

DamBuster shot her a hard look. "How's *your* experiment going?"

TripStone tried to smile. "We don't know what we're doing, either."

"I saw how BrushBurn held MudAdder when he was here." DamBuster fingered the cold flesh on the table. He stroked ravaged limbs. "That was when I realized how little I knew about the Farm." He looked toward the door. "You didn't bring FlitNettle along just for a hospital visit."

"No. We're giving him and Jirado some privacy." TripStone's palm rested on MudAdder's shoulder. Her glove muffled sharp bone. Her other hand made a fist, trying to get its circulation back.

She touched discolorations, lesions. Trailed her finger down a knobby spine. "How soon before you break?"

"Now that I'm out of Masari, you mean?" DamBuster's hand covered hers. "I don't know if my weaning will stay where it is or revert back to what it was."

"We'll prepare a special barrel for you." She nodded down at MudAdder. "It'll be no one but him."

"Thank you." The hand squeezed. "You don't know what that means to me."

TripStone closed the Yata's legs, trying to picture rounded calves and strong thighs. Something other than a desiccated husk. "He might not hold you for long."

"He'll hold me."

For a moment love seemed to radiate from the corpse. "You realize," TripStone said, softly, "that the ecstasy of the break will be its own form of worship. You won't need words." She looked up, into DamBuster's sad smile. "You knew MudAdder better than I knew any of my prey. He's already a part of you."

She stepped toward vials and stoppered bottles that flattened out as though losing their depth. Full and half-full, opaque and translucent, solid and liquid. Parchment fluttered on the wall when TripStone walked past. Diagrams of crisscrossed lines covered whitewash. Mazes of chalk.

"The hearth was warm when we left." She gazed at unintelligible symbols and shapes, different colors bridged together by hastily scribbled notes. "Jirado was still asleep. BrushBurn held me almost as tightly as he did before the hunt." She forced a laugh. "He's still afraid of losing me."

DamBuster stepped up behind her. "Are you afraid of losing him?"

"It's not that, exactly." The diagrams tunneled and bent. She tried to peer past their corners. "He's always belonged to the Yata."

"Part of me will always belong to MudAdder. That doesn't make my love for DevilChaser any less strong."

The mazes were a foreign language that told TripStone nothing. She backed away from the wall. "There's a different hymn for each body part. Each healing property. The dissection is a journey through the body's gifts of life. It's a walk taken through a paradise, giving thanks to the gods along the way."

Her voice was as flat as FlitNettle's. TripStone turned back toward MudAdder, face down and anonymous on the metal. She meditated on his stillness, waiting for her pulse to slow as the door opened with the doctor's tired greeting.

She leaned against DevilChaser as the slim man hugged her across the back. "Help me turn him," she whispered. "He should be facing up when we start to cut."

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Jirado folded herself into a large chair, knees bent beneath her. "Tell me what it was like in the pens."

The man across the table leaned on his elbows, hands clasped. His plain shirt opened at the front, laces hanging halfway to his waist. "I wore a sheath in the pens." BrushBurn looked up from his tea. "Tell me what it was like in the factory."

"I wore a mask in the factory." Jirado smoothed her tunic over her shoulders. "Sometimes the Destiny permeated the cloth, but that was one of the benefits of the job. It was happy work. Not enough to incapacitate me, though we had some cases of overexposure." She smiled to herself. "They were an embarrassment."

"There was no embarrassment in the pens." BrushBurn sighed and leaned back, hands loose on his lap. "I made sure they knew it was me, so they'd be-ready."

"Because of your larger size."

He looked at her curiously.

"You're blushing."

"I suppose." BrushBurn crossed an ankle over his knee. His bare foot extended from a coarse linen cuff. Rusty curls on weathered skin. A high arch and defined ankle, long toes. "Funny, isn't it?" he mused. "I never thought I'd blush in front of a Yata."

Jirado held up her finger. "A Farm Yata. I used to think I was an offshoot of the Masari." She reached for the tea. "That must make things very strange for both of us."

He smiled. "You don't look half as uncomfortable as I feel."

"I don't expect to feel uncomfortable. I'll know it's you."

He guffawed, slapping his hand over his mouth.

Jirado glanced toward the door. "They're probably wondering if we're undressed by now." She sipped, shaking her head as BrushBurn dabbed at his eyes. "I'm glad we're getting to know each other first. That's how it should be."

"Jirado." BrushBurn lowered his leg and leaned forward, arms on the table. Wonder danced in his eyes. "I'm still getting used to thinking of the Skedge Yata as *Yata*. It isn't that I believed you were Masari. It's just that you were so different from the Yata I knew."

She reached out and traced a line on his wrist, seeing the shiver. "We were your trading partners. You knew a commodity instead." She turned his hand over and examined the wide palm. "My own people have trouble recognizing that the Yata in the canyon are just like them. Even the ones taken from Skedge are being discounted as dead. It's easier that way." Jirado squeezed BrushBurn's fingers. "I'm sorry. I'm supposed to be seducing you."

"Hey." His skin was warm, blanketing her forearm. "We're getting to know each other." He let go. Steam curled from the teapot as he poured. "I worry about Skedge, myself."

"That's because you're worried about your food supply."

"Ultimately."

His steel blue gaze was direct and open. Jirado met it. "You're as helpless as I am."

She drew her knees up to her chest, curling her toes over the seat edge. Even the privacy curtain blocking her pallet from view couldn't erase the cavernous feel of the kitchen. She craned her neck and squinted at the ceiling.

"To be honest, I don't know how many children I have. They'd all be Masari."

Jirado looked back down, into pensiveness.

BrushBurn's elbows were on his thighs, his chin on his knuckles. "Sometimes I took payment in other ways, from women who didn't care if I used a sheath or not."

"Sex for meat, you mean."

He nodded. "I suppose they preferred pregnancy to starvation. It's not something I'm proud of." He reached for his cup. "There's much that I'm not proud of."

"They consented?"

"They were desperate." He sipped. "Yes, they consented."

Jirado pursed her lips. "Do you think I'm desperate?"

BrushBurn lowered the tea quickly, startled. "That isn't what I meant-"

"Look around, BrushBurn. I think we're *all* desperate. Don't you?" Jirado barked a laugh. "Our peoples have been desperate for generations. You. Me. SandTail. TripStone. Making a mix-child is an act of desperation. You said yourself that we wouldn't know what to expect." She lowered her legs. Her feet dangled above the floor. "I just happen to think it's a better desperation than most."

She leaned back and closed her eyes, breathing deeply. The chair scraped on the other side. Footfalls.

"Lean forward a little." BrushBurn's hands enveloped her shoulders, massaging. They lingered at the nape of her neck.

She whispered, "You won't find a brand there."

"I'm not expecting one."

"That's good." She let her head drop forward. A giant kneaded her back.

He lifted her out of the chair and held her to him, finding pressure points. "It's odd." His voice became a gravelly purr. "The last Yata I

massaged like this was MudAdder, in DamBuster's lab. I never thought I'd be doing it again so soon."

Jirado rested her arms on his hips. BrushBurn's pelt cushioned her cheek through linen.

She murmured, "You've got a slow heartbeat."

"Yata hearts beat faster." His fingertips eased against her neck and pressed. Paused. "You could be more relaxed."

"You don't want me falling asleep."

He held her closer. "I suppose not."

She followed the laces to his open shirt. Her fingers glided through pectoral fur. "You're softer than I thought." She smiled. "Don't shave that off."

"I don't intend to."

BrushBurn's lungs filled against her. She wondered if his eyes were open or closed, if he looked at the curtain or at the past. He loosened the knots in her lower back muscles, careful not to bunch her tunic.

"MudAdder was naked when you massaged him, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

Jirado dropped her hand to his waist. "You've already seen me naked, BrushBurn. It won't be a surprise."

He hesitated. "No."

"And I've seen SandTail naked." She grinned. "I can extrapolate."



BrushBurn chortled. "Telling me about SandTail naked is not the way to seduce me."

"You're more at ease with me. That's good."

She coaxed his shirt from his breeches, grazing his abdominal fur. Cloth slid along her legs. BrushBurn's palms rested above her buttocks, against her skin, warming half her back. Her tunic bunched to either side of his wrists. He didn't move for a long time.

She whispered, "You're being very careful with me."

"I'm being very careful with myself." The voice above her rose, confused. "Sometimes I think I'm dreaming this, Jirado. I ask myself what brought you here. One day I'm sure it's the gods, the next day I'm sure it's the demons."

Jirado nodded, pressing closer. "I'd like to think the gods have brought me, so that we can both banish our demons."

She pillowed her head, listening to his pulse quicken. She waited for his knees to bend, for them to be face to face.

Her thumb smoothed the furrows in his brow. She whispered, "You and I have a lot of banishing to do, BrushBurn."

He tried to smile and shook his head, eyes moist. "Gods forgive me."

"They will."

Her tunic lifted up with his arms and dropped to the floor behind her. BrushBurn cradled her head in his hands. He could twist it off if he wanted to. Instead Jirado opened her mouth to the gentle pressure of his lips and waited, tasting. He almost pulled back.

Then he leaned forward, exploring her uncut tongue with his. Delicate probes. She answered in kind, touching tip to tip. Flexing.

She grazed his lower lip with her teeth and let it go. "Better?"

"Different." His palms traveled down her sides. "This takes getting used to."

She felt the muscles in his thigh, his tentative balance. "You should get more comfortable."

BrushBurn straightened and looked about the room. Jirado watched him, rubbing gooseflesh as he fed the hearth. He glided slowly around the kitchen, first clearing the table, then ducking behind the curtain and emerging with her pallet in his arms. He set it on the tabletop, moving chairs and boards away, tucking linen. He moved some of the boards back, testing their height. Scrutinizing.

Finally he turned back, facing elsewhere as he pulled off his shirt. Sweat glistened, tracking from skin onto curls as his chest rose and fell. Daylight flattened the whitewash.

"Your pelt pattern brings out the broadness of your shoulders," Jirado observed. "Your time on the road has sculpted you."

"My fasting has sculpted me."

She studied the hands loose at his sides, following his gaze. "You're not just looking at a blank wall."

"No."

His neck fur waved as he shook his head as though dispersing rain. Jirado stepped up to him, snuggling closer as his arm rounded her

back. Her fingers hovered by his breech ties. "What do the spirits tell you?"

"I don't know." He brushed back her short hair. "You knew about that."

She looked up into puzzlement. "You seemed like you were conferring with someone."

She took hold of a lace and twisted it, finding a loop. Her voice grew heavy as she loosened it. "I may know more about your childhood than you wanted, BrushBurn. But you know more about Yata bodies than I know about Masari." She eased leather as the cloth beneath her palm began to strain.

BrushBurn chuckled above her. "You know more than you think, Jirado."

"I had a husband once." She peeled away from the ache, driving out the image of SilverLode's body. Lightless eyes, wasted limbs. She swallowed down a sob before it broke free.

BrushBurn's hold tightened, his voice hushed. "I know what grief smells like."

She nodded, pressing against his torso, eyes closed. "Help me."

His fingers touched hers in greeting. Together they unknotted the laces, drawing down the cloth, freeing his feet.

Her hand traveled as BrushBurn caught his breath, hardening more. She whispered, "You must have been very gentle in the pens." She lifted, stroked. "And outside them."

He gasped, "I had the best teachers."

"Love is always the best teacher." Her lips brushed his waist, his cock pulsing against her sternum. Heat spread across her chest. "They must have learned from you, too."

"Jirado-" Her name floated in air. "Hang onto me."

BrushBurn reached beneath her buttocks and under her arms. The giant kitchen closed in as he lifted her onto the pallet. She sank into a conduit, listening to the hydraulics of her blood.

His soft gravel echoed. "Lean back. I'll hold you up." Jirado's nipple puckered between his teeth, her abdomen warming beneath his palm. When he raised his head his steel blue eyes were narrow passageways cinching her reflection.

He whispered, "Stop me if anything feels wrong." He kneaded her breast, pausing where white interrupted golden bronze.

"Steam leak." Jirado reached out, tracing the line of his chops. "Scar tissue. It doesn't hurt."

His great head lowered, lips caressing the burn mark. They followed her contours as BrushBurn eased her down and raised her rump. A ten-degree incline, like the access tube behind the tertiary vat. Heat there, too, near the boilers.

His chops brushed against her thighs. His tongue stroked her clitoris. Warm breath.

"You see?" Her voice deepened. "I do have something of a pelt."

The tongue moved lower, opening her. Drawing lubrication.

Jirado's heart raced. She had to loosen the valves further, regulate. Had to shunt energies to where they were needed most. She sighed

against the pallet as BrushBurn's fingers dipped inside her. Gauges measuring, determining her depth. Testing friction, unwinding coils. His shoulder fur cushioned her ankles.

*She reaches into a crevice, spreading grease. Over and under the metal where gears mesh. Doubled over, hanging and tethered to the assembly. Always at risk of someone forgetting that she is hidden in the works, of a hand pushing a lever to release the pressure.*

She heard BrushBurn step onto the boards. He lowered her legs, guiding her into position.

She whispered, "I'm ready."

"I know."

Relief in his voice. Want.

He spread her muscles around him and pushed. His cock remained just inside, beating like a second heart. His chest and face shone as he smiled down at her.

He tilted her again, easing her toward him. Linen cooled the soles of her feet. Jirado barely felt BrushBurn's single hand against her back, his arm supporting her spine. She breathed in his musk through parted lips. Responded to the circling of his thumb, opening deeper.

Blood steamed in her ears, a massive release of breath as latches gave. Suction, vacuum. She was one of many moving parts, calibrating and realigning. Metal under viscosity. Bellows filled and emptied. Pressure increased and decreased, returned.

She moaned when he pulled her closer.

*Her shoulders are so narrow, her hips so compact. Jirado pulls herself along cables, inching further. She squeezes around one bend, can trace her progress by watching reflections in the steel. Tending the machinery takes patience. Move too fast and skin burns or is sheared away. Try to fit too quickly and gears strip away.*

BrushBurn slid in further and began a shallow plumb. Jirado sighed happily at his rhythm, power under pressure, controlled. An engine of the flesh.

*The factory's great pumps begin to run, creating thick waves in the vats. Their sound eddies in the air, vibrating through the walls as production schedules are amended once and then again, demanding ever more Destiny. Alternating pistons push and pull. Through one shift, then two. Then three. Faster. Their sound follows Jirado home. It rocks her to sleep, rocks her awake, leaves her legs buckling.*

She pushed against the linen, both his hands holding her now. Sweat streamed from her as she clutched the pallet, answering BrushBurn's groans, thrusting. Churning his ingredients, building momentum. Jirado's muscles took over. She was automatic now, fully fueled, bucking. Slaved to perpetual motion.

*So much drug exacted in so short a time. Mixed and heated; cured, dried, pulverized. Hissing through chutes into burlap bags. Metal fatigue, plates bending. Snap of brittle springs. So much to repair, so much to replace. She lives inside the machinery.*

Jirado's heart pounded in her throat. BrushBurn shook against her, doubled over and hugging her to his chest, her thighs against his hips. Her vats filled with him until they couldn't hold any more. She

began to pour.

They both cried out, his spasms riding hers.

BrushBurn lowered her back down after her body quieted and her jolting stopped. He brushed wet hair from her forehead and kissed her belly. A boyish smile spread across his face when he looked up.

Jirado gulped air, regarding him past swollen breasts. "Feel better?"

BrushBurn raised his eyebrows. "I'm more relaxed."

"That's good." She sank into the pallet. "I feel better."

He still rested inside her, softening. Jirado closed her eyes.

The chutes inside her remained open. Mash flowed down their spillways until everything drowned in pepper. It coursed through her blood and breached her womb, waiting. It was a slurry, a blackened pool. Trapping seed, pulling it down, choking it into stillness. Melting down the factory of life into sludge.

## **Chapter 35**

The Lodge was blessedly quiet. No one broke. No barrels were being trundled in from the back and hauled up the stairs, unsealed with a fleshy pop. No plates clattered, running with brine. Wood glowed warmly in lantern light on a still, cold evening.

Only a few workers lingered in loose coveralls that hid their ribs, dining on donated food of lesser flesh. Now that was being rationed, too.

BrushBurn looked up from his numbers, listening to the off-rhythm of

crutch and peg-leg as his assistant approached. "Slow night, StemIron."

The youth pointed down at parchment. "Not for long."

"No." BrushBurn slid one sheet out from the rest. "I've been putting together recommendations for the Chamber. We can't staff a base camp with anything less than level three *yatanii*. You qualify."

StemIron's ruddy mop bounced as he laughed. "I'm not that fast yet. Might grab my leg instead of a gun when I have to shoot."

"Not to hunt. We'll need a supply master." BrushBurn handed him another page. "It's better pay than this. I know you're supporting family."

He turned back to statistics as the boy sat opposite him to read. His loins still tingled. BrushBurn rubbed his eyes and tried to focus, finally settling for sitting back in his chair.

The slate walls were too distant to make out individual numbers, their chalk forming nothing more than pretty patterns. Off in the corner two men and a woman took tea, conversing over their own papers. Visitors. Hunters from Rudder, from the look of their tunics.

Tapping brought his attention back to the table.

StemIron's finger rested on BrushBurn's plate. "You finishing that rabbit?"

"Take it." He nodded toward the far table. "Why are they here?"

"Figuring our accounts." The boy lifted a strip and chewed gristle. "They're meeting with the Chamber in the morning." He swallowed



and licked his lips. "We're in bad shape."

"Could be worse. There could be someone from Crossroads with them."

StemIron laughed. "There could be someone from *Basc* with them."

*That* would be a sight. A proud Yata, armed with as many bullets on paper as in steel, climbing onto a high Masari chair to deliver an ultimatum. "Luckily for us, most of the aid from Basc is going to Skedge. But you're right." BrushBurn watched the trio. "I once did just what they're doing, StemIron. Sitting at Crossroads' Grange at the end of last winter, telling HigherBrook how much in debt to Promontory his people were."

His assistant nodded. "Each missive from you led to another round of drinks at the tavern." His teeth worried another strip. "They don't *look* like an invasion force."

BrushBurn shook his head. "Rudder isn't Promontory. They'll find another way to collect."

The front doors opened; flames wavered. TripStone shucked her coat as she stepped across the foyer.

"Wait here." BrushBurn pointed to his papers. "Those are my notes on staffing and provisions for the canyon. The Chamber has the final word, but I want your input." He left a boy grown into a man too soon and strode toward the doors.

TripStone hung her woolens on a hook. She clutched BrushBurn as he enfolded her, rubbing her chops against his.

"Let's warm you up." He found her mouth and tried to lose himself in

her Masari imprint. Her breasts against his shirt, the broad span of her lips. Her roundness. The nap of crimson pelt beneath her clothes.

TripStone murmured, "That bad." Her eyebrows rose as she looked at him. "That good."

It was an accurate assessment either way. BrushBurn buried his nose in her neck fur, breathing her in. Beneath her musk lay the smells of a body washed clean of blood. With a start he realized they'd both bathed for each other, hiding the evidence of their acts.

He took her hand and led her toward the counter. "FlitNettle?"

"Still at the hospital. Helping." She nodded toward the back room. "I've brought MudAdder in. I've got to prepare him for DamBuster."

"I'll assist you."

TripStone shot him a questioning look. "You've never liked that part of the job."

"I owe them both that."

He slipped his arm around the waist of a woman who never liked killing. TripStone held him in return. He scented her guardedness, an inventory of unasked questions.

They passed from burnished oak into hard steel. Counters and basins, scales and cutlery. BrushBurn handed TripStone an apron and tied his own. He opened cabinets and retrieved herbs, setting a mortar and pestle to the side. He avoided looking at the packages she unwrapped. He'd see what was in them soon enough.

From behind him TripStone remarked, "Patrons of the Milkweed outside."

"Yes." BrushBurn measured and poured, then began to grind. "They're meeting with the Chamber tomorrow." He forced lightness into his voice. "Rudder's announced its first level eight *yatanii*. No Yata consumption for almost a year and a half."

The steel echoed with a low whistle.

"Started fasting almost thirty years ago, before he came of age." BrushBurn drew water from a barrel. "*Thirty years*, TripStone. I try to think of what Promontory will look like in thirty years. That used to be a lot easier to imagine than it is now."

"I've heard from Ghost." Liquid spilled into a metal bowl. A knife slipped quietly through flesh. "He was in Rudder and Alvav, gathering samples. BubbleCreek is carrying a Yata-dependent child. She's dropped behind the Threshold."

BrushBurn stopped his mixing and turned. "She was at *level six*."

TripStone nodded without looking up. "I'm committed to what we're doing, BrushBurn, but I thought you should know." She sighed. "As you said, there are no guarantees. She talked of moving to Crossroads after the baby is born. Rudder allows mix-children now, but only those that aren't Yata-dependent."

Morsels sank with a soft plop. BrushBurn forced himself to look at slabs of flesh sliced neatly from bone. At organs preserved in canisters. TripStone's hands moved fluidly, dancing around the meat. She could be wielding the blade in her sleep.

After a moment she met his gaze. "I'm willing to try whatever might work." She gestured toward the walls. "Without controlled fasting the Warehouse would be empty of Yata right now and we'd be going

after Skedge. Then Skedge would be gone and this city would die out." The knife resumed cutting. "We have the Milkweed to thank for the Lodge. Conditions here might actually improve if Rudder annexed Promontory."

Too many aromatics perfumed the air; BrushBurn couldn't scent past them. Nothing revealed what lay underneath the soft control in his wife's voice. He continued mixing the brine.

TripStone spoke to his back. "I know how hard you've fought for survival. I know what Promontory has sacrificed and how hard losing your independence would be. But that independence would not have been possible without Rudder's assistance during the frontier wars."

BrushBurn's neck fur puffed. He set his teeth as he ground seeds. "Promontory tried to collect on Crossroads' ancient debt so now Rudder collects on ours, is that it?"

Her voice strained. "I didn't mean to imply-"

"You didn't mean to, but you did." He tried to shake his anger and couldn't. "I'm sure HigherBrook would be pleased to hear your news. No irony is lost on him."

"Do you think Crossroads doesn't have its own problems?" Flesh thumped. "Rudder has always been your ally and still is. Would you rather Promontory just fell?"

Measuring scoops *thocked* against the counter. "That would certainly ease Crossroads' conscience, wouldn't it?"

She whispered, "Let's not do this."

He heard her dismay, couldn't help laughing a little. "When you

traveled here with me I was defending our way of life to you. It didn't do any good." He measured. Remeasured. Wiped his hands. "Considering that we were hauling Crossroads' relics at the time, you have every right to gloat."

"Believe me, BrushBurn," TripStone answered, tiredly, "gloating is the last thing I want to do."

He wanted to shake the salts from his hands and wipe the oil from hers. Wanted to gather her in his arms, press their spattered aprons together, and carry her to a private room. To a place where there was no Promontory, no Crossroads, and no Rudder. No Masari and no Yata. No canyon to die in, no city to starve in. No need except the one that counted.

"DamBuster thinks you can help him." TripStone's voice was gentler now, softened around its edges. "He wants to teach you what he knows."

BrushBurn nodded, staring down at powder. "As you said, whatever might work." He looked back over his shoulder. "StemIron is going over my base camp recommendations. They include several dozen more people for you to train. Including him."

Her gray eyes narrowed. "He's young."

"He's older than Flit."

"FlitNettle's different."

"And she's a level two. That's not good enough for the camp."

TripStone flashed a wry smile. "You're her cousin, BrushBurn. You're going to have to tell her that."

"Gladly." He turned back to the counter.

Meat plopped behind him. "I'll make sure the guns are all out of the room."

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TripStone winced at the sounds of shouting in the kitchen. "Let's take a walk."

Jirado sat at a diminutive desk, her elbow on burnished wood. The Yata was quietly attentive, focused on the threshold, following the occasional red face and shaking fist that passed into view. "You're guarding the guns, remember?"

"I'll carry them with me. You shouldn't be hearing this."

"I told you, TripStone, I *need* to hear this." Jirado gestured toward the commotion. "I may look like a girl, but FlitNettle *is* one. To hear her brag about her hunting prowess terrifies me." She looked up. "Being ignorant about what you do terrifies me more. Is she really as good as she says?"

TripStone pursed her lips. Finally, she nodded.

"Why aren't you defending her?"

"They're blood. And she's his only surviving kin." TripStone crossed to her pallet. She studied BrushBurn's indentations next to hers, could trace the outline of his body. She hoisted a chair under one arm and turned away from the linen.

Shrieks and bellows ricocheted off the whitewashed walls. Neither combatant was backing down. Jirado leaned forward as TripStone

sat beside the desk. "She hates him."

"She only sounds that way. Flit's got a formidable temper." A palm slammed against pine in the next room, followed by another. Protestations and threats. TripStone tried not to listen. "I've rarely seen BrushBurn this angry, but he worries about her a great deal."

Jirado raised her eyebrows. "Don't you?"

"Yes, but in a different way."

Jirado smiled a little. She rested her hand on her stomach. "Considering the two of them, maybe I'll be punched as well as kicked."

TripStone's gut twisted. She struggled to steady her breath, gasping involuntarily as earthenware shattered.

"FlitNettle!" she called toward the kitchen. "That won't help you!"

"A lot *you* care!"

TripStone sighed into her hands. "I won't side with her against him but I can't try to dissuade her. I've got to remain neutral."

Tapered fingers touched her shoulder. Jirado's high voice sounded younger than the girl's. "Would they be fighting like this if I weren't here?"

"Over whether she can join the base camp? Yes."

Jirado leaned back. TripStone looked upon half-lidded eyes and relaxed shoulders and saw a woman satiated. Hand on her belly again, suggestive. "You're supposed to be getting pregnant and I'm the one who's nauseous."

"You're the one he loves, TripStone."

They sat in silence, listening to accusations and repeated, immovable arguments.

"She believes she's indispensable," Jirado observed.

TripStone watched them stalk each other around the kitchen, yelling across the table, BrushBurn ready to lunge at his furious ward. FlitNettle's language turned ugly, her tone menacing, shoulders thrown back.

"Do *you* believe she's indispensable?"

TripStone blinked at Jirado. "I'm sorry. What?"

"FlitNettle. Do you think she's indispensable?"

How many times have the same curses circled around? How long have they been after each other? "That's something none of us can afford to be." TripStone nodded toward the kitchen. "BrushBurn knows that. That's why he's so upset with her. He saw how Flit ran to the Lodge after she was finished at the Warehouse."

"To eat Yata."

"Yes. Another day out there and she would have begun getting sick."

"But you were all *carrying* Yata."

"Which is highly regulated now." TripStone tried not to stare. How calm would she be if their roles were reversed? "The bodies we bring up belong to Promontory first. Everything the Lodge dispenses is tightly controlled." She squinted at Jirado. "This must sound awful to



you."

"I'm trying to understand, TripStone. That's all." Jirado hugged herself around the waist. "I might be the only Yata making that attempt. But I've got to face reality no matter how unpleasant it is. I can't survive any other way."

A nervous laugh burbled up. "I'm still trying to face the reality of you and BrushBurn-" TripStone waited for a new eruption to quiet into obstinacy. Her head began to throb. "I ask myself why I have trouble accepting that you are here to create life with him, while you have the strength to listen to how we go about dealing death." To her surprise she realized her legs were drawn up, her arms tight across her chest. No wonder she could barely breathe. "Jirado."

"Hm?"

TripStone stared bleakly into the kitchen, seeing nothing. So hard to ask a simple question. "How was he?"

The voice to her left was pensive. "Shy." Cloth rustled. Jirado eased her hands behind her head and stretched. "Curious." She paused. "Concerned about you."

TripStone looked into dark, untroubled eyes. If she focused on them, maybe the images in her head would go away. "Was he happy?"

"I think so."

"Then that's what's important." Her muscles might unclench if she repeated the words to herself often enough. "You're doing us a favor, Jirado. I should be grateful."

Jirado patted her arm. "And you're doing me a favor by letting me

live."

"We're not hunting Skedge."

"Not yet."

"We can't afford to." TripStone shook her head. "For many reasons."

"Maybe not in the traditional way, but I'm sure you'll think of something." Jirado leaned on her elbow, head cocked to one side. "Promontory was able to suppress our identity so well that we still don't want to face what we are." She raised her eyebrows. "Or are you telling me that Masari can be deluded as easily as Yata?"

FlitNettle stomped into the room, smoldering. She shot TripStone a glare before grabbing her coat. The door slammed behind her.

BrushBurn's surprise reached them from a distance. "Don't tell me you were both here all this time."

Jirado smiled up as he approached. "We could lie and say we weren't."

"She prefers the truth, BrushBurn." TripStone unwound cramped limbs. "I can't find fault with that."

"Still." He gave TripStone a hard look. "My decision is final."

"FlitNettle's a level two. You won't get any argument from me."

"Good." BrushBurn studied each of them in turn, still incredulous. His pelt began to settle. "Welcome to our household, Jirado. If neither of you has anything else to do, you can help me put the kitchen back together."

# Chapter 36

## Early Winter

### Crossroads

"He doesn't want me living in my *own home*, Izzik." CatBird glared out her window. TripStone's house, empty and dark, stood beyond the training yard. "Where am I supposed to stay? Ghost's infirmary? With HigherBrook in his cramped rooms?" She expelled a sharp breath, watching it spread on the glass. "He's lost his senses."

"HigherBrook loves you." Izzik stepped up beside her, his dark eyes level with the tops of her crutches. "He's terrified of losing you."

"He *is* losing me." Her knuckles whitened around dowels. "I can't go into Basc because Zai's guards won't let me through. I can't see your family-*our* family. And if *you* go back to them, HigherBrook won't let you return to Crossroads." She slammed a crutch against the wood floor. "This whole valley's gone crazy because of what happened to me. I am *one person*, Izzik."

"You're the adopted daughter of Crossroads' leader," he reminded her. "You were the best hunter among your people."

"And I was made into a cripple with child, is that what you're saying?"

He winced.

CatBird leaned left. She shook her right hand free of the crutch and rested her palm against her navel, through hunting clothes made useless. Masari babies couldn't cause such a feeling of fullness so quickly, could they? Could Yata?

She whispered, "I can't even talk to my co-wives about this. I miss them so much." Her eyes pleaded with Izzik. "You'll stay here with me?"

Izzik smiled up at her. "I'll shoot anyone who tries to drag me from this house."

"Good." She bent to kiss his tattoo. "I told HigherBrook that if I couldn't live here and you couldn't be with me I'd never speak to him again." She nodded at the window. "Now he comes here every day to check on TripStone's house and to rebuild the sentinels." She barked a laugh. "I think he's gotten to enjoy ripping them apart first."

Izzik slipped his arm around her waist. "I still don't understand why you keep them around at all."

"It's become a habit." Tears welled up. CatBird spluttered a curse. "This baby is making me weak."

His hold tightened. "Lean on me."

"I'll be all right." She leaned her right crutch against the wall and fished a piece of dagger root from her pocket. "If I'm going to cry I should give myself something to cry about."

Her exercises would do. CatBird looked away from the window and down toward her lifted stump. It was as unreal as the sentinels, the straw Yata dotting the fields, their heart spot clearly marked on the back. Equally useless.

She rotated a nonexistent ankle and stifled a yelp. First one way, then the other. Pretending.

*She is a little girl again, pretending to be a hunter. Lifting her small,*

*plain training rifle, mouthing a Covenant prayer, squeezing the trigger. She will bring food to her family and to her village by sending the Yata of her fantasies into divinity.*

Even when CatBird practiced on snowy winter days, the sky in her dreams had been clear. The sun shone, the air was warm, birds sang. The prey she shot was strong and brave, ready and willing to become a part of her.

Wasn't that what the Covenant was about? Yata and Masari becoming part of each other?

*Her bullet thunks into the heart spot and CatBird's body sings with joy. Her aim has been true. She has caused no pain. Straw shoots forward from the force of impact. The child creates a newgod.*

*She rebuilds the dummies, each a sacred thing. Each one a fantasy of living skin, warm pulse. She talks to them, honors them, tells them her dreams of the hunting grounds when she is a grownup come of age and consecrated. She kisses their burlap-covered torsos when her mother TreeRain calls her in for dinner.*

CatBird drove the vision away and curled imaginary toes, screaming through clenched teeth. She lifted the stump again and stretched, tensed, circled, wiggled. Izzik held her through anguished sobs.

She let the crutches drop and unlaced his shirt, pulling it off. Her palms caressed his smooth shoulders, gliding down the scars on his hairless chest, circling around to his muscled back. She followed the ridge of Izzik's scapulae, finding the place where she'd made holes in the straw.

He whispered, "I'm still here."

"I know." CatBird tried to keep the agony from her voice. Her belly, full of unknowns, pressed against his. "You're rebuilding me, this time."

~ ~ ~

Once the great books had been everything-rows upon rows circling the Rotunda's dome, Crossroads' cultural mortar. So many recorded lives, so much intimate detail. Dizzying immortality, the dead brought back to life.

Little joys and petty arguments. Matings and childbirth. Laughter.

All of it Yata.

HigherBrook steadied himself against the railing. He wheezed as leather pressed in on him, one layer and the next, and the next. The library towered behind him, extending around and across the dome, shrunken in the distance. Tons of narrative.

He couldn't touch any of it now, not even the volumes written in his own hand. His fingers flinched away.

Once he could lose himself in the pages. They'd fed him when he was starving through the winter, when half of Crossroads was dying. They'd guided him in battle. Protecting and preserving them had infused HigherBrook with a courage he hadn't known he possessed.

Even reduced to hunting Yata down, HigherBrook had found solace here. The valley still possessed rules. The villages still exercised respect. A shred of the Covenant continued to exist despite the meat stored obscenely in the rooms below.

Thank the gods, the Rotunda was not yet the Warehouse. These walls held memories. They held life. He'd loved them.

Now the leather sickened him. HigherBrook felt only CatBird clutching him as she vomited into a bowl. He saw only her bravery warring with confusion and the heat of her anger against him. He reeled from her senseless love of a man who, despite everything, still protected those who had raped and surgically butchered her.

HigherBrook gripped the railing. He stared blindly at hanging lamps until the center of the Rotunda became a watery glow. Zai had placed her guards on Basc's perimeter, so he had done the same for Crossroads. His soldiers stood stiff-backed and silent as he passed them, but he knew better. They have traded with the troops on the other side, have worked with them, raised toasts with them. There was no hostility among anyone, only duty.

*Six men.* That's all HigherBrook wanted from Basc, all that justice demanded. And the wives who goaded them on, who helped with the drugging and the disinfecting. Who cleaned CatBird's wounds and changed her bandages during those scant minutes when their husbands weren't mounting her.

Zai won't give him the criminals. Izzik won't disclose their names.

CatBird, red-faced, yells to be left alone as she hobbles on her Yata husband's arm to the Hunt Guild yards.

HigherBrook choked on his breath. He wanted to grasp his beating heart and rip it from his chest.

Instead he rubbed his eyes and peered below. About a dozen citizens had taken the time to come here. They sat cross-legged on the different levels of platforms, large volumes open on their laps. Once that act would have gladdened him.

Ever since Yata and Masari started interacting freely, more and more

of them have consulted the books. Visiting Yata almost always looked for their own lineages, given the chance at last to read about their ancestors. Masari no longer researched the lives of gods but learned about the families of their friends from Basc.

Now almost all of the faces in the Rotunda were tufted, the villages isolated from each other again.

*For as long as it takes.*

*Please, gods, let it not take long.*

Even the gods were no comfort now. What could they tell him about heartache?

HigherBrook sighed, forcing himself away from the railing. He couldn't stay here, but where could he go? His dormitory cinched him like a net. Early winter's chill penetrated his coat and sank into his bones. He could only respect his daughter's wishes or lose her altogether. He could only skulk around the Hunt Guild homes and visit with her neighbors, pretending that TripStone's house still needed guarding against theft.

TripStone's reports on Promontory's condition were startling. He dared not tell her what happened to her star pupil.

HigherBrook descended toward the great bronze doors, calling out noncommittal greetings as he hurried past readers bent over narratives. Then a hand grasped the cuff of his trousers and almost sent him sprawling.

He stifled a shout. His scuffling echoed around the dome, causing heads to rise. He spun around, ready to protest.



Kova held a finger to her lips. She whispered, "Sit down."

She was a bronze mirage. A person out of place. She was a magical interlude in the Meethouse, a Basc embrace, a fantasy that took form in-between the nightmare of the hunts.

HigherBrook knelt. "What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm reading."

He glanced at the pages, looked away.

"You took dictation very well," Kova mused. "Your writing seems very relaxed."

"I'm sorry," HigherBrook muttered. He pushed up from marble veneer. "I'm in no mood to talk to a Yata right now."

She pulled him back down. "Too bad."

"I wouldn't have thought you could cross the border."

Kova smiled. "All they had to do was look at me, Brook."

She closed the tome and moved it to the floor, straightened her legs and extended them across the platform. HigherBrook spied loosened trousers and modest curves beneath her tunic.

Without a word Kova shifted until her head lay on his lap, her body supine so that there was no mistake. She followed the direction of his gaze.

HigherBrook swallowed hard and sank against the stacks.

"Trust me, Brook." Kova's hand sought his out. Amusement lilted in

her voice. "This is ours." She raised an eyebrow. "I was going to tell you when you were next in Basc and we could meet, but given our current state of affairs I decided to come here instead. Still don't want to talk to a Yata?"

