

Skii FURIOUS HEART



A NOVELLA BY
NICHOLAS RYAN HOWARD



SKII *Furious Heart*

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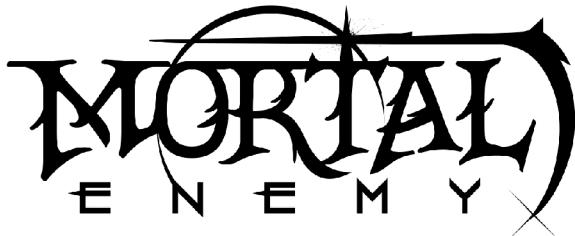
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For A.S.

ONE

“One blink may turn you from hunter to prey.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside the township of Radeon

A drop of moisture cut a jagged line down her cheek.
The bead dangled, threatening to fall from her chin.
She didn't flinch.

The conditions were miserable. Rainy sleet slapped the ground, covering the terrain in pockets of slush and chunky ice. Skii hated the ice. *Hated it.* Ice made you slip. Unsure footing was the second-to-worst thing for a hunter.

The first was blinking.

Her father taught her that. Loss of sight, even for an instant, could cost a hunter everything. It could mean more than simply losing track of prey...

It could mean *becoming* prey.

So she fought against her eyes, which begged her to blink. The day was young, but grey clouds slung darkness over the forest making her target harder to track by the moment. A thunderous rumble in the distance foretold that the sputters of precipitation would soon give way to something far worse.

She pulled in air equally between her nostrils and mouth. The cold stung the back of her throat. She wanted to shift; her layered stockings were freezing to her legs, and the holes in her dress were letting the wind claw its way to her skin. But she held steady, still unblinking, still remaining on her stomach, still in the mud. After all, she had waited out things for far longer and in far worse conditions.

“**Better hurry,**” said a voice in her head.

“Shut it,” Skii whispered to Cassidy, the teddy bear strapped to her back.

“**It's going to get away,**” the voice taunted again.

Skii ignored her. Cassidy was her best friend, but that did not mean she was immune from getting on her nerves. The bear loved nothing more than to heckle her

when she was trying to be stealthy, constantly filling her mind with taunts and dares. While others couldn't hear the cavalier and surly prattles of the inanimate object strapped to her back, to Skii, the conversations between them were just as real as any.

•I sure hope that thing doesn't bite!• Cassidy added with a deep, rumbley chuckle.

Skii forced herself to not roll her eyes, and none too soon. The snowshoe hare she was fixated upon took three hops closer. Its little pink nose twitched, sniffing.

Skii remained silent.

•Lemme loose!• Cassidy bellyached. **•One bite and we got 'er. Just a little one. I won't use all my teeth this time. Paw-promise, Skii. Paw-promise!•**

"You'll wake up the whole forest, dummy. And this one we can take alive."

Cassidy grumbled in protest.

The hare hopped closer, now inside the area between Skii's flat-in-the-muck, outstretched arms. Skii wiggled her left hand and, startled, the hare reacted by bounding toward her right.

A single swipe was all it took.

"Hot damn, I'm fast! Faster than a bunny-bun!" Skii bragged to Cassidy. She held the animal by the scruff of the neck and raised it to eye level. It was cute. Fat. It didn't fight. It sniffed her wet nose.

•Let's have a nibble!• Cassidy drooled.

"Naw. This one we bring back to The Grizz. The storm's getting close, and they'll need all the live food they can get. Alive is always better. Means a fresh meal in the thick of the snowfall. This little fluff ball may save a life."

•Fine,• Cassidy conceded. **•But I still wanna munch it.•**

"I'm gonna give it a name."

Cassidy gasped.

"I know, I know. If you name something, you get attached." Skii rubbed the hare against her cheek, it was *very* soft. "As such," she addressed it, "I'm gonna call you Din-Din. That way, neither of us gets the wrong idea about your delicious fate."

Cassidy purred, pleased with the compromise.

"I caught you easy," Skii said to the hare as its legs ran in place. "Where you trying to run to, plumpy? I'd just catch you again! I'm guessing you don't have any babies... you're *clearly* not sharing food with anyone. So, I don't feel the least bit bad for taking you from your home. Look on the bright side. At least you get a change of scenery. Plus the pleasure of my company!"