Her fingers were calm in his. HigherBrook watched the slow rise and fall of her breasts, the quirky upturn of her lips. Her slightly mounded belly.

He hadn't discounted the possibility. On the contrary, their trysts must have guaranteed a child. But Crossroads and Basc were supposed to be at peace with each other when their baby was born, every hybrid a celebrated melding of their villages.

He bent down to kiss her and smelled the changes in her scent. He tasted them on her tongue. He whispered, "I'm glad you're here. How do you feel?"

Kova pursed her lips. "Quite pregnant. How do *you* feel?"

"Thoroughly off-balance."

"I imagine so."

"Deep down inside I know I'm ridiculously happy at this news." He squeezed her fingers. "Please believe me."

"I do." She nestled by HigherBrook's stomach and sighed. "I wasn't born in this valley, Brook. I don't claim to know how Basc society works. In Alvav a hunter like CatBird would generate little interest unless champions from the Marsh banded together to challenge her during the Games. Then the betting would be on them to take her down. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He turned bleary eyes to her. "Not really. I still don't understand Alvav."

She whispered, "I can't advise you on this one."

He cradled her head. "I know."

"Except that you have to trust CatBird." Kova craned her neck and surveyed the dome. "And if I'm going to stay here with you, we need something larger than your dormitory. I hear some of the Hunt Guild cottages are unoccupied." Her hand came up, fingers stroking his chops. "I've never carried a child before, either. I'm going to need someone to talk to."

## Chapter 37

### Promontory

*HigherBrook, nothing would make me happier than to know that you and Kova are enjoying my family's home. Yes, you have my permission to live there.*

The old mining entrance shielded TripStone from the wind. Flurries melted against her lantern as she wrote. Beyond them the training grounds remained black, the starless sky filled with blowing snow. *After all the times you've checked on my property while I've been gone I consider it half yours anyway.*

She dipped her nib and switched from Masari to Yata. DustClaw might still be in the hospital, but he hadn't lost his ability to snoop. *You haven't mentioned CatBird. She is living in Basc now, yes? Being a co-wife must keep her busy because she hasn't answered my letters.* TripStone's hand wavered above the parchment. *I need*

*her to teach me, this time. She is able to share so freely.*

*I'm sitting in a cold mine shaft hours before my new trainees arrive because I can't bear to be home. BrushBurn was not next to me when I awoke.*

She stopped and stared at the fluid script; her hand had taken on a life of its own. Sighing, TripStone slipped a knife from her belt. Friction echoed around her as she scraped the confession away. She replaced the knife, blew curled detritus off the sheet, and drew her coat more closely around her.

Had she imagined the movements shadowed behind the privacy curtain? Should she tell BrushBurn she had tried to peer through the weave?

*She swallowed, waiting for her pen to fill. FlitNettle's been at the hospital assisting DevilChaser. Sometimes she spends the night. She's not pleased at being excluded from the base camp, but perhaps she can be a trainer. I can learn from her, too.*

At least FlitNettle wasn't threatening to shoot anyone, but her reticence was even more disturbing. Another girl her age would be in tears, not obsessively sweeping the walk and tending the hearth, scrubbing breeches and studiously ignoring thanks.

For that matter, studiously ignoring eye contact. TripStone cursed herself for feeling relieved whenever the child left the house, pulling the door shut with exaggerated care.

*Let me know when BubbleCreek arrives with her baby. I need to confer with her about Rudder.* Her script became angular, her nib tilting toward thicker lines. At first TripStone didn't realize she'd

switched back to writing in Masari *You know what we're up against here. I've got forty-seven new hunters to train, which means forty-seven fewer people at their jobs. The Warehouse supply of Yata has dropped below thirty percent of capacity, but AgatePool is arguing for more integration in the factories. She's seeing only production figures, not how tempted Masari would be to kill a Yata coworker. It isn't even a question of revenge any more. If Rudder has designs on Promontory, how does it propose to feed our people?*

Some Crossroads representative she was, sounding like a Promontory citizen. TripStone raised her wick and studied white ripples on the dusted ground outside. They blew away from her, fading into the darkness.

She was being silly, huddling inside a mountain like this. She should go home, lift the curtain, and pleasure BrushBurn on one end while Jirado took the other. Wasn't that how the co-wives did it in Basc?

She didn't have to look to Yata traditions. PickGrate had shared her body even while dying in the canyon, then shared it more deeply afterward. Consuming her should have imparted some wisdom, injected some whoring animalcules into TripStone's blood, but it hadn't. She could only hunch over her letter and follow the snow, and wonder why she'd become a Crossroads prude when Crossroads itself wasn't prudish any more.

She looked away from the flurries and shook the cold from her hand. No sense letting the ink congeal.

*Write back soon, my friend. Tell me you have better news.*

## Chapter 38

## Basc

Yata sentries cradled their rifles with wool-gloved hands. Their breath puffed into the air as they turned away from the border, looking back toward clusters of adobe huts. Most citizens worked inside as columns of smoke rose toward the mountains.

The little boy marched back and forth, house to house, shifting a satchel half his size from one shoulder to the other. He faced straight ahead, serious and industrious. Nothing distracted him, not even distant gunshot from the hunting grounds.

The sentries glanced at each other, shrugging. A few leaned forward when Abri left a hut, easing parchment into his bag. Some sheets offered a glimpse of different colors and haphazard lines. Sky blue, forest green. StormCloud black, blood red. Stick figures.

The child waved at the guards as he did every day, but now he seemed preoccupied. Focused.

Across the meadow stood a tall line of Masari, also gloved and dressed in heavy coats, also breathing out mist. Their rifles, held higher up than the Yata's, were cocked at the same angle. Their faces were too distant to make out, but the sentries knew what they looked like.

Pensive and sad. Tired. Ignoring the cold.

Just like the Yata.

It was a day like any other except for the boy. His curious actions provided a sliver of variety cutting through early winter's gloom. He must have walked all over the village by now.

Parents shook their heads. They told the sentries it was some kind of secret game. Something to do with the battle when the adults had been away. It kept the children quiet, all that drawing and scrawling. They might be shut inside, but they had found a way not to be restless.

Only the boy's brother Evit made a racket, crying incessantly and demanding to visit the mix-child across the meadow. Zai remained adamant, pulling her younger son away from the sentries whenever he tried to squeeze past them and escape to Crossroads. She must be thanking the gods that Abri had found a way to occupy himself.

~ ~ ~

## **Crossroads**

Kova stepped up to four pairs of hooks, two of them filled, two empty. "Covenant rifles."

HigherBrook nodded. "The training rifle on the bottom belonged to TripStone's brother. The inscribed one was her father's." He repositioned a table and moved chairs into place.

The house was a museum of scent, shutting the old ways inside wood beams and stone blocks secured with mortar and resin. Each hunter had lived in a butchery, draped with aromatics to conceal the presence of gore. HigherBrook could still tease out remnants, fleeting memories inside his lungs.

The bronze-skinned woman standing by the guns was the first living Yata ever to set foot here. If she smelled anything, she wasn't saying.

Kova held up a hand. "May I?"

"I don't think TripStone would mind."

The Yata eased the small training rifle away from the wall and held it against overalls loosened around the middle. Concern crossed her broad face, her lips pressed into a line. "This is the kind of gun Promontory traded to Gria for Destiny. I'd seen only the modifications." She inspected the action, eyebrows raised. "This really does fire only a single shot."

"Seems outlandish now, doesn't it?" HigherBrook pointed to the empty walls, where faint outlines still remained. Shadows held up by smaller hooks. "Those dark spots all used to be bones, Kova. With stories etched onto every surface." He headed toward the door, where his pallet leaned by the threshold. "TripStone delivered her family's relics to Gria when almost everyone else was selling theirs to BrushBurn for meat."

Kova replaced the gun and joined him. She took hold of a pallet end. "You said CatBird still has a few."

"What wasn't stolen from her." He lifted straw. "Don't strain."

"The bed's bulky, not heavy." Kova angled her chin toward the window. "She's been watching us."

"I know."

The heart-shaped face across the training yard remained maddeningly neutral. HigherBrook couldn't tell what CatBird thought as she looked upon the cart he had run from the Rotunda, loaded down with the contents of his dormitory.

A distant door opened. A figure departed CatBird's cottage, advancing across the field, head to head with the straw dummies he



passed. Another Yata, living in another Covenant hunter's house. Footfalls crunched on dried grass.

HigherBrook glowered at him and muttered, "One bullet is all it takes."

"Oh, *that* would endear you to your daughter."

"I didn't say I was going to shoot him, Kova. Only that I want to."

Kova shook her head. She pulled on the pallet, grunting. "Who would have thought straw could be so dense?"

"CatBird did." Izzik's high tenor called from outside. "She thought you could use some help."

The Masari growled, "You know how you could help me."

Izzik didn't answer. He eased into the house, taking hold of the other end of the bed, lifting. He smiled at Kova. "I'm glad there's a Yata around that HigherBrook still likes."

HigherBrook glanced over his shoulder as they crossed the common room. "CatBird could probably use some company, Kova. Let Izzik and me handle this."

"Of course." She followed them into the bedroom. "Leave you two alone with each other, a couple of rifles in plain sight and two more in the cart. I'm pregnant, Brook, not stupid." Hands shoved into deep pockets. "I'm going to tend the hearth and fix us some tea. Don't make me have to come back here."

He flashed her a sheepish grin before she turned away.

Izzik was eclipsed by the Masari-sized bed. Wordlessly they set it

down, tilted it, and let it fall flat. The Preserver squatted to check bindings.

No sense trying to hide rising neck fur. "Thank you, Izzik. That won't be necessary. You may go."

"CatBird would send me right back if I did." Izzik looked up. "She wants a truce between us."

"She knows what I require for a truce."

The Yata nodded. "I've told *her* the names of her attackers."

HigherBrook bit down rage. "For what ungodly reason, Izzik? Hasn't she been through enough?"

"She wanted to know." His dark eyes held steady as he stood. "She has a *right* to know. They are the co-fathers."

HigherBrook's hands balled into fists before he noticed the pinch in Izzik's brow. "You're as sick as I am about all this."

He nodded.

"Then for pity's sake, tell me who they are!"

Izzik sighed explosively. "I can't do that."

The Masari stalked past him, out into the common room and up to the window. CatBird stood behind her own, leaning on crutches. Her expression was a practiced blank.

HigherBrook hung onto the sill and mouthed, *Why?*

She turned from the glass and hobbled away.

~ ~ ~

*How can I explain this to you?* Piri drummed onto TelZodo's wind-whipped cheek. Her son hung onto the legs of Masari sentries as though they were tree trunks. Evit did the same across the meadow, stayed by Yata soldiers from progressing any further. *I want you and Evit to play with each other, but you can't right now.*

She wondered how much the toddler understood. About anything-the border, the pall over the villages, the touch of her fingers. His downy chops were wet. He slapped her hand away when she tried to dry them.

Piri pulled up the collar on TelZodo's coat and mustered her strength. She couldn't stay away from the lab much longer. She'd already left too much unattended for too long. Someone had to be the first to give the signal.

She raised her hand in somber farewell and waited for Zai to do the same. They bent down together and scooped up their children.

"Nooooo!" TelZodo's pudgy fists pummeled her shoulders. He pushed Piri away, trying to squirm free. Twin screams echoed across the meadow as both boys thrashed.

One simple command from Zai and they could be together. This forced separation was absurd. Didn't she realize what she was doing to these children? While the leaders of Basc and Crossroads fought over the fate of rogue Preservers, the rest of their valley unraveled.

Piri gritted her teeth against tantrum. She had expected to weep with joy on hearing TelZodo's first word, this miracle of delivering a child who could speak. Instead her son cried, yelling his futile litany of *No*

and *Down and Now* and *I hate you*.

He tried to tear her braid off and swiped at her face. He kicked. He turned his head away from her attempts to hum comfort back. He was almost half her size now. Just holding him was an ordeal.

The wool-swathed winter rendered Piri's fingers almost completely mute, even after she'd snipped the tips of her gloves away. How could she communicate when everything else was covered? Only those close to her could read her touch-talk by sight alone. She couldn't even thank the sentries, not for guarding Crossroads but for their polite silence. She hoped her expression conveyed as much to them as theirs told her.

TelZodo was hiccuping by the time she reached the lab. The child's nose quivered before he buried it in her chest and sobbed with enough pathos to break her heart.

"They can watch him back at the house." Ghost lifted stained hands tangy with chemicals. He softened his voice to forced calm. "You know how much I want to hold you, TelZodo. I wish Evit were here, too. I know you're angry and sad and I don't blame you."

The child squirmed in Piri's arms, straining back toward the door.

Her husband grasped tweezers and bent toward a dish. "It's better if you take the long way around."

Piri nodded. The morgue must be full. She could picture it, Yata on one side, Masari on the other. Tests and extractions covering counters and shelves. Each body cut apart and categorized, everything labeled before transport to the Deliverance Inn. Walls hung with meticulous records on who ate what and when, the strength of their reactions and the effects on their weaning.

Even empty of corpses, the room threw TelZodo into a state of panic. In its quest for sustenance Crossroads had become one collective feeding frenzy when its people weren't fasting.

She held her whimpering son to her breast and stepped back out into the cold. Needles blew down from the windbreak pines, decorating soldiers' hair and neck fur and carpeting the ground by their boots. HigherBrook's troops milled about, vigilant but relaxed. Bored. Not even a line of Yata to stare back at, with all those trees in the way. Just narrow trails weaving through the stands.

Two Masari suddenly stooped low to the ground, but TelZodo riveted Piri's attention first. The child looked everywhere, eyes wide, sniffing. He asked in a meek voice, "Down?"

She lowered him, following as he ran toward the troops. One guard straightened, squinting at unfolded parchment.

TelZodo scooted past breeches and stopped, swaying. He looked up and scowled. "No! Want *Evit!*"

Abri stood at straight-backed attention, petrified. The older boy squeaked, "Me, too." A satchel bursting at the seams hung off his shoulders. Only his widely-planted and angled feet kept him from toppling backwards. He tried to smile up at Piri, struggling for breath.

Piri motioned her willingness to take the bag. Abri shook his head resolutely no.

"This looks real." The sentry passed the note to his comrade. "Abri, you'll have to let us inspect that."

The boy shook his head again. He shifted the bulk around and hugged it to his chest.

"*Evit!*" TelZodo demanded.

"Hey!" Piri injected sharpness. Sentences were beyond her, but she could still manage sounds useful for discipline. She gathered TelZodo to her side and held her palm out to the soldier, waiting for him to remove his glove.

*I'll take full responsibility for Abri*, she drummed. *And for whatever he's carrying.*

The Masari looked at her skeptically, as though she were a Yata spy in their midst. Piri would laugh, but he seemed so pitiful. They all did, these giant soldiers hoisting their big guns, discussing amongst themselves whether to let a little boy and his bag into Crossroads. TelZodo fidgeted against her hip.

Finally the note finished making its rounds. The sentry handed it back to the boy. "I don't know what Gria's up to, sending you here all by yourself. But go ahead." He added, pointedly, "Be good."

Abri's shoulders relaxed. He repositioned the satchel on his back and ran into Piri's arms.

"Hi, TelZodo." He ruffled the toddler's violet hair and added, still breathless, "Evit loves you. I wish he were here, too. Please don't be mad at me." He looked up at Piri, then away. "I have to take this to Izzik. The Honorable One said to go to you for protection."

Piri sighed and hugged him to her as they walked away from the soldiers. Gods strike down any Masari who would want to harm this child. Her fingers grazed his cheek. *I'll keep you safe, Abri. Tell Ghost where we're going.*

He ran toward the buildings and disappeared inside. A minute later Ghost peered out the door, his brow furrowed. Piri met his gaze and shrugged.

"Do you need a Masari bodyguard?"

She didn't know whether her husband was joking or not. Piri jerked her chin toward the lab; he was more useful there. If she needed a bodyguard, this might as well be Promontory. Abri rejoined her as Ghost ducked back inside.

The Hunt Guild houses lay at the other edge of town. Piri drummed again, *Keep TelZodo entertained or he'll throw a fit.*

## Chapter 39

### Basc

"You sent my son alone into *Crossroads*?" Zai wailed with wild-eyed disbelief, her feet rooted to the floor. She searched the illustrated walls like a trapped animal. "*Why*, Honorable One? He's done nothing!"

"This isn't punishment, Zai. Not of you, and certainly not of him." Gria studied her disciple's unkempt hair and rumpled uniform and wished for a return of the warrior who'd once been eager to kill her. "He will be *all right*."

"Is that what the gods tell you?"

Gria nodded, trying to look sage. "Yes."

"He didn't say a word to me before he left." Zai choked on agonized

laughter. "When he didn't come home I looked everywhere. Evit knows something, but he hates me right now. I had to find out from the sentries. They didn't want to let Abri through, but then they saw your-" The commander turned away, holding onto the wall. "The leader of Crossroads sacrifices his daughter, so now I must sacrifice my son."

"Abri is coming *back* to you!" Did sleeplessness or zealotry make the woman before her so fragile? "Zai, you have to trust me."

"I do, Honorable One."

Her voice was a sinew drawn taut. Gria looked up at the ceiling's glazed-over pictograms and shook her head. It didn't matter that she was messenger to the gods now. The gods were still perverse.

Gria eased her coat over scabs, grimacing as one caught and began a fresh trickle of bleeding. Her hideousness had instilled a fresh wave of idolatry, placing her even more firmly between life and death, turned inside-out. Her embroidery of symbols shifted as wool fell to her ankles. The embroidery on her skin extended to the soles of her feet, turning each boot into an instrument of torture.

"Walk with me." Gria hung onto Erta's staff-*her* staff, now-and took her first laborious steps toward the door. From behind she could see Zai's shoulders straighten and the commander smoothing her disheveled tunic. The sharp pains in Gria's muscles had diminished to dull aches by the time the women traversed from inner to outer chambers and spiraled past pictograms to the outdoors. Her comrade-in-arms led the way, deceptively calm and controlled.

Clouds massed overhead, hoarding snow. Gria refrained from moaning with pleasure as the chill bit her cheeks. After a lifetime spent in her padded room, the sight of the mountains made her want



to shout with joy. Even the gray day was almost too bright for her eyes. She couldn't stop blinking.

Citizens sprang from their huts. They bowed before her, offering their arms for her to lean on. They planted kisses on her blotchy hands. One palm and then another eased against the back of Gria's head and the portal of her white hair, to touch divinity or to seek out visions. She didn't know.

They were all so earnest. Gria wanted to laugh aloud. She didn't dare. Zai took command by her side, marshaling the crowd. Talk of Abri would have to wait.

The boy would have passed the Soala to his left, with its black adobe and perpetual torches. If any Yata were grieving inside, he would have heard them. The sounds of the hunt would be louder as well, even from well within the border.

He would have walked close to the huts where CatBird had been brutalized. Abri would then have turned right, onto a broad road peeling off from that cluster. Pounded dirt and cobblestones would stretch ahead of him.

That avenue to Crossroads had been laid down to bring its advisors and their skills to this village. Everything that Basc was now, it owed to that passage and to the Masari who had blazed it. Now that passage was closed, serving only as the first checkpoint.

Gria tried to picture the boy gazing into that long, empty expanse cutting through the meadow. The far woods and the sounds of war would be behind him. His own people would be deciding whether to let him leave. If they hadn't, he would be back in Zai's hut and his mother would not be here by Gria's side, struggling to keep her composure.

Abri would have left the line of Yata soldiers behind and marched down the straightaway, encountering no one either coming or going. All that empty space. All that time to think. It would have been so easy to turn back. The windbreak, that stretch of dark green at the edge of the Grange, would have grown ever larger and more ominous for its significance. His little legs must have started to grow tired.

Gria watched as Zai motioned worshipers forward, holding the others back. Confident movements, single-mindedness. No indication of the turmoil inside.

*I want to take you into my paltry arms, Zai.* Gria blessed a supplicant, trying to ease the sorrow of diminished families. *I want to tell you how brave your son is. How caring. I want to tell you how closely the gods are watching him.*

Their eyes met. Gria's heart lurched as Zai looked away.

Abri could have taken any of more than a dozen trails threaded among the pines. He might have sat in their shade, taken some food, and sipped from his water bladder. Or he might have just kept walking until he had to stop, face to face with the first Masari seen up close in days and days. Armed towers of leather and fur.

Beyond would lie the vast complex where Ghost and Piri labored on behalf of both their peoples. Abri would have to get past HigherBrook's soldiers before he could reach his protectors. *If the gods exist, he has.*

If the gods existed, he would be at least halfway through Crossroads by now, hauling those precious missives and Gria's hopes with him.

~ ~ ~

## Crossroads

An orange blur set across the meadow. CatBird dozed fitfully on her pallet, a piece of withered dagger root tucked between cheek and gum. She had left her tunic untied, re-wrapping her shirt around her thickening waist.

Izzik's attentive fussing grated now, through no fault of his own. CatBird stood on a knife edge, unbalanced and jumpy. HigherBrook and Kova looked as though they could use some help and she had no other way to get Izzik out of the house. Thank the gods, she heard no gunshot.

Instead his absence left CatBird alone with time and silence. The chance to hunt down shadows. Matching the faces to the names drained all her strength, but finally she could hold the six men in her head without blacking out.

None of the men had been inducted as Preservers with Izzik. They were all older and more experienced. CatBird had visited with four of them to deliver news of her kills and to ask forgiveness. Of the nine wives accompanying the six men, two were also Preservers. CatBird had visited with eight.

All of them had served her tea. All of them had told her stories about the loved ones she had shot.

She had hugged most of them after the Lacuna. The men and women had clasped CatBird to them, almost afraid to let go. It could have been a warning to her. But everyone had sweated together during the harvest. They'd slept huddled and exhausted in the fields. Kept each other warm, comforted each other.

Which face grew inside her? What proportions? Whose seed was planted there?

*Who killed my family?*

She might never find out. Yata and Masari had hardly known each other then.

CatBird shifted on her pallet, wincing. She spat out the used dagger root and bit off a fresh piece. Soon her stump stopped throttling her and became the red-hot pincers she could almost ignore.

She was half asleep when the door opened. "Izzik?"

"It's me."

His words were clipped, his throat constricted. CatBird listened to him negotiate boxes and step stools. A drawer opened and then slammed shut. It opened and shut again, quieter this time. Trying to erase the anger, make it go away.

She had lost track of the number of times Izzik did everything twice. It made her smile. CatBird sucked more juice from the root. He'd come to bed when he calmed down, telling her about HigherBrook when he was ready.

And about Kova. Thank the gods, that woman had come to the valley with no relatives for CatBird to kill.

Soon the smell of stewing root vegetables wafted in from the kitchen. CatBird listened to Izzik slicing cheese, forcing delicacy into his movements. She must have napped while he wielded the cleaver, pushing it through tubers. Through her window the sky glowed a dark, iridescent blue. Lantern light seeped in from the common room.

She slept again and dreamt her baby was crying, then jolted awake at a hard rap on the door. Izzik's call to wait. Sounds of washing. The crying didn't stop.

"Abri?" Izzik sounded nonplussed. He made no attempt to hide his nervousness. "What are you doing here?"

"The Honorable One sent me." Shrieks almost drowned out the boy's quiet reply.

CatBird listened to thumps. On the table. On the chairs. Clattering in the kitchen. She levered herself up and grabbed the first crutch, leaning against the wall as she positioned the second. She hobbled to the doorway.

Piri sat collapsed on one chair, feet dangling and shirt open. Her head was thrown back, her pale braid dropping a plumb line toward the floor. TelZodo covered her lap, suckling while fisting a slice of cheese.

Abri sat in the chair to Piri's left and hung onto his seat back, trying to stay upright and awake. His eyes were half-closed, his short black hair mussed. Periodically he straightened. Then his head began to loll again.

The table was piled high with parchment. Izzik held one sheet and then another, a tiny smile on his lips. He looked up at the doorway and said, softly, "All of these are for you."

CatBird clumped forward as her husband stood. Abri snapped to wakefulness and stared at her even more intently, his eyes filled with fright.

"It's okay, Abri." She gentled her voice as Izzik helped her sit. "We're

all friends here." She leaned forward to brush his hair back and saw his skepticism. "Bad things happened to me, but I still like you."

The boy let out his breath as his shoulders relaxed. His eyes began to close again.

CatBird found Izzik's arm and drummed, *What is this all about?*

*Read.* He stood beside her chair, bending a little to kiss her forehead. *The first few, at least. Then I'll clear the table for dinner.*

The others at the table slept. CatBird smiled at them in wonderment. Izzik would have to put together some beds.

She lifted a sheet as he returned to the kitchen. By the time the stew was ready CatBird couldn't smell a thing. She breathed quietly through her mouth, tears streaming from her eyes and nose, the ends of her shirt wet from wiping.

~ ~ ~

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

CatBird nodded. "I'm sure, Izzik." She looked out their bedroom window at the troubled man gazing back from the next house over. "I've been thinking about it for a while. After last night, I'm certain." Her hand extended beyond the crutch and rested on his back. She whispered, "This is going to be hard."

Izzik glanced toward the common room. "We'll wait for Abri to wake up before we take him home."

CatBird's house had never seemed so full since before the massacre. Abri slept in a room meant for older brothers, not a young

boy. Its empty walls dwarfed him.

From across the way came the sounds of marbles muffled by cloth. The game had been going on since Ghost's arrival at dawn. Sprinkled clattering. CatBird positioned herself against the doorpost and listened to Piri's humming, TelZodo's attempts to count, Ghost's encouragement and correction.

Izzik helped her to the table and served her breakfast.

She kissed his hand. "You do too much for me."

His dark eyes twinkled. "Just you wait."

She could taste the stew, now. Its flavors melded on her tongue. She overlaid adobe on the wood and stone, picturing a hearth that was round rather than angular. Smaller doorways and chairs, lower tables. Not all of these boxes and step stools lying about.

Two co-wives. Two husbands.

*Eight husbands.*

"Izzik."

He stood behind her, his hands on her shoulders. "I'm here."

"I can't eat any more." CatBird drew his arms around her. "Have Ghost examine me before we go."

Later she lay in bed listening to Izzik playing with TelZodo, lightness in their laughter. She didn't have to look to know that Abri was already dressed in his little uniform, giving sleepy greetings. His shoes knocked against wood as he was lifted into a chair, a giant bowl and spoon set before him.

Izzik's scent still lingered, but another Yata touched CatBird's belly. She opened her eyes and watched Piri's ministrations. Ghost checked beneath the bandages farther down.

Everyone was being so careful with her.

She whispered, "Tell me I'm fit to travel."

Ghost murmured, "You'll be fitter if you eat more."

"We'll take food along."

"That isn't what I meant." He re-wrapped and secured linen. "The last time you ate Yata was sixteen days before the Lacuna began."

CatBird shook her head. "I don't feel a break coming."

Piri looked up, her warm palms stilled. Then her fingers moved again, probing more deeply.

"That puts you squarely in level four. You were a level three *yatanii*." Ghost reached forward to drum on Piri's shoulder.

*The baby seems fine.* Piri's slow fingerpress answered to the side of CatBird's navel, her words visible. *Rapid growth, more like Yata than Masari. But it's still early.*

"It's weaning me." CatBird laughed a little, staring up at a ceiling that already seemed too high. "Ghost, is that possible?"

"I wish I knew. We're the first to keep records concerning hybrid births."

"Then they'll *have* to let you into Basc to check on me." She pushed



herself upright and began re-wrapping her shirt. The others helped her on with her breeches, folding and pinning cloth.

CatBird's words rushed from her. "I know you're not a believer, Ghost, but there must be a reason for what happened. I wish I knew whose seed is in me. Maybe it's all of them, I don't know." She swayed between them. "Tell me something good will come of this. If this child can end my dependence it's got to be a gift of the gods, yes?"

They were still being too careful with her. Saying, drumming nothing.

She squeezed their hands before positioning her crutches. "I know you need more evidence before you can tell me anything."

It didn't matter. She would keep her hopes to herself. Grow them inside her until they emerged, full-blown and irrefutable.

First she had to step outside and traverse the old Covenant training fields. Walk past the straw Yata dummy she had spent her childhood shooting and repacking in burlap, until she reached its counterpart in TripStone's yard.

It was a short distance, but so much longer than crossing that vast meadow into Basc.

Ghost squeezed her arm, close by her side. "Do you need someone with you?"

"No." CatBird set her jaw and swung her crutches forward. "I have to face HigherBrook alone."



# Chapter 40



"I can't understand why you don't simply go over there and talk to her." Kova knelt over the chamber pot, her bronze face tinged with green. "Unless this estrangement is another Covenant tradition I don't know about."

She barely finished speaking before she pitched forward, coughing.

HigherBrook held her across the back. He brushed wet hair from her forehead. "CatBird would only turn me away, especially with *him* there. She wants nothing to do with me."

"I'm not too thrilled with you either right now."

The limp hand patting his knee told him otherwise. Half the morning was gone and he'd emptied the chamber pot three times. Their baby developed with the speed of a Yata, but his lover's morning sickness followed a Masari timetable. "I've been told this passes."

"If it doesn't soon, you'd better hide those guns." Kova shuddered and cursed again. Her hands came down hard on the pot's broad lip. "Don't you have a Chamber session to run?"

"Tomorrow."

She gasped, eyes red-rimmed. "Wonderful. We can be miserable together."

He could do nothing for her. The water he offered came back up. Soon even his touch would be just as disruptive. "Tell me when you want me to go."

"Now would be good. I'll try to convince my stomach it's empty." Kova held herself, wincing through burps. She gave HigherBrook a tired wink and waved him off.

He wiped her forehead again and kissed cold sweat before turning away.

The window exerted its pull as soon as he entered the common room. HigherBrook tried to ignore it, but the image of CatBird's face persisted. *I don't even know how you are.* How often had he worn down the same path from the sill to the pot and back? If the gods existed, they have made him helpless.

Nothing to do but sit back down, nurse his cold tea, and listen to dry heaves resounding from the next room.

Or pace. Past the bedrooms and Kova on her knees. Past the empty sacrificial room where Yata were once blessed and dismembered. Into the kitchen, out to the shed, back to the common room.

Or he could step into the yard.

He plucked his coat off its hook and drew up the hood. He stood just outside the door as a chill wind blasted him. Fresh and stinging.

How had things gone so wrong?

"We're not starving," HigherBrook reminded himself. "A year ago we were starving."

He should be thankful. Promontory was much worse off. TripStone would laugh at his self-pity if she weren't so busy trying to keep that town alive.

He cinched his hood tighter and stepped onto flagstone, then out to the field. Thin clouds raced above his head. He looked from them to the dummies, which appeared both vigilant and inert. Heart spots but no hearts. Burlap skin. Blank faces. Demolished and rebuilt, none the worse for having been shot countless times an eternity ago. True survivors.

He bent down until he was head to head with the first one. "You could teach me, you know."

The straw didn't answer. HigherBrook patted its arm in sympathy.

A distant door shut. Odd-sounding footfalls, muffled on frozen ground. HigherBrook's breath caught as he spied another coat, another hood, crutches. His feet carried him forward before he realized he was moving.

She wasn't backing away. HigherBrook uttered a small cry as his arms wrapped around the young woman who had become his daughter. CatBird gripped him back. Wood fell onto brown grass.

He clutched her to him. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too, Sir."

"Then why didn't you-"

"I couldn't."

He lowered his hood, then hers. Their chops pressed together.

"I was afraid you'd never speak to me again."

She whispered, "I didn't know if I would."

"*CatBird*." HigherBrook tried to hold her up, easing the weight off her foot. "Let's go inside where it's warmer."

"Not yet." She leaned into him, pillowing her head on his chest. "There's something I have to tell you first."

Even through the bulk of her coat he could tell that she had changed, from more than just the child and her injury. She'd aged. Her azure eyes reflected a different depth when she gazed up at him. They didn't look lost any more.

"Abri is staying with us." CatBird dug into her pocket and fished out a note. "He's been in Crossroads since yesterday. Izzik and I are taking him back to Zai."

A fresh chill swept through him. "Abri is *here*?" HigherBrook shook out the parchment. The words jumbled in his hand, or was it his brain? "Since *yesterday*?"

He sniffed the sheet. The words were undeniably Gria's. When had she recovered enough to write? Why weren't Zai's troops storming Crossroads at this very moment to retrieve her son?

He read further. The pictograms almost made him drop the letter.

"Zai would never let me into Basc with the border closed," CatBird continued. Her grip on HigherBrook tightened. "But Gria will allow it. And Zai will listen to Gria."

HigherBrook shut his eyes, dreading what she was about to say.

"I'm going home, Sir."

He tried to blink the truth away, swallowing past a lump in his throat. "Your home is here."

"I am part of Izzik's household. I belong in Basc."

Her heart-shaped face was just as earnest as it had been when she was not yet come of age. But she was of age now. He couldn't stop her.

"You'd be a Masari," he croaked, "living among Yata."

"And Piri's a Yata living among Masari here. So is Kova. So is Izzik." CatBird's chest heaved, her neck fur standing on end. "Izzik's been living in exile because of me, away from his family, with no complaint. You and I have spent a lot of time in Basc, Sir. This has never been a problem before."

"You'd be in close proximity to *them*." The faceless men, the conspiring women. The names he didn't have. "You'd be a *target*, CatBird."

The hands against HigherBrook curled into fists. "I am not a target any more."

"At least tell me who they are."

"I will deal with them myself."

"CatBird-"

"*Sir!*" Her body flinched against his. She stiffened when he tried to hold her closer. "You can accompany us to the border. Or you can

stay behind. But I am leaving Crossroads."

Her hands came around and hung onto his coat. Her scent was blunt; she would push him away if she could keep her balance. Instead she leaned in further, just long enough to use HigherBrook for support while she fished dagger root from another pocket.

He held her upright, beginning to shiver. "We have to get inside. Lean on me." Her weight pressed against him as he bent to retrieve the crutches. It was the weight of muscle, still a hunter's body.

He straightened past the stump, past her expanding middle. He waited while she grasped the dowels, feeling unsteady before he realized his arms were empty. His voice turned hoarse. "How soon are you leaving?"

"As soon as we can. I won't feel at ease until Abri is home safely."

"Agreed." He barely had to slow his walk as she swung her crutches beside him.

"Sir." She slurred around the root. "I still love you."

HigherBrook wished he had his own pair of crutches. Anything to hold him up.

"I love you more than you know, CatBird." He held the door open for her and spotted Kova half-collapsed in a low chair. "Stay here while I do something to prove it. I won't be long."

CatBird hesitated. "All right." She managed a little smile. "I'll tell Kova how to take care of you."

~ ~ ~



HigherBrook shifted Abri's satchel higher up on his shoulders. For something so overstuffed with parchment it felt curiously light-maybe because the boy's watchful eyes burned holes in the fabric. "If you're going to walk, Abri, you should look where you're going."

"I can carry it."

"The last time you carried the letters, Izzik had to carry *you*." HigherBrook raised his eyebrows at Izzik, who returned the gesture.

CatBird huffed on the other side of the Preserver, face placid despite her exertions. Her gloved hands had to be blistering around the dowels by now. She'd slapped the men's gestures of help away on more than one occasion.

But her voice lilted, as playful as it was stubborn.

They advanced down a broad dirt path. The meadow extended to either side with more trails in the distance, empty of traffic and ringed by eroded granite summits. Mountains lay flat against a white sky. Clouds joined together to erase the sun, spreading a layer of muted light over everything.

The dark line of Zai's sentries began at the foothills and ran clear across to the far woods. They looked flat, too, against the background of Basc's adobe roofs. It all tempted HigherBrook to examine the thickness of his arm, to make sure he hadn't turned into a pictogram on parchment.

No. The bag on his shoulders was delightfully lumpy, enough parchment to solidify the valley. HigherBrook passed it to Izzik. "You'd better take this from me before he trips on something." He smiled down at Abri. "Better?"

The boy answered with a shy nod before turning his attention forward. It didn't matter that he'd already made his delivery or that HigherBrook had read some of the letters. Zai's son remained on his mission.

Someone in Basc must have spotted them by now; they were the only people on the paths. Between CatBird's rest stops and Abri's short legs, their journey was taking the better part of a day. Enough to occupy the Masari troop leaders back in Crossroads, who peered through handheld clarifiers, tracking their every move.

He didn't know what to do with his hands. "I should be carrying something."

CatBird glanced at him over Izzik's head. "You're carrying Crossroads, Sir."

She had no idea. HigherBrook almost turned to check on his own defenses. His orders had been clear. His soldiers knew what he wanted. Like Abri, he had to keep facing forward.

No rifle weighed on his shoulders. None of them carried firearms. They were three hunters and a child and the only weapon among them was the knife passed down from Abri's father.

Zai's sentries were larger now, some of them holding clarifiers as well. Bustling, a messenger running down the line. A fleet girl in a uniformed coat disappearing amidst the huts.

Izzik pointed. "They've recognized us."

"I know."

"They'll assume a defensive posture."

HigherBrook nodded. "I know that, too. I was furious when Zai and I last spoke. Half the Chamber was pressing for invasion." He caught the worry in CatBird's face. *You don't know how much it pained me to argue for restraint after what they did to you.*

Whoever "they" were. HigherBrook counseled himself toward calm. "I suppose I should thank Zai for posting a perimeter guard when she did. Posting our own in reply proved a useful compromise."