•And mine!• gloated Cassidy.

"Yes, and yours, pretty girl. Just don't be stealing a snack when I'm not looking."

Skii gently placed the hare in the hunting sack attached to her hip. *Finally a capture*, she thought. It had been a few days since she had caught anything. Game was becoming scarcer as the temperature was growing colder.

She glanced up and shivered, shocked at how thick the clouds had become in such a short time. At this rate, she would have to end her expeditions far faster than expected. The Grizz would want her back at camp, not running the risk of getting stuck in a blizzard. They were still nomads, and still wild as hell, but they weren't uncivilized. *Bodies over burden*, that was their motto. It meant the tribe must stay together at all costs and survive through any burden. Including a lack of food, should that be their fate.

It'll be a lean Winter, Skii thought, *but there should be enough grub to go around*. Although there were more tribespeople than ever (due to some late-in-the-season deserter pickups from the usual townships), there was a cave full of live animals—and another full of dead ones—back at camp. If they rationed, there would be enough meat to last until the snow melted. Skii took pride in this; even at the age of sixteen she was, no question, the tribe's best hunter. At least half of their food was because of her. The thought filled her with gratification, albeit a touch of guilt...

While she experienced stealth as a kind of methodical, ritualistic zen, she never enjoyed the taking of an animal's life at the end of a hunt. Killing things was never her thing, but in the wild, there was no choice. Crops could only grow so fast, and farming within her tribe's territory was impossible in the winter months. Plus, swaths of farmland was a clear indicator of settlement, and concealment was essential to survival. While Corpo-Bots were plentiful in the habitable zones and delivered goods to populated areas, in the outskirts where tribes roamed free, a bot flying overhead drew massively unwanted attention. Furthermore, a reliance on technology meant attachment to it. Nomads cherished, above all, their ferocious independence.

The sack dangling at her hip swung about. "Settle down, Din-Din," Skii whispered to the hare searching for an exit. "You're safer with me than you are out there. At least *we're* not going to eat you for a few months."

•Don't you dare squeeze that thing,• Cassidy griped, not bothering to mask her jealousy. **•I'm your squeeze bear. I am.•**

"Don't get possessive," Skii said, reaching behind to comfort her with some scratchies...

...but she stopped.

The quiet suddenly felt quieter.

Too quiet.

She listened.

She sniffed the air.

It held a tinge of bitterness.

Wet fur.

"Skizzbutts," Skii said.

•Double-skizz,• said Cassidy.

A beast behind them snarled.

TWO

“Get the kill. Get the kill, or be the kill.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside the township of Cy-Klai

Its eyes flashed hatred.

It watched.

And drooled.

Skii forced herself to stare down the grizzly bear. *I'm the alpha*, she postured. *I'm not your prey*. Adrenaline pumped into her veins. Her fingers tingled.

A rope of saliva dangled from the animal's mouth. Its black lips quivered, savoring the forthcoming kill. A final meal before hibernation.

Cassidy's voice filled Skii's head. •**It's one of my kind! Let's go say hi!**•

Skii did the opposite. She took a step backward. The beast slapped the ground then stood tall, parading its massive frame with arrogance. It shook the forest with a roar.

•**Rude! We are definitely not related!**•

“Keep quiet!” Skii snapped. “You, too, Din-Din. I'm trying to think!”

•**Lemme loose!**• insisted Cassidy. •**One growl and I'll scare off this dummy!**•

Skii inched her hand behind her back toward Cassidy—and the grizzly blasted malice from its gut. It gnashed its teeth and scratched at the soil, leaving gashes in the mud.

Skii froze her movements.

It blinked.

Gotcha, Skii thought, her hand now on Cassidy. She was *that fast*. A blink was all it took to equalize the odds. There was no way she could survive this attack alone, but with Cassidy by her side, she stood a chance.

The bear stepped closer, but did not charge. Clouds of breath froze in the air in front of its snout.

Come on. Make your move. Skii's heart entered into a rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* as she prepared to defend herself.

The bear's eyes flared.

Skii dove to the side. Claws flew past her face. She caught a whiff of sour breath. The bear scrambled to catch its footing on the frozen mud.

Skii snatched Cassidy from behind and flung herself onto to her back. She gripped the stock of the teddy-bear-decorated repulser shotgun and took aim; the open mouth of the stuffed animal—the barrel—pointing at the beast. Skii cocked Cassidy's pump-handle. *Shlick-shlock!* The priming of the weapon pulled air into its chassis, storing it as volatile energy.

But there had only been time for one cock. A blast from a single-priming, though strong, would not be powerful enough to knock back an animal this burly. It would take at least two, if not three, pumps.

The bear snarled. And charged again.

Skii rolled to the side and tossed a fistful of mud upward, spattering the animal's face. It shook its head in protest and pawed at its sludge-covered eyes.

Skii was back on her feet. *Shlick-shlock!* Cassidy was now double-primed.

The beast widened its stance, preparing to lunge. Skii took aim and fired. *Bah-doom!* A shockwave of energy flew from Cassidy's mouth and smashed into the bear. The force shoved it backward. Hard. It toppled onto its back, and it let out a shrill cry.

"Ready to growl, pretty girl?" Skii asked Cassidy.

•Let's show this chump what we can do!•

Shlick! Skii held down the shotgun's pump-handle and a steady stream of air flowed into the barrel. The weapon whined with overload. The bear got to its feet... and faltered. It was either injured, or its arrogance had waned. It started toward Skii, significantly slower than before, but still pissed.

Shlock! Skii released the slider, pointed upward, and pulled the trigger. A sonic thrum, like a growl, accompanied blue energy fountaining from the barrel. The discharge encapsulated Skii in a protective shield.

The charging bear panicked, frightened by the phenomenon. But it could not get traction on the icy mud. Its flailing body slid into the energy dome and the shield crackled with disruption, creating a mess of sparks and singed fur. The animal howled with pain and wrecked pride. It scrambled away. But did not flee.

Cassidy sputtered, running out of power. The energy field waned.

The bear stalked her. It limped as it paced. "Come on!" Skii screamed. "I want you to do it. I *need* you to do it!" She cocked Cassidy several times, in a taunt.

The grizzly huffed. Its lips twitched.

"Come on!"

The bear howled a reply to the challenge, then charged.

Skii braced her stance, took aim, and shot a burst of energy at the bear. The force lifted it from its feet and slammed it into a tree, cracking the trunk. The defeated—

but still alive—animal collapsed into the mud. It wheezed. Its eyes were closed but twitching, disoriented.

Skii approached the stunned animal and held Cassidy's barrel to its head. Her finger moved onto the trigger.

“Don’t!” said Cassidy. **“That bear’s just a grumpy-face. She didn’t mean it, Skii.”**

“I have to,” Skii said. “It’s my final test. Hunting a bear completes my rite of passage with The Grizz.”

“You can’t!”

Bears were extremely rare, and she had survived a battle few would attempt. And even fewer would walk away from. She knew she may never get an opportunity like this again.

“I have to.”

“Wait!”

“I’m sorry. Close your eyes. Don’t watch this.”

Cassidy whimpered as the barrel touched the grizzly’s face...

...but Skii did not fire.

A mournful wail came from behind the hill. She knew the sound the moment she heard it: a cub calling out for its mother. The call was wild but filled with heartfelt longing. A sentiment Skii instantly recognized. She, too, knew the feeling of wishing for mom.

Skii stepped away. And cursed at herself. Cursed at what she was giving up.

The bear’s eyes opened. Sensing opportunity, it righted its damaged body.

“Go on, get out of here!” Skii shouted. She cocked the shotgun multiple times, and: *Bah-doom! Bah-doom! Bah-doom!* She fired blasts of energy, but not at the animal. At the ground in front of her. Mud, branches and shattered ice launched into the air with each impact. The chaotic sounds and visual mess terrified the bear.

It fled, toward its child.

Skii listened. Soon she heard the cub’s squeaks of joy as it was reunited with its mother.

She sucked in a breath of relief and steadied her heart.

Din-Din settled down, inside the sack.

And Cassidy purred with pride.

THREE

“Never run. Never hide. Evaporate. The other two leave a trail.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside The Alchemist's stronghold

The snow arrived.

Winter was no longer coming... it was *here*. The sky dumped hard, blanketing the forest in an oppressive white.