Beside him Abri remained focused straight ahead, brow furrowed. Concentrating.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Abri?"

The boy looked up at him with troubled eyes. "I'm not sure."

From the look of him, he understood enough. HigherBrook squeezed the small shoulder. "Take your time mulling it over. But know that your mother did the right thing."

He smiled as relief washed over the child's face. *If the gods see fit, your mother will continue to do the right thing, and so will I.* HigherBrook hung onto that hope as the muzzles up ahead lifted and aimed.

Nothing to do but keep walking, until they were well within range and received the order to stop.

Sharpness reached his nose. "At ease, CatBird."

"They are pointed at *you*, Sir."

"I can see that," he said. "This isn't the hunting grounds."

lzzik's scent remained unruffled, though HigherBrook couldn't decide whether that was comforting or not. Abri could barely contain joy that had nothing to do with the guns.

A voice the governor hadn't heard in weeks called out from the line, "Hold your position."

Even Abri obeyed, when clearly all he wanted to do was run into his mother's arms. Zai's hard angles hid only so much as she left the perimeter and stepped out onto the dirt road, StormCloud strapped to her back. Behind her scowl and steely glint she looked haggard.

Her black eyes didn't leave HigherBrook's as she knelt, her arms ready either to hug or to grasp metal. "Abri," she whispered, "come here."

Her son sprinted. Zai's lip trembled as she enfolded him. She whispered in the child's ear before both of them straightened, regaining their composure. Abri ducked back through the line.

*Believe me, Zai, I know how much you're holding back. I will have to do the same.*

If he lived.

HigherBrook waited as the commander stepped before CatBird, appraising her condition. He could feel his own troops' eyes on him. They could be breathing down his neck, not standing poised a meadow away.

But they *were* a meadow away. Staying back, well out of range.

Zai turned from CatBird to him. "My decision is unchanged," she said, flatly. "I will not tell you their names."

"Then I withdraw my request." HigherBrook's stomach lurched. He turned and looked past Izzik. "Give me one of your crutches, CatBird."

"Sir?"

"You heard me."

He wondered how close he was to being blown away as he grasped it by the foot and held it by the dowel. The wood was warm. The sentries at Basc's perimeter waited, their hands resting by cocking levers and triggers.

Zai was as patient and alert as her troops. HigherBrook gave a small nod. Without looking away from her, he raised the crutch slowly into the air.

He was still alive. One deep breath. Two. Zai's expression began to change before he took the third. Rustling wool told HigherBrook that CatBird had draped herself around Izzik.

Zai's sentries no longer kept him in their sights. Their attention was elsewhere.

*As it should be. You are being saluted.*

HigherBrook didn't need to turn around; everything unfolded in the faces before him. Heads turning, eyes tracking. The dawning of comprehension.

The first actions came from his troops guarding the Hunt Guild homes. Called to attention, rifles unstrapped and raised, and after a moment lowered again. Smart pivots before they marched away from the border.

The salute from the Textile Guild homes followed, and the Scrimshanders Guild, and the Carpentry Guild, though none of the old distinctions applied any more. Many of those homes were empty; many had moved. HigherBrook's village had been reduced to a jumble of survivors.

But his soldiers had guarded all possible points of entry. One station at a time they raised their guns in greeting, lowered them, and stood down. Crossroads' dark line peeled away, now separating at the Rotunda. The market square. The Grange.

HigherBrook squeezed CatBird's crutch to the point of pain as he heard her weep with relief. He could hardly speak. "I wanted to give you something meaningful before we said goodbye."

He ignored the burning in his arms. The longer he could hold his signal aloft, the longer he had until he had to let go of her.

Zai faced toward the windbreak. "They could all be back in position in the morning."

"True." HigherBrook laughed a little. "I could be a corpse right now. Anything is possible."

"Agreed." Zai combed her fingers through her short hair, once. She turned and called to her deputy, "Dismiss the guards."

HigherBrook whispered, "Thank you."

Her voice dropped. "Let's not have to do this again."

He lowered the crutch and hugged it to his chest before passing it back. Terse commands repeated down the line, carrying on the wind. The wall of Yata dissipated like chimney smoke.

Izzik cleared his throat. "Commander."

Zai turned.

"I've come to bring CatBird home."

She regarded his mate through narrowed eyes. "Our border is open, Izzik. I am not in the business of regulating households." She nodded toward HigherBrook. "Or visitors."

Her sharp turn and straight-backed departure didn't fool HigherBrook for a moment. He, too, had thrown his shoulders back, his manner equally brusque. The gods had blessed and cursed them both with well-practiced facades.

Including the one that kept his legs from turning to jelly as he held CatBird up. "You must be exhausted."

HigherBrook's daughter cinched the waist of his coat, burying her face in his neck fur. After a moment, she nodded.

"It seems we'll have plenty of time to talk." He cradled her head. "You don't have to say anything now. I'm not sure I can, either." Her limpness against him, her own lowered defenses, said enough. "You'll send for me when you're ready."

She nodded again as excited shouts reached them. In a minute they were surrounded and his arms were empty. He redirected numb attention as CatBird's co-wives embraced her. As Izzik shared a spirited hug with his co-husband. As delicate hands grasped HigherBrook's own.

Their gratitude was almost too much to bear.

"It's getting dark." Suddenly he wanted to sleep. Body relaxed and unfettered, lost in Kova's scent. Or emptying the chamber pot again. "Someone's waiting for me. I should be getting back."

In the flurry of goodbyes, HigherBrook remembered only CatBird's lips against his cheek, her chops brushing his own. He forced himself to turn away as her family led her toward their hut, jubilant conversations receding.

His village lined the horizon, shadowed in the late afternoon and looking curiously quiescent. There wasn't a soldier in sight. But the paths traversing the meadow began to fill as Yata and Masari ventured forth. HigherBrook moved aside as a runner passed, harnessed to a cart of goods. Chains shortened as the Yata picked up speed, trundling her wares toward Crossroads.

He should flag the next one down, enjoy a brief ride above its whirring wheels. Save his strength for standing before the Chamber in the morning.

He would go home without CatBird, but he wasn't going home alone.

## **Chapter 41**

### **Midwinter**

#### **Basc**

Thirty-seven steps led from Izzik's hut to the first left turn, four-hundred-sixty-one to the second. One-legged steps, or was it three? All CatBird knew was that she had to keep counting.

They would be one-legged steps when she left her crutches outside.



When the only weapon she possessed was her body.

Children followed her. Even the youngest knew that something important was happening, no matter how their parents explained it to them. Some came up and touched her, backing away as she continued her progress. She could attach a letter or a drawing to every single tiny face.

The importance of what they did made possible what she was about to do. To some it might be only an historic act. Others knew better.

A curved path bore right, three-hundred-forty steps. The fallow fields of Liberty Farm dropped behind.

CatBird could make this journey blindfolded if she had to, she'd taken it often enough. Every day for fourteen days, while the doors were still closed to her. She had walked it alone and she had walked it with Izzik. Today he paced beside her while the rest of their household followed.

A sword of fire cut from her nonexistent foot up through her spine, making her gasp. Three-hundred-thirty-six, thirty-seven. She opened her mouth and took a piece of dagger root from him. Three-hundred-forty.

They turned onto a long straightaway. Five-hundred-twelve more steps to go.

Did her demons slink between the numbers? Did they ride her counting into her soul? CatBird could feel them gathering in her throat, squeezing her heart. How many did her child hold in its hidden fists, waiting to free them like bloody butterflies?

She tightened her hold on the dowels, white-knuckled as the numbers

flipped and suddenly she was counting down. Four-hundred fifty, forty-nine, forty-eight. Perpetual torches ahead of her smoked into the morning, the cold sun risen now above the trees. A crisp day.

More Yata lined the path, not children any more but adults. Respectful. In the end they decided not to begrudge her this rite. Their demons were hers now. She was as much a citizen of Basc as they were.

CatBird swung her crutches forward, hobbling past their silence. She focused on nothing but the Soala's black adobe, thought of nothing but the number of steps remaining. Her nose told her when she passed the clot of women she couldn't look at. The ones she had smelled for five days.

Those other co-wives, those wedded to her attackers, stood in a cloud of dulled fear. They had every reason to be concerned.

The numbers filled CatBird's brain. The smaller they got the larger they became, until she overlaid them on the outer walls. They covered the utilitarian panels of Zai's uniform and the riotous embroidery up and down Gria's robe. They overran the thick doors flanked by Basc's military and spiritual leaders. Images of flame-white ink flowed into new formations. Yata script.

They could have refused her. No Masari had ever been allowed inside the Soala, only grieving Yata who had lost their own to the hunt, including to her. The six men inside it now had been there many times before, releasing their own demons.

Then they'd bypassed the hut-of-need completely to implant those demons in her.

The white numbers filled CatBird's field of vision, so enormous they

painted the adobe in negative. Two steps remained. One.

Zero. She flushed under the heat of the torches.

She held one crutch out to Gria and the other to Zai, her skin tingling. She opened her coat and let it drop. The Soala's oak doors were high; she didn't have to bend beneath them at all. "Izzik."

His arms came around her. CatBird breathed in his own anger as he became her legs and her balance. They moved forward, a three-booted rhythm as she pushed open the doors and stepped past the threshold. Her vision began to clear as she heard the wood pulled shut behind her.

It could be an initiation ceremony: the six Preservers in the center of the room, their forehead tattoos melding into a single, thick blue line. Resigned to their fates, their expressions sobered. Instead of hunting tunics they wore plain shirts and trousers, unarmed. Their hands dangled at their sides.

CatBird's hands stiffened into claws as she looked from one face to the next, then down between their legs.

"You're wondering if I'll kill you." The air became thick as her chest heaved. "Or geld you." She shook her head, every hair on end, until she had no fur left to fuzz.

Izzik moved with her as she dove forward, yelling. She ripped off the first shirt, plunging her nails into hairless flesh. Bloody crescents oozed onto her fingers.

"Shall I rip away your breastbone?" She shoved the Preserver against the ground. The eyes beneath CatBird's were half-dulled, the man's heart racing against her fist as her grip on him tightened.

"I could do that, you know. I could squeeze the life from you so easily." She blinked back tears. "Do you want to know why I can't?"

He couldn't answer. She yanked her fist away with a scream, hearing his follow as his flesh shredded. Her hands closed around the Preserver's neck, her remaining knee pressing against his crotch. A sob broke from her as he began to strangle. Her voice welled up from mud. "You think that *this* is pain."

Ribbons of skin trailed around his blood-spattered head. CatBird increased the pressure on his windpipe, watching his bronze cheeks redden. She began to shake. "Pain is reading your daughter's letter, Jotha. Pain is knowing how much she loves me, and how much she doesn't know because she is so young and so innocent." She pressed harder and howled, "Pain is smiling at the smudged portrait drawn by your little boy before I remembered who his father was. I can't kill you-I can't kill *any* of you-because *they won't let me!*"

She reared up and lifted, then slammed him to the floor. She clapped her hands over Izzik's and shouted, "*Pull me up!*"

Another shirt ripped, and another. CatBird named them all, her nails filling with flesh. She wailed their sons and daughters aloud, every letter a laceration, every picture a bruise. Her womb churned. She laid six breastbones bare. Six chests trailed ragged flaps.

Izzik's hold remained tight around her waist as he pulled her up, eased her down. She couldn't pummel them enough. She hauled them against her as they choked, her husbands, her butchers, her rapists, the comrades of her soulmate, the fathers of the children she loved, the fathers of the child she carried. The men who had spared her life, who had branded her a full citizen of Basc. She clawed their tattoos until blood ran into their eyes.

Her attackers lay scattered and in agony. CatBird sank to the gory floor and pushed herself up against a wall, surveying the room. "Return to your families, and be aware that if HigherBrook sees your marks he will realize who you are and will hunt you down."

Bits of their flesh still clung to her clothes and hair. She picked one off her arm, rolling it between her fingers. She'd pop it into her mouth if she were hungry. She had torn enough away to furnish a half-decent meal. "Help them outside, Izzik, and then come back for me."

She watched them go. Elite warriors. They must have been under orders not to fight back. A useful disciplinary action.

And they were responsible for her now, and for her child. Their passivity might also have been an act of love. She couldn't tell without asking each of them directly.

*Another day.* CatBird sank against the adobe and closed her eyes, easing her fingers across her stomach. They should all recover first, before she and her extended kin broke Liberty Farm's bread together.

## Chapter 42

### Promontory

*TripStone grasps BrushBurn and shivers with delight, her lips slack. Her legs twine about his.*

*He is all she needs. All she has ever needed.*

*She fists his back fur, grips his buttocks. His muscles bunch against her thighs as he begins to thrust. She lifts her hips,*

groaning as heat sweeps up her spine and down to her toes.

TripStone pulls her husband to her as he plunges inside. She ripples, squeezing his buried cock, milking him. Clenching as he moves forward and back. Sucking. They are one with each other.

His mouth come down on hers, hard. His lip between her teeth, his tongue against hers. So warm. So hot. He buzzes against her. His tongue flows, thick and silky.

It lengthens. Liquefies. Spills down her throat.

His lips harden more. Her teeth touch glass.

TripStone can't tell where she ends and he begins. He is golden now, a heady dissolve coating her gullet. The buzzing spreads as she drinks him in.

Everything else is gone; only the two of them remain. Her lips around the glass, throat loosening and constricting. He is so good. She is so thirsty. The flow doesn't stop. The buzzing spreads into TripStone's fingers, melts into her toes. Soon she cannot feel her feet, does not know where her hands are.

It doesn't matter. Nothing else matters. She has him. Joy rises inside her like rain filling a lake.

She floats away, keeps pulling him into her until even her lips turn numb. Nothing is left of her but liquid. Someone else swallows for her, takes care of her, gives her what she needs. Her life, her dependence is a dream. If she never moves again, if her body never returns, it will be all right.

TripStone blinked, didn't know whether her eyes were closed or open. She rolled onto her right side before she could think, reaching out to the side of the pallet. Fingers outstretched, seeking the neck of the bottle.

They closed around wood.

She blinked again, muddy-headed, puzzled. Sharp angles impressed upon her palm. She ran the pad of her thumb along a corner, listening to BrushBurn's soft breaths behind her. She eased her hand away from the chair leg.

He slept peacefully, an indistinct lump under the covers. TripStone rolled onto her back and pulled her own up to her neck. The air was still, the house quiet and dark.

When had her husband's nightmares ceased?

TripStone crossed her arms over her chest, her hands bunching wool. In time the room began to lighten. She looked over at the chair, nothing but simple geometries in shades of gray. She turned her head, smiling at the silhouette of a curl dipping by BrushBurn's eye. Her hand wavered over his face. She ached to push his hair back, to caress his cheek.

He shifted beside her, eyes still closed. He reached out from under the blanket and laced their fingers together.

TripStone bent over him. His lips were warm, fleshy. Immutable. They opened to her, curling back slightly to draw scent.

He whispered, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Odd dream. It's nothing."

"It's something."

TripStone relaxed as his arm came around her. BrushBurn's eyes were open, reflecting concern through the shadows.

She whispered, "Please hold me." She laid her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. She snuggled inside his warmth as he wrapped his blanket around her.

"TripStone." He cradled her head. "We can stop this experiment."

"Not if Jirado's pregnant."

"She isn't yet."

TripStone clung to him. It would be so easy. *Send her home.* Three words and it would be done, and Jirado would be just another Skedge Yata trying to make sense of a post-Destiny, post-Little Masari existence.

Her body would be gone, but everything else about her would remain.

TripStone kissed the smooth triangle between the place where BrushBurn's neck fur ended and his pectoral fur began. "I love you." She reached toward the curl. His forehead was dry. He hadn't sweated in his sleep or tossed in his bed for weeks. "I'll be all right."

"You're sure."

She smiled at his doubt. They'd reassured each other before. Tender lies.

"I'm afraid. That's all. I didn't expect to be."

His hand dipped away from her scapulae and down to the small of



her back. "It's still early."

She heard his unspoken question. "Yes." She smoothed his pelt from chest to hip, across his thigh as he stretched his arm to the side. Membrane slid from a pocket and passed into her hand.

He was ready for the sheath, but TripStone could still taste the brandy. She folded the membrane in her palm and ducked beneath the blanket. The memory of alcohol began to fade as she reached BrushBurn's abdomen, lapping salt where his pelt yielded to bare skin. She kissed his stomach as he caressed her hair.

Her tongue teased his navel, moved lower. She took him into her mouth, round and long and not glass. The tip of his cock pulsed near her throat, his breaths turning more erratic.

*Save me.* TripStone found BrushBurn's hands and held on, the sheath trapped between their palms. His musk carried his sighs down to her as she pulled, licked, pushed her lips back down. She sucked his flesh, his veins, his length. She rode his gasps, leaving the sheath in his hand as she took hold of answering hips. Rocking buttocks. His scrotum burned against her palm.

From above he choked, "Bless you."

TripStone wanted to weep with gladness, but she had to breathe. Her body returned, flesh and blood and bone as he came and she swallowed, burying demon drink.

~ ~ ~

A year ago this mine stank of sweat. It sang with curses. Its mouths belched ore whenever one turned around. And the ore kept coming after an eternity of hacking the mountain clean. Light the fuses, stand

back.

Deafening shudders. Gunpowder and smelter ash thick enough to bathe in.

*Now see how dead it is.*

SandTail sat on an empty truck bed, his short legs dangling. Bastard pain was almost gone, just enough left to tell him he was still alive. Which was better than a hell of a lot of Promontory.

This mountain should be crawling with miners but they were gone, working other shifts or prancing right here between the waste rock and the slag heaps, soon to be off to base camp. Every worker down in the canyon meant one less up top. More would be leaving their jobs to run the supplies.

Couldn't be helped.

Hunters in training maneuvered among the shafts as if they were caves; they'd been drilling for hours. SandTail leaned forward on his cane. The Crossroads representative was as foul-mouthed as everyone else now. What a long way she'd come. *You thought you destroyed us, TripStone. You haven't. You've become one of us.*

She'd deny it. SandTail chuckled to himself. Nothing like good entertainment. Especially when everything else was so blasted rotten. Cold, impotent smokestacks and Rudder itching at the gates.

Citizens glanced toward him and looked away, embarrassed. SandTail nodded in their direction. *That's quite all right, my friends. I don't know what to make of me, either.*

He didn't care whether they treated him as a champion or a pariah.

They were his people. This was his city. Nothing else mattered.

He watched back slaps and butt slaps, listening to bravado and raucous laughter. For all TripStone's sauciness she still found something else to joke about when the talk turned crude about that meat running loose down below. Tender innards, still. She wasn't fully mined yet. Still had soft spots to be exploded away.

SandTail slid off the truck bed, gritting his teeth as bastard pain whipped his legs. Time to exercise what he'd worked so hard to rebuild. He negotiated a field of fully-rotted timber and half-rotted tubs, piles of buckets and ore handles, mining cars sleeping on their sides. Abandoned, pathetic wasteland.

Trainees sauntered between the empty bunk house and the inert power house and headed out. No time to wash before their shift; they'd cover one grime with another. A few stragglers clustered around TripStone, poring over the latest maps.

He waited until they left, then caught her eye and motioned her over. Her raised eyebrows told him his presence was a surprise. SandTail suppressed a smirk. Did she expect him to hide out in his house forever?

She gave him a noncommittal nod. "You're healing well."

He pulled her glove off her wrist and drummed, *How soon will they be ready?*

"I'll let the Chamber know when they're ready. You're not on the Chamber any more."

He took in her sharp cheekbones. Greasy chops, rough skin. The many notches on her StormCloud. *You don't have to tell me*

*anything, TripStone. We're on the same side now You want this town to survive as much as I do.*

She shook her wrist free of his touch. Their boots left dark imprints in the snow.

Her gray eyes turned hard. Whatever she was thinking, it wasn't about him. But she didn't quicken her pace, didn't leave him and his cane behind. Just shoved her hands into her pockets, quick breaths puffing before her. Audible breaths in this miserable quiet.

SandTail held his leather-clad palm up like a slate board. He spoke on it with slow fingerpresses. *You're enjoying my company, my dear. I want to know why.*

She chortled low in her throat. Swaggered.

Fine. Let her gloat, whatever she was gloating about.

It couldn't be about depleting Promontory to support the base camp. And no matter what her feelings about the Farm Yata, she was as bent on killing them as the next Masari.

AgatePool would have mentioned something if TripStone were negotiating with Skedge, and no full-blood Yata from there had tried to infiltrate the factories. *At least our little nurse is back on her mesa now. I'm glad we're rid of her.*

The answering twinkle in TripStone's glance stopped him short.

She said, bemused, "BrushBurn's been sleeping well, these days." Her sardonic smile conveyed the rest.

SandTail gripped his cane with both hands. He swung at her half-

blind, yelling when she caught and immobilized the staff. He struggled to free it, would beat her senseless if he could.

She opened her hand and parried his blows. Toyed with him, laughing.

He whipped off his glove. His fingers shouted against her cheek, *Idiot! Must I spell it out for you? You're a hunter! Jirado belongs on your plate, not in your husband's bed!*

"Really, SandTail. I don't see *you* with a Masari wife."

*AgatePool thought she was a Masari wife until recently. This is different. Jirado's been after BrushBurn ever since she got here.*

TripStone's grin froze his bones. How elated she must feel to have bested her nemesis by sacrificing her husband to that golden-skinned demon. To have undone years of careful rehabilitation, made BrushBurn back into that sick, quivering boy.

"He's happy, SandTail."

*Of course he's happy! He's got his blasted Sunrise back.*

TripStone shoved him hard against a hill of tailings. SandTail swallowed blood, felt the inside of his cheek smarting. No mistake, this truth hurt both of them.

TripStone shook her head, hissing, "You made BrushBurn into a monster. You took a devastated child and made *him* into meat, and when that wasn't enough for you, you made *me* into a drunk. Look where it's gotten you." She cinched his chin in her fist. "Look where it's gotten Promontory."

Bile rose. SandTail pushed it back down. How earnestly she cared about Promontory now that it was dying. How noble of her.

He winced against the heap, ignoring its sharp edges. *Do you honestly think BrushBurn would have survived without my help? He was desperate for it. And you made yourself a drunk, my dear, because you're just as soft as he is. You can thank Crossroads for that.*

"Let me tell you something, SandTail." TripStone held his shoulders, bending to bring her face closer to his. Triumph oozed. "Where I come from, one mix-child is living happily. He is not persecuted. He is not endangered. His mother was a Farm Yata who would be *dead* by now if she hadn't broken out of that place."

If she thought she'd won this argument, then why was she so insistent?

"HigherBrook has married a Yata and *they're* expecting a mix-child. You thought you had him by the balls and instead he's got yours, SandTail. I hardly call that soft. That food we're packing to feed the base camp is charity from the Grange."

*Don't forget that less than a year ago Promontory owned the Grange. That isn't charity, it's delayed payment.* He nodded at puffed neck fur. *And now that Skedge devil owns our mutual friend, and you too I might add. Is Jirado pregnant yet?*

"No."

His pelt stiffened with panic. *And she's been fucking him for how long?*

TripStone pulled his hand from her face. "She swallowed

contraception for years before SilverLode died. Conceiving might take more time."

SandTail caught his breath and tried to think. There was no sense in both their brains being addled.

How skillfully that tiny Yata had manipulated his bandages, wrapping SandTail with the skins of her own kind. How patient she had been. How inquisitive. They'd been alone in his house and he'd been wide open to her.

She could have done away with him so easily. Instead, she was fascinated by the history books about her ancestors' atrocities and Promontory's equally horrific response. And through it all she'd remained amiable. Adorable. Absolutely fearless.

*If you love BrushBurn, you'll get rid of her, he wanted to shout. Put her on an angel cart to Skedge or open her up and cook her, I don't care. But get her away from you.*

The proud Masari next to him leaned against the tailings, rifle shunted to the side, looking weary.

SandTail held up his palm again, positioning his fingers with maddening care. *I consider you a friend, TripStone.* He smiled wryly at her incredulous grunt. *You've been spending time with my people, learning about them, listening to their stories. You thought you'd hate us, but you can't.*

She rolled gravel between her fingers. "I led Gria's army here, SandTail. Are you sure you want to call me your friend?"

*We both did what we had to do. I can't blame you for that. Hate me all you want; I consider it a challenge.* He'd drill the words into her

skin if he could. *Promontory is as vulnerable as it's ever been and you're a hunter harboring a Yata. That terrifies me.*

"I don't understand you." TripStone craned her neck and rubbed the back of her skull as though to shake something off. As though she needed to break her Yata fast, but it was too early for that. Something else caused her discomfort. "AgatePool trusts Jirado. They've worked together for decades. And during all that time when your wife didn't know she was half-Yata, *you* did. You cared for her anyway."

That was the trouble with damned softness. It rubbed off. *I love AgatePool, TripStone. But she is as much a fool as you are.*

"She believes in Promontory as much as I do."

He heaved an explosive sigh. "Ah, Rip." It was as much of her name as he could manage, but it would have to do.

Promontory wasn't Crossroads and never could be, no matter how much the tender-hearted wanted to deny what was real. SandTail pushed himself off the rocks and wobbled toward the silent assay office. One wooden shell among all the others.

Promontory wasn't Promontory any more, either.

## Chapter 43

Jirado's head sank, forehead against her pallet, gasping. Above and around her BrushBurn shuddered, his stomach twitching against the small of her back, his pectoral fur blanketing her hair. He dripped inside her, beginning to soften.

Her elbows and knees made imprints in the linen. Her thighs sweated



between his, her breasts stiff against his wide palms, still swollen from his massaging.

She had shaped herself to him, becoming a chuck ratcheted open and then closed around a larger bit. The deeper she entered the machine the more different her shape became. She'd folded herself according to specs, wedging into smaller and smaller spaces until she had nowhere else to go. If she was to complete her mission, she could not stay barren any longer.

BrushBurn's lips curled back as he breathed her in. His tension climbed during their muted sex while TripStone slept. He nuzzled Jirado's nipples and her armpits and her cunt, sniffing for fertility. Still blind to the peppery mash burning deep inside her.

She couldn't hold this family off any longer. She was here to bear them a mix-child.

BrushBurn's inspections of her body and the troubled looks from TripStone told Jirado what she had to do. She couldn't risk being sent back to Skedge now.

All she needed was access to the base camp's supplies at the right moment. Everything else was immaterial. Jirado shivered and tightened. She wriggled as BrushBurn grasped her in reply, his silence forced in the midst of dizzy pleasure so as not to wake his wife. He could smell Jirado's fear, so she buried it in coy squirms, wagging her raised rump forward and back, side to side. Applying the right torque.

He hunched his back, his lips by her ear, and whispered, "Enough."

She relaxed her muscles and inhaled, distending her belly as his hands moved lower. He caressed her roundness, knowing it was air.

"BrushBurn." She raised her head and leaned her cheek against his chops, her mouth gone dry. "You seem lighter."

"I am."

"I'm not imagining your ribs, then."

She listened to his measured breaths. His hands were at rest, one on her navel, the other on the linen.

"BrushBurn?"

His voice was almost inaudible. "It has to do with fasting."

She breathed more fullness into her stomach. "Tell me."

"Yata deprivation. I've begun to feel the effects." His lips warmed her ear. "It means I'll break soon."

His lungs filled and emptied against her back. Jirado turned her head and opened her mouth. His kiss couldn't calm her.

"You're upset."

"Yes." If she couldn't erase her fear, then she would give it another form. "I was trying to imagine what happens in the Lodge."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"I can't help myself." She managed a soft, nervous laugh. "What if the chunks in those barrels were me?"

She relaxed into BrushBurn's embrace. He tried so hard to comfort her.

"Let me go there with you."

He pulled away so quickly she felt a breeze between her legs.

"Absolutely not." He rolled onto his back, cushioning her against him as though protecting a child. "I know you don't want to be sheltered, Jirado. I know how strong you are. But trust me, this is stronger than either of us." He stroked her back. Repetitive motions. "You were screaming and incoherent after you saw the haul from the canyon. It took TripStone and me hours to clean you up. Breaking a Yata fast is worse."

Jirado pillowed her head on his chest. "I saw corpses after the hunt, BrushBurn. Horrible, deformed people who were *recognizable*."

"But you also saw Masari in control." His arms cinched her, as though trying to convince her by the force of his hug. "The Farm gave us a steady diet of Yata; it was like eating anything else. We didn't think twice about it. But using fasts as a way to wean also means that we starve ourselves just to the point before we suffer damage. When we break, the impact of eating Yata affects us the way that Destiny affected the livestock."

She caressed his chops. "I know."

"You know the facts, Jirado, but you haven't seen what happens."

"I've already seen you lose control." She opened BrushBurn's lips with her tongue. Her toes traveled across his thigh. She shifted her hip, teasing him with her instep.

He took her face in his hands and eased her away. His whisper turned fierce. "No one but TripStone has watched me break. She knows what to expect, because no matter how irresistible that meat

is or how much I need it, I hate every second of what I am doing. Do you understand?"

"I do." Jirado scrunched down, as though to crawl inside his pelt. "I do, BrushBurn, and I love you for it."

The lie came so easily. The man who should have fathered her children was dead and in pieces or he'd already passed into the chamber pot. Now she had to sacrifice her body, too, the way all good Yata did.

Jirado smiled at her furry tool through moist eyes. She couldn't hate BrushBurn, he did her bidding so readily. Let him think that she was terrified of becoming his food, not of carrying his seed.

Later she pulled on a simple dress and peered into the front room. TripStone lay collapsed on her pallet in the cold dawn, her face drained. Her breathing had become shallower, the dark circles under her eyes more pronounced. Her slow weakening continued to progress according to plan, leaving her enough strength to finish training the others.

Jirado felt in her pocket for bunched cloth and weighed her options. She couldn't decide, yet. She had to wait until the hunter awakened. She headed toward the back of the kitchen.

BrushBurn knotted his breech ties, frowning at FlitNettle's empty pallet. "She can't stay angry at me forever." It was more hope than statement. He squatted by the hearth, coaxing more flames to catch.

"At least you know where she spends the night." Jirado unstacked boxes from a corner, building steps by the kitchen shelves. "I'll be honest, BrushBurn. I'd rather see FlitNettle slicing Masari open at the hospital than slicing Yata open at the Warehouse."

BrushBurn sighed. "So would I. She wants so terribly to be useful."

"Then let her."

She climbed the steps and retrieved dried blackberry leaves, teacups. A soft moan floated in from the next room and stopped abruptly. BrushBurn sat back on his heels, his brow pinched with worry.

"TripStone hasn't been well," Jirado offered. He shook his head in agreement.

Jirado spilled leaves into a mortar and began to grind, smiling at aromas hovering between tart and sweet. The kitchen warmed. The kettle had already begun to steam when soft footfalls climbed the steps and the front door shushed open.

FlitNettle eased inside, lowering her hood as she tiptoed toward the kitchen. Without a word she hung her coat by the storage room and ducked inside it. In a moment she emerged with a block of cheese under one arm and dried greens under the other. She positioned herself at the counter and lifted a chopping knife.

Jirado pursed her lips. She put her pestle down and laid a light touch on the girl's arm. When FlitNettle looked at her, she drummed, *It's not easy being small, is it?*

Stalks separated. FlitNettle concentrated on the food, her blade dancing on the cutting board.

*People underestimate you all the time.* Jirado tapped ground leaves into BrushBurn's teapot, then reached out again. *They think you're too young and too inexperienced. It happens over and over. They*

*have no idea of how much you have to offer or how much they can learn from you.*

She returned to her grinding as BrushBurn left the hearth and passed behind them, headed toward his marriage bed. She didn't look up when FlitNettle whispered, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because if I were born a Farm Yata, I would be a grandmother by now," Jirado whispered back. She pointed to the steps beneath her feet. "And people still look at me and think that I'm a child."

She waited as FlitNettle scraped the vegetables onto plates. Cheese curled away from the block.

"Great-grandmother."

Jirado raised her eyebrows at the girl, who nodded back.

"You're joking."

"Nope." The blade cleaved. "You'd be a great-grandmother or culled."

"That's astonishing." Jirado spilled more leaves into the pot. "How many of the hunters know that?"

FlitNettle stiffened. She answered through gritted teeth, "Why should I care?"

"I don't know, Flit. You tell me." Jirado shrugged. "How many people do they know to look for if they don't know how the generations work?"

"They don't even know what to *smell* for. And those are the better hunters. The new ones are even more stupid."

Jirado climbed higher and slipped the canister of unused leaves back on the shelf. She heard a dull thump as she descended. She peeked out from the kitchen and saw BrushBurn guiding a disoriented TripStone away from the wall. "Do you need help?"

"I'm all right, Jirado." TripStone's eyes blazed as she reached for her clothes. "It's these damned dreams. They make me wake up drunk."

Jirado counted off seconds until the hunter regained her balance. TripStone scowled as she tugged on her leggings and shoved her feet into breeches. Her hands remained steady as she tied them shut, as she wrapped her shirt around her breasts.

How amazing her body was, bearing up under accumulated doses of heart-willow resin with so few symptoms. Cultivating sickness like a slow-blooming flower.

Time to pollinate her, then.

Jirado reached into her pocket and fingered knotted cloth. She untied and grasped the untreated end of her splinter. FlitNettle was lifting the kettle. BrushBurn shared a semi-private moment with his wife. It took only a second to touch the poison to the inside of TripStone's cup, hardly enough to cause any distress by itself.

Re-pocket the splinter, re-wrap it one-handed. Bury it later.

Muscles stood out on FlitNettle's arms as the girl poured from the kettle into the teapot. Jirado smiled at her through a haze of steam. "I should be thankful you're at the hospital these days. If those new hunters are as stupid as you say, they'll be thoroughly incompetent in the canyon without your guidance. That might save a lot of my people."

FlitNettle turned back toward the hearth. "I'm a level two, Jirado. I'm not allowed *in* the canyon any more."

"True." She grasped the pot and brought it to the table. "It takes so long to reach the Farm Yata now. The hunters would probably forget anything you could teach them up here."

She busied herself with cleaning the counter as FlitNettle set down the food. How long had it been since that girl picked up her rifle? Since she'd shared a meal with her comrades? How badly did she want to?

Jirado listened to sounds of tenderness in the next room. She had to tame her eagerness. Live in the moment. Trust in the machine.

The kitchen filled. She placed TripStone's cup before her and set the others down as BrushBurn poured the tea. She moved a box beside the table and climbed into her giant Masari chair.

Even chopped, the greens would choke Jirado if she *were* a Farm Yata with a mangled tongue. What had SilverLode been able to eat during his wretched existence as livestock? What were her brother and sister swallowing if they were still alive? How far from Promontory had her people been able to travel?

Jirado could move the morsels around in her mouth. She could chew solid food. How easily Skedge took that simple act for granted when their forgotten citizens had been robbed of it.

She couldn't think of any of them. She had a job to do. She had to concentrate on the task at hand. Follow procedure.

She was savoring the cheese when FlitNettle blurted, "Take me with you, TripStone. I'm going to train the recruits."



The hunter's eyes brightened as she sipped. "I was hoping you would. We could use you."

"And as soon as I'm a level three I'm going down to base camp." The girl turned to her sour-faced cousin. "Try and stop me."

BrushBurn grumbled, "Let's not talk about it. You're not a three yet." He narrowed his eyes at her. "Did you get any sleep at the hospital?"

"I got enough."

Jirado leaned back in her chair, cradling her cup. Listening. If she closed her eyes she could be back on Skedge, sitting at the family table with her husband, her siblings and their mates, her niece and nephews. All of them Little Masari with their family spats, the workers among them dressed in coveralls, grabbing a quick breakfast before reporting to the factory.

What a beautiful, terrible lie they had all lived. How dearly they were paying for it now.

BrushBurn led TripStone from the table, speaking low to her about their ward. He should be thankful FlitNettle was talking to them again at all.

Jirado leaned toward the girl. "Let me know if the big people bother you."

FlitNettle smirked. "I can handle them."

"I don't doubt that for a minute." She smiled engagingly. "I'd be grateful if you tell me what happens at the training grounds. I'm cooped up in this house, trying to make a baby." She picked at her

food. "Tell me some stories. I need somebody to talk to."

FlitNettle arched her eyebrows. "Even a kid?"

Jirado grinned. "*Especiall*y a kid."

## Chapter 44

"I'll have you know you've robbed this hospital of its most adept Death player." DustClaw dealt a hand of cards, a mock scowl on his lips. "I am *not* pleased."

TripStone lifted eight strips of stiffened parchment and tried to remember the rules. "You should be happy, DustClaw. You told me FlitNettle was beating you all the time."

"I was so close to winning." He squinted at his cards, twitching blood-colored chops. His lean frame had grown stringy. "I've been in here so long I've lost track of time. I'm a traveler, TripStone. I *hate* these walls." He repositioned the strips. "I owe Flit my sanity. If I couldn't go after the Farm Yata, then I could at least aim for beating her before my back healed up."

TripStone grinned. "So you'll beat me instead and your back will heal that much faster."

"It doesn't work that way." He passed her the marble cup. "I wish it did. Who knew you could get infected so badly without Yata?"