Skii's freedom diminished as the inches of powder rose. She knew the worsening conditions meant it was time to return to the tribe. Like a domineering overseer, the gusts of wind pushed her away from the outlands and toward the base camp of The Grizz.

By stroke of luck, the journey netted her two pheasants and a gopher. She could not take them alive, as Din-Din wanted no part of sharing Skii's hunting sack with anything living. But the trade-off was worth it; while it was admittedly a pain to accommodate her new friend, she quite liked Din-Din's company, despite the extra weight it meant she had to carry. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, she would sneak little pets and back scratches... although *never* in front of Cassidy. She could be insufferable when jealous.

Camp grew near.

Skii admired the scenery of the forest clearing. In the weeks to come, the landscape would be totally whitened out, but for the moment, she could take in the sight of the rolling hillsides. To her, they resembled a fleet of turtle shells. More than simply a unique natural phenomenon, the hills hid tremendous secrets. A system of interconnected caverns ran underneath, providing shelter from the merciless forces of nature. And, volcanic activity created a heated subterranean with pools of water that bubbled year-round. Dozens of natural hot springs, both above and below the surface, provided warmth and comfort in even the coldest days.

But more than the comfort of the environment was the warmth of her fellow tribespeople. With so much time spent alone in the wilderness—just her and Cassidy—returning to a bustling community after a sojourn in isolation was a joy. True, she was fine on her own and even preferred it at times, but camaraderie offered her something rarely found in isolation: *fun*. The fun of friendship, the fun of gossip, and the fun of dancing and singing. Celebrations of new life, supporting each other in times of loss, and the rush of spirit bounding from overcoming obstacles as a group were enticements that always pulled her back to the tribe.

That, and the pangs of longing she experienced daily—hourly—for familial love were soothed by her adopted family. While she was an outsider, not having been born of the tribe, they had welcomed her as such. Her tribe supported her in ways she never would have known she needed, had she not let herself join their ranks. She reflected upon how they nursed her through her first pox. How they protected her during a raider attack. And how her closest friends were there to hold her the first time she bled as a woman—then protecting her freedom by hiding it from the tribal elders.

Skii touched her hair, which was frozen in clumps. She loved it when it did that; she found the biggest dreads and pulled them apart in a soothing catharsis. She rolled her fingers together and felt the residue. It was oily, signaling it was *definitely* time for a bath. She knew she probably reeked as well, but she didn't care. There was no one to impress, even though there were quite a few tribespeople who always went out of their way to attempt to impress *her*.

Especially Dirke.

Ugh! She had to search harder for frozen hair to distract herself from thoughts about Dirke. He was the best hunter in the tribe—*save for her, of course*—and he was tall. Very tall. But the creep wanted to put a baby in her. Although he never outright said it, she could tell that was what he wanted. After all, The Grizz prided numbers above all else. Becoming a parent meant privileges, and a huge increase in status among the tribespeople.

But having a kid? *Nuts to that!* she thought. She liked kids well enough, but one of her own? The idea seemed insane, though girls her age often succumbed to the pressure to do so... and because of the seduction of perks. Though, for Skii, those were not factors. Her concern was much different: the wild had grown familiar to her. Comfortable. Uncertainty was where she now found reprieve, like it had become hardwired into her DNA. So much of her young life was spent wandering the outskirts that traversing its dangers was part of her very being. What would happen if her wanderlust was suddenly stymied by a big fat belly?

Worse was the thought of actually *making* that baby. The very idea of Dirke touching her made her gag. *Though, she thought, it is fun to make him look like an ass.* She had him beat when it came to hunting, which she threw in his face time and time again, but in tracking she only had him slightly edged out. The guy *did* have talent, but not as much as her. So, rub it in she did, every chance she got. His total lack of a

sense of humor meant a consistency in his reactions, always the same, every time. Stoic. Unyielding. Frowny. He was a chiseled statue of aloof grump.

Skii crested the largest hill. Many of her tribespeople were beneath her feet at that very moment; the cavern below served as the dining commons, though mealtime was still a way off. Skii squinted hard, scanning the twin peaks in the distance. She waved to her friends Salsina and Coy, who were on watch. Though scouts were supposed to remain hidden, Skii could always spot them. Later, she decided, she would offer plenty of unsolicited advice on how to improve their concealment. She loved playing know-it-all, just to get under their skin. Their bemusement was endlessly entertaining to her.

Skii's shoulders loosened, relaxing with the calm of security that permeated Grizz territory. She inhaled, detecting the faint scents of civilization venting from the caverns below. It should have smelled like home. It should have smelled like comfort.

But there was something else on the breeze.

And there was something else in the distance.

Between the twin hills.

A person.

Three of them. No... five. Eight. Approaching.

Something was wrong. This was all wrong. No one was allowed in the open in such a way. All hunters were supposed to be back to camp by now, and Skii was the only one who dared push her expeditions this close to the snowfall.

They can't be out here for me.

But they were. They most certainly were.

A dizziness washed through her. She rubbed her coal-lined eyes in a triple-check that her vision was not playing tricks on her. It wasn't. And... her heart sputtered with anxiety at a realization:

Thogre was among them.

The leader of The Grizz.

With her leading the way, Skii's fate was foretold. Thogre emerged only to discipline her tribe, or to deliver sentencing for crimes. Death was often the penalty. Skii swallowed in an attempt to squelch her panic. It did not help.

I need to run. There's no way they'll catch me. I'm too fast. I'll evaporate into the woods.

But her feet kept going, as her head continued to spin. She reached behind her back and pawed at Cassidy, a nervous tic when danger was nearby. She forced herself to stop. She could not be seen touching a weapon. If she was headed for a fight, playing possum would be her best strategy. She would have to pretend nothing was wrong, and when the gauntlet got thrown, she'd have to be faster than them. Better than them.

What have I done to warrant punishment? She ran through her list of tribal offenses. Sneaking food to the children. Not giving the tribe a baby. Sassing off to her generals. Not surrendering Cassidy when she first joined The Grizz. Sometimes being late

to lookout duty—well, arguably, always being late to lookout duty. Disregarding curfew. And, as if on cue, she felt movement next to her knee, coming from inside the hunting sack. *And now this. Keeping a meal as a pet.*

She had to decide what to do. Fast. Now.

She decided...

...to pretend nothing was wrong.

To keep calm, she internally listed her positive credentials. *Four years with The Grizz. Discovering three new sources of fresh water. Countless successful hunts. Tracking down that pack of deserter thieves. Training scouts in the art of stealth. And general merriment... personality has to go a long way, right?*

As the group grew near, she identified who else was with Thogre. Dirke was there, along with his father, Orid, advisor to the leader and second-in-command. The Cheebles brothers had somehow found a way into this entourage, and three of Thogre's personal guards shadowed her. They were mean-looking tribespeople, covered in fur, and each of them brandished curved, razor-sharp knives that stuck out of their gloves. Like bear claws.

They grew closer.

Closer.

And stopped in front of her.

No one spoke.

Skii could not breathe. She tried to, but she couldn't. She opened her mouth to speak, but Dirke's eyes widened. *Don't*, they seemed to warn.

Thogre took a step forward. Her physique was brutish and rock-solid, like a walking monument. The bearskin hides packed onto her body added to an already imposing form, a form made more unnerving by her disfigured stature. She was bent over in a permanent hunch, the result of an unknown disorder. Her head tilted sideways, locked in a default position down by her chest. She looked outward with a crooked gaze, one that permanently dared anyone to comment on her condition. To give her an excuse to slay.

Thogre raised her walking stick. It hovered in the air, circling as if deciding. Finally, the sharp end pointed at Skii's face. "You," she said. Her voice was gnarled and twisted, like her posture.

Skii said nothing. Frozen with fear.

"You will help us," Thogre said.

She signaled to Orid.

Who nodded to Dirke.

Who dropped a lifeless chicken in the snow.

FOUR

“Food is a weapon. It tempts the starving. It nourishes the weak. And it can kill you, if you’re not careful. There is little more dangerous than food.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside the township of Tithe

The carcass was frail. Pale.

Drained.

Skii took in the sight of the dead animal. It was an unnatural shade of white. Its feathers and skin crackled with dryness, decaying before their time. As if something had forced it to waste away.

“What caused this?” Skii asked.

“We don’t know,” replied Orid, rubbing his bald head. “It’s the same as the others.”

“Others