"Don't forget I was a *yatanii* before the practice became acceptable. And my fasting was completely uncontrolled. I saw friends die from scrapes like yours."

DustClaw toyed with his cards, shifting their positions again. "I was

holding back the whole hunting party. You should have left me behind."

"I should have, but who would tease me then?"

The sounds of Death filled the ward. Stone lozenges shaped like stylized bones rattled and spilled onto tables. Parchment slapped on wood amidst eruptions of groans and laughter.

All the other hunters had been discharged. TripStone studied a ragged array of factory injuries, shooting accidents, victims of snakebite and rockfall, burned limbs. Both winners and losers in fisticuffs.

She peered at the lozenges. Fused minerals, dark on one side and light on the other. One side symbolized Yata, the other Masari. "How many of these games is Rudder delivering?"

"It's all over the hospital." The courier shifted in his chair, hunchbacked from a mass of bandages. "And since I haven't been *out* of the hospital, I can't answer that question. Just throw the bones and don't blame me if your mail is late."

TripStone shook the cup and spilled its contents. "Does your replacement read other people's letters as faithfully as you do?"

"Trade secret." DustClaw grinned. "You know we do it for your own good."

"Voyeurism with a conscience." She separated the strips in her hand, trying to keep them from sliding together. Did the prisoner's pictogram combine better with the Destiny bag or with the chameleon's cart? Which ranked higher, the rifle or the serpent? How did the constellation symbols affect the other values? "These are very

small cards."

"The Yata complain they're too big. And you're supposed to *be* a Yata for this round, so just tighten your hold on them. You've got more bones on the table than I do, anyway."

TripStone frowned at the playing pieces. She already had too much Yata in her life. The last thing she wanted right now was to be one of them. "We're up to our necks in debt to Rudder. Why are they giving us this toy?"

"So that we can enjoy being conquered?" DustClaw shrugged. "My guess is they're preparing us to play against real Yata, just as they do. Our factories are in the shit pot and Skedge has been itching for integration."

TripStone snorted. She lifted the serpent card and laid it down. "That hardly leaves any time for games."

"You've got more friends in Rudder than I do. Why don't you ask them?"

"I will." She anchored the card with a bone and pointed. "That's Basc."

"You must have the Destiny card, then." DustClaw laid his strips down and linked his fingers around his knees, bowing his back. He stretched, wincing. "You could bring one of these sets home. Teach Jirado how to play."

TripStone smoothed down her neck fur. "Jirado's getting all the play she needs." She narrowed her eyes at him. "What's Flit been telling you?"

"She's more interested in training hunters than in watching your husband walk around with his legs bent." He raised his eyebrows. "I've got a comfortable bed here if you get lonely."

TripStone laughed. "You're wrapped up so tight you can't bend at all."

"Seriously, Trippy. You look terrible."

"Yeah, well so do you." She leaned back as DustClaw lifted his cards. "We've been racing to prepare for this expedition. I've just spent sixteen hours drilling recruits and loading supplies. Even with FlitNettle's help it's been grueling."

He laid the cards down again. "Then why the hell aren't you *home*?"

To do what? Watch BrushBurn duck behind the privacy curtain? Or hear Jirado and FlitNettle giggling over gossip about the training grounds?

TripStone reached back to massage the kinks from her neck. She couldn't get high from guzzling tea, only from falling asleep. Even the imaginary alcohol didn't help her. Her heart hammered whenever she awoke, and she felt as though she hadn't slept at all.

Long fingers kneaded her shoulders. How long had she been napping? She blinked and looked up into earth-colored eyes. "I didn't hear you step behind me."

"I know." DustClaw returned TripStone's hand to her lap. "Lean back."

She smirked. "You'd like that."

"If you think I'm going to seduce you, you're in worse shape than I thought." He tilted her head. Warm palms lifted her jawline, moving in small circles. "I like my lovers to be animate."

His kneading wandered. Down her throat, across her clavicle. TripStone leaned into the chair back until DustClaw eased her forward. He reached beneath her shirt, working the length of her spine. Her lashes dropped.

"No wonder you look terrible. You're a mass of knots."

She flared her nostrils, registering his musk amidst the medicines.

"Ah."

She opened her eyes. "Hm?"

"You *do* have the Destiny card."

TripStone turned the strips over and slammed them down on the table. She glared up at him. "I must say, you have a pleasant way of cheating at cards."

"I have a pleasant way of cheating at everything." His palms eased forward. "When was the last time he touched you like this?"

"You wanted animate, remember?"

"Your nipples are doing just fine." DustClaw bit his upside-down lips, looking pensive. "Have you noticed that all the rattling around us has stopped?"

Marble cups sat motionless. TripStone chortled as she surveyed the room. "We've gotten some attention."

"Think how disruptive we would be if we took all our clothes off."

He was half-mummified in dressings. Stripping wouldn't accomplish much. TripStone looked into gauze-wrapped, inquisitive faces above closely-guarded hands. "After what we've been through, DustClaw? Let me tell you, you're not much to look at."

She gave him a coy smile. If this were a watering hole in the canyon, their clothes would be off and their insults already flying.

He settled in, cupping her breasts. "That may be, but my dick is a lot less wrinkled than your butt."

"My butt is a lot rounder than your balls."

He grinned. "With an asshole tighter than a new brandy cork!"

"All the better to pop you one!" TripStone took one look at his knuckles straining her shirt and crowed. She raised her voice above a cheering section of invalids. "I don't care how hard you pull on 'em, DustClaw, they don't come off."

"I'm holding onto them for balance."

"I'll hold onto *you* for balance."

"I wish you would."

"I'll bet you do. You've never fucked calluses so good."

"You think you're talking about your fingers."

"You think you're talking about your dick."

She wiped tears of laughter from her eyes, struggling to catch her

breath. Wisecracks around the room punctuated their banter, died down, and burbled up again. They faded away, replaced by renewed rattling. More bones spilled onto the tables.

TripStone chuckled as DustClaw fit his lips over her open-mouthed grin. He gave her nipples an affectionate pat before withdrawing his hands and straightening with a groan. She supported him as he hobbled back to his seat, pecking him on the nose as she sat him down.

He gazed up at her with a boyish smile. "You're looking more relaxed."

"I am." Her chops rubbed against his. "Thank you."

"Let's do this again some time." His finger traced the bags under her eyes. "Get some rest."

## Chapter 45

The Lodge's soft lighting turned harsh. Its wood walls looked burnished with blood. Smears reflected off the scales. Columns of chalk-white numbers floated off slate panels, directionless. They fattened, colliding with each other.

BrushBurn's hands tingled. He shook them out, pacing between tables, bumping into chairs. *Too dangerous*. He couldn't hold out for much longer. He was being reckless.

StemIron should be here, but BrushBurn hadn't roused his assistant. The boy had been busy with his training. He'd be gone altogether once the hunters departed in a few days.

*You don't need him here. There's still time.*



BrushBurn staggered into the back room and measured the barrels. He hauled one over his shoulder, sprinted up the stairs and into a private room, and dropped the meat supply to the floor. Adrenalin coursed through him in waves. One minute he was curled around a chair, the next he was clawing the walls. Oh, how he wanted to run home.

*Do it alone, BrushBurn. Don't think.*

Then why wasn't he lifting the lid?

How did they possibly manage in Crossroads? How had Ghost and Piri survived holed up in a cabin? The smell of her flesh must have permeated everything while the scientist had tried to wean.

The walls lost their ruddy tinge and turned golden, like skin. Soft and furless, yielding. Responsive. BrushBurn's stomach roiled. His mouth watered.

He didn't know how his legs took him back downstairs or how his table filled with ink and parchment. He jabbed his pen into the open bottle, ignoring spatters. Why even write for advice at all? He wouldn't get an answer back for days.

*My dearest Piri-*

His letters skewed across the page. Skips and blots.

BrushBurn dropped the pen, didn't dare grab a blade to scrape the mess away.

He began to pace again. *All right.* His lips pressed into a thin line. If Ghost and Piri had managed, then he could, too. *You want this*

*infernally communion, Jirado. Don't blame me for what happens.*

All he had to do was stay in the Lodge. Climb the stairs again. Shut himself into a private room, lock the door, and gorge alone.

But he was outside now, coat-less. Cobblestones bent with the wild swings of his lantern; the stars were needles overhead. BrushBurn skittered on patches of frost, sizzling.

He opened the door and tiptoed to his bed, wick lowered. TripStone's body was limp, her mouth open. BrushBurn watched her heavy breaths, his hand wavering before her face. He wanted to kiss her to consciousness, but she was so exhausted.

*Dear gods, what will this house be like after she's gone into the canyon?*

He bent close to her ear and whispered, "I love you."

His wife didn't move. BrushBurn straightened and looked toward the kitchen, hunger warring with rage until he couldn't tell them apart any more. He scooted to the privacy curtain and threw it behind him, clapping his hand over Jirado's mouth as she jerked awake.

He rasped, "Climb onto my back and hold tight and don't say a word."

He couldn't cradle her against his chest without sinking his teeth into her side. BrushBurn's hands shook as he grabbed Jirado's blanket and threw it over them both. The wool stank of meat.

Her legs wrapped around his waist as she grabbed onto his neck fur. They weren't even outside and already she'd begun to hyperventilate.

*I warned you, Jirado. His fingers staccatoed on her thigh. Slide off me now and I'll put you back to bed and we'll forget this ever happened.*

She tightened her hold. He ducked out the door and down the stairs and careened back to the Lodge.

It was still a glowing cavern empty of all other customers; the gods had at least granted him that. BrushBurn threw the blanket to the floor, nothing now but a naked slab on his back. His nails dug into her flesh. Pulling, relaxing.

"The barrel," Jirado whispered behind him. "Upstairs, BrushBurn. I'm not your food."

"Oh, but you are."

He squeezed her harder, taking the steps two at a time. Slamming the door, throwing the bolt.

He could shove his back against the wall. Crack the skull. Drop her unconscious to the floor and bend over her to feed.

Instead he tore Jirado from him and grabbed a plate, staggering to the barrel in the corner. He whipped off its cover and ladled chunks, dropped the plate on a scale, and recorded the baseline in almost illegible chalk.

She huddled panting on the other side of the room as BrushBurn scooped glistening Yata with his hands. He looked away from her and shoved his face into the meat, gulping. Life built back inside him. It shot down into his fingers, driving his tingling away.

He swallowed the chunks whole, a stoked furnace swelling with fuel.

Brine dripped off his chops, but he still smelled Jirado beyond it. She was on her feet now, inching across the room. Hesitant. Sweeter than before. A dark, mildly acrid veil had dropped away from her; or was that just a trick of the feast?

He leaned toward her, his eyes half-closed and lips parted. "Come closer."

She hung back. Her breathy command raced from his ears to his groin. "Keep eating, my beloved."

BrushBurn stuffed his mouth, moaning. The plate was half empty, but he still surged. Fingers yanked on his breech ties, but his hands were full of meat. "Jirado-"

"Eat."

She gulped air, but he could do nothing for her quaking before banishing his own. BrushBurn kicked his pants away and dropped into a chair, reaching around her for the Yata on the table.

"Lift me up," Jirado begged. "Quickly."

She cried out as he pulled her onto his lap. Her fingers pushed chunks into him, faster and faster, pulling away before he could open her knuckles between his teeth. She impaled herself on his cock. He almost softened, she shook so hard, but the grip of Yata was too strong.

She was meat against his stomach, arching her neck like a sacrificial offering, exposing her jugular. Her pulse raced beside his jaw. Her windpipe quivered under his tongue.

"Measurement, BrushBurn." Tears dropped onto his face. "You

haven't weighed me first. Don't bite down."

He leaned back and took more chunks. Jirado's hands were coated in brine. He gripped her to him, listening to her anguished groans as he began to thrust. She fed him convulsively now, sobbing. Eyes wide with fright.

Her terror blurred. The Yata fused BrushBurn together; he'd pull Jirado inside and through his skin if he could. Joy throttled him as he shouted for more.

~ ~ ~

TripStone licked her lips, waiting until feeling returned to them. Her nostrils still twitched with the smell of brandy, a sparkling river this time, carrying her body through Promontory's streets. She'd heard a door shut as she spilled down narrow alleyways, before she surfaced out of the dream, breathing again.

The pallet beside her was cold; her husband must be sleeping with Jirado. Truly sleeping. No furtive whispers or shifting cloth reached TripStone from the kitchen.

She rolled over until her knee hit the floor and she was hanging onto the chair. Her head began to clear, then sharpened further as she pulled herself onto the wooden seat and leaned against its simple back.

Then her blood drained down and her head dropped between her legs.

Her own snores woke her. TripStone breathed deeply through her mouth, pulling away from the dream before it engulfed her again.

She padded naked into the kitchen. A shadowy lump lay to her left, near the unlit hearth. She listened to the regularity of FlitNettle's breathing. TripStone turned right, pausing by the privacy curtain to listen.

Nothing. Her lips curled back but only old scent remained.

Yata sweat. Dried semen.

She dressed quietly, wrapping woolens around her vest, then her coat over those. She slipped her boots on, found and lit her lantern in the dark.

BrushBurn's ribs had been pronounced against her palms, his movements stiff and his mood irritable. Signs of deprivation. The cold brought TripStone fully awake as she strode toward the Lodge.

The Sheep had set; the Caterpillar still churned through the underworld. Meteors radiated from the Dove and streaked above her head, dying across the sky. The sun wouldn't rise for hours.

The canyon's dark seam stretched ahead. Guards patrolled the Warehouse and its dwindling stores to the east. Farther still, the Lodge's lights were on.

TripStone heard only cobblestones beneath her heels and her own wheezing before the muffled yells registered. When had she broken into a run, reached the doors, pushed them open? She stumbled into the light, catching her boot in a crumpled blanket. Clutching the wall.

Bedlam reverberated off the beams, making TripStone's knees buckle. She should go to BrushBurn, help him until his gluttony and his lusts were sated. Drop what meat remained on the scale and record the numbers afterward.

But the other yells froze her. TripStone listened for physical pain and heard none. Jirado was not being ripped to pieces, but she was a screaming corpse. Cleaving to BrushBurn, riding him, pleasuring and pleased and dead.

The stairs became a pinpoint, the lamp-lit walls a blur. TripStone held her hand against her mouth, fighting nausea. What Yata would participate in this horrific feast? What Masari would *let* her? They were both mad.

And they weren't stopping. Another wave of frenzy began to build. Her encouragement, his need, her relinquishment, his capitulation, Jirado screeching for a child as though begging the gods to strike her down.

Someone should run up to the room. Someone should save these people, but from what? The stairs shifted back as TripStone stumbled forward. The lamps cast darkness. It made no sense. The wool suddenly against her cheek made no sense, either, or the sideways tilt of the walls, or the burnished wood against her palms. Nothing focused, not even the sounds any more.

She clawed the floorboards. One passed beneath her, and another. The woolen blanket dropped behind. The brandy was gone, but she was underwater, her lungs filling. Her chest was ready to explode.

It didn't matter. All TripStone knew was that she had to keep scrabbling.

But then the floor fell away, and there was nothing left to grab onto.

## Chapter 46

### Crossroads

Snow drifted into bootprints descending the gentle incline into Crossroads. Large wet flakes, blue against the dusk. They already filled the indentations at the pass, erasing all traces of the broad-shouldered woman who had left Rudder carrying a screaming bundle beneath her coat.

She reached the Hunt Guild homes, stopping at the one with two lanterns set side by side in a road-facing window. The Yata dummy in the yard became formless. The growing blizzard plastered its head to its shoulders, melding its arms to its torso and reducing its two legs to one.

"She's here." HigherBrook pulled his woolens on and trudged over buried flagstones, sinking halfway to his knees. He called above the wind, "BubbleCreek!"

She struggled toward him, her hood coated with ice, her chops dripping.

Up close he spied patches, hasty repairs. BubbleCreek was married to a chameleon; the Yata trader should have given her better clothes than these. HigherBrook listened to the muffled cries at her breast as he guided her inside.

He took her rags to the hearth to dry. He had to build up the fire again and check the mutton stew. The soles of her boots were worn thin. A quick check of her rifle showed it was empty of ammunition.

Soft conversation floated to him from the next room. Sounds of pouring.

When he returned he could barely look at the woman sitting at his table. BubbleCreek's lips pressed into a thin line as her daughter



sucked hard on a nipple and pulled away, wailing. The baby tried again, tiny fists with carroty tufts beating against her mother's breasts. Sour-faced swallows.

"I can't tell you how many times I've almost buried her in the snow." The big-boned Masari held a warm mug against her cheek. Her free arm cradled an infant that at first glance looked like a newborn Masari, but the baby's proportions were Yata. The child was older than she seemed.

HigherBrook couldn't tell how much older. He ached just watching her hunger. The clinging, the sucking, the twisting away. "How long has she been like this?"

"Twenty-four days. I haven't had to eat Yata since she was born. Until I break again, she's not getting any in my milk."

Kova sat across from mother and child and took meditative sips. She propped swollen feet on a chair.

"I don't know if HeadWind can live without Yata," BubbleCreek continued over the baby's yells. She guided the tiny mouth back to her nipple, watching the battle between expectation and disappointment. "If she can't, she'll die."

The baby was enraged but healthy. "You've given her a name," HigherBrook observed. "That means you want her to live."

"That means the gods will know what to call her when she goes to them."

The stew began to bubble. BubbleCreek's nostrils quivered at the scent. She looked nothing like the robust warrior who had marched with HigherBrook into Promontory back in the rain-drenched spring.

She was weaning from Yata again, but she had to be starved for everything else.

Kova asked, "What about Yucof?"

Long, auburn-tufted fingers smoothed the baby's orange pelt. "He's still on the road. You'll probably see him, now that the chameleons do business here. He's left the black market, calls himself an ordinary trader now." BubbleCreek raised a threadbare sleeve to indicate differently-colored kerchiefs decorating the walls. "He peddles items like those. The artisans in Basc do a good job with them. They've become quite popular on the Cliff."

"I wouldn't know," the Yata murmured. "I don't keep contact with anyone on the Cliff. But even when I was a slave there, I dressed in better clothes than the ones you're wearing."

Amber eyes hardened. "You're still a refugee, Kova, just as I am." BubbleCreek held the tiny head more firmly against her breast. "I was ravenous for Yata during my pregnancy. I used to joke with Yucof that he looked good enough to eat, but then it came true. He learned to keep his distance from me. I lost my standing in Rudder. For a long time I just wandered, shooting when I had to and stealing corpses otherwise."

She could be commenting on the blizzard. A force of nature, nothing to do but bear up under it. Resignation and wind burn etched her face.

HigherBrook looked down at arms beginning to flail. Milk dribbled down pectoral fur. "Does Yucof know you're weaning from Yata again?"

"No, and I'm not going to tell him. I've already killed two of his friends."

Our friends. Even if I could face him, we don't belong with each other." Her sleeve collected more stains, smelling rancid. "He's part Masari, HigherBrook! We never should have tried this. I only hope that you and Kova have better luck."

A fresh blast from outside sent ice clattering against the window. Heated fumes from inside made HigherBrook's stomach grumble. The stew must be ready.

He carried bowls to the hearth, striding past the embroidered kerchiefs. Their nod toward Covenant traditions seemed laughable. The traditions themselves had transformed from sacrament into kitsch.

Basc made a tidy profit weaving the stories of its dead into decorations. It certainly made a profit off *him*. HigherBrook smiled wryly at the script-covered cloth nailed over spots where stippled bones had once hung.

Did he miss living in the Rotunda so much that he now bought up the narratives of its great tomes recast as souvenirs? Or did he just miss the scribes who had died before him, his ancient mentors and boyhood friends, whose handwriting the Yata weavers simulated so well?

Easier to think about the commodities on his walls than about the Chamber debates echoing around the Rotunda and the decisions he had to make.

BubbleCreek was not the first Masari to come to Crossroads for sanctuary. Promontory was impoverished and Rudder implemented strict regulations on who and what could live within its borders. Crossroads' emptied houses filled again, this time with Masari who couldn't wean fast enough to remain in the central valley.

More Yata Preservers trained across the meadow, cutting those Masari down in the hunting grounds.

He grabbed a plain rag on his way back. BubbleCreek whispered thanks as he draped it over her shoulder before setting her stew on the table.

"This isn't gallantry," he assured her. "After HeadWind spits up, I'm taking it to Ghost." He retrieved Kova's dinner and then his own.

"Trust me, HigherBrook. It's gallantry." The former warrior barked a laugh, brushing back unbound, oily hair. "I'd hate to see what his lab looks like."

"I do, too, and I'm there almost every day."

The carrots were still too hard, the potatoes too soft. The mutton was too bland. Crossroads' governor chewed on gristle, musing that its tastelessness came not from Yata deprivation but from the toiling of a distracted cook. Waves of tension rising from Kova kept his stomach unsettled.

He waited until BubbleCreek left the table, her baby drifting toward sleep, then turned to his wife. "What is it?"

"I've watched her during the Games." Kova's pensive gaze followed mother and child toward the hearth. "An easy wager to win. Very few odds against her."

His spoon halted. "Has she killed anyone you know?"

"What if she has?" Kova pulled gravy into her mouth. "My owner drank with Masari, including combatants. Some of them killed people I knew. One died at the hands of a friend of mine." She bent back to

her stew. "It isn't easy being a god to you, Brook."

The comment jolted him. "I haven't thought of the Yata as my gods for a long time."

"No, you just hang their narratives everywhere." Brown eyes bored into his. "Whatever I am to you, Brook, I'm telling you not to be lenient with her. Or with any Masari who come into this valley from abroad, or their children. If any part of the Covenant should be preserved, it's the balance between our populations. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He nodded. "Too well."

She whispered, "Good."

BubbleCreek's stew had grown cold by the time she returned to the table, her daughter swaddled and asleep. She removed the soiled rag from her shoulder and dropped it by HigherBrook's empty bowl. "I overheard. Tell me what you require of me."

He looked from her to Kova and back. Both women had been raised in the central valley, conditioned to a barbarism of which he'd been ignorant for most of his life.

He wasn't ignorant any more. On the contrary, he had to inject that barbarism into his own culture.

"I'll assign shelter to you and HeadWind." How many times had he repeated the rules, heartbroken by gratitude from the displaced? "You may avail yourself of harvest from the Grange over the winter. In return, you'll help us plant in the spring. If you survive."

HigherBrook sipped cold tea and cleared his throat. "Hunting Yata

inside either Crossroads or Basc is punishable by death, without appeal. As soon as you are able, you will join troop missions into the sanctioned hunting grounds. After you are credited with your first kill, you may break your Yata fast at the Deliverance Inn. Not before."

BubbleCreek nodded. She swirled the stew with her spoon, separating fat globules.

"When do you expect to break?"

She looked up from the bowl. "I don't know."

He should at least reheat the stew, but BubbleCreek was pulling it off her spoon so fast it didn't matter. At least her child's hunger had ceased and the baby slept peacefully, tucked into a blanket, thumb in mouth.

His voice sounded distressingly formal, even to him. "Until you can enter the Deliverance, you will report to Ghost. He will provide you with Masari flesh and will do what he can to sustain you."

BubbleCreek swallowed and grimaced. "What are my chances there?"

"I don't know. Our results are still inconclusive. What works for one person doesn't work for another." HigherBrook shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You're offering me a better life than Rudder is, right now. If HeadWind dies and I become a level six *yatanii* again, they might take me back. Until then, I am indebted to you."

It hardly sounded like charity.

"Crossroads is indebted to *Rudder*." HigherBrook wanted to cry out against senselessness, but what alternative did he have? "You helped defend our border during the massacre. We'd have all been killed if it weren't for Rudder's shooters and the arms you gave us."

"And you're repaying that debt by taking in people like me and my daughter."

He sputtered, "Then tell me why Rudder is forsaking its own citizens to support *Promontory*!"

"We are *annexing* Promontory, not supporting it. Skedge is densely populated and enjoys a healthy birth rate, enough Yata to feed Promontory for a long time. Those Yata can also work in the factories and start healing the city economically."

HigherBrook's eyebrows shot up. "How do you propose mixing integrated labor with murder?"

"*Controlled* murder." BubbleCreek scraped the bottom of the bowl. "Promontory's culture will have to change significantly, but our agents have begun that process both there and on Skedge. It will take some time before we know whether our design works."

She licked her spoon, ignoring HigherBrook's level gaze.

Kova ventured, "This is a covert operation."

"Covert and in plain sight." The spoon clattered into the bowl. "The hunts in the canyon are losing their sustainability and more industries have had to close. We're offering them another way to survive, but they must want it first. I'm sorry I can't tell you more."

After all the cultural changes that Promontory had caused across the

region, it seemed only just that its own was being manipulated. HigherBrook couldn't gloat. He had friends over there now. BubbleCreek was wise to keep the details from him.

She nodded at his discomfort. "Trust me, they'd be worse off without us." She left her chair and headed toward sounds of fussing. Her face became blank as her daughter again warred with her breast.

## Chapter 47

### Basc

*Dear TripStone, I am sorry I haven't written to you in so long. I am living in Basc now I bump my head on things all the time, but I am learning not to.*

Crutches punched into hard-packed snow turned icy, so many boots had trodden on the walks. CatBird listened to crusts breaking, but the chorus to either side of her was louder. Excited yells, furtive whispers. Youngsters scrambled to free her from the holes her crutches made.

She had begun her letter and gotten stuck a thousand times, and not even the efforts of a thousand children pulling on her pen could free her.

Dozens followed her around like an exotic thing, a declawed thing. She was not the visitor from Crossroads any more, not the babysitter who kept them company and protected them. She was one of them now, but oddly-shaped in a way that had nothing to do with her enlarged belly, which when compared with the rest of her was still quite small.

She wondered how many thought of her as some kind of giant pet.



*The orphans go everywhere with me, especially the younger ones who don't have chores to do yet. I took some of their parents away from them. They know that Yata took my family away from me, so we are all orphans together. We share something that I don't think any of us really understands.*

Then her nib had refused to move. She had scraped the words away and tried again, and again. How could she explain to her mentor why she didn't hunt any more?

"Yes, this is where I got the baby." CatBird swung uphill, huffing. The path curved left and narrowed, and the children crowded into a long line behind her, looking more than ever like an entourage. Some day they'd stop pointing and jabbering at the cluster of huts to the right, asking her the same questions over and over as though repetition would wear the old answers out and substitute new and nicer ones.

"What did they do with your leg?"

CatBird stopped to rest. She twisted around on her crutches and looked behind. The children's breaths misted down each other's collars in the still air. Some of them were shorter than the snowdrifts were high.

"It got used in a special Preserver ceremony."

"Were you there? Did you get to see it?"

The boy asking the question was the same size as her amputated limb.

CatBird shook her head. "It happened while I was still very sick. Before I got here."

Open mouths and wide-eyed amazement surrounded her, so transparent she was sure she could read everyone's thoughts. She could only imagine what they saw, burning torches and somber songs, her shapely leg impossibly unblemished and whole, handed Yata to Yata like a massive drumstick or an ear of corn. One bite of her flesh from a juicy inner thigh or a toe nibbled off, before the slab of her passed to the next person. A spicy coating on her, perhaps. Her pelt singed off in the cooking.

Some of her leg still remained, hacked into small chunks and dried.

"They didn't use everything up," CatBird called back. "They'll use more in the next initiation. They made it taste bad, to remind people of what they shouldn't do."

A girl piped up, "You should go see!"

*She* wanted to go see. CatBird looked into a face unabashed and earnest before she turned away and resumed her climb.

She was already a reminder to everyone she passed in the village. Attending an initiation ceremony might satisfy her own gruesome curiosity, but it could also send the wrong message. The power to kill and the power to cripple were two different things.

"Listen!"

The children's hearing was acute; they shushed each other. CatBird hadn't heard the distant report. Was she too preoccupied or had her senses already atrophied?

Whispers passed up and down the line as crackling echoed off the mountain face. One puff of smoke and then another rose from the far woods. Someone who didn't know any better might assume they

came from campfires instead of battles, but the misconception wouldn't last long. By the time the white haze spread as far as CatBird and the children, it would have reduced from a toxic gas to a nasty tang. Everyone around her would make ugly faces, complaining about the smell.

None of these children harbored misconceptions. Many of their parents died in the very spot where they looked or just over the foothills. Every child knew someone engaged in combat because the entire village had adopted them, as much as it had adopted CatBird.

The rest of her household threw itself into work. CatBird would return home to the monotonous meditation of clacking looms. To steady drips of snow melting into a barrel, to the intermittent banging of a hammer.

Two of CatBird's attackers were down below. So was Izzik. So were HigherBrook and the rest of her former company. Individual movements far beyond the border were impossible to see, so many trees stood in the way. She couldn't even tell where the snow turned red.

Standing here was almost as bad as remaining at home, but watching over the children didn't feel like work. Some day they wouldn't be fascinated by her any more and would be harder to control.

The trail led up to a pinnacle of granite and a solitary silhouette. The deputies were in charge, then, with Basc's military leader fighting in the far woods and its spiritual leader up here, watching from the summit. Whispers about The Honorable One rose from the children, flitting among the more graphic imaginings of war.

The disfigured head above them turned. An arm extended and made

a broad arc, layers of woolen sleeves dripping fabric.

*All of us?* CatBird hung back.

The arm gestured again. Both arms. Circular motions.

"We're moving ahead," she called. "Be careful on the rocks, everybody. We're going to see The Honorable One."

The news inspired a few nervous giggles, but most of the children squealed with delight. Many would pile up on Gria's thick blanket, tiny fingers tracing the embroidered pictograms. The ones who sat next to Gria would touch the back of her head, her patch of white the closest they could get to the afterlife and their kin.

Some children even claimed to have crawled into The Honorable One's brain, vanishing from the world through a shimmering circle. More insisted that they saw the dead rise out of the snowy woods, settling like a cloak over Gria's shoulders and entering the cracks in her skin.

No one expressed any doubt about the children's stories. No one teased them.

Gunfire continued to pop, sounding like fat sizzling over a flame. It was a minor reminder compared with what CatBird couldn't hear. Crossbows were also releasing down below. Puffs of air raced through blowpipes at close range. Grunts and gurgles accompanied hand-to-hand combat as flesh ripped open under blades. Nets sprang, traps opened. Combatants exchanged final requests and respectful farewells. Brutality mixed with sanctity.

The tall Yata sat cross-legged on her parti-colored blanket. Symbols draped about her, from her lowered hood through multiple folds

between her shoulders and down her arms, over her lap. The children engaged in a favorite game of finding the places where Gria's cloak and blanket met so that the pictograms formed new and mysterious patterns.

CatBird had stolen a glance or two, herself, trying to draw hidden meanings from random bunches of cloth. Sometimes she saw what the children saw, a figure of divinity, a messenger not of this world. Sometimes she saw only a tired, thin woman who might even be called old.

The Honorable One hugged the children to her, listening to stories of their young visions, and suddenly the mountains filled with spirits.

As CatBird sat, Gria pointed at a ledge lower down, nodding toward the lone boy. His dun tunic and wide-legged stance were unmistakable.

The children around them knew better than to call down to Abri, who stood at attention before the gods, keeping vigil for his mother. They were in awe of him, more even than they were of Gria, who was too scarred and wrinkled to be frightening.

Crutches lay down next to the cane. CatBird's remaining leg stretched beyond the blanket, most of her boot cushioned in the snow, but Gria's torso was long. They were almost eye to eye.

Yet they almost never talked.

~ ~ ~

Gria paid close attention to babbles delivered in utmost seriousness and half-believed them, herself. Had the children worked out their own agreements of whose fathers brought the dawn, whose mothers

sent the wind, whose aunts and uncles decided which seedlings lived or died? Or had everyone's supernatural powers just fallen neatly into place? Or had they fallen sloppily into place, only to have their discrepancies conveniently ignored?

Did it matter at all how the dead became the gods?

The young Masari next to her offered a shy smile, then resumed watching the battle. Every time Gria wanted to say something to CatBird her tongue felt cleaved, as though she were a Farm Yata. Her fingers fell mute.

Which gods, whose parents robbed Gria of her power of speech? Her own? The more she was a messenger to the dead, the more exclusivity they demanded of her. Talking to the living became harder, but listening to the living became everything.

Someone probed the back of her head and spoke to her white halo of hair. The child listened and answered back, a two-way conversation. Someone else identified the face that appeared in the mountain to the southeast at just this time of day. Stray clouds animated the face, making its expression change as though the rock itself spoke. High above the horrors hidden in the woods, Gria rode the orphans' stories into the rarefied atmosphere of fantasy.

*I am a Yata who is not a Yata any more.* She floated somewhere between life and death, in a land where no one could accompany her.

CatBird gave no indication of whom she worried about the most. Her Yata mate and her Masari foster father could be murdering each other at this very moment. Even the men who became her co-husbands through their act of rape visited CatBird to pay their respects. They brought food and material goods to her household. Their children clung to CatBird's breeches in a fierce show of

tenderness. In spite of everything, she was probably concerned for her attackers, too.

Gria studied the heart-shaped face in profile, with its dark pink chops and bushy eyebrows. Thick, wavy hair grown to shoulder length, large azure eyes. *You are a Masari who is not a Masari any more.*

They were enigmas, both of them. They once dressed in hunting tunics, a hunter and a soldier, unambiguous. Then they both lost their bodies and kept their lives, wandering through the world surrounded by adoring crowds and entirely alone.

"CatBird."

The young woman looked away from the fighting.

"Come to my hut after you have seen the children home."

She nodded. "Yes, Honorable One."

Gria couldn't tell whether CatBird addressed her out of tradition or out of belief, but determining the reaches of her own faith proved impossible. She couldn't take comfort in either skepticism or fanaticism. She could only exist in-between the two, buffeted by the faces in the mountains. By the arguments animated in changing light, the yelling, silent stones.

## Chapter 48

Gria rested her palm on a sturdy hardwood plane, square-shaped and unadorned. It was old wood, sliced from an ancient tree in a forest her own forces had later unwittingly burned to the ground. Dark rings lay half-concealed in earth tones above strong, functional legs.

Coded missives had lain on this table, along with building layouts, orders and chains of command, lists of contingencies and sealed alliances. Here she and others had composed strategies that had changed the region.

The playing cards looked ridiculously out of place.

If this were to be only a game, they would be.

"Tell me it isn't loneliness that drives me to do this." All Gria could talk to were the spirits of the Dirt People. She had read their pictograms a hundred different ways, changing her sight lines up and down the walls, across the floor and ceiling, debating the significance of shadows tossed from the hearth.

They answered her with echoes. The passage to her room carried an uneven rhythm of two and one. Its cadence sounded more like a heartbeat than a march. Gria sighed as she bent to her kettle.

Why *not* loneliness? Anything could be a tool of the gods. She'd certainly become one.

Mint tea steeped, sharp and sweet when CatBird arrived at the sanctuary. Gria helped her off with her coat and pointed. The young woman's knee would be the height of the table top. "Unless you'd prefer a Yata-sized chair."

CatBird shook her head as she scanned the walls and its many stippled bones hung on hooks. "Those were TripStone's, weren't they?"

"They belonged to her household, yes."

Gria felt no wiser than before, despite the added symbols in the



room. She poured tea as the young woman lowered her crutches onto the floor designs. "It's all right to be uneasy. We're both used to being where the battle is. The guards will alert us when it's over, so that you can be with your family."

The mug was tiny in CatBird's hands as she sipped, its earthenware all but invisible beneath tufted knuckles.

Gria set the strainer of wet leaves aside and squatted by a shrine made from the turquoise-colored bag containing Erta's bones. For the first time she prayed to an ordinary woman whose collected, cleaned remains were one step away from dust.

Who had Erta been behind the Covenant? Behind her robes and her stern facade? They had walked together only briefly after Gria's return from exile. They had hardly spoken to each other at all.

CatBird was a patient mountain sitting with her hands clasped, in prayer or uncertainty or both.

"I don't claim to understand how the gods set our lives in motion. Or what or whom they use to direct us." Gria sat and snuggled herself against the table. She lifted the cards by her elbow and shuffled them, nodding at her visitor to do the same with the second deck. "Yata in the central valley invented this game. They and the Masari use it to predict combat outcomes. Some use it to place wagers. That behavior fits Rudder and Alvav, but it is not useful here."

CatBird set her cards down, cutting them when Gria did. The young woman sat straight-backed, polite.

"Speak freely, CatBird."

Her shoulders relaxed. "I've never played."

"Neither have I."

"There should be something else, shouldn't there?"

"For the game." Gria indicated the pair of marble cups on a shelf. They flanked her sealed stone box containing Destiny Farm meat long decayed. "If Death were just a game."

She shook tremors from her hand.

CatBird leaned forward, puzzled. Her nostrils twitched. "You're afraid of something."

"Yes. We both are. About many things."

The tea warmed her. Gria could almost forget the fissures throughout her skin, the cracks she had become.

"This is a place of fear, CatBird, as much as it is one of sanctity. That is why my hut carries all its echoes to this room from outside it and not the reverse. What you and I say here does not leave this table. Ever."

The other woman nodded, giving Gria her undivided attention. Waiting for more information, more sensory cues, as though she were still on the hunt.

"You and I have trained to kill for our people, something our loved ones are doing right now. We knew that we could die at any moment, but we also felt invulnerable. We had to."

The face opposite hers was one of practiced neutrality.

"I called you here because you are meant to walk with me in the

afterlife."

CatBird's brow furrowed. "Am I to be executed, then?"

It sounded like a question of propriety. She could be asking whether she should wear her woolen gloves or the leather ones. Gria couldn't tell whether CatBird's lack of resistance conveyed complete trust or utter resignation.

"You have already been executed," Gria said, curtly. "As have I." She rested her palm on the back of a painted card. Plant dyes, a laminate of animal fat over scraped, dried skin. The deck itself was an afterlife. "We can be candid with each other because we are already dead. SandTail killed me. Preservers killed you."

CatBird looked away from her, down toward the strips. She bit her lip. "It's not the first time I've died, then."

Gria nodded. "You understand. We are corpses many times over. That means the gods speak through you as well as through me, but only if we lay ourselves open for them. I must entrust you with my spirit and hope that you will let me safeguard yours in return."

She watched the thick brows dip, the lips remain apart after CatBird sipped her tea. The Masari tasted the air.

Finally CatBird whispered, "I believe in you, Honorable One." Her fear was quiet and unconcealed, an admission in itself.

"I am The Honorable One everywhere else. I am Gria in this room." A flush crept up her neck, her own admission. "I believe in you, too, CatBird."

"What do we do?"

"The Death cards will direct us. You'll follow my example."

She lifted a card and turned it over as CatBird copied her gesture. Two designs slapped onto the table.

An empty Destiny bag faced Gria from the wood, darkness inside an open maw. She muttered, "The gods don't hesitate."

She stood and began to pace, rubbing circulation back into her arms. Scars crisscrossed beneath her voluminous sleeves. She followed them up to her shoulder.

The pictograms on the wall couldn't help her, now that she had turned to the deck. Gria had told the gods her needs and they complied. Wasn't this what she wanted, to break open even further?

She faced the wall, nothing on it now but pretty designs that revealed nothing. "You can't imagine how good Destiny feels." A sad smile ticced the corner of her lip. "Some of the Yata here can tell you what it's like, but they have not been overdosed as I have. I still wake up craving it."

Gria strolled past Erta's bones, holding herself. "And I wake up craving SandTail. Not as a man, not as a Masari. As a thing. I fought him so hard, but he drove me to such extraordinary pleasure. I'd have been happy to die if the gods had let me. But they condemned me to live."

The cracks widened, the dead flakes of her falling away. "That is how I remember being raped, CatBird. I envy you your unconsciousness."

CatBird whispered, "I was not completely unconscious."

"Tell me."

"They were all so gentle. Caring." She sipped. "I envy you your violence." Tears nestled in her eyes. "I couldn't tell anyone about this. Not even Izzik."

"I can't tell Zai what I've told you." Gria gazed upon a woman shifting in her seat. "They don't walk where we walk. What card did you draw?"

CatBird half-laughed, half-sobbed. "The rifle." She cradled the drawing in her hands. "I don't know where to start."

"Start anywhere, CatBird."

"I want to know who killed my family." She wiped at her chops. "I sound like a child, but it's so unfair! You know who killed your kin and I don't know who killed mine."

"It *is* unfair. And you *were* a child." Gria found a kerchief in the corner. One of the newer ones, white script on red. She laid it out on the table, embroidered narrative face up. "I was a child when my mother told this story about my favorite father. The hunter who killed him remembered everything." She lifted it up and held it out. "You can cry into it."

"I'll get snot on it."

"You won't be sacrilegious. The original text is still in the Rotunda." She waited for CatBird to blow her nose. "Whose turn was it in your family to hunt that day?"

"My mother. Her name was TreeRain." CatBird dabbed at her eyes. "Everyone else rushed in later."

"My orders were responsible for your mother's death."

"I know."

Gria sat down again and refilled her cup. She watched the steam and pictured a still-vibrant forest, Covenant hunters advancing across the grass. Messages from her soldiers couched in bird twittering. "I was hidden at the front. My archers waited on the ridge for the hunters to show themselves, moving toward their prey."

CatBird's fingers barely touched her card. "I was at home. Cleaning the sacrificial table. Before everything happened."

"Do you know anything about how your mother died?"

"She took an arrow in her chest." The smoky voice fell flat. "Other parts were shot. Trampled."

"Where was her body found?"

"The meadow."

Gria nodded. "She would have been one of the first to die. I might have seen it." The Masari had been a scattering of easy targets, falling where they stood. One brief moment of shock. "She was probably killed by an archer. Most of the first wave of them also died in the attack." She paused. "The massacre."

The rifle lay crooked on the table, reduced to a drawing.

"I don't know about the rest of your family, but I will try to find out about TreeRain," Gria whispered. "I'm sorry."

The rifle card moved to the side. "There should be an Atonement."

"You're right. We atone when we kill Masari now, but we didn't then. It

should be addressed." Warmth pricked Gria's fingers, heating her hands like lead. "I will be the first to kneel."

She untied the laces at her neck and waist. Her skin began to breathe as the heavy black robe slid off her shoulders, leaving a plain gray nightdress underneath.

The woman opposite her stared helplessly, her gaze cast down. A new card faced up, dwarfed in CatBird's palm. "I don't remember drawing this. I've gone out of turn."

"It's all right, child. You and I have always gone out of turn."

"I don't even know what plant this is."

Nothing was painted to indicate the scale. "Most cotyledons look pretty much alike." Gria smiled at CatBird's confusion. "It's a seedling."

"But it's choking."

Gria leaned over the table, peering at the card. "Where?"

The Masari was almost inaudible. "Inside me." CatBird dropped the picture on the table, her breaths quickening. "I didn't think the cards would do this. Not so soon. I'm not ready."

Gria proffered her hand. She looked up into wide azure eyes. "Your baby."

CatBird's fingers engulfed hers, gripping. "This is like aiming for my own heart spot." Her voice became hard. "Nothing leaves this room, you said."

"Nothing." Her hand bones felt ready to break. "Ever."

"We are telling each other our secrets, Gria. Sacrificing ourselves to each other, yes?" The Masari's body was rigid, her gaze challenging.

Gria took a deep breath. "We are stripping ourselves before the gods, CatBird. I am their messenger only. I have no power to judge you."

"But they do. And they tell you what to do."

If only the gods were that clear-cut. Had they told Gria to unburden herself, or had she summoned this young woman to her hut out of her own selfish need?

CatBird snatched her crutches from the floor. Her groans came from more than physical exertion as she levered herself up, each step an effort. She stretched and gazed into the hearth, her nose reddening.

"I should have broken my fast weeks ago. I thought the baby was weaning me." CatBird turned from the fire. She leaned heavily on her crutches, her arms dangling. "It was growing, but now it isn't any more. I should let Ghost examine me, but I can't. I don't want to. I've been telling him and Piri I can't see them."

The Masari looked away. Gria squatted beside CatBird and loosened her breeches further. She lifted the wrapped shirt, pressing her palms and then her ear to smooth skin between swaths of abdominal fur.

Words rushed in a torrent above her. "I thought that somehow all the men together-if they were all going to do that to me it should at least be magical, you know? To make up for everything they've taken away. That my body wouldn't need Yata any more, but that's not true, is it? I'm reabsorbing this child."



Gria shook her head. "I can't tell for certain. Your baby is still alive."

"Barely."

The other's vehemence jolted her.

CatBird's large hands came around and re-tightened laces before gripping the dowels. She swung away. "You tell me to strip myself before the gods. You tell me it's all right because I'm already dead; you tell me to trust you. You know I have no one else to talk to. Not about what really hurts. If I am already dead, then why does it still hurt so much?"

Gria whispered, "It's part of returning to life." She sank into her chair. The black backs of the cards, the unknowns, made her shudder. "I don't understand the gods any more than you do. I only know they've chosen me, but they can't help either of us come back to life alone. We must help each other do that."

CatBird barked a mirthless laugh. "I kill everything."

"We've shared that, too."

"I don't even know what I'm devouring. *Whom* I'm devouring. What am I supposed to do, Gria? Keep getting pregnant so that I can grow my own food?" The young woman hauled herself around the room, clomping. "I'll tell you why I don't want Ghost to see me," she hissed. "Not because of the blood or the piss he'll take from me or the tests he'll do. I don't care about that. I'm afraid he'll want to deliver the baby early and try to save its life. And if it was weaning me it won't be weaning me any more. And if it was feeding me it won't be feeding me any more. And if it were just *dead* I might be able to hunt, so that Izzik and I would have *something to talk about again!*"

She dropped into her chair. Her crutches clattered to the floor as her large head fell forward, buried in her arms.

Waves of roseate hair spilled over the cards. Gria looked upon a woman bent almost double, hunched over the low table, the stump of her leg angled to the side.

"I want so badly to be out there with him." Moans rose from the wood. "Even if we go up against each other. Nobody understands that."

Gria's throat closed up. The words squeezed out of her, surprisingly high and thin. She dabbed at her eyes. "I understand, CatBird."

The azure eyes glittered at her, skeptical.

"We have our deepest connection in battle," the hunter insisted. "Izzik still loves me but he was ripped away from me. You don't know."

If Gria didn't know, then why did CatBird's words dissolve her? Why was she short of breath and ready to bawl?

She reached into the middle of her deck for a black-topped card. It probably made no difference from taking one off the top. One didn't escape the gods that easily. CatBird watched her curiously as she flipped it over.

The illustrated side was as dark as the other at first glance, but then the pinpricks emerged. Stylized sun rays fell off its rightmost edge, opposite the constellation beginning to rise. The outline of the Great Wagon was just coming into view. Only the yoke for tandem runners was up, a faint sprinkling of stars as evening twilight faded in midsummer heat.

"The first time I saw Zai it was midsummer." She could have drawn

anything; it didn't matter. Gria cradled the image in her hands. "She was newly widowed. She was frightened, and crazed with grief. Sometimes I think she still is."

Gria turned the top card over and peered at the rifle from her own deck. "When I taught her how to shoot I had no idea what destruction I was setting loose. I wanted only to destroy the Covenant, not the Masari. Zai wanted to kill all of you." Gria laughed through tears. "She wanted to kill me, too, when I tried to stop her. Now she worships me instead and it breaks my heart."

Her voice cracked. It was only a drawing of a gun, but its bullet had claimed her.

CatBird offered a sad smile. "You love her."

"For most of my life I needed no one. The mountains were my lover when I was in exile." A simple shack, a few snares. Untroubled nights alone in her own skin. "I lived in complete freedom from the Covenant. The ground beneath me was all I worshiped. I'd trained as an herbalist; I knew how to survive. The more I realized what was possible, the more I wanted to share it."

A third picture slapped down on the table. A simple cart with minimal chains and gears, the harness only a few leather straps. "Zai was brought to my camp in one of these. She'd left her sons behind so that she could help us fight for our independence. She didn't want Abri and Evit to become just another blind sacrifice to the Masari, even though she knew she might never see them again." Gria pointed a trembling finger at the deck. "Zai is in every one of those cards, CatBird. I can't let go of her. What's worse is that she loves me, too."

The Masari looked confused. "Why don't you tell her?"

"Because I have too much power over her now." Gria refilled her cup, watching tendrils of steam uncurl. They brought back all the fragrant baths. Telltale splashes, caresses she could see but never feel. "I've already sent her son into danger, and I'll do so again if I have to. Zai speaks for the army, but I speak for the gods. To ask her to love me would be too cruel."

"But she already loves you."

"Yes, and it's caused her to deify me. She's my disciple. I can do anything to her. Don't you see?" She wished she were physically helpless again, with no choice but to relinquish control. "We can't be rivals for power any more, just as you and Izzik can't hunt each other down."

CatBird nodded. "You wish you were out there with her."

*I wish she were in here with me.* "I am the soul of Basc. I can't be a soldier any more." Gria rested her finger on her lips. Every nerve fired in them now.

She reached for her tea, cutting the torment short. "I won't interfere with your pregnancy because I don't know what is intended for you. Whether or not you enter the hunting grounds again, you are part of us."

CatBird lifted the pot. The aroma of mint filled the room. Her eyes mirrored the resignation Gria felt as they reached toward their respective decks, stripped before the gods, and awaited word of the dead.

## Chapter 49

## Promontory

The Great Cogwheel turned. Impersonal. Anonymous. So much colder than dead gods. So much more exacting. Prayers meant nothing, did nothing.

It demanded only efficiency and single-minded attention to detail. Dedication to the task at hand, ever since Jirado was a little girl and play wasn't play any more but work.

She wiped tears from her eyes. She straightened from the kitchen table and meditated, waiting for the sensation of steel to penetrate. Her skin turned sharp and gray. An I-beam pounded into the top of her head and down her throat. It cleaved her heart, chilled her stomach, crushed her womb, pushed out through her cunt and down into the center of the world.

The Yata had always been pinned. By Masari jaws in the forests. By firearms in the hunting grounds, delusion in the desert, Destiny in the canyon. The steel had always been in her, shoved through her body.

Crying accomplished nothing. It was a trick of the baby, a pollution of delicacy.

Pile drivers echoed in Jirado's head as she unbraided, wrapping one lock of Masari hair and then another around her breasts and belly. Chestnut-colored hair, crimson-colored hair, cut from FlitNettle and TripStone before the hunt. Jirado wrapped the thick frizz under her arms and between her legs, cinching it into place with strips of their clothing.

She had spent her life believing she was a Masari. Now she had to smell like one.

It didn't matter that she had made Destiny all her life. It didn't matter how thoroughly she'd been fooled. The Farm Yata fucked in the pens and died in the slaughterhouse and their cousins on Skedge had been none the wiser.

They were wiser now but they didn't care. Why should they? The Great Cogwheel didn't care. It was only part of a machine. That's all her people had ever been.

Jirado's blanket lay on her pallet, undisturbed since the night she had worn it home. That had been six days ago, when she fetched FlitNettle while BrushBurn rushed TripStone to the hospital.

No one had come back to the house since. Jirado dutifully maintained an empty dwelling, curling up in the marriage bed and rubbing herself with their essence.

The hunters would descend in the morning. FlitNettle's stories of all the big people's foibles had turned the kitchen into training grounds and then the canyon edge. Her verbal pictures of supply depots had been detailed as thoroughly as a map.

Whatever she forgot to tell, her diary remembered. Jirado tightened her bindings and filled her pockets. Part of her wanted to thank the girl for expressing her frustrations so well.

She swept up the last of the hair, rolling it into a ball between her palms and sticking it down the front of her shirt. She checked the kitchen a last time, making sure the house was pristine before she departed.

Her fingers swam among waxy morsels of resin knotted in cloth, each piece small enough to fit into a bung hole. Stars overhead wavered, becoming water. Each bundle dropped through its imaginary hole

and splashed into its barrel. Cloth unknotted and undulated away.

*These are the thirty-six children on Skedge who have lost their parents. The sixteen parents who have lost their children. Jirado's gloved hand lifted each ball of truth and pushed it through. These are the twenty-two of us who have lost our siblings. These are the eleven wives who have lost their husbands and the eight husbands who have lost their wives.*

Tears streamed from her eyes as she skittered over gravel. Water splashed in her head and created tiny whirlpools, welcoming the poisons.

*Dissolve, Ladav and Adalora. Kill anyone who comes after your mother.*

*Save your father, Tylie. Grow up strong and angry. Teach your cousins everything.*

She shoved her palm against the bung holes, pushing through the image of her niece and nephews, then of her sister MeadowDoor and her brother CloudHook. She held the soul of SilverLode in her palm.

*I am with you, dear husband. A final splash echoed through the canyon. Just wait a little longer. I will see you soon. Think of me as you feel them die.*

Jirado swallowed a sob and shook the vision from her head. She had to sneak past the guards first and bypass the arsenal. She had to count the number of turns she made and duck beneath the correct tarpaulins. She had to finish before dawn, when the runners harnessed themselves and the giant carts began their journey down

that long, wide, snow-dusted trail.

Steam shot into the air; whistles cracked open the sky. The pile driver resumed its rhythmic slams into Jirado's skull. A second beam displaced her flesh, and then a third.

The delusions, the dreams all flew away. Jirado was anchored now, surefooted. A cog in the wheel, clicking firmly into place.

~ ~ ~

*Naked children chase each other beneath the awnings. They hop over boulders and slide in chalk beds. Noisy and rambunctious, Yata and Masari, tangled in a single, massive field of play. They drown out even the breeding pens, these sons and daughters of farmers and livestock.*

*The oasis is green, the canyon walls a great bowl stretching high overhead. Somewhere beyond the rim is a big, busy place called Promontory, where the farmers take the meat and return with toys.*

*Sunrise and BrushBurn laugh open-mouthed, up at the blue sky and the black-red rock. Wind kisses their bare skin. Raptors echo their calls. It is a beautiful day to be young.*

*Sunrise squats. She gathers and tosses a cloud of chalk against her Masari playmate. It coats BrushBurn's chest, silky against the raw spots where he has shaved his pelt again. He dives after her, filling his hands with talc.*

*Powder halos her hair and drops from his lashes. They roll together over the ground, clinging to each other, skin to skin, colorless. Coughing and howling with glee.*



*But her eyes are still brown and the insides of her cheeks are still red. Sunrise opens her lips to BrushBurn as he gathers her in his arms, ignoring the taste of chalk. He sinks beneath her, cushioned in the knowledge that it is possible for a Masari to melt in a Yata's mouth.*

*He could live in her scent for the rest of his life. It is sweeter than ever against the alkaline dust. BrushBurn's lips draw back as he and Sunrise slide against each other, until the odor of the talc begins to fade and he is carried in layers of her musk.*

*Nursery musk.*

*No, not nursery musk. That can't be right.*

*They're still too young for that.*

*BrushBurn lies very still. The yelling all around them is loud, but he can't hear it any more. Finally he tilts the girl's chin and blinks up at her in confusion. Sunrise nods when he touches tentative fingers to her stomach.*

*The baby could be anyone's. Yata boys race around the fence perimeter, their callused feet pounding against the rocks. BrushBurn's cousins and brothers chase Yata girls. One brother tried to sneak into a breeding pen days before. His back is still striped from the whip.*

*The world stops when Sunrise lays her blanched palm over BrushBurn's heart, the look in her brown eyes unmistakable.*

*She kisses him again, more fervently this time. She knows what it means. He knows what it means. Mix-children don't live. She is*

*carrying Farm waste.*

*BrushBurn wraps everything he is around her, answering her desperate embraces until they are both choking in chalk. She can't talk and he will not.*

*He should have. The baby had been small, keeping the farmers guessing until the end. BrushBurn's mother had held him against her and forced him to look at what he had done. Her low, smoky voice had sliced him open as she told him in grave tones that the first throat was being cut out of practicality and the second one out of love.*

~ ~ ~

The movement looked like a fetus kicking, but it was the wrong place for a fetus. It was set too high. It rippled too fast. The skin straining upward was chalk-white between matted clots of crimson fur.

BrushBurn bent over TripStone's hospital bed. Her heart was a bird struggling to break from its cage. It fluttered against his ear, wings beating wildly one moment and lurching off-kilter the next.

Her hand was limp in his, but her palm still had some warmth, some suppleness. "FlitNettle will be here soon." BrushBurn didn't know whether his wife could hear him. It didn't matter. He had to talk. "She's been helping to launch the expedition. You should see her, TripStone. You'd be proud."

There had to be a way to heal the body lying beneath him. Sweat still beaded up on TripStone's forehead and above her lip, despite the dehydration that shrank her like parchment.

"DevilChaser tried injecting you with fluids, but they only made your

condition worse. We don't know what's happening to you, but I promise you we'll find out." BrushBurn dabbed her skin, shunting perspiration into a vial and kissing cracked lips. He held her fingers against his rust-colored chops. "I've been breathing you in. I can smell what's trying to kill you, but I need to *find* you. If you can hear me, you've got to come back."

Something in the pharmacy had to relate to whatever had swallowed her up. "I am trying to link everything together, TripStone. DamBuster's diagrams, the dead animalcules in DevilChaser's lenses. You thought it was nerves. It isn't. I've been working with DamBuster in the lab, but I hate the thought of taking more blood from you when you're already so dry."

He wanted to turn away. Her face had never looked so frighteningly serene.

Bleached curtains and walls surrounded them. A window filtered mid-afternoon light from an icy courtyard. BrushBurn had propped it open with a narrow rock, repositioning a table to divert the chill, but at least the room was ventilated.

If only she could tell him whether she felt too cold. Or too warm.

"I sleep here now. I have a pallet next to yours. The Lodge can do without me."

Rudder's agents had taken over his duties, but they knew what they were doing. The numbers in the lab were more important. "Flit will be staying here, too, now that the hunters have gone into the canyon."

TripStone's shallow breaths were barely visible beneath her galloping chest. Nothing else moved. BrushBurn wanted to reach inside her and cup her heart in his hands until it quieted. Find and rip apart

whatever was strangling her.

"I love you, TripStone. I'm not letting you go."

Hooks slid behind him. The curtain shushed open.

FlitNettle's voice seemed to have deepened, or was that tiredness?

"Hello, Cousin."

He nodded. "Cousin."

She'd washed up and changed into a fresh tunic and breeches. Pristine next to his own rumpled state.

"You've been home."

"I was filthy." FlitNettle pulled the curtain closed before stepping to the bed. "How is she?"

"No change."

"Jirado's been asking about her."

At least Jirado was not asking about *him*. He hadn't spoken to the Yata in more than a week.

The girl sat, her spine straight. "Jirado says she's okay, and that she understands what happened."

What happened between them in the Lodge? Or what happened to TripStone?

"She thinks she understands," BrushBurn growled. "She doesn't."

He pulled up a chair and dropped heavily onto the wood. The child

beside him was all hard edges. Barely an adolescent, but her face was already worn. She could be wearing an invisible rifle strapped to her back.

He studied pensive, river-green eyes in profile. The short chop of her hair above hollow cheeks. "You and I haven't talked much."

FlitNettle continued staring straight ahead. "I'm not angry at you any more."

"That's good."

She turned to him, her face working. "I thought I would be more like you, BrushBurn. But I'm not, am I?"

He shook his head and tried to smile. "No."

"I'm not like TripStone, either. And I'm not like any of the other hunters." FlitNettle scooted back in her chair. Her arms encircled her knees, her boot heels resting on the seat edge. "The children my age are all stupid up here. I'm not like anyone."

She wrapped herself into a tiny fortress. She'd push him away if he tried to hug her now.

"FlitNettle." How could the shy youngster before him be such an adept killer? The day he found her she'd cowered in his arms. Now she looked to him for answers when he couldn't grasp her questions.

He had to settle for his own. BrushBurn looked away from her, toward the bed. "Help me to understand who you are. I know how TripStone can stomach the hunt. She was born and raised that way. But you weren't."

"I became a hunter when our kin died," the girl hissed. "You weren't

there. You don't know what it was like."

BrushBurn hunched toward his dry-eyed ward. He steeled himself against blocking out the images of butchered bodies, rising unbidden. "I saw them."

"You didn't *hear* them! I was locked up in my room. I couldn't see anything." She curled up tighter. "It went on forever, BrushBurn. I kept throwing myself against the door, trying to get out, but I couldn't. I threw everything that wasn't nailed down and some things that were. I screamed as loud as I could but I couldn't drown any of it out, and I couldn't make it stop."

He reached toward her. She twisted away from him, muttering, "Don't."

"I'm sorry."

"I know." She rested her cheek on her knees. "And then you and TripStone brought me up here and everything about the Farm disappeared." She turned back, squinting. "You tried so hard to protect me. I didn't even realize I hated you."

Curious, how sensible the statement sounded. "I'm thankful you didn't pity me. That's what most people did." How could he tell her he still wanted to protect her? How could he show his relief that she hadn't gone down below? "You've been exposed to things I never have, FlitNettle. I wasn't there for you."

"By the time you got back to the Farm everyone was already dead. They were all so *quiet*."

The girl unfolded her limbs and slid off the chair. She studied the body in the bed. "I used to like the Farm Yata. I'm trying to understand

you, too." FlitNettle rubbed the back of her neck, twitching. "Jirado told me you passed into level three that night at the Lodge. If TripStone were healthy you could go with her into the canyon now. You wouldn't have to worry about her because you'd both be together. But you don't want to hunt the Farm Yata at all, do you?" Her chest heaved. "I know you loved them, but they murdered our *family*." Her voice thickened. "I miss all that cruel teasing and the paddling sometimes, you know?"

BrushBurn sprang from his chair. His arms wrapped around stiffness. "I know, Cousin." It was absurd. She was the child and he wanted to cry. "I've missed it, too, ever since I was sent up here when I was your age."

She tried to push him away.

"Please don't fight me."

"I can't be soft like you."

"I've tried to be hard, Flit." He rubbed her arms but couldn't smooth down the fur standing on end. "Believe me, it doesn't work."

The girl shoved him back. "Maybe I'll change my mind when I'm *your* age, but I can't do it now. And it doesn't matter that I'm only a level two. I'm a *hunter*, BrushBurn! Even TripStone is too soft. I look at her and it hurts." The small hand reached down to touch crimson chops. "Like my heart is trying to do what hers is doing."

BrushBurn stood to the side. He didn't dare tell her she was still a sensitive kid.

A lanky shadow hobbled into view behind the curtain and tried to strike a relaxed pose. Head cocked to the side, thumbs hooked into

the belt. He'd probably been eavesdropping all along, standing out of view until now.

FlitNettle saw him, too. Relief washed over her face as she strode to pull back the sheet.

DustClaw enveloped her in a bear hug. He mussed her hair and let her go, offering BrushBurn a cordial nod.

BrushBurn cleared his throat. "You're looking better."

"I'm walking out of here after I finish saying hello."

The courier's blood-colored chops were trimmed, his short hair combed back. Heavy canvas leggings draped down. Round Yatabone buttons gleamed from a crisp black shirt covering the spot where his bandages had been removed.

DustClaw surveyed the trio of pallets before bending over the one in the center. He rested his palm against a quaking chest. "Just keep breathing, Trippy. That's all I ask." He looked up at BrushBurn. "Any news from your other wife?"

The question rankled but its tone was polite. "She's not my other wife. And no."

The room was an unsettling tableau. FlitNettle stood at DustClaw's side, equally somber as they tried to comfort the unconscious hunter among them. The courier's scent was not one of hunger any more. Long fingers moved from FlitNettle's shoulder to TripStone's, touches both intimate and restrained.

How thoroughly had the three of them acted as a family unit inside the canyon?



"DustClaw." BrushBurn studied him from the other side of the bed. "You and I need to talk."

"Gladly." DustClaw's eyebrows ticced up. He straightened, sniffing the air and nodding to himself. "To be honest, BrushBurn, I wish your suspicions *were* correct. Might be better for all of us." He reached back down. "TripStone and I are friends, although not the way you and Jirado are friends. We've saved each other's life a few times. I've seen every dimple on her body that you have but it doesn't matter. She's devoted to you." He flashed BrushBurn a grin. "Don't ask me why."

FlitNettle murmured, "You know why."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

BrushBurn took hold of TripStone's hand. It still didn't squeeze back. He should be in the lab, examining her fluids and hunting down what was wrong with her. He should be outside, coatless and with his sleeves rolled up, squaring off against DustClaw as anyone would with an interloper. He should be at home, trying to explain to Jirado what had happened at the Lodge, as soon as he puzzled that out for himself.

He should spirit TripStone away to Crossroads where she belonged, and *stay* there with her.

He couldn't do any of it.

"I'll be going on the road." DustClaw kissed TripStone's forehead and stepped away from her pallet. "I was looking forward to all that open space before this happened. Now I don't know what I'll be coming back to."

BrushBurn took his arm and steered him toward the curtain, feeling diminished muscles beneath the shirt. "Come with me to the lab. I want you to take something with you." The other man's stiff-backed walk echoed through the corridor. How could DustClaw possibly pull a mail cart across the region? "You'll have some assistance, I hope."

"Kind of you to be concerned about my health." Hands shoved into pockets. "Yes. An agent from Rudder is accompanying me to evaluate my service."

"As a potential messenger for Rudder."

DustClaw nodded. "I hear she's proficient at evaluating other services as well. It should be a pleasant trip." He shrugged. "Distracting, anyway."

Curtains fluttered to either side of them as they walked through a scent cloud of diseases and chemicals. BrushBurn couldn't tell which windows had been cracked open and which had not.

He ventured, "I know what your life is like."

DustClaw nodded. "I know you do."

"I spent years living in my tent."

"You were lonely in your tent. I'm not lonely in my cart."

"Don't kid yourself." He tried to picture the tall frame bent over opened packages. The man had probably memorized everyone's handwriting, could tell business correspondence from personal missives at a glance. News of community and family, and all the sentimentality that Promontory didn't dare show on its surface.

DustClaw only thought he traveled alone. His cart teemed with

people. Loved ones he lived with briefly, passing through. "My handling meat was far easier than what you do."

They turned a corner and strolled inside a wood frame bridging the former barracks.

"If that were only meat to you, then I would agree. But you saw faces behind all those slabs."

"Not after the first few years."

DustClaw laughed. "Sure, you did. Why else would you be humping a Yata now? I should think your Masari family would be sufficient after all that time on the road."

BrushBurn stiffened. "Sufficient for me, DustClaw? Or for you?"

"I *said* TripStone's loyal to you. I'm sorry you don't see that."

"I *do* see that," BrushBurn answered through gritted teeth. "Do you think I just plucked Jirado out of SandTail's home and bedded her? I *refused* her. TripStone encouraged our pairing, not I."

The courier nodded. "Flit told me."

"If I knew how hard it would be on TripStone, I'd never have allowed it to happen. I offered to end it."

They were both slouched over, staring ahead as they entered another corridor. Muffled conversation and clattering filtered in from the larger wards. More patients were ambulatory, passing them with crutches and canes. They exchanged greetings, moving aside to make room.

DustClaw said under his breath, "You wanted Jirado. You would have

kept wanting her after she was gone. TripStone saw that." His voice strained. "That's the part of Trippy that you understand better than I do, BrushBurn. That's what makes her stay with you. I know I can't compete."

BrushBurn nodded. "Except during the hunt."

"Not even then." DustClaw eased his back against the wall. He stretched, wincing. "You and I talk about family. The hunting party is mine. I'm sorry I'm not weaned enough to join them. The most I can do right now is be a supply runner. If TripStone couldn't make you understand what happens down there, then I certainly can't." He pushed off the wall. "I envy you your weaning more than your wife. *I'd* fuck Jirado if it would shoot me up to a level three."

They eyed each other. Dead earnestness showed through DustClaw's smirk.

The courier faced forward again. "So, what am I carrying abroad for you?"

BrushBurn pointed. One more turn would take them into the lab. "I'm going to give you preserved samples taken from TripStone. Maybe Ghost has seen something like them in Crossroads."

"I'll help however I can." He squeezed BrushBurn's arm. "It'll be nice to carry part of her with me."

He already carried part of her with him, something more powerful than bodily fluids. BrushBurn didn't know whether to punch the hobbling messenger or thank him.

They both wanted the same thing. In the end, that realization was more comforting than not.





# Chapter 50



Jirado dragged herself from her pallet. Her nostrils twitched with faint smells of burning tinder.

When had she fallen asleep? For that matter, when had she stepped away from the kitchen table? What day was this?

It was light before; now it was dark. Her dress bunched up when she tried to smooth its wrinkles away. Jirado stumbled to a hearth reduced to embers; she must have been unconscious for hours. Before she did anything else, she had to build the flames back up.

She wouldn't know for days whether her mission succeeded, and even then she wasn't finished. The next party of hunters was only one level of weaning away from going down below. All Jirado had done was give her people a chance to edge farther out of reach.

She pulled on heavy gloves; the fire sizzled as she fed it. A fresh blast of heat wrapped her in sleepiness. Did the baby demand this much of her so soon, or was her body claiming its rest now that the expedition was finally underway? The pile driver in her brain was quiet, the sensation of steel fallen from her skin. She was only a Yata now, alone in a Masari house, with too much time to grieve everyone she had lost and left behind.

FlitNettle's dirty clothes lay in a pile next to the girl's pallet; Jirado had promised to wash them. Her own bed smelled only of Yata, now that

she had scrubbed all the linen's encrustations away. No matter how thoroughly she cleaned, she still awakened in the middle of the night with BrushBurn in her lungs.

His young cousin already began to weaken. The poison's uptake was quicker in FlitNettle than it had been in TripStone; Jirado would have to dilute it more. Incapacitated the Masari were no longer a threat, but dead they would invite attention too soon. First the base camp's destruction had to be confirmed.

And then what? How much time did she have left? How much resin would be sufficient to spread throughout the hospital? Throughout the Lodge? Jirado's tin was almost empty, but the pool of potential hunters was not. She had to get word to Edin soon, pay another visit to his chameleon's cart. Save as many Yata as possible while she still could.

Not now. Jirado poked the wood until her brain filled with crackling. She filled a large kettle and added the clothes. Her muscles bulged as she hauled and hung everything above the flames.

The kitchen table was still littered with parchment as she climbed into her chair. Her lamp illuminated the unfolded letters taken from a small wooden box laced with aromatics. Jirado had needed only to follow the trail of unusual scent through BrushBurn's clothing, past his breeches and boots, and down to a dark corner. She'd thrown a simple latch to gain entrance.

Even before she had read the first Yata words, Jirado had smiled at Piri's handwriting. Her careful penmanship was so like a child's. So much like the Yata on Skedge who had grown up writing only in Masari.

Jirado's own script was similar, filled with strange shapes and



patterns. Her forgotten ancestors spoke to her through the nib.

In the beginning Piri had not written Masari. She hadn't written anything at all.

Had she drawn pictures in the chalk before she'd been taken to the breeding pens? The Yata children's minds had been clear for a few years, before their first taste of Destiny. How did they play, what did they invent before everything was taken away from them?

FlitNettle would know, but the child was so angry about the Farm that Jirado was afraid to ask her.

BrushBurn would know, but she couldn't ask him. He would tell her everything, and much more.

*I've done enough to you.* Jirado dropped her gloves, rubbed her eyes, and tried to focus on the letters. *You've done enough to me.*

The correspondence didn't contain much detail. Why would it? Piri and BrushBurn had both lived in the canyon. Piri's letters to him could be written in code, a single word evoking images and feelings that Jirado couldn't touch. Nothing gave any indication of what had awaited SilverLode, or CloudHook and MeadowDoor. She still didn't know what her husband, brother, and sister had endured in the pens.

Instead she read a gentle voice. Piri spoke to her from the parchment, as though her tongue were whole. Deep overtones. The woman could be standing here before Jirado in the kitchen, but Jirado didn't know what she looked like. Yet the gaze meeting hers was solid and direct, hiding nothing.

"I am so tired of pretending, Piri."

Jirado heard only the sound of her own voice speaking to the shadows.

"How can you be so open with him, after all that his people have done to you?"

She should put all the letters away. Fold them, stack them in the exact order they had been in when she'd opened the box. Sprinkle the aromatics over and around everything, secure the latch, duck back behind the breeches and the boots. Go back to bed.

"Please help me to understand. There's no one I can talk to."

Then who placed this fresh parchment before her? Jirado squinted at the inkwell by her elbow and the pen in her hand, confused. She tried to remember when she had pushed the letters to the other side of the table. When had the water in the kettle begun to boil?

Tapered fingers rested on her shoulders, but no one stood behind her.

*Dear Piri, I don't know why I am writing to you. I am so alone, and so afraid, and there isn't a single Yata here who can understand what I am going through.*

Jirado barked a laugh. Would Piri? Would she even want to understand when news of the poisoning reached Crossroads?

*I have read all of your letters to BrushBurn. You love him, don't you? You write to him as a sister writes to a brother. You are greatly concerned for his welfare even though he is a Farm Masari.*

*He will need you, Piri. I am killing all of Promontory's hunters that I can, including his wife and his ward. If you love him as much as*

*your letters show, then you must help him after I'm gone.*

*I wouldn't be telling you this if I didn't care for him, too. I am sure I am carrying his child. He wanted one so very badly. I do not love him. I know he doesn't love me, either, though he cares about me far too much.*

*My husband is dead. I never had any children with SilverLode, and I am sickened by what is growing inside me now I am sickened by what I have had to do, Piri, but I have a brother and a sister who might still be alive. If they are, they are in danger from every Masari who enters the canyon.*

*What do I tell their children? Is my sister pregnant, too? Would she even know who the father is? How many children would she have delivered after her capture, fathered by how many men? What is life like for her, for them, for my brother? My niece and nephews want to believe they are orphans no matter what happens. Are they right to think this way?*

*Skedge has lost so many to Destiny Farm. My people are out there somewhere in the canyon if they're not already dead and eaten, and that is why I am killing all the hunters.*

*I don't know what else to do. I can't pretend my people don't exist any more, even when every other Yata here is doing just that. I can't just let them die. It was so hard for me to pretend my family was already dead, Piri. I had to believe they were dead and then I had to get pregnant, or I would never have been allowed to stay here.*

*I almost lost my mind when I saw TripStone carrying SilverLode. He was already half fallen apart. She never knew it was him. I know that*

*TripStone was your friend, and I know how much BrushBurn loves her, but I cannot let her live.*

*Do you remember the Farm Yata you left behind, Piri? Do you wonder about them? Am I the only one who cares at all about the people who were my friends and my colleagues, whose faces I can't stop seeing and whose voices I can't stop hearing, who never knew what they really were and who didn't know what was happening to them when the Farm took them away?*

*You and I have both been used by the Masari. Can you see I still have trouble forming my letters? I have to write them carefully or I put things in the wrong places. I can't even master my own language. If I knew what I was helping to make all those years, Piri, if I knew what it was doing to you and to everyone else in those pens I would have melted down the machines. I am melting them down now. I am making up for what I did not do in the first place.*

*Maybe you hate me now, I don't know. I don't hate anyone. Masari have been very kind to me here and all I've done is lie to them and destroy them. I'm not asking for your forgiveness. I don't know what I'm asking for. I just need to write to you because you know what it was like. You know what my family has been through, in ways not even BrushBurn can understand.*

*Tell him I'm sorry. Tell him he is a dear, sweet man who doesn't deserve what I've done to him.*

*Tell him I had no choice.*

Jirado lifted her head from her arms and saw spattered ink where she had dropped her pen. Her nose wrinkled at the stench of burning leather as an acrid cloud filled the room. She spilled from her chair

and rushed to the water barrel, coughing.

Steam hissed; the toxic haze brought tears to her eyes. She shoved her gloves back on and spread rags across the floor. Hot iron singed her dress; she trembled as she held the kettle at arm's length. She would have to scrub it down, scrape away FlitNettle's ruined clothing.

Jirado wedged a window open with a piece of wood and collapsed beside it. She leaned toward the darkness, gulping fresh, cold air. She should throw her letter into the flames.

She forced herself upright and staggered back to the table. She folded the sheets and wrote Piri's name on the outside. What kind of a magical place was the Grange that a hybrid child like TelZodo could play so freely in its fields and be wanted? How could Crossroads even exist?

Jirado waved the smog away as she moved a crate into place and climbed in search of wax. She would give Edin the note to hold at their next trade. He could deliver it to Piri after Jirado's spirit was delivered to SilverLode.

## **Chapter 51**

### **Late Winter**

Promontory held its collective breath. Frost covered the windows. Bonfires burned at the quarries. Shopkeepers spread sawdust and then gravel on the cobblestones. Runners strained, pulling carts over crackling ice.

No one held vigil at the canyon rim, but the rim was everywhere. It sat on the tavern's empty stools. It slept on pallets left cold. It was the

unfamiliar face in dirty coveralls replacing the familiar face gone below. No matter where they were, Promontory's citizens peered over the edge, waiting for news.

The Warehouse emptied. Stacked circles of headless Yata on hooks vanished one by one. Barrels of flesh in brine grew lighter, their volumes dropping tic mark by tic mark. Scales wheezed under the weight. Chalk skittered across slate boards.

The agents from Rudder copied the numbers down. They sent letters home, repaired to their tables at the Lodge, and dealt another hand of Death.

BrushBurn descended the hospital's stone stairs, pulling his collar up as he stepped into the wind. FlitNettle slumped against the outer wall, gnawing a piece of cheese with a faraway look on her face.

The fresh air wasn't doing her much good. Dark circles grew under her eyes. She tried to keep them open, struggling for breath.

"I think you've been starving this girl." Jirado leaned into view. The small woman was a bundle of wool, her gloved hand curled around his ward's shoulder. "I brought her some food from home. Don't they give you anything here?"

FlitNettle bristled. "I'm not hungry, Jirado. Stop treating me like a child."

"I'm not forcing you to swallow that cheese. All I did was put it in your hand." Jirado glared up at BrushBurn. "How long has she been like this?"

"She's gotten worse since we've been here."

"She needs to rest at home, not in the hospital." The Yata stepped out onto the gravel walk, drawing her hood tighter. "She's got a pallet by the hearth at home and she's not surrounded by sick people there."

FlitNettle pushed off from the wall and staggered past Jirado. "*She* was never sick when *she* spent nights here cutting sickness out of people. If you'll excuse me, *I'm* going back to TripStone." The girl shoved past BrushBurn and pulled herself up the stairs.

Jirado heaved an explosive sigh and snuggled against him. "Keep me warm?"

"You shouldn't be out in this cold at all."

"Someone has to watch over you two. I'd ask to come inside, but SandTail would have my head. You can show me around when he's not here."

"He's almost always here. Skulking around when he isn't visiting someone."

Jirado leaned further into the crook of his arm. "I was SandTail's *nursemaid*. You'd think he'd be thankful I'm willing to help these people. He never trusted me."

Waves of exhaustion spread from her. She shouldn't travel to the hospital in this ice and wind, not when the sight of Skedge made her wince. BrushBurn looked into a face lined with homesickness and wondered how much she'd given up to bear this child.

"You expected to have a family around you." He drew her closer. "Especially now. I'm sorry it's been like this."

"Stop it, BrushBurn. I'm not the one who's sick."

"No," he agreed. "Not sick."

He repositioned her layers of coats, had not realized she wore so many. Beneath the wool and her tunic and leggings, she was bare skin. He'd shave off his pelt all over again, not to pretend he was a Yata this time, but to transplant the warmth of his fur.

Sunrise had become pregnant in late spring. Before summer was over she and their daughter were both dead. Ghost's wife Piri had carried TelZodo through the winter and delivered as the spring began. Both babies, one murdered and the other one making snow angels in Crossroads, had developed with the speed of Yata. BrushBurn had no reason to believe this child would be any different.

How was a Masari supposed to prepare for such a birth so soon? He hadn't known what to do as a boy and he didn't know what to do now.

Except that this time the Yata who carried his seed belonged somewhere. BrushBurn didn't have to keep secrets any more. Everyone could know the truth about this child, except the one person he wanted to tell the most. He'd tried to, but TripStone gave no indication she'd heard him.

His leather-clad hands dangled near Jirado's pockets. She lifted and positioned them across her chest. "Hold me here."

He tried to smile. "Anything, Jirado."

"If you mean that, you'll tell me what's bothering you."

He settled the small body against him, trying to curve around her like a cave. She was almost as broad as a Masari, so much swaddled



her. "What *isn't* bothering me? You should be home where it's warm. I don't want to have to worry about you, too. I don't care what SandTail thinks, I'm taking you inside."

She balked, limbs stiffening as he steered her toward the stairs.

"It's all right, Jirado. I won't let him do anything to you."

"It's not that." She huddled inside the wool, making herself into a gray wall. "You're right, BrushBurn, I should go home. I can see what the hospital is doing to FlitNettle and she's a strong young woman. I don't know what the contagion in there will do to our child."

"I'll take you to the library, then. It has a hearth. I can build a fire."

"You don't have to. I'll keep my coats on." They had to weigh more than she did. Jirado dropped her hood down as they stepped across the threshold. "TripStone needs you more than I do and you have work to do with DamBuster. Don't you think I know about the labor shortage here? About the healers who've left with the expedition?" She leaned against him, laughing. "I sound like an idiot. One minute I'm complaining they won't let me work here and the next I'm afraid to go inside. It must be the baby."

She maintained a tight hold on his hands as they walked past the dispensary. BrushBurn guided her along the outer corridor, away from the beds and past supply rooms and offices. DevilChaser and DamBuster had not returned to their desks. The doctor lived in the wings now, the apothecary in the lab.

A cluster of buttressed and angled pipes dipped down ahead. BrushBurn watched as Jirado craned her neck to follow them. "Those lead to the wash rooms."

"The water supply."

"Yes."

The air was warmer than usual; someone was already in the library. BrushBurn pulled off his gloves, shucked and folded his coat. The woman beside him clutched hers closed despite the sweat beading up on her forehead.

"I should go home," she whispered. "I should lie down."

"You're wearing too much."

She pushed his hands away from her shoulders.

"Jirado, you're not being reasonable."

"You're right. I'm not."

"Give me *one* coat. Too much heat isn't good for the baby, either. It's not good for *you*."

"Forget about me," she snapped. "Don't you have enough people to care about?"

"I'm making sure you're all right!" BrushBurn bit down his exasperation. There had to be one person in his life he could keep healthy. Someone he wasn't in danger of losing. "It's a long walk home, Jirado. I will carry you there if I have to, but you've got to rest first."

She relented, looking troubled, but she refused his attempts to make her comfortable. Perhaps their mixed-blood child froze her one moment and broiled her the next. He couldn't argue with a baby, or with this woman who had sacrificed her body to it.

And to him. They hadn't spoken about the Lodge. She didn't know how close he'd come to killing her on the night she had finally conceived.

He muttered, "Our child should be exacting its revenge on me, not you."

He pushed open the large wooden doors and reeled beneath a blast of heat. "What are you trying to do, SandTail?" he bellowed. "Burn the place down?"

Jirado wobbled. She shrieked when BrushBurn grabbed her shoulder and yanked off a layer of wool.

"Stop," she pleaded, hugging herself. "No more."

SandTail rose from his seat at a broad oak table half-covered in open books. He leaned on his cane, hobbling past floor-to-ceiling shelves, toward the woodpile by the side of the hearth. Flames already licked partway around its walls. Much more fuel and they'd leap to the stacks.

BrushBurn raced ahead and grabbed his mentor's arm before the smaller man could hoist another log.

*About time you two got here.* SandTail dripped, hair and chops darkened and plastered to his face as he pressed BrushBurn's palm. Hazel eyes bored into steel blue. *Make sure Jirado doesn't leave this room. Undress her as quickly as you can.*

"You're a demented *fool!*" BrushBurn threw him aside and cast about for a bucket of sand. His woolens scattered on the floor as he smothered the flames.

SandTail's cane came down hard on his back. The man's yell was indecipherable, his fingers digging into his protégé's cheek. *Look at her. She's not even running away, she's so hungry for information now.*

The Yata leaned over the table, standing on tiptoe, her gaze riveted to a hospital map anchored by texts. She didn't look up. "I'm reading to calm myself, BrushBurn." Her voice shook. Perspiration trailed down her face. "Just keep SandTail away from me."

"I've put out the fire, Jirado. I'm going to get us some air." BrushBurn dragged SandTail with him to the window. "Endangering a *library*? Promontory's medical history? Now I *know* you've lost your mind."

*Losing my mind is worth the risk. But I'm not so demented as to give her a map that's accurate.* SandTail flashed a mirthless grin. *I made that mistake with TripStone, as you recall.*

"Is that what this is about, SandTail? Is anyone who's ever loved the Yata that threatening to you?" BrushBurn panted in the heat, his fingers wet. The window slipped as he lifted it. Wood cracked when he shoved it up and anchored the frame with a stick. "How you must have hated me when you took me in, molding me to fit your needs like a piece of scrap metal."

Jirado climbed into a chair, half-crawling onto the table top. She wiped her brow repeatedly, hunched into a ball. BrushBurn doubted she could see what she looked at, let alone read it. "Or did you just want to turn *me* into scrap metal? Because you've made an admirable attempt at it. I'd throw you out this window right now if it didn't mean squandering everything we've all sacrificed to prolong your miserable life."

SandTail hung onto him. The smaller man's distress was even more infuriating. *I don't know what it is, but Jirado is hiding something under those coats. I'm sure of it.*

BrushBurn roared, "She is *pregnant!* That's why she's wearing those coats!"

*Dear gods. SandTail stared at the table. He tapped without looking back, BrushBurn, listen to me. I realize you have no reason to trust me any more, and that is unfortunate. But you have even less reason to trust her.*

BrushBurn jerked his palm away. SandTail pulled it back.

*I overheard you talking outside. That's why I came to this room. His nails pressed hard enough to leave crescents. When I hired DamBuster to make Destiny last winter I had the chameleons bring him his supplies directly. I know where their trail is. So does Jirado. I've seen her walk by the edge of the salt pan and toward that trail, in colder weather than this and in far fewer clothes than she has on now. And the satchel I saw her carrying earlier today is gone.*

"Skedge traded with the chameleons all the time. They've been Jirado's friends for years." BrushBurn watched the Yata woman blink. More than sweat dropped onto the pages before her. "You monitored that trade yourself, SandTail. You can't blame her for wanting to stay connected with them."

*I find it curious that after wanting so badly to get inside this hospital she is suddenly expressing her doubts. I find it equally curious that both the hunters she's lived with are ill. Whatever she's carrying under all those layers, she wants to hide it first. Undress her!*

BrushBurn shoved him against the stacks. "I'm taking you home, Jirado."

She whispered, "Watch your back."

BrushBurn nodded and whirled. The butt of his revolver cracked against bone. SandTail was the better killer, but what would he have done if he'd reached his holster in time? What did one do with scrap metal?

"You dumb bastard. I'm sorry." His mentor didn't move when BrushBurn pulled the wood from the window and its frame banged down. It was still too hot. He sighed and gathered his fallen coats from the floor. "I'll carry you home, Jirado, right after I take him to a bed."

"It's all right, dearest. I can walk."

Sadness coated her voice. When BrushBurn straightened he almost dropped the limp man in his arms.

Kerchiefs covered the books on the table. Dozens of cloths. Red and yellow, forest green, deep purple. Fine weaves dyed black and bleached white, blues plucked from the sky and the river, browns of fertile soil and textured bark. Yata script meandered through them, each fabric bearing a different story. Daily minutiae of the lives of Basc.

Jirado lifted them one at a time, making careful folds. "TripStone told me once that after Promontory had conquered Crossroads it was going to sell off all of the Rotunda's books. It was going to make everyone from Basc into livestock, and the stories of their dead wouldn't mean anything any more." She lifted her layers of coats, sliding the folded kerchiefs into her pockets. "Now the Yata visit the

Rotunda, they copy the notes of their ancestors down, and then they weave them into the cloths. These are selling all over the region. I bought them from the chameleon." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I can't think of a better present for TripStone when she recovers, or for a better way for our child to learn the things I never could. Can you?"

He'd gather Jirado to him if he weren't holding SandTail. BrushBurn watched her climb down from the chair. The last kerchief floated in stuffy air before it disappeared.

He shook his head, swallowing hard. "Promontory's got to change."

"It will." Jirado staggered toward the doors, looking more drained than ever. "When Brother Wanderer wakes up, tell him that I forgive him. Try to make him understand that I'm not his enemy." She blinked up at BrushBurn. "You should forgive him, too."

"If I didn't, I'd have left him on the floor."

She patted his arm. "He'll need you. I think FlitNettle should walk me home."

## **Chapter 52**

### **Crossroads**

"I want to see!"

Evit's shrill yell pierced the quiet of the morgue. Zai's younger son tried to climb Ghost, hauling on the tall Masari's breeches.

He'd done it before. Ghost restrained himself from slapping pesky

hands away. One tug on a lace and his tan pants would fall down altogether.

"This might make you sick," he warned.

"I don't care! I want to see!"

The boy's clothes were rumpled, his short, black hair spiky. Jam smeared his face and he smelled of cheese. They did not mix well with the tang of preservatives, or with the opened, lavender-tufted body on the table.

"What's the first rule about coming here, Evit?"

Black eyes gleamed triumphantly. "Don't break anything!"

"That's the second rule. What's the first one?"

Brows pinched. A sticky cheek pressed against Ghost's thigh.

"The first rule is, you have to wash up."

A soft whine answered, "I can't reach the basin."

The boy was still too short for Piri's raised steps to do any good. Ghost sighed and wiped his gloved hands on a leather apron. He should wash up again, himself.

He lowered the basin, then returned to the corpse as soft splashes reverberated from the floor. Against his better judgment he enjoyed Evit's intrusions. The little Yata ran to Crossroads to play with TelZodo, but stayed to explore the very things that scared his best friend witless. Ghost grimaced as he heard soap drop and slide against the wood.



"I'm sorry," he called to the corner. "I'll make sure you have a smaller piece next time."

"S'okay."

The boy had sniffed every bottle of preservative and kept copious notes on how much everything stank. He had looked through the lenses, the *good* ones this time, goggle-eyed at all the animalcules. He already knew where some of them came from.

Today he would learn more, if he could keep his lunch down.

"You sent him to me, didn't you?" SnowMoth's insides were easier to talk to than her face. Strong muscles, conditioned more from the land than from a gun. Pink lungs. Draining arteries.

Ghost had rejoined his family only to watch them picked off. Two siblings gone. A nephew, a niece, two cousins. The farmhouse became a cavern of empty rooms. "You told me I could do this to you, but you knew I needed help. Someone to make me laugh." Once again Ghost talked to dead he didn't believe in.

No. He believed in their bodies. He prayed over his sister's flesh while his remaining kin prayed over her spirit. She resided in the afterlife either way. He would take what he needed from her and let them prepare and label the rest.

Evit teetered to Ghost's side, hugging a wooden box. He dropped it and looked up for permission. Ghost nodded, watching as the boy pulled with both hands on the iron ring attached to Piri's system of stairs. The Yata grunted, straining as greased chains engaged beneath the floorboards. Finally the steps levered into place, knocking him to the floor.

"I'm okay!" Evit scrambled to his feet. He set his box on top and climbed. "Do I get to touch anything?"

"Not this time. But if you're still interested after today I'll make gloves and an apron for you. Everything I have right now is too big." At least they had started at the Masari and not the Yata side of the room "You've seen corpses before, right?"

"Yeah."

From what Ghost had heard, the child had almost become one during the famine. "Have you seen any of them cut up?"

"After."

Meat off the bone. Food unattached to a face. "What about in mid-dissection?"

Evit shook his head. He stepped up, chest high with the lip of the table. His gaze had a long way to travel from SnowMoth's broad feet up her long legs. A Y-incision bisected her torso. Her flesh was folded back and clamped.

Black eyes widened. A small voice said, "Uh-oh."

Ghost caught Evit as he swayed. The boy set his feet more firmly on the box, eyes tight shut.

"Nauseous?"

"Mm."

"It's better if you put your head between your legs."

Small fingers clutched his shirt instead. Evit breathed deeply through

his mouth, his grip on Ghost lessening. Ghost watched the squint, the short lashes twitching. Lips closing, set in a hard line. He could almost hear the boy daring himself to look again.

"She's not going anywhere," he said, softly. "Take your time."

A distant door opened. Light footfalls, the familiar ratchet and *thunk* of stairs arcing up and falling into place in the next room. Piri had found a babysitter after all.

She wasn't alone; a man was in the lab with her. Masari from the sound of his voice, though Ghost couldn't make out the words. The walls between them muffled too much, but equipment was being moved and objects placed on a counter. The man helped her. A drawer opened and closed. They must be getting parchment.

"Is that how she died?"

Ghost turned his attention back to Evit, whose eyes were fully open again. The boy leaned forward, pointing at discolorations in and around SnowMoth's heart. He'd recovered quickly.

"Yes. Heart-willow resin, the same way VineSong died." Ghost added, "VineSong was her son. My nephew."

The boy opened his mouth, closed it.

"It's all right, Evit. The Preserver who killed her was very respectful." He whispered, "She's with her son and her husband now, and other members of my family. Most of them died peacefully."

Bright eyes turned somber. "She was pretty."

"Yes, she was." Ghost squared his shoulders. He had to be brave

like the boy beside him, who had lost his father, his uncle, and dozens of extended family members to the Masari.

In an imaginary afterlife their kin all sat together at a vast table, laughing and joking. Their world was one big Lacuna where they harvested peace instead of crops. No need to eat. No need to shoot. No need to be or do anything except love one another.

What could compete with a dream like that? Ghost couldn't. Sometimes, like now, he was ready to sink right into it, his need almost great enough to make him a believer.

"I'm going to cut her some more." He lifted a knife. "You'll let me know if you start to feel sick."

The door to the morgue opened. Piri strode to him stiff-backed, parchment in her fist, eyes gleaming. She jerked her chin toward the lab before she bent down and pulled up another set of steps. Quick taps fluttered on Ghost's arm as she straightened. *I'll do this.*

Whatever was in the lab was important enough to take him away from his sister. "What have you found?"

*I'm not sure yet, but it looks too familiar. That's why I'm here.* She handed him her notes and climbed toward the table, giving Evit a little smile as she reached for tweezers and gloves. Her hands zeroed in on SnowMoth's chest.

Ghost read a tangle of contradictions in her script. "This person should be dead."

Piri glared at him from the cavity. She jerked her head toward the lab again, harder this time.

DustClaw waited for him, but the courier looked more than just empty-handed and out of place. The emotions playing across his face were too many to distinguish, none of them good.

Vials and dishes littered the counter, next to more notes. Ghost recognized DamBuster's handwriting. DevilChaser's. BrushBurn's. "Whose fluids are these?"

The courier cleared his throat. "TripStone's."

Ghost's hand paused by the lenses. Suddenly everything on DustClaw's face made sense. He just looked at something impossible.

*No. Not impossible.*

*Transportable.*

~ ~ ~

## **Basc**

"Empty it." Zai gestured with her rifle toward the trader's small cart. Inspecting it shouldn't take long.

Its owner seemed unafraid of the arsenal trained on him, or of the troops hauling his crates into the open. On the contrary, Yucof regarded her curiously, his movements slow and careful to avoid any misunderstanding. Flurries melted onto dyed textiles and small painted sculptures. Ink smudged on unwrapped parchment.

"Might I request my tarpaulin?" Carroty hair kinked out from beneath Yucof's hood as he pointed. "You've got my cooperation, but I'd like to leave here with my goods intact."

Zai called to her soldiers, "Help him set it up."

She was sure Yucof didn't have what she wanted, but he was here in Basc and would have to do. A former black marketer still had connections, enough to tell her how a poison produced only in this valley had found its way into Promontory and into TripStone. Not in a single, merciful stab, but in a drawn-out drugging that whittled the hunter away piece by piece.

*All those times I wanted to kill you, TripStone, all that time I hated you, I still would have been kinder than this.*

A metal frame sank into the snow. Oiled cloth slapped around scaffolding.

Yucof peered up at the ridge, where dark clouds massed over Alvav. He sighed and turned back to his covered cart. He passed a soldier whose arms filled with tapestries, answering one tired greeting with another.

"We're costing you a day's travel," Zai observed.

"You have your reasons."

Yucof's mild irritation told Zai he knew the barrels trained on him were a bluff and that this search posed a minor inconvenience. But they were more than just a simple formality at the border.

"My Preservers are being held for interrogation." Zai noted the mild surprise in his face and tried to hide her own. "You know something about that."

"Not really." He ducked beneath the tarpaulin and dropped another crate, unlatching it. Dozens of Death sets rested inside.

They seemed to form most of his cargo. Obviously he hadn't made many sales of them here.

"If you're asking your Preservers whether they trade with me, the answer is yes." Yucof flipped more latches, chuckling. "I'm legitimate now, but I'm used to keeping my manifest in my head. I'll have to learn to write it down, though I have a feeling that still won't stop you. What are you looking for?"

"Heart-willow resin."

Yucof nodded. "You could have saved us some trouble if you had asked me."

He ducked back into his cart and emerged with a small box. "Skedge wanted to secure the resin early for its training program, while the sap was still running and could sustain an extra harvest."

Zai stared down at the opened box and its half-dozen wax-sealed tins. "What training program?"

"The Covenant method. That's what they call it. Though they're really more interested in marksmanship than in poisoning. Guns were invented in Skedge. It's a matter of pride." He furrowed thick brows, Masari orange against Yata-bronze skin. "Don't tell me you know nothing about this, Zai. You're the one who stopped *me*."

She shouldered her rifle, squatting. "There's enough here to kill half of Promontory."

"Or most of Crossroads, or maybe a third of Rudder. Skedge will run out of bullets before it runs out of this."

The tarpaulin flapped. The wind picked up.

"Yucof, I'm detaining you." Zai looked up into bemusement and knew she was really sheltering him from the storm. She scowled. "Don't thank me. You won't get any sleep tonight."

He pursed his lips as she straightened. "I've done nothing illegal."

"Then maybe you can tell me how this resin got into Promontory."

"It hasn't gotten into *Skedge* yet."

Zai nodded at lines of worry beginning to form. "Then you and I have some investigating to do."

~ ~ ~

*The Covenant method.* Zai would laugh if she weren't so dismayed. How had a religion that had kept her people enslaved for so long become a synonym for mercy?

It must have been the bones, all those pretty paperweights sold to the Little Masari for bed snuff. Then the Little Masari realized that they were Yata, the bed snuff was Destiny, and the paperweights were relics. Then they'd learned to read the pictures stippled on the bones in brightly-colored inks.

*We'd all been such helpless gods.* She studied the equally distressed Masari across the table. *But we'd been gods.*

The lamps in the visitor's hut had been burning all night. Guards flanked all the doors, inside and out. They had released all the interrogated Preservers and admitted the leader of Crossroads and the refugee from Rudder.



HigherBrook regarded Zai with a steady gaze, his brown eyes smoldering and his lips pressed tight. BubbleCreek held a sickly child to her breast and avoided looking at Yucof. The trader aimed a sad smile at their tainted baby.

Zai cleared her throat. "First, I am satisfied that no Preserver wittingly contributed toward the poisoning of TripStone. The resin trade was established to further the *painless* execution of Masari."

HigherBrook blurted, "By whose authority?"

"Skedge. And on Yucof's recommendation I will send a Preserver there to help train its citizens in the skillful and merciful taking of life. They call it the Covenant method."

HigherBrook glowered at BubbleCreek. "Tell me this is not part of Rudder's design for cultural change in Promontory."

"No, but I think it's admirable." BubbleCreek turned bleary amber eyes to him. "I told you that Skedge has enough Yata to feed Promontory. That's true only if Promontory's numbers can be controlled, just as the numbers are in Crossroads. That means Masari will have to die, and the Skedge Yata will have to kill them." She shook her head. "We didn't propose how they should do it. The Covenant method was Skedge's initiative. It's a fair sight better than the atrocities conducted during the frontier wars."

Zai passed parchment to her right. "That still doesn't explain how the resin reached Promontory, where it's obviously been abused. I've just given Yucof all the Preservers' reports of the trades they made."

HigherBrook asked, "How many purchases of the resin?"

"Two." The trader flipped sheets. "The chameleon didn't leave a

name, but the physical descriptions are informative. Not many smugglers live long enough to go gray."

The baby fidgeted. BubbleCreek turned away, hunching over her daughter.

Yucof called, softly, "Bubbles? Let me hold her."

The Masari barked a laugh. "She'll want to eat you."

"Not without teeth. I won't die being gummed." He reached out. "TripStone was part of the mission to destroy Destiny Farm. Anyone in Promontory could have wanted her dead."

The infant snuggled against him. Her small amber eyes opened wide. Her nostrils quivered before she dozed off in the crook of his arm.

Yucof offered an apologetic smile. "I haven't seen her since she was born. What did you name her?"

"HeadWind."

He laid his smooth, bronze hand on BubbleCreek's arm. "Let's talk later."

Across the table HigherBrook looked pasty. He straightened his linen shirt and smoothed down his chops. Zai watched his attempts at dignity before she rose from her chair.

She settled into a seat next to his. "I know you want me to stop the resin trade. I won't, but I *will* make sure that Skedge uses it properly."

"Rudder seems to be in agreement with you."

He was not the same man who had towered over her the day before,

demanding an explanation for this latest crime against Masari. Zai almost wished he were. "You're thinking of something else."

He ignored her and turned a wistful eye to the trio in the room.

"I'd like to request an audience with The Honorable One," he finally said. "I need her to help me rage at the gods."

Zai nodded. "I'll arrange it."

Her face flushed, surprising her. Why the flare-up of jealousy? She could see Gria any time she wanted.

"Rudder has obviously approved the sanctioned killing of Masari," HigherBrook continued, sour-faced. He waited for BubbleCreek to face him. "Does Promontory know?"

"Not yet. But we are training both sides in the techniques they'll need. I told you, HigherBrook, it will be controlled murder."

"*Where?*" His body turned rigid. "We have hunting grounds. You have the Games. They have only the canyon and the salt pan, and those get washed out during the monsoons. What do they have?"

BubbleCreek glanced at Yucof, who shrugged.

She turned back to HigherBrook. "They have the parlors."

## **Chapter 53**

### **Promontory**

*Why am I sick?*

FlitNettle hunched over BrushBurn's kitchen table, dragging her pen across the page. Black ink leapt up. The contrast hurt her eyes. Her head swam.

She opened her mouth and curled her lips, unable to take a full breath. Something about the room was wrong. Glands, she must use her glands. Her nostrils flared.

*What am I hunting?*

Her nib touched down.

*No.*

She couldn't write that question, not even in her diary. Too dangerous. It shouldn't be, but everything screamed that it was.

Jirado pretended to sleep. The Yata's shoulders were relaxed, her breathing slow and even, but she didn't *smell* asleep. She was alert, listening to nib scratches. Her privacy curtain was open. She had lain down in her clothes in the middle of the afternoon again, saying it was the baby.

But it wasn't. FlitNettle frowned at the pallet. Jirado probably just didn't want to talk to her any more, now that the hunters were away and the only gossip left was about TripStone. Which wasn't really gossip at all, because nothing about TripStone had changed. She still fought to live.

Their tea was cold, its blackberry scent dissipated. It had to be bitter by now. FlitNettle pushed both cups to the side and noticed a nervous twitching on the pallet.

Why should that be surprising? She was only making more room on

the table to write. Or lay her head on her arms. She'd napped so much already and she was still tired. It wasn't fair.

In a moment the parchment became a pillow. The ink was still drying and sticky. She'd have to wash it from her chops.

Did she remember to cap the bottle? She reached out to check, blinking in confusion when Jirado rounded the table and spirited their teacups to the counter.

The Yata chirped, "Watch where you flail, sweetheart."

FlitNettle murmured, "It's only tea." If the tiny woman cared about spills so much, she should move the ink away, too. Stupid.

And what was Jirado doing, standing so close to her? What could possibly be so interesting to watch? "Leave me alone."

"Don't worry, honey. I will."

Her voice came from the other side of the kitchen, but her scent was claustrophobically near. FlitNettle struggled to fill her lungs. If only she didn't feel as though she were drowning all the time.

But her nose and her open mouth kept registering the same blend. Parchment and ink. FlitNettle's own scent, tangled with Jirado's *inside* the papers.

That sneaky Yata's hands had been all over her diary.

She clamped down on her rage. *Don't frizz!*

FlitNettle pressed her cheek further into the papers and tried to steady her nerves. She had to keep her fur under control.

*Why is she reading my diary? Why is she pretending to sleep?  
Why am I sick?*

The questions circled in her brain like buzzards. Their beaks worried her flesh. They treated her as though she were already a carcass, decomposing slowly at home. She hadn't been getting any better; she'd been getting worse. Just as TripStone had.

Now her skin smelled like TripStone's, too. But BrushBurn's didn't, and he'd been just as close to both of them. Jirado's didn't, but she was a Yata.

*What am I hunting?*

Jirado headed back toward her pallet, stopping to rest her fingers lightly on FlitNettle's head. "Do you want to lie down?"

FlitNettle didn't have to pretend to be asleep. She was almost there, hanging onto a thin thread of consciousness.

*I don't know what I'm hunting yet, Jirado, but I can out-snoop you.*

~ ~ ~

DevilChaser slipped a needle into TripStone's upper back and checked the drip falling from a scraped Yata stomach through cleaned intestines and into a syringe. Stubble offset the doctor's graying chops. "She's been able to take liquids for two days and that first one was close. Her heart was ready to shut down no matter what we did, from either the pressure or the thirst."

BrushBurn rubbed unguents into TripStone's legs, working the paste through strips of pelt. Cracked skin flaked off in his hands, leaving rosiness underneath.

DevilChaser added, "I'd say you made the right decision."

"We already knew about thirst."

In the end they'd had to go with what they didn't know, filling the room with lenses in scaffolding and mineral powders lined up on a table beside the bed. Injecting fluids, drawing blood, measuring chemicals. Hoisting TripStone with padded ropes to let everything drain down while BrushBurn held his ear against her chaotic chest.

He wanted to turn his wife over just to listen to her rhythms quieting again, becoming steadier amidst intermittent gallops. Instead he watched a liquid subcutaneous mound grow on TripStone's back, its contents soaking into her body like the gentle rains of Crossroads.

He flexed her ankles, massaging toward her heart. "She didn't even grow up in the desert."

"No, but she's hunted in extreme conditions. She's trained herself to survive with very little water, better than anyone in the base camp has." DevilChaser scooped paste with his fingers, applying a thin film to help relax her brittle hide stretched around the hump. "The camp should be operational by now. Shouldn't we have gotten a dispatch?"

"It's four days overdue."

The doctor straightened. "You lived in the canyon. Is that cause for concern?"

"It's hard to say. I saw StemIron's final manifest. They won't need anything from us for weeks, but they *should* have reported in by now. Their messengers are experienced and the trails are cleared."

Long hands withdrew the needle. "We'll let her lie quietly. Might not

need the ropes this time. Keep massaging her." He reached for another syringe.

BrushBurn worked the paste up TripStone's thighs. Her shrunken buttocks were almost lost beneath dulled fur. If this were Yata deprivation that fur would be falling out by now, crimson tufts littering the pallet. But it remained thick, sticking out at unnatural angles from flaccid skin.

He scooped up more paste and worked it into her hip. Bone jutted. BrushBurn whispered, "How long before she starves?"

"One problem at a time, BrushBurn. The water will hold her a while." DevilChaser turned from a stain beneath his lenses. "Her blood looks healthier. We know it's not animalcules doing this to her. It's some kind of toxin that's spread throughout her body. Now that she can accept water, she's cleaning herself out more quickly. It might be a while before she can take any food."

The hump began to flatten out, wrinkling. Ribs shifted. BrushBurn pressed his lips against TripStone's spine and listened to her tortured lungs before reaching for more paste.

"I've memorized your pharmacy and I've never seen anything like this." He winced. Those were her *kidneys* beneath his palms. "The poisoned Destiny was different. The heavy metals in the factories are different. The mines are different. No venom here matches. I can't begin to understand the properties of this thing."

DevilChaser rounded the pallet. "You were a trader all your life. DamBuster's a chemist and he's never seen this before, either. I don't mind telling you, I could use a change in my bedroom conversations with him. We're up half the night trying to figure this out."



TripStone's scapulae were knife blades trying to cut free of her skin. BrushBurn caressed them before applying more ointment. "I thought it was SandTail keeping you awake."

"I've moved him to another wing and put him in tighter restraints. He stopped screaming when I threatened to muzzle him." The doctor shook his head, snorting. "He's the last person I'd expect to burn down a hospital."

"A Yata was in the hospital. For SandTail that's reason enough."

He massaged TripStone's shoulder and neck. The mound on her back shrank further. Soon he and DevilChaser would turn her face up. She would be dead weight in their arms.

Over the past few days BrushBurn had touched more of her body than he had in close to a season. He had rubbed unguent into almost every inch of her, from the soles of her feet to the crease of her jawline. Around her wrists, between her fingers, down her sternum.

"We should take blood from Flit, too," he blurted. "She hasn't been well, either."

The muscles in TripStone's biceps had all but burned away. Her elbows were cracked, her forearms spindly. The backs of her hands looked bruised. BrushBurn lightened his touch as he brought more ointment around to her palm.

Her bony fingers twitched, then squeezed.

DevilChaser whispered, "I saw that."

BrushBurn stared at a hand fallen limp again.

The doctor squatted and turned TripStone's head, lifting an eyelid.

"She's still unconscious. For now. Do you need a chair?"

"The floor is fine." BrushBurn dropped to his knees, pressing her paste-coated palm to his chops. "I know you're in there, TripStone. I know you're trying to come back to us. Don't give up."

It didn't matter that she couldn't hear him. She *heard* him.

## Chapter 54

*If I'm hunting, then this house must be the hunting grounds.*

Nothing made any sense except in FlitNettle's glands. In the hunting grounds, you listened to your glands or died.

The smudged diary had remained open on the table for two days, untouched and ignored. Jirado turned her head away whenever she passed it. That was information.

Jirado's many step-up crates moved constantly between the living area and the storage room. "I don't want you to trip on them," she explained.

How could FlitNettle trip on them when she was bedridden half the time? She needed only clear passage to the chamber pot. But every time Jirado had to reach something the crates came out, and then she put them back again. She moved them around and rearranged them, in a far corner from the sound of it. Empty boxes that would only get in the way.

That was information, too, but it was like a card in a Death deck. Meaningless by itself.

Now the Yata was behind the curtain, straining over the chamber pot.

This time the baby affected her for real. Her nursery smells were stronger. She startled easily. She still pretended to sleep, even though the baby kept her awake. She stayed in the back room with the boxes when she thought FlitNettle was asleep. Brief trips to the back, in and out.

Then the glands talked, and FlitNettle pulled her magazine tube out from where she'd wrapped it in a shirt and hidden it in her pallet straw. One more of Jirado's trips and it would be fully loaded. Then FlitNettle would lever her StormCloud out of its corner, turn it over, return the magazine to its buttstock, set her rifle back in place, and wait.

She was hunting. She didn't know what or why.

But in the hunting grounds, you needed your gun.

~ ~ ~

Jirado held her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. First she couldn't stay awake, then she couldn't fall sleep. Now she couldn't shit. Her waist had barely thickened, but she already carried a lead ball bent on cleaving her womb.

The baby could fight her all it wanted. It wouldn't win.

She had tunneled and squeezed where no one else could reach. Past the pantry and its vegetable stench, past mud and gravel shovels. Past old trunks filled with the generous pillows and festive rugs of a trader's forgotten tent. Anyone who approached would see a wall of crates that only looked solid, while inside Jirado created a maze and a sanctuary for her secrets.

She squirmed on the cold wooden floor and sliced cloth with a

sharpened blade. Kerchiefs lay in strips. Beautiful Yata embroidery, fragments of words now, but Jirado didn't need words any more. She dipped a flat wood chip into the resin, scraped the poison out, smeared it on a strip, and rolled the cloth, finishing the fifteenth ball.

A chill rode fresh air through the hole she'd made in the plank by her shoulder. She had to remove her gloves to rub gooseflesh away, but she couldn't stop now. The sounds filtering in told her it was time to move. Shouts of husbands and wives and cries from the children of hunters spread from street to street. Boots clattered on cobblestones, slipping on gravel.

Masari panicked the same way the Yata did when their loved ones were taken away.

Promontory's citizens were always fleet, but now they rushed about. Tension had been building for days.

The base camp remained silent. There was talk of sending scouts. If the resin worked in the canyon it would work in the hospital, once Jirado brought FlitNettle in.

The girl slept more lately. She was ready.

The fourteen other balls formed a pile on an uncut kerchief woven in white on black. Seven more would ensure sufficient contamination of the cisterns. Another kerchief, red script on yellow, held needles tipped with enough poison to deliver quick, merciful deaths when jabbed first into TripStone's heart, then into FlitNettle's.

Jirado had pictured all the steps, traversing every corridor and entering every room so many times she no longer needed to check the map she'd redrawn from memory. Every time she lay on her pallet and closed her eyes she was back at the hospital. She should thank

BrushBurn's insolent, churning seed for keeping her awake at night.

~ ~ ~

BrushBurn took TripStone's hand in his and waited for another squeeze that didn't come.

Sounds of suffering edged in from the hall, but only the battle by his side existed. What dreams made her struggle so hard to blow the demons out of her body? What shivered her chest and shoulders as she fought for air?

He stood on one side of her and then the other, trying to become her lungs. He tried to massage TripStone's nightmares from her, thanking the gods when she calmed and praying she didn't fall into silence. Her sweat soaked the linens.

"Breathe." He urged her with his voice, his fingers. "I know it hurts, but breathe."

The harder she fought to come back, the more determined the demons were to drag her away.

When did DevilChaser enter the room? BrushBurn didn't remember reacting to terse instructions or to the hand on his shoulder. He didn't remember when the sloshing started or when the stomach appeared again, hanging on a hook. Or the intestines snaking down to the syringe, or the drip into TripStone's back. Another pile of washed, dried sheets brightened the table.

The curtain moved aside again. More chemical smells, a somber baritone. DamBuster shouldn't be here, he should be in the lab.

When was BrushBurn last in the lab?

Natural light spread from the window. It must be day.

DevilChaser's thin command sliced into his brain. "Somebody take him outside."

Somebody helped BrushBurn into his coat and pulled on his arm leading him past a labyrinth of curtains and hooks and down the stone stairs. Dried snake meat and a water bladder passed into his hands.

"They're taking good care of her." Smells of factory grease. "If it makes you feel any better, I haven't been sleeping, either."

BrushBurn hugged AgatePool across her shoulders as they paralleled the salt pan. She clutched his waist. Clouds thickened over Skedge.

She stared at the hospital, her dark eyes trained on the room where her lover remained tethered to his bed.

She asked, "Do you know what SandTail and I talk about?"

Skedge would be visible through the man's window. The monolith would be a taunting image, seen as either a target or a threat. Probably both. "I imagine he's fuming."

Not long ago these rooms had been barracks filling with Masari shooters. Maybe that was why SandTail was ready to burn the hospital down. Invade Skedge and cut up its Yata for food. Continue where he'd left off.

"We talk about how much we love each other." The mixed-blood woman seemed frail despite her bulk shifting under heavy coats. Her coppery face gleamed in the low sun, her night-colored chops like

perpetual shadows. "That's all he wants to say now. I'm half-Yata, BrushBurn. SandTail hates Yata, but he loves me. What am I supposed to do with that?"

They turned back toward the stone stairs.

"I don't know." The snake meat hung from his hand. He had to eat before he stepped back inside. "Be thankful you can talk to each other. SandTail refuses to speak to me and TripStone can't."

"And Jirado won't see me. I tried to apologize for SandTail's treatment of her, but she refused to open the door. She's hated me ever since the hunt."

The snake meat tasted wooden. "You didn't see what she saw."

"But why *me*, BrushBurn? She's going to be a mother of a hybrid child!"

"She thinks you've betrayed her." The former barracks gleamed as they approached. A plume of dust rose in the distance, catching late afternoon light as it zigzagged down the mountain. "Even more than Promontory has. Skedge lost a lot of people to the Farm."

"And I wish we could find them and bring them all home, but we *can't*." AgatePool shoved her fists in her pockets. "I can see every single face of the friends and colleagues that we lost, and the riots took more than the Farm did. We memorialized them *all*, BrushBurn. We grieved them all. We stood together by the ruins of the Destiny factory and remembered them to each other for days. And we cried, and screamed, and cursed the Farm and Promontory and the gods, and did everything we could so that we could move on toward some kind of peace. That's why I'm working over here and that's why I encouraged Jirado to join me. It isn't just because of SandTail."

The plume grew. Whatever descended from the pass was moving fast.

BrushBurn shook his head. "Jirado is still grieving over those people."

"I know she is, and I'm not surprised. She didn't come to the memorial at all. I couldn't get her to leave her house."

He forced himself to swallow the last bit of snake and washed it down. The plume streaked closer. It jogged to the left, leaving the main road. A trail of red haze billowed behind it.

AgatePool watched it, too. "What would be coming to the hospital from Rudder?"

"I don't know, but they're exhausting themselves." Two figures in silhouette. The cart bounced too much, too light for the combined strength of tandem runners. They almost floated on air from momentum alone. Any faster and they'd lose their ability to steer.

Realization jolted. BrushBurn squeezed her shoulder. "DustClaw was traveling with someone from Rudder."

"Yes, but he brings the mail to the Lodge."

"Not if it's important enough to come here first. He was taking TripStone's fluids to Ghost." He shouted as he sprinted toward the cart, "That news is coming from *Crossroads*."

Metal slapped as chains shortened on the straightaway. Grit and sweat covered the runners; even their coats looked blood-drenched. The taller one threw back his hood and whipped off his mask.



"Thank goodness it's you." DustClaw waved BrushBurn away without breaking stride, half-collapsed in his harness. "Everything from TripStone shows she's been poisoned. Heart-willow resin." His eyes pleaded. "Tell me she's still alive."

"Barely." BrushBurn matched their pace. "I don't know what heart-willow resin is."

"It's gathered outside Basc." The courier gulped air, coughing. "It's used in their war."

The world took a nauseating tilt. "But Basc is days away from here."

DustClaw's face twitched in pain. "Only three with uninterrupted travel."

The image of the kerchiefs from Basc filled BrushBurn's head. Every color floated all around him, riddled with stories. They wrapped around TripStone's throat and pressed against her nose and mouth, smothering her.

He choked, "I've got to get home."

The runners were fast but he was faster, pulling away from the mail cart. AgatePool's confused yells barely reached him, lost in the thunder of his boots, his heart, his lungs.

## Chapter 55

Names flew through the air and up to the open window where FlitNettle leaned over the sill, shivering. HammerLake, WestCarriage, StemIron. Names of level three and level four *yatanii*. Everyone who had gone down into the canyon.

She could see their dusty faces, feel their strong arms around her as she'd bade them all goodbye. The bright scent of fresh oil in their StormClouds, greased chains whirring as carts trundled supplies past the rim. Warm leather vests against her cheek, chalk and gunpowder mingling in her memory. Sixty-three hunters and support personnel, the long column dwindling to dots as it snaked down the trail, vanishing into switchbacks. Hundreds of kin mobbing the edge, letting their loved ones go.

This time she was up here and not down there. This time FlitNettle's face was creased with the same worried and expectant lines as everyone else left behind.

Every day she'd overheard talk of almost everyone she knew. Spirited tales of the hunters' prowess on trail and pallet alike. The anecdotes became bright baubles of hope as the Warehouse stores contracted, one smoked body at a time.

The food supply will grow again, the voices said. It had to. The Farm Yata couldn't have traveled that far. Their meat will come back to Promontory.

Dozens of citizens demanded an invasion of Skedge. So many Yata were an easy strike away, looking down on the city from across the salt pan. But Rudder's Masari protected them, posted around the perimeter to deter a full-scale slaughter.

FlitNettle leaned further out the window. Her head still swam but she breathed more easily, almost ready to push herself upright.

The anecdotes and jokes had been absent for days. The hunters' names still filled the streets, but they rang with urgency and rode odors of fear. Everyone waited for word from the base camp. Every day passed with no news from below.

FlitNettle remembered the hugs of her comrades and wondered how much of her trembling came from the cold.

Too much had gone strange. Too much had gone wrong. She didn't know why.

"Jirado!"

The effort winded her. She steadied her legs as she stood, leaning against the wall.

No answer. Was the Yata still back in the storage room or had she left the house?

*Don't think*, the glands said.

*Arm yourself*, they said.

FlitNettle hauled her fully-loaded StormCloud across her back and tightened the straps. It weighed twice as much as before, but that couldn't be right, either.

She was alone again, but not locked up in her room at the Farm while everyone died around her. She could walk away from the window and past the hearth, through the narrow passage leading from the kitchen to the storage room. She could leave the pantry behind, with its pleasant mustiness of dirt crops and dried, salted meats.

She could open another door, away from the heat. Its soft latch closed behind her. She stiffened her knees to keep them from buckling and edged past iron tools on the left, trunks piled high on the right. The smells of Rudder were in those trunks, and Crossroads, and the highways in-between. All that traveling. She'd have to ask her cousin about his adventures some day.

Instinct gripped her shoulders and swung her head forward again. She held her rifle by her side so it wouldn't tug her down. Her cocking lever clicked before she realized what she'd done.

Nothing in the back but neatly-stacked boxes. "Jirado?"

Silence. Not even a mouse skittered.

But nursery scent eddied from the crates and into FlitNettle's open mouth.

She pulled one box down and then another, her legs shaking. A tight corridor of crates stood behind the wall they made, and behind that corridor was another wall. Her head pounded. Her glands took over, moving her arms for her and squirting strength into her limbs.

More crates tumbled. Small gloved hands caught one and tossed it aside. Muscled arms flashed into view.

Jirado greeted her with a soft chuckle and a breathy, "You found me."

The Yata's eyes gleamed. She could be a whipback defending its cubs, but this had nothing to do with the child she carried. FlitNettle glanced from the amused smile down to ripped kerchiefs and an opened tin, to each gloved hand holding a long steel needle.

The odor of resin wafted past fallen crates as Jirado sprang to her feet. Beneath the Yata's open coat her waist had filled out. Her angular body was rounded, her breasts beginning to grow. She stood unafraid in FlitNettle's wavering crosshairs.

The girl squeaked, "*You* were making us sick."

Jirado nodded. "Yes, I was making you sick. You've got the gun,

FlitNettle. Go ahead and shoot me."

"But I don't understand!"

"Of course you do." Jirado's nostrils flared. She surveyed their cramped surroundings as though the StormCloud didn't exist. "You're a hunter, yes? You kill Yata and then you eat us. *My blood*, FlitNettle."

The crosshairs jerked. FlitNettle tracked small movements by narrow hips. Her arms burned, but she couldn't lower her rifle with the threat of death facing her, clamped in leather fists. "Your blood died in the riots."

"*My blood is in the canyon.*" Words like ice picks. "My kin were taken away to be bred like animals. When that wasn't enough for you, you hunted them down and slaughtered my husband like a wild beast."

"Then we're even." FlitNettle blinked tears away and tried to see past her own rocking. She struggled for air. "Because the Farm Yata killed *my blood*. Your kin killed my kin."

The target began to move. "We're far from even. But we've gotten closer to even, now that the base camp is dead."

Thunder split wood. The recoil flung FlitNettle back, her scream cut short. Jirado ducked among the tumbled boxes, weaving scent trails like a net. Bullets punctured the walls and ricocheted off iron plates.

FlitNettle couldn't feel her arms or her legs any more. The crates caught her feet as she went down shooting. She aimed toward a flash of coat and tunic, but then it was gone and then it was back, closer. A needle split pine next to her calf.

She pulled her legs in and scurried back, driving herself against the wall. She grabbed winch hooks, wheezing. Hanging nails cut through her shirt and into her back, blurring everything as she hurled a hook swinging on its rope. The rope shuddered with the vibrations of flesh yielding, high-pitched yells of pain.

Jirado jerked away and disappeared among the trunks as FlitNettle sagged against the tools. The nails tore her flesh when she pushed away. She looked up at the sounds of scrabbling, heavy dragging. White spots danced against the beams. Leather straps cinched her arms to hold her upright, but she didn't remember wrapping them.

Her gun fired again. Twenty-two bullets left in her magazine. Twenty-one.

Was that right?

Too much echoed as she pulled her cocking lever and squeezed the trigger. It could be twenty bullets left, nineteen. Or it could be fourteen, thirteen. She didn't know.

It couldn't matter any more.

The straps gave way. She grabbed and swung a shovel that flew from her hands. Tent cloth dropped around her, thick and stifling. FlitNettle fought through heavy folds and darkness as Jirado's feet hit the floor. Her gun went off again as canvas ripped.

More resin smell, stronger now. Jirado had the tin with her. She'd reloaded her needles.

Bullets sped toward straining cloth. A sliver of dim light breached the edge of the canvas. FlitNettle swam to it through mildew, coughing. The weave streaked with her blood.

She fired at dim shadows flying toward the opening, rolling away from where the tent pressed down. More blood dripped, now coming through from outside. FlitNettle scrambled shrieking into the open.

The light stung her eyes. The Yata vanished again, leaving her coat behind. FlitNettle tried to follow the spatters. She tried to hear Jirado's breaths above her own suffocation.

*Please, gods, don't let me think.*

Everything hurt so much.

"You're bigger than I am." The whisper echoed from several directions at once. "But I'm stronger than you are."

She was stronger but wounded, otherwise she wouldn't be talking.

"I do care about you, you know. You can't help doing what you do." Muffled words around gritted teeth. "I can't help doing what I do."

Ripping fabric, friction. She must be tying a tourniquet around her arm.

*How can you carry BrushBurn's child and do this?*

FlitNettle held herself across her chest, wanting terribly to wail.

"Do you really think I wanted to kill the hunters? I *had to*, FlitNettle."

Jirado's moan sliced into soft underbelly. FlitNettle bit her lip to keep from answering. Stickiness trailed down her chin. There was too much smell in the air and not enough in her lungs.

She couldn't track anything. Her head was all jumbled.

Choked laughter echoed between them. "We've made a mess here, haven't we?"

She was sure Jirado could see her shaking. She tried to focus, pulling on the leather straps until she dangled upright again. She'd fall in a heap if she let go, but she had to let go to fumble the latches open.

Cloth glided. Sound placed the Yata inside the wall, but that was impossible.

FlitNettle threw open trunks, nothing left of her but her glands. They told her to hurl pillows into the passageway, shooting shooting shooting until nothing was left but feathers floating amidst the dust motes. Holes of sunlight breaching ceiling and walls.

She stumbled backwards and careened into the door to the pantry. She groped through vertigo, flinging down whatever food touched her hands. Furniture. A wall of garbage.

The back of her head hit the floor. Vegetable pulp squished as chairs toppled. A steel needle scraped against tin.

FlitNettle uttered a faint cry as more recoils drove her into the planks. Water gushed from a barrel. Earthenware shattered. She didn't see the relic from Crossroads fly off the wall, stippled bone splintering apart. She was blind.

How much longer could she blister her palms, inching herself away, before that needle punctured her chest? When the front door slammed open it sounded so far away. Not real at all.

A gravel voice grieved, "No."



Jirado, terrifyingly close, whispered, "Not you."

~ ~ ~

BrushBurn howled as he squeezed the trigger, but he couldn't make a sound. Only his revolver did, spinning Jirado away with a loud crack. Red pumped down the side of her tunic.

One arm hung, tied with the hem of her soaked dress. The rest of her clothing plastered to curves and to the tiny mound just forming inside. She offered him a contrite smile, beads forming above her upper lip. Tears streaked down golden cheeks beginning to blanch.

Her bare feet made ruddy smears as she lurched forward again, gloved hand poised.

He shot again. Steel dropped, injecting resin into the wood. Jirado lay on her back, her mouth open, panting. Her head lolled to the side until she faced him. She blinked.

The third bullet broke his howls free. They poured from BrushBurn, ripping him apart as he slid to the floor. Everything inside had no place else to go but out. He cracked open like the rest of his house, shattering alongside the plaster.

He couldn't look at her as he holstered his gun. He had to move, get FlitNettle to the hospital.

The girl wheezed, sprawled next to Jirado's body, her StormCloud rising and falling on her chest. Gore dissolved into a broadening pool of water spreading from the pantry. It tinged FlitNettle's trousers, climbing up her legs.

She gripped BrushBurn's shirt when he set her rifle aside and took

her into his arms. Shouts reached them from the outside, a hubbub growing louder. People must be running into the street. Someone raced up the stairs and opened the door.

BrushBurn couldn't stand. A post appeared beside him, but that couldn't be. Stranger still, he braced himself against breeches instead of wood.

DustClaw hauled him up with a loud grunt. "Not bad for a terrible shot."

FlitNettle clung to both of them. With a start BrushBurn realized they were all holding each other up.

The courier straightened. "My cart is outside. Take it. There's a runner in harness." His words trembled, the glint in his eyes barely concealing shock. "I'll carry the meat to the Warehouse."

"You've been running for three days. Someone else should do the cutting."

BrushBurn wondered at his own dry tone; he sounded like a businessman. Pragmatic, detached. How could he talk about processing? Part of that meat down on the floor was him.

"It's all right. I can do it. I want to." Shoulders hunched. "If I can't sharpen my knives at base camp I might as well sharpen them here."

This time the howling erupted from FlitNettle.

## Chapter 56

Being strapped down for days, telling the hours by one's escort to the shit pot, left a man enough time to reach the merciless conclusion

that it was better to be crazy than right.

SandTail huddled by the hospital doors, leaning on his cane and wishing he were still locked up. Trading his sanity for Promontory would be more than equitable. Releasing him back to the street had been DevilChaser's cruelest act.

The doctor answered his knock, looking sick. Who in this town wasn't?

SandTail wasn't. He felt curiously light. He should be afraid.

No matter. He grabbed DevilChaser's hand and tapped, *I've heard TripStone is conscious. I'm here to see her.*

The doctor was silent long enough for the wind to chill them both. He could say yes or no to the request, but he was being glacially slow about it. Surely he had other patients to attend to, like young FlitNettle.

What a mess *that* household had become. Enough to give BrushBurn a completely new set of nightmares if someone didn't kill him first.

A fresh blast drove icy air against SandTail's cheek. His fingers jabbed, *This is ridiculous. You obviously prefer freezing to death over starving to death. Neither will help me, and I'm sure it isn't helping you.*

The slim man looked sour. "All right. Come inside."

Warmth from a crackling hearth thawed them. The sounds of suffering were a relief. At least this wasn't the morgue.

SandTail held tightly to the doctor's wrist, slowing long-legged steps

past curtained rooms. *I don't intend to add to TripStone's ailments beyond telling her the truth. If you don't trust me, I'll be happy to leave my gun and my cane outside her room.*

"Your gun and your cane are the least of my worries."

*Yes, I would say so. Has anyone else been in to see her?*

"I've examined her, yes."

*I mean see her, doctor, not tiptoe around her. You haven't told her anything.*

"No. And I don't relish the idea of you being the first. Though obviously *you* do."

*I don't see you chasing me out of here.*

BrushBurn was staying with his ward, then. How convenient, to have an excuse not to face his wife.

DevilChaser stopped walking. He shook his hand free of SandTail's and slid the curtain open. His scowl faded into resignation as he turned away and continued down the corridor.

TripStone never looked so shriveled. Even at her most starved and drunk, she'd been better than this. SandTail hobbled to her raised pallet, shucking off his coat.

No sense hiding his surprise. She wasn't hiding hers, given her pinched brow and the confusion in bloodshot gray eyes that floated inside their sockets. She'd obviously been expecting someone else.

Her mouth worked, trying to produce enough saliva to speak.

SandTail looked about the room for a water pitcher. It sat beside a metal cup on a low table by the window. A pretty courtyard, nothing but emptiness and brief glimpses into other people's pain.

He poured, watching her gasp for breath as she tried to push herself upright. TripStone's arms seemed ready to break from her exertions. Was that why SandTail's anger fled despite everything that had happened?

He didn't feel sorry for her. Couldn't.

She just was.

He set the cup down near her pallet and leaned his cane against the wall.

TripStone looked even more troubled as SandTail lifted her into place. He'd have to tell her if she couldn't figure things out for herself. He held the cup against her lips and waited while she took hesitant sips.

At least she trusted him, however reluctantly. He almost laughed at her scrutiny. He wasn't the one who'd poisoned her.

He eased the cup away when she turned her head from the lip. He bent close to hear her whisper. Her palm waited for his reply, her hand flopped to the side. She didn't even know what was wrong with her.

*Heart-willow resin, my dear, administered in very small doses over a long period of time. You almost died from it.*

Her eyes widened in disbelief, her lips asking, *How?*

*Jirado. SandTail nodded as TripStone's hand jerked against his. Might as well save her the trouble of looking for the right words. BrushBurn is still alive and so is FlitNettle, but the girl could be better. He isn't here because he's been watching over her.*

Waves of distress played across TripStone's face. She slogged through confusion, disoriented.

SandTail waited. He had all the time in the world, now that all the time had run out.

TripStone looked past him, squinting at the window, the walls.

*Do you remember when you collapsed?*

Her face pinched further for a moment before she nodded. A different pain there.

*FlitNettle would be dead right now if BrushBurn hadn't caught Jirado trying to kill her. He finally got some sense into him and shot the demon.*

He looked down at eyes tight shut, at breaths trying to steady. If he'd already caused this much discomfort it would be a long visit. SandTail pulled up a chair.

He should let her puzzle out the rest, but likely she was thinking only of her husband. The smaller heartbreaks were easier to negotiate. The larger ones were far too ominous.

His deformed rump seared against the wood. That old ache still had the tenacity to come back when he least expected it. Easier to negotiate that, too. Be distracted from the news he prepared to deliver.

SandTail withdrew his hand from the bed. He leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers against his chin.

He wasn't sad. He should be. How deep must his own pain go that he couldn't even feel it any more?

Instead a great weight lifted from him, leaving him perversely happy. He should be horrified, but he couldn't manage even that. SandTail closed his own eyes, overcome with the sudden urge to nap.

"SandTail."

Her whisper was shards of glass over gravel. She needed more water. Her eyes were open, but she wasn't looking at him. She couldn't seem to focus on much of anything.

He wanted to tell her, *I envy you your fright.*

Instead he retrieved her cup from the floor and held it against her lips again. Her palm faced up, her fingers extending past the linen. For once he was thankful he had no tongue.

Should he tell her about the intermittent gunshots he'd heard throughout the city? About good friends gathering for a last hearty toast, their affairs in order and their revolvers loaded? Furniture covered, mementos moved to places of safety?

Should he mention the mercy of parents murdering their children? Of spouses deciding which could deliver the cleaner shot to the other, knowing they killed the person most dear to them?

Or should he tell her about the gruesome task fallen to DamBuster in his quest for Sustainer Masari? Of his days spent cutting up and labeling each corpse, feeding volunteers courting starvation in the

hope of furthering knowledge?

He took the cup away and laid his hand over hers. Better to start with the others in the morgue. The ones she knew. He settled back into his chair.

*We were to receive a dispatch once the base camp was operational, before its first team expanded into the canyon to set up supply lines. That message never came.*

The telling left SandTail as dispassionate as the hunter in the bed must feel. TripStone stared ahead, blank-faced. The gleam fled from eyes grown flat.

They were both trying to escape the truth. A fruitless attempt.

*A scouting party went down to the camp and sent word back that everyone was dead. All the hunters, and all the support personnel.*

What must it be like to be so physically weak that one's emotions were trapped inside? Only TripStone's face gave SandTail an indication of her suffering. Her lips writhed because her body couldn't. The tears she couldn't spare fell anyway, screaming for her because she didn't have the lungs for it.

*A recovery party followed. DevilChaser found lethal amounts of heart-willowresin in the water supply.*

SandTail had trouble looking at her. His reaction surprised him; surely he was stronger than that. Even distress was better than the numbness he'd lived in for days.

He patted her palm and curled his fingers again. *You'll live, TripStone. The grief only feels as if it's killing you.*



She struggled to speak through quick, shallow breaths. He leaned closer to the horror in her face.

Her whisper collapsed in on itself. "You tried to warn me."

SandTail shot her a sharp look. He should be infuriated, but even that satisfaction had fled him.

TripStone wasn't the only person besotted by the Yata in that house. The blame for sheltering Jirado did not rest wholly with her.

But she'd had the power to end it.

The revolver in his holster should tempt him, but it didn't. *My greed for Crossroads began Promontory's demise, he tapped, but your greed for the Covenant finished it.*

It wasn't an accusation, merely a statement of fact. SandTail watched her, helpless to call up any emotional response. He felt as bland as a column of BrushBurn's numbers. The torture in TripStone didn't do a thing for him.

He wished he could hurt as much as she hurt now. Didn't that happen when your city turned to slag?

It must be his own defect, then. Melt down, recast. Start over.

SandTail laid his hand on TripStone's hair and didn't know what else to do. He didn't have to tell her that the Warehouse was empty of Yata. Most of the remaining citizens weren't weaned enough to endure a canyon expedition, even if they had trained to hunt.

Only Skedge remained, with Rudder protecting its Yata and preparing to integrate them into Promontory's factories. A thoroughly

senseless gesture. They could be coworkers or they could be food, but they couldn't be both.

What did it matter?

*When BrushBurn is ready to see you, tell him-*

SandTail pursed his lips. Could TripStone even feel his fingers any more? She gave no indication either way. Her palm hung over the linen, unmoving.

What could he tell any of them any more? SandTail turned away from her and retrieved his cane from the wall, his coat from the chair.

He had other errands to perform. The cold felt good when it hit him.

The world turned colorless, all white sky and salt pan and Skedge punching through the two like a big black dowel. The mountains were nothing but shadows.

The center of town wasn't much better. A small detachment of Rudder's soldiers patrolled the streets, at ease and mildly concerned. Their presence here was more symbolic than anything. They weren't expecting a fight.

They wouldn't get one. Promontory's few citizens on the road shuffled up and down cobblestones and gravel, avoiding eye contact. This could be the afterlife, filled with shades of gray. Only the illusion of flesh remained, insensate.

SandTail lost track of time on his way to the Lodge. DustClaw wouldn't depart Promontory until morning. Despite his long torso, the courier was half-hidden by the bags of mail piled high on his table. They almost obscured the new insignia embroidered into his tunic.

SandTail couldn't blame him for aligning himself with the victor, especially since Rudder paid him for his services now.

A fast was being broken in one of the private rooms; the barrels in the Lodge held the only Yata meat left in the city. Lewd echoes from overhead faded behind quiet conversations in a spectacle as absurd as it was tragic. Hardly anyone talked about the dead hunters any more, or about Jirado. They all focused on the insipid game imported from the central valley.

Players filled every table in the parlor. Conquerors and conquered hunched over their cards and bone-shaped rocks, rattling their cups and dealing from decks. SandTail stared at the agents from Rudder, relaxed and neatly-dressed while the citizens they instructed slouched forward in smudged coveralls, intent on learning the rules. Workers left tables in mid-play to report to their shifts, replaced immediately by the next person waiting in line.

There was no better indicator that this town was dead. Promontory may have survived through its stoicism and willingness to sacrifice, but this was idiocy.

What else could they do?

DustClaw was as obsessed as the others. He didn't seem to notice when SandTail fished a letter from his coat pocket to drop by the mailbags. The man was too busy laying down his cards, lips curled back in an attempt to read his opponent's intent.

His seriousness merited some mild interest, but that was all SandTail could spare. He still had more to do before AgatePool came home. Better to just turn away now.

The courier's surprised call reached his back. "*Gria?*"

Yes, Gria. She deserved to know.

DustClaw could snoop all he wanted. He couldn't read the note unless he'd learned Yata, but so what? His round of play was probably much more entertaining.

No one looked up when SandTail passed them. Instead their fingers jabbed down at the cards, anchoring them with stone lozenges and laying others to the side. Some of his people stopped to jot down notes about strategy. Lists of value combinations, how one symbol's worth was conditional upon the next. Complex puzzles.

It was comical, really. Everyone was dying and playing Death to distract themselves. SandTail sighed and shook his head. It might actually make sense if he thought about it long enough.

He hobbled toward the doors as daylight faded and wicks ignited. At least someone had stopped playing long enough to light the lamps.

The houses all looked the same, oddly without depth, but they were a better sight than the scene behind him. The canyon breathed down SandTail's spine, clawing at his head.

He could still see the carts hauling up livestock for market season after season. Promontory had eaten well, once. Its smokestacks had belched contentment as more carts hauled metal goods up and over the high passes to Rudder and Crossroads. Ale spilled its guts in the tavern. Every hardworking Masari could point to an ancestor's blood in the stone and steel that had built this place.

How quickly that had all been wiped out of existence.

His people still poured into the canyon after the Farm was gone. The

hunts would have stopped altogether if they could have bred the Skedge Yata, but without Destiny that had been impossible. Promontory fasted and labored harder because that's what you did. After all that Promontory had already endured in its struggle for existence, no one could have have done anything less.

Now those hunters were gone and the only thing holding this town together was a card game. And the canyon turned from a grand, descending river of hope into a ravenous maw that SandTail couldn't look at any more.

He couldn't look at the Warehouse, either. It was an eggshell now. Nothing left for it to do but crack wide open and dump out its dregs.

He listened to the dull thud of his boots on featureless walks and followed streets that seemed scrawled rather than laid down. The mountains were extensions of the houses, everything layered on top of everything else.

SandTail rested his palm on his holster, still finding some depth there. The butt of his revolver retained its solidity. So did the shape of his hip, built up from bone with countless medicinal wrappings of Yata.

How many demons had dissolved into him? Had they returned him to his original form or only tricked him into thinking he'd been healed? If not for them, would he also be sitting at a table rattling stones in a cup and trying to deal his fortune?

SandTail pulled himself up the stairs, past piled burlap bags filled with tailings. He stepped from winter into his equally cold study.

No reason to light the hearth. Might as well leave his coat on the couch. He felt mild surprise when he didn't shiver.

The weight of Promontory's history books rooted him to the floor. They completely covered his low, broad desk and bent his strongest shelves. The cabinets packed with his ancestors' diaries sank into oak.

The tomes melted into each other, bound in Yata leather. Thick sheaves of preserved parchment bore census tables next to drawings made by sacrificed Masari children. All the maps and broadsheets, all the deeds and declarations, all of Crossroads' refusals of aid during the frontier wars. Those Yata-lovers sent different aid now, too late to make any difference.

Out of his desk grew his walls, hung with their ancient Yata musket and obsolete single-shot Masari rifles. Framed certificates and proclamations. Factory gloves worn by a father he hardly knew except in storied legend. Beery tales told by the grownups as they sat and filled piss buckets at the bar while SandTail sat on the frothy counter, listening wide-eyed and being careful where he put his feet.

He forced himself to move. Might as well leave the cane behind, too. Take hold of the desk corner. Let the books hold him up.

Ease through the doorway and lean against the kitchen table. SandTail's lightness began to return once he'd gotten past the ghosts in his study, limping beyond an afterlife smothered in parchment.

He paused for a moment in the bedroom, where AgatePool's scent still lingered in the chill. *You deserve better than this, my dear, but I can't give it to you.*

But maybe he could give something back to Promontory. Start to make up for everything he'd taken away.

The pantry had little left for consideration. Some dried snake meat, a barrel of potable water. They were out of cheese, but that had been mainly for his benefit, something he could guide easily down his gullet.

The tools in the storage room could be cleaned; they weren't his concern. SandTail pulled down bottles of preservative and set them safely back. He surveyed dark wood boards and rough-sanded chests, deciding where best to lean.

It was a cramped little room. He didn't have much choice.

He stripped off his shirt and tossed it aside. His ochre pelt had grown back and thickened. He could feel AgatePool's fingertips, the eighteen years between them teaching her where all his scars were located. Not even his fur could hide them from her.

Lately she'd found more. Hairline reminders of Gria's carving, crisscrossed where all the Yata bandages had built him back up. The least that devil could have done was push him over the edge with her knife, changing him enough to make a difference. He'd certainly changed her.

There was only one way to know.

DamBuster couldn't answer SandTail's questions. He'd have to become his own empirical evidence. He pinched his arm, still real, still solid. Whether he could sustain his people was another matter.

If the gods existed, he would.

He reached across his chest, gave his forearm an affectionate pat, and drummed, pointedly, *Don't go to waste.*

He pulled his revolver from its holster, released the safety, and cocked the hammer back as far as it would go. At least he had no tongue to get in the barrel's way. Not everyone was on shift. A neighbor or two would know what the sound meant, part of the same chorus all over the city. They would come for him.

It was almost too easy. High time something was.

He was as buoyant as a cloud when the shot rang out.

## **Chapter 57**

### **Early Spring**

#### **Crossroads**

HigherBrook's ears rang; they must be blood red by now. If not from the sheer force of Kova's screams, then from all the Yata epithets imported from Alvav.

Filthy curses, really. Marvelously inventive uses of anatomy. She'd been hurling them at him for hours and still no two were alike.

He wiped her brow, unleashing another torrent. When he slipped a fresh piece of dagger root into her mouth she chomped down on his fingers, breaking skin. New scars to add to the calluses from his pen and the reminders of battle.

He would treasure her tooth marks the most. A conspiratorial grin rose through her rage as he freed his hand. He wiped the moisture on his pectoral fur before he realized what he was doing.

It was that or the old trousers. He was gloriously rumped.



"Baby's crowning." Ghost knelt next to Piri, who massaged oil between Kova's legs. "Now's the time to get down here."

BubbleCreek smiled at him from above, on the edge of her chair, her slick arms locked above Kova's breasts. Kova hung onto her, squatting on tiptoe with knees wide and bunching canvas leggings in her hands.

One last kiss before the broad, bronze face twisted with another contraction and Kova tried to rip his chops off. HigherBrook leaned in. "I love you."

Kova panted, "You *worship* me, you bastard."

"That, too."

He laid his hand over hers and squeezed before backing away. Ghost moved aside as Piri's fingers danced on HigherBrook's bare arm. The child was small, she told him. Yata-sized. The top of the head was tan and bald and sliding.

"Only a small push, now," Ghost called when the room quieted.

HigherBrook looked from Kova's stern determination to Piri's fluttering hands as she checked the umbilical cord and cleared mucus. Her movements were automatic, midwifery born of a nursery where Yata women had delivered each other's children only to see them all taken away.

He lowered his voice. "Thank you for this."

She was too preoccupied to answer. From beside her Ghost said, "I think Piri would tell you she's thankful for the chance to see this baby in Kova's arms."

His wife nodded agreement, then grabbed HigherBrook's wrists and directed them as Kova moaned from above. He trembled on his knees at the sight of the warm, wet bundle he suddenly held. Sienna skin plastered with translucent, ruddy down. His daughter.

A small voice behind him said, "She's beautiful."

He couldn't talk. Couldn't turn around.

BubbleCreek called across the room, "He heard you, CatBird." She eased forward from her chair, lowering Kova to the stained linen on the floor.

The newborn passed to her mother with a hearty yell. Clamps closed. A blade snipped. Kova sighed as Ghost cut a sample from the placenta.

Further back a peg-leg stepped on wood boards, still shaky. Still used to crutches.

"I can take HeadWind now." BubbleCreek kissed the top of Kova's head and glided toward CatBird. Another baby shifted position.

*What were the chances?*

The unfinished question gnawed at the base of HigherBrook's spine. He couldn't contemplate now, when he needed so desperately to marvel.

Kova cradled their child and managed an exhausted, "Hello, Bless."

CatBird hobbled beside them. "That's ancient Yata, too, isn't it?"

"It meant 'little flame.' The kind used to start one fire out of another."

HigherBrook flashed her a quick smile. "You've been reading." His head was level with her flattened stomach. "CatBird-"

She squeezed his shoulder. "I'm all right, Sir."

She wasn't, but they couldn't talk about it now. She had gone to the Soala to grieve the loss of her child, accompanied by seven men. She had not told HigherBrook anything more.

He had learned not to ask.

The daughter who carried his blood napped on Kova's breast. Ghost murmured and Piri hummed as they continued their examination.

Kova whispered, "She's so tiny, Brook."

He blinked back tears. "If she looks tiny to you, imagine how she looks to me."

What were the chances of anything? Of a child free from Yata-dependence? Of one carried to term? Of survival in the hunting grounds? Of survival altogether?

TripStone was recovering. What of Promontory?

HigherBrook focused on a closed fist the size of his thumbnail and drove everything else away. He lay beside Kova and touched down-covered shoulders too soft and small to exist. How could he worry about what barely seemed real?

The fist seemed larger now, close up. More solid.

He had learned to ask the gods for one moment at a time. And this was a glorious moment to be alive.

~ ~ ~

## Basc

*I know you have been thinking about me, Gria. I've certainly thought about you.*

*We are permanently connected to each other. One always is to one's enemies. Intimately, as you and I have been.*

Gria closed her eyes and rested the parchment in her lap. The flourish of SandTail's hand, mere ink, shivered her skin.

Beside her, Zai spluttered, "I should never have let DustClaw give you that letter. I should have taken it myself and turned him away at the border."

"It's an open border now."

Still-naked oaks stretched claws into a windless sky. Gria leaned back against bark, snuggled in her coat and hood. The grove at the edge of Liberty Farm was as close as she could get to wilderness now without risking her life.

"He can't hurt me any more, Zai. DustClaw told me he's dead."

"He was believed dead before."

"They're sure, this time."

His face flashed before her with demon quickness. She caught her breath as her eyes sprang open. She could almost hear Zai think, *He's hurting you now*, but her companion kept silent.

Why read the letter at all? What could he possibly say to her?

"Lean against me." She reached around Zai's shoulders, but the tree held her to the world, this time. She comforted the commander, not the other way around.

The ink spoke in his grating tenor, clipped and lyrical by turns.

*Imagine my surprise when I learned you had commanded your army to spare my people. So quintessentially Yata, to preserve Masari for a more bitter fate. But you couldn't have known the consequences of your mercy. Another Yata has merely dressed in your mantle and finished what you started.*

*How much longer does Crossroads have before you run its duped fanatics into your sparkling vision of the afterlife? Believe what you want, lead your worshipers where you want, but yours is the path of deception. Your alliance is a sham, Gria. Any Masari-Yata alliance ultimately is.*

*It can't be helped. I don't blame you.*

"Doesn't blame *you*!" Zai stared at Gria with wide-eyed disbelief.

"It's funny, you know," Gria murmured. "For years I was convinced Yata and Masari could only be natural enemies. I thought the way he did."

"He *tortured* you!" Her voice shook. "Do you think I don't remember what I saw?"

"Zai." Gria wiped tears off her disciple's cheeks. "You saw me when I was most vulnerable. You gave me your strength when I was helpless. I can't begin to imagine what it must have done to you."

"I should have killed him when I found you."

"You were obeying my order."

"I don't know why, Honorable One."

Gria drew her closer. "I know why."

Without touching Zai, SandTail had committed his crime against both of them. But this letter was different. It was a caution, not a threat.

*A few hybrid children without Yata dependence. His script dominated the page. A few Sustainer Masari. Hopes raised and dashed in a fool's peace. How diligently you destroyed the Covenant only to engender something worse: nostalgia for that cursed faith.*

Gria restrained herself from yelping aloud. He had seen clear down to her heart and branded her. Not on the back of her neck like a Farm Yata destined for slaughter, but in places no one else could reach.

She gazed past bare branches to brown mountainsides. Whole swaths of evergreens were gone, sacrificed to war and to Basc's burgeoning industries. The landscape's destruction was the price of self-sufficiency and the freedom for which she had fought so hard.

Her first lover had been turned into killing grounds or was being killed itself. Was that why she turned away from it to watch the troubled mist rising from Zai's breaths?

"I know how you cared for me," she said, softly. "Even when I couldn't feel anything."

"I witnessed a miracle," Zai whispered. "How could I not care for you?"

Dear gods, how frightened they both were.

SandTail could be sitting here with them. Cross-legged, his compact body blending into the foliage. Calm now, unarmed. Waiting to see if Gria flinched as he spoke without moving his lips.

*Your noble intentions are as doomed as my own, and that is where you and I truly have become one. I know that Promontory will not survive, but I cannot change. Down to my final act I am trying to save my people, and that conviction is a defect in me. For even if my flesh could feed them as I so wished yours had done, I know I am only postponing our extinction.*

*That is your triumph, Gria, and only that. You should savor it. I would, in your position.*

*I still feel your blade in me. I know just how much you had carved away. Do you want to know how many Yata bodies built me back up? By sparing my life, you nurtured both my hunger and my need, and more of your kind were condemned to feed me and wrap me in their skins and heal me.*

*Is that the legacy you want? A waste of good meat?*

Her breaths turned heavy. She grimaced, forcing herself to read past nausea.

*You can't help yourself, and in the end I am no less sentimental than you. Had I the chance again I would stuff you with Destiny just as I had before. Your body would be against the Warehouse blocks,*

*my gun would be between your legs, and I would pull the trigger. I tell you this not out of malice but because of my love of Promontory, whose citizens I would do anything to protect.*

*That sentimentality is my greatest flaw because I believed my people would endure. Does it surprise you to learn that we share the same fantasy of Masari survival?*

*Think on that when you hear that I have died by my own hand. My misguided faith is just as strong as yours. I admit I did not expect we would be so much alike. As I write to you now, I feel closer to you than I ever have to anyone.*

*If the afterlife exists I will be there, waiting for you.*

His signature sprawled across the sheet.

Gria dropped the pages back into her lap. She stayed Zai's hand from grabbing them.

"You've read it," Zai said through gritted teeth. "We can destroy it now. It's filth."

Gria wheezed, "It's wise filth. Let it be."

"You can't be serious."

The sky was a hard, bright blue. "Even if he's right, I can't change who I am, either." Gria laced their fingers together. "I'm still here, Zai. He hasn't trapped me in the afterlife again. I can still feel your hand."

"That's beside the point."

She laughed a little. "No, my darling. It's not."



# Chapter 58

## Crossroads

Hardened ground began to give. Fog rose from fallow fields, blinding and clearing by turns.

Ghost looked toward disembodied yells. His son and Evit rolled in slush, their wet slaps filling the air. Soon they'd be covered in mud.

TelZodo's coppery face popped into view where the fog thinned. Thick, plum-colored hair flew like a mane behind him as he ran.

His hybrid body was maturing fast. His long limbs already pushed his growth ahead of his friend's. Evit, still chubby with Yata softness, hardly looked the older of the two.

Ghost turned away from the shrieks of tackling. They faded behind the rhythms of metalwork, a distant thresher under repair. His kin tended the animals in the barns or fanned out among storehouses and trench silos, but most of the people on the Grange were not of his blood.

Different-colored pelts blended into the fog. Like Ghost's, many households had been more than halved since the Covenant fell. They were not kin groups any more. The whole village was a single family now, laboring in heady anticipation of planting, or keeping watch over Crossroads' dwindling young.

Yucof's covered cart rested on the gravel road beside the lab, but Ghost hadn't ordered any supplies and the trader peddled his wares in the marketplace. This must be a social call, especially since the man had already gone inside.

It was the wrong time for a social call. Gossip about the Marsh was best heard at night, not midday. The prison turned walled and prosperous city had recently turned to selling gruesome souvenirs of the Games. Artisans whittled Yata and Masari warriors into ridiculously endowed sculptures, good luck and fertility charms. Or they sculpted lurid figures in mid-disembowelment. Yucof must be on a timetable, otherwise he'd be at Ghost's door after sundown, with a bottle of goldberry brandy in one hand and a copy of the latest obscene ballad in the other.

The former black marketer met him at the door, looking anything but jovial.

"It's you. Good." He peered around Ghost's lanky frame. "Are you alone?"

"TelZodo's out playing."

"Where's HigherBrook?"

"At the Rotunda or at home with Kova and Bless, I'd imagine."

Ghost waited patiently at the threshold until the smaller man waved him inside. Old wariness kicked in. They could be back at the prison, preparing to meet with smugglers and bribe the guards. His adrenalin rush felt refreshing after three seasons of respectable living.

Stairs had been pulled out beside his lab table, which sported a single, small crate and two lumps wrapped in rough linen. Even concealed in layers, the lumps bore a too-familiar shape. "Whose heads?"

"Chameleons'." Yucof stepped up and began unwinding the cloth. "These can go to HigherBrook when you're done with them, but he's not getting the rest of the remains. I killed these men in the central valley, not here. Neither your leader nor Zai has jurisdiction over the meat."

Yucof didn't have to say any more. His blunt tone told Ghost that the meat was in BubbleCreek's possession, to feed her when she broke and HeadWind when she weaned, if their daughter lived that long. He must have smoked the bodies on the road and cut them into preserved strips. Small packages, easy to hide.

The first head to emerge was wrinkled and puckered and had been since long before death. Ghost fingered a mass of gray hair as Yucof unwrapped the second. The dead could be grandfather and grandson.

"These were Jirado's resin suppliers. I'd be thankful if you didn't give me credit for their execution."

Ghost raised his eyebrows. The elder would have been easy to overpower, but the other head looked taken from a once-virile body. Keeping one's family fed was ample motivation, especially when given clearance to dispense justice. "You're sure these are the right Yata?"

"Jirado was kind enough to leave her confession with Edin. Piri's reading it now." Cloth wound back around high cheekbones dulled from bronze to gray.

"Jirado died weeks ago. Chameleons are known for their survival abilities. Why would Edin take that risk?"

"Ask Piri. The letter was addressed to her." Yucof shook his head.

"Jirado must have meant something to the old man even while he was on the run. Gods help me if I live long enough to get that sentimental." He levered open the crate and lifted sealed bottles of blood and tissue. "Samples for your work."

The heads were back to being linen-wrapped lumps. Ghost examined the bottles with cursory interest, but they weren't important right now. The letter to his wife was.

Yucof lifted the empty crate. "I've got another delivery to make, otherwise I'd stay."

"Not a delivery like this."

"Nothing so interesting." He quirked a smile. "Gria's ordered one of the first rifles produced in a Yata-Masari integrated factory. They call it the Reckoning. After all these generations it looks like Skedge is finally arming Basc."

If Skedge had succeeded the first time, there'd be no Masari left. At least it was only one rifle, not one hundred. "How does it compare with the StormCloud?"

"They've made some improvements." Yucof patted Ghost's arm. "Tell HigherBrook to place his order."

A few minutes later, Ghost heard chains ratcheting and lengthening outside. The wheels of Yucof's cart began to turn. Gears slipped into place, creating the illusion of lightened cargo as the trader gained momentum.

A door banged shut from behind. More ratcheting, more chains, but of stairs this time. They levered up from hidden wells and *thunked* down on the wood floor as Piri hauled on iron rings, again and again.

Her long, straw-colored braid jogged to one side and then the other. Her trousers ground against the floor as she knelt. She huffed, her bronze face reddening.

She wasn't preparing for research. The steps to her work table were up, but they were one set among many. She was pulling all of them out, her loud grunts competing with the noise. When she brushed by Ghost she shoved Jirado's letter into his hands, then continued her exertions on the other side of the lab.

He read amidst the clattering while his muscles jumped. Every few words he looked from the parchment to his wife to the preserved heads anonymous behind their wraps. Yucof had dispatched death without a second thought and out of love for his family. Jirado, as monstrous as her crimes were, had done the same.

The last stairs *whammed* into place. Piri backed away from them, hands dangling at her sides. Her fingers curled into fists.

"It's not worth hurting yourself over," Ghost said as she raised the fists above her head, ready to slam them against the counters.

She glared at him, panting. The object of her fury was impossible to tell. It could be anyone. Fright wavered behind Piri's rage, her eyes looking lost as she climbed to the heads and whipped off their coverings. She lifted cold flesh, heavy skulls one at a time, gazing into glassy, dead eyes. Her fingers tapped Edin's stiff and furrowed cheek, their movements slow and deliberate, where Ghost could see them.

*If the afterlife exists, and I believe it does, then you must take my message back to Jirado. And my husband, who sees what I am saying, must keep his distance from me for a while.*

Ghost nodded, concerned and a little confused, but she wasn't looking at him. With a start he realized he was being shut out, a witness only to her tumult. A Masari granted the illusion of intimacy with a Yata.

*Jirado, I have seven children who were taken from me at birth. I don't know whether they are alive or dead. I don't know who they are. If you see them and they know who their mother is, tell them that I love them.*

*If they are not in the afterlife, then they are like your kin in the canyon, unless your kin are also dead now I can't retrieve them. I can't retrieve anyone.*

*But I have never denied their existence for one moment, Jirado. You ask me if I remember the Farm Yata I left behind when I escaped. I remember them all. Not faces, not individuals, because we didn't live as individuals. We lived as a meat factory.*

*We loved as a meat factory.*

Piri cradled the head to her, her eyes shut against its open ones, her warm brow pressed against its cold counterpart. Ghost's stomach clenched. It was only a body part, an inert object. It didn't have the power to think, to act any more.

Then why did it look like a conduit to another world? Ghost tried to rub the chill from his arms, but they wouldn't move.

*You have passed into your existence as food, just as I will some day, his wife tapped. You are not alone in realizing the enormity of that fact, but I have known it always, while you had gone through a lifetime believing otherwise. Skedge only wants to forget what it has*

*learned. It cannot.*

*I know what your people have experienced at the Farm, though I cannot imagine their shock. And, yes, not even BrushBurn would understand. Neither would my husband, even though I have told him everything.*

*Jirado, your letter frightens me. Because if I had been raised as you were, if I were in your place and had your opportunities, I would have done the same thing. Do you think that I wouldn't murder to protect my children?*

*I must believe in you. I must believe in the afterlife, because I thank the gods whenever I hear of a Masari killed in the hunt, even those I have grown to love. I work to end their dependence on us so that some day I won't have to thank the gods so much.*

*I forgive you, Jirado, because even though we are not related by blood, you are my sister.*

Piri's long sigh filled the room. She laid her cheek on Edin's thick, gray mop of hair, then planted a kiss on his curls and set his head back down on the table. She drew up and knotted the linen.

Ghost stared at her, then at the parchment. Sixty-three Masari lay dead of poisoning and the future of Promontory with them. Two more, including the woman he'd almost married, were disabled. His wife had embraced the head of an accessory to mass murder, but her own confession was even more disturbing.

He said around hoarseness, "Jirado was mad, Piri."

She rewarded him with a blank glance, shaking her head as she

turned away.

"If she wasn't, then the rest of us are."

Piri ignored him. She descended the stairs and knelt beside them, hooking her fingers beneath the bottom board and shoving it up. She grabbed hold of the ring and eased the short flight back.

One by one the steps vanished, replaced by floor boards next to the examination tables, dissection tables, supply cabinets, counters. Up one side of the lab, down the other. Piri waited for Ghost to move out of her way.

She could slit his throat as he slept.

No. They had saved each other's lives and produced a wanted child together. They had fought for the right to be a family. They had mingled everything.

Everything but this.

Piri reached her work table and climbed. Astringency rode the air as she cleaned now-callused hands. They were still tiny, still graceful, sporting the occasional chemical burn. Splotches of darkness clustered amidst the bronze.

She clicked lenses into their iron scaffolding. Steel bands tightened as she rotated mirrors, bouncing light from a controlled flame. Piri belt over slivers of Masari pancreas, studying the remains of one boy slain in the hunting grounds and a second, displaced from Rudder, who had starved to death without Yata.

Her meticulous notes revealed everything about her hypotheses and her methods and nothing about her temperament.



Ghost opened his mouth, shut it. He couldn't blame her for feeling as she did, but he couldn't understand her, either. He couldn't come close.

"I'm sorry."

Words never sounded so inadequate.

He set Jirado's letter beside the two lumps, then gathered up the bottles from Yucof and moved them to the Yata side of the room.

## **Chapter 59**

### **Promontory**

Another shot rang out in the killing yard behind the gaming parlor. The reports came more quickly now as the fourth Death Bout dwindled to a close. Only a few players remained to puzzle out the cards. One cup rattled and spilled a final round of stylized bones, semiprecious minerals fused together.

Filigreed lamps hung from the ceiling and lined the walls, their wicks high enough to drive the shadows away. Most of the playing tables had emptied, the surviving players joining their comrades on the balconies. Open windows ferried heat outside, but everyone still sweated.

TripStone gazed down at her table's burnished oak. For a moment she saw only pictograms on laminated strips laid beside the lozenges of river-green beryl on one side and fire-orange quartz on the other. Which rock was Yata again, which Masari?

The beryl side was Masari, the color of FlitNettle's eyes. It should be

easy to remember.

*You want to forget.*

Forgetting meant she could die. She could lose this game. It would be so simple. Honorable, after all she'd done.

But if she won, Promontory would eat.

TripStone and her Yata opponent were evenly matched, but his sharp smell reeked of discomfort. Would he be this nervous if she hadn't won the previous bouts? As punishment for harboring Jirado, she and her family had been condemned to play every game, rather than trust their luck to the lottery.

FlitNettle watched from above, flushed from her victory. BrushBurn still huddled over his table across the room. The three of them, the perverse Yata-lovers of Promontory, had ended every contest by killing the loser.

A small bronze hand laid a Destiny card beside the quartz on TripStone's side. She couldn't parry it with her rifle card; she'd already laid that beside the beryl representing Crossroads. It was a neutral move, recapitulating Basc's sacred use of the drug. But it forced TripStone to draw from her deck, where the Death card still lay hidden.

She offered her opponent a smile. "You play well."

Deep indigo eyes met hers and gazed back down. She couldn't blame him for his silence. He did well to study the table instead.

He smelled of the mines. They opened more deeply, now that the Skedge Yata had joined the tunneling.

If TripStone won, she would feed Promontory but remove one of its valued laborers. If she lost, she would forfeit her life to that laborer. But her advanced weaning from Yata would do little to decrease Promontory's demand for their flesh, and her own skills in playing to obtain that meat would be lost.

She had to continue the game as best she could and leave the rest to the gods. Shrugging internally, she lifted another strip from her deck and studied the wavy pictogram for water.

Her opponent's knife card lay beside the orange-topped lozenge representing Skedge, placing it squarely in the frontier wars. Laying down the water there would combine with her constellation card for the Caterpillar rising at sundown, when TripStone could flood the salt pan. They'd both already used their boats.

A blast of dismay reached her nostrils, not from the Yata across the table but from the Yata standing behind TripStone, side by side with his Masari counterpart. Two monitors stood behind her and two behind her opponent to maintain order. Rudder's soldiers guarded the doors. Aside from an occasional skirmish, the only gunshots came from the killing yard.

BrushBurn's quiet, gravelly voice floated across the room, apologizing. TripStone glanced in his direction and couldn't tell who looked more ashen. In a minute he left the parlor to procure liquor for the Yata, whom he left in the custody of the monitors.

He wouldn't imbibe until afterward; he'd only recently learned to shoot cleanly. A woman moaned from the balcony and TripStone listened to the clumsy tread of feet too small for Masari stairs. She steeled herself to play against the sounds of tearful goodbyes.

TripStone's opponent slapped the pictogram of a chameleon's cart

next to the water, opening up arms trade with Alvav. Anger flashed in his eyes. If he held his rifle card and placed it on her lozenge for Basc, it could give him the game.

Nothing in TripStone's hand could block him. She reached for her deck, but another crack echoing from the killing yard stopped her from touching parchment. She looked across the room, where an empty table and a full brandy bottle told her that her husband had just executed his playing partner.

Tears spurted from her eyes. She wanted to dive after the bottle, herself. Scatter her cards randomly on the table and let her weak heart finally stop.

*If you're holding the rifle, use it.* TripStone plucked the midnight Dove at zenith from her hand and laid the starred card beside his quartz-topped lozenge. There; she'd made it winter in the Marsh. Fewer Yata prisoners got sick in winter, but the Games were more evenly matched. It was a neutral move.

She heard FlitNettle curse from above.

The Yata across the table didn't have the rifle card. He rested his bronze hand on his deck and lifted the strip. He looked at it for a long time as his scent fell flat.

The Masari monitor behind him sighed with audible relief. The Yata monitor's lips became a thin line as the parchment turned face-up to show a jumbled, unadorned skeleton and a skull in profile.

TripStone strode to the table where BrushBurn had been. She grasped the brandy bottle by its neck, brought it to her finished game, and slammed it down before her opponent.

He said, voice hollow, "You could always relinquish the win."

She answered in Yata, "Don't think that I don't want to."

The man lifted the bottle to his mouth with both hands. After a few gulps his shoulders relaxed.

TripStone asked, softly, "Is there anyone who should be here?"

"No." Golden liquid bubbled, flowed. "My family's dead." He set the bottle down before his cards and clasped his hands. "But tell AgatePool I won't be coming to her meetings any more."

"*Vyak*." It was as strong a Yata curse as she could manage. "Just my luck I have to shoot a Frontier Peace member."

"*Your* luck?" Indigo eyes twinkled. "*I'm* the one who's dying."

TripStone balled her hands into fists to keep from diving toward the booze. Of all the people she had to play, this was the type she least wanted to kill. AgatePool's incessant campaigning had brought together Yata who had lost loved ones to Destiny Farm and Masari who had lost loved ones to Jirado. Descendants of ancient enemies and recent battles comforted each other in their grief.

TripStone managed to whisper, "Do you have any last requests? Anything you wish to tell me?"

He shook his head. Together they watched the final two tables of players. Shiny dark brows on one side, ruddy chops twitching on the other.

The monitors clustered around them when they rose to approach the killing yard. But the Yata walked calmly to his death, like most of his

predecessors.

And like most Masari who lost the game. One less mouth to feed meant less risk of starvation for Promontory's remaining citizens.

DamBuster carried a dead neighbor from the arena, fresh blood joining the other stains on his apron. A slate board hanging on a post gave the bout's statistics: twelve games won by Yata, five by Masari. TripStone lifted chalk and added her victory to the tally while her victim studied a spattered wall.

His breathing quickened. "I wasn't expecting this." His voice tightened. "I don't care how you do it, but do it quickly."

TripStone dropped the chalk on the ground, hearing it split as she turned. "You've hugged Masari, yes?"

"Yes."

"You've found it comforting?"

His voice became small. "Yes."

TripStone nodded as her mind raced and her muscles bunched. She looked into eyes wide with fright. "May the gods bless you-"

"Ellet."

She blinked back tears. "Be with your family, Ellet."

She hugged him to her sunken chest, kissed his forehead, and broke his neck. She was still too weak to carry him. She waited until DamBuster took the Yata from her to spirit to the cutting table.

"Oh, good," a familiar voice said behind her. "Someone gets fed."

When had she closed her eyes?

TripStone opened them. She watched as the victor of the next-to-last game retrieved broken chalk from the ground and reached high up to record another Yata win. Off to the side, flanked by monitors, NailBit offered TripStone a contrite smile.

"I would be honored to be dispatched by a fellow hunter," the Masari said. "If my friend here agrees."

TripStone nodded. She accepted a Reckoning from a monitor and inspected it. Even armed with smaller and better-balanced rifles, the Skedge Yata were still learning how to shoot.

"Don't look so sad, Trippy. I'm joining our friends."

"I'll miss you." She slid the buttplate closed.

"I'm only a level two *yatanii*," NailBit chirped. "Don't miss me too much."

The slow weaning that kept him out of the doomed base camp had caught up with him in the lottery. His forced grin almost distracted TripStone from her own dread.

The victorious Yata looked on attentively as TripStone settled into position. She breathed the odor of sawdust swirling in the early spring breeze and took aim.





# Chapter 60

## Crossroads



Broad tents ringed the Grange's fallow fields. The last snows melted into the ground, softening it for the planting to come. Heavy stones joined spikes to hold the cloth down.

Bleached canvas billowed with occasional gusts of wind. From the mountaintops the scene must look like a bright, sunlit necklace worn by a giant, but CatBird saw only phantom archers when she looked toward the ridge. Their arrows screamed from above, driving Masari into the soil. The Covenant hunters dropped without armor, with only single-shot rifles, stricken with surprise and confusion as they died.

The sky had been as blue as this on the day of the massacre. It had begun with prayers, just as this day had begun, when CatBird had been only a girl.

She leaned on a single crutch to adjust one strap on her shoulder and another rounding her upper leg, snugging her prosthesis about its stump. The long walk to Crossroads had numbed her, but refusing offers of passage had been more than a matter of pride. She had to get used to walking and to keeping her muscles conditioned. Promontory would expect no less of her.

The Yata had been arriving all day. Soon they would come again to the Grange for the spring Lacuna, when nothing mattered but getting

seed into the ground. CatBird wouldn't be here for it.

"I expect you back for the harvest."

HigherBrook's terse comment reached her from behind. She turned and he enfolded her in a bone-crushing hug.

"Do you just hear my thoughts?" she asked against his coat. "Or do the gods tell them to you?"

"You're still my daughter, CatBird. Even an adoptive father has certain mystical powers."

She drew back and studied his face, trying to tell if he was joking.

If only her own perceptions were better calibrated. HigherBrook's scent was a mass of conflicts. His giddiness over his new daughter warred with the sadness of separation. "I *am* coming back, Sir."

He brushed his chops against hers. "I know you are."

*TripStone left Crossroads a year ago. She said she was coming back, too.*

The thought rose unbidden. Were they CatBird's, or was she hearing his?

More Masari filled the fields; the front row began to form. CatBird took her position among the other Hunt Guild children orphaned in the massacre. A second line formed opposite them, with Gria and Zai at its center.

Soon the space between the lines would run with plowed rows. Yata and Masari would mingle with each other, keeping time with work songs sunup to sundown for days. CatBird had embraced the very

people she regarded across a chasm now. Some had already confessed their atrocities in passing conversation, but many had not until today. Discomfort and relief lined dozens of faces, one shifting into the other.

More body heat rose as shuffling sounded behind her, the second row of Masari. Those who had lost friends and neighbors joined those who had lost kin. HigherBrook squeezed her shoulder.

He should be out in front, not behind her, but he insisted on taking a secondary position. This was Atonement. Even Ghost, who had witnessed neither the massacre nor its bloody aftermath, stood down the line from CatBird with what remained of his family.

The survivors faced what was left of Gria's original militia and Zai's raiders. Other Basc Yata stood behind and to either side of the guilty, as though the entire village had been culpable. Far to the left, somber and blameless, Izzik shared a last day with the other members of his household before he departed for Skedge.

The Yata in the arid lands had shown their eagerness to learn merciful killing techniques from a Preserver. The Promontory Masari would be harder to teach. Izzik would probably return to Basc long before CatBird did.

*Is that why you're sending him away, Zai? To get rid of me because you knew I'd follow? Or to punish him and his family for loving me?*

She couldn't think of that now. When she came back, only Izzik would have the power to turn her away.

CatBird gazed at Zai's obvious discomfort and reigned in her satisfaction. The Yata commander had been imprisoned and rehabilitated. She had openly praised the Masari and worked for

peace between their villages, but had never apologized for what she had done. This day she wore a plain woolen coat and a thin tunic, with no uniform to hide behind.

Gria had dressed just as modestly, but even leaning on her walking stick she was a tall, composed column next to Zai's compact stiffness. The Honorable One could stop Zai from sending Izzik to Skedge, but she hadn't. If the gods were guiding her, they must agree with the commander.

Tent cloth flapped in the wind. The pines echoed with squabbles over nesting rights, while down on the ground CatBird listened to an uneasy peace.

Gria moved first, advancing with slow paces ahead of the line. A shiny strap crossed her woolens. The sun glinted off a barrel ending above her shoulder, too small to be a StormCloud. No other Yata was armed.

Gria's old, once-secret militia followed until CatBird could see everyone's faces clearly. She couldn't tell who killed whom that day. No one could. All of them together were one aggressor and one victim, shattered into pieces.

"Citizens of Crossroads!" Gria's voice still rang with the hint of a slur. "I come before you not as the soul of Basc. Not as messenger to the gods, and not as The Honorable One.

"I bear no honor this day. Instead I come before you as a suppliant and a former soldier, seeking your forgiveness for the crimes I have committed against you and against those whom you have lost."

Fingers brushed against CatBird's. She let go of her crutch and squeezed the hand on her right, reaching out to her left. The Hunt

Guild orphans faced forward, too proud to share their tears and too reserved to glance to the side. CatBird still smelled everyone's salt. The younger ones tried to be strong, but they were all holding each other up.

Gria faced the line of tents as a breeze ruffled her hair. She winced before turning back to the Masari. "For generations you have paid respect to our dead. In this new era we have learned to pay respect to yours. Six seasons ago we had no such recourse. I trained my troops to kill your hunters. Your neighbors, your parents, your mates." Her sad gaze traveled up and down the line. "None of you was given the chance to make remembrance to us. What I thought would free my people nearly destroyed us all. For that I am deeply sorry.

"You honor me by calling me your friend. I had not believed that possible."

She unstrapped a rifle too new to have seen war and set it before her on a bed of brown grass. Her voice carried on the wind as she straightened. "Today, I and those under my command shall bow before the dead we have wronged and before you whom they have left behind. Whose trust we have violated and who fell when they were most devout and vulnerable and unsuspecting. Today, before the gods, I pay homage to SkimmerDusk. StarRose. MossDancer. TreeRain..."

CatBird stiffened as Gria called out her mother's name, and suddenly all the Yata were a blur. Tiny shudders sent shockwaves up and down the Masari lines. Each incantation was a bullet. Bodies lurched as memories found and split their targets.

CatBird's father CrowGrip shot across the field and lodged in her breast. Her oldest brother SedgeHeart. StingGarden, the moody brother caught between them. Everything she had forced herself to

forget steamed up from the warming ground until she gasped for breath.

FeatherFly. ShadowGrass. TripStone should be here to witness her kin remembered. NightShout, who succumbed ultimately to wounds and grief.

Those who died during the raids. Those who died from dysentery. Those, like old WindTamer, who had died simply from exhaustion.

Across the divide the Yata stood respectfully and uncomfortably through Gria's recitation. CatBird's neck fur stiffened, her pelt fluffing beneath her clothes. In the flick of a dream she was running across the field and snatching the rifle by Gria's feet. She centered her aim on one heart and another, and another, until all that remained was a crumpled line of motionless limbs and inky blood flooding the ground. The air around her crackled with acrid scent. Her absent toes itched. Her knuckles must be white from squeezing because she couldn't feel her hands any more.

The names didn't stop. They were so few, compared to all the Yata lineages memorialized in the Rotunda, but they still didn't stop. They had increased over time, incubating and multiplying, but that couldn't be.

Then the world fell away and warblers were the only sounds left before the crows called out. Canvas fluttered. Trees breathed. CatBird listened to them through the mists of her own breath and blood.

Gria retrieved her gun from the ground and held it out. "This rifle is called the Reckoning. It was manufactured by Yata and Masari working together in Promontory. Under the Covenant our Day of Reckoning was the day of your sacred hunt, until we turned that day

into a massacre." She raised her head. "HigherBrook."

CatBird released her grip to let him pass. A reassuring squeeze warmed her shoulder before he took measured steps across the field.

Gria met him in the center, wobbling slightly without the walking stick she'd left behind. She remained unsteady as she backed away empty-handed. Zai stepped up beside her, vigilant and protective.

More of the new guns had arrived. Relinquishing this one was only a symbolic gesture. It might not even be loaded.

A flush climbed CatBird's cheeks. How much longer must her rage ride her? How many demons? She observed Zai's thin-lipped studiousness, the commander's barely-concealed glare, and could be gazing into a mirror. How could she train Promontory to control its contempt for the Yata when her own prickled her skin?

HigherBrook filled the empty space behind her. Their lines closed again.

"As we are helpless before the gods, so too are we helpless before each other." Gria unhooked and lifted her woollens from her shoulders. "Of the three hundred thirty eight soldiers who joined with me to destroy the Covenant, eighty-seven remain. We are at your mercy."

Eighty-eight black coats dropped to the ground with a sound like falling wheat.

"Hear our names, Crossroads, and know our guilt." She squared her shoulders. "Plor. Taba. Doru...."

Thin tunics whispered atop the coats. Plain trousers. The Yata disrobed as their names were called, lifting bare feet. CatBird looked upon callused soles and intersecting scars. Newer ones, still red against bronze, knotted with old, puckered lines that faded almost completely away.

Early spring chill raised gooseflesh. It spread down the line in a naked furrow as though confession could be cultivated. Fertilized and controlled, harvested with its seeds saved. CatBird swallowed, trying to wash the bitterness from her throat.

She didn't know where enemies ended and bodies began. She had killed and cut up so many that the line of living soldiers became a phalanx of the dead fused back together. They blurred again, re-focusing into men and women with whom she had broken bread. She had trained with them and marched by their side. She had guarded and treasured their children.

She had helped save the Yata of Basc when she hadn't tried to destroy them. They had helped save Crossroads when they hadn't tried to destroy her.

"Lotzil." Gria exhaled a slow breath and glanced to the side. "Zai."

The commander's face was a mask as she stripped. Gria named herself, more loudly than the rest, and uncovered a maze of ruptures. Force of will alone seemed to hold her together.

Zai, who must have seen Gria naked more than anyone, trembled beside a woman butchered by the gods. She dropped ungainly to her knees as the former general assumed the position of atonement. Eighty-eight Yata pressed their foreheads to the ground, their cold backs exposed.



CatBird swallowed a sob. Her mother had groveled like this. Her father. Her brothers. As a girl she had practiced her own prostration, rehearsing the sacred remorse she would be able to truly feel once she had come of age.

The innocent of Basc passed behind their bent comrades and padded toward the tents. They began to light lanterns and prepare writing tables for remembrances. When they were finished they would quietly withdraw, ducking into the windbreak and traversing the paths home.

Stories crowded CatBird's head, shoving each other aside, each wanting to be the first. Small things. The dimple she would never see again in her father's smile. The day she'd bested SedgeHeart in wrestling, only to catch his cough.

The heartbreak in StingGarden's face when he returned home after his first hunt, with a naked, dead Yata draped over his shoulder. On that day the sacred remorse CatBird craved had become a real and terrible thing.

She had so much to tell.

Her people let each other go, shaking life back into cramped hands. They took hesitant, short steps across the field. The sight of the repentant drew all the Masari forward, pulling and lengthening their strides like magnets.

An exhausted Gria clung to HigherBrook as he helped her to her feet. Shivering Yata left their clothes behind, stumbling toward tents on the arms of Masari. CatBird punctured a trail until she stopped before Zai. She shifted her weight to her booted foot.

The commander lifted a dirt-smudged forehead and squinted at

tapered wood. Her face was startlingly wet.

CatBird couldn't drive the roughness from her throat. "I hadn't expected tears from you."

Zai sat back on her heels. Dark specks tumbled between her breasts as she shuddered. "This is what it's like to know your guilt."

"You killed us because you wanted to, not because you had to. You don't know my people's guilt." She reached down. "Just as I will never know your hate."

"You've wanted to."

They grasped each other's arms. CatBird braced her left leg as Zai levered herself up.

Inside the tents the air thickened with recitations. Silent Yata leaned forward, listening to Masari whom memory made feverish. CatBird was ready to burst with hers, swaying beneath phantom hands and spectral smiles. She hobbled through a hemorrhage of the afterlife.

Zai guided her to an empty table and waited for her to unstrap from wood.

"I never hunted under the Covenant." CatBird dropped into her chair. The Yata wore no clothes, but the Masari was the one stripped. "You never gave me that chance, so how can I understand my family's suffering? You don't know their guilt, but / don't know their guilt, either. You've robbed it from me. Even that connection I could have had with them is gone."

This was not how she wanted to begin. If the hunts were more equal now and the valley more united, then why was she so distressed?

"Do you know that the first Yata flesh I consecrated was stolen meat from Destiny Farm?" Heat rose to CatBird's face above puffed fur. "I couldn't bless my gods, but I could bless Promontory's livestock because they were the only thing left. I knew all the hymns. I knew all the motions. I'd watched my parents and my brothers pray over hundreds of bodies."

Her fist wavered inches from Zai's face. "All my life I wanted to *touch* that. I wanted to know what they knew and feel what they felt no matter how awful it was for you. You would have had such a *worshiper* in me, Zai. But I couldn't worship you any more, so I had to kill you as best I could. My prowess doesn't frighten you. My *devotion* does."

CatBird's devotion welled up through her phantom leg and swirled inside her murderous womb. It filled her throat, speaking through her before she could think.

She leaned forward and slammed a sheet of parchment on the table. "I remember my mother singing to me when I was very little, and I learned the melody before I knew what the words meant. But in less than a year I could dissect a Yata, sticking my knife into one made out of mud. I pretended so hard that it was almost more beautiful than I could bear."

Zai whispered, "We were things to you."

"Yes, and you're going to write down how you were things. How the gods and the demons are things. That's the only way they have any power at all. My memories are things, and today they give me power over you. Because that's what happens when you take love away from people."

The afterlife ran backwards. The dead mended and sprang full-blown from CatBird's mouth. Her brothers snuck her into the old tavern for

her first taste of ale and she hiccuped all the way home. She rode on her father's back and discovered a bird's nest with pretty speckled eggs. Between the hunts were winter soups and summer festivals. One Thanksgiving Day she buried herself in a transport, pretending to be part of the tithe to Basc just so she could look upon a living Yata. But her excitement betrayed her, and TreeRain sniffed her out even through the heady perfume of the harvest.

Zai's script skewed. She couldn't keep up, her wrist already stiff. Her elbow would ache soon. Cords stood out on the Yata's smooth neck, but her struggle was only physical. She was not trained to memorize stories as the Masari had been. They wouldn't lodge in her dreams. They would sluice through her and wash away like so much spilled ink.

CatBird listened to a burst of laughter from a far corner. Another Masari dabbed at moist eyes. A third spoke in an angry tremolo. The tent was a multitude of smoky voices all asking the same thing, no matter what they said.

*Who will remember us when we are gone?*

The Yata would live forever, but the Masari were fading away.

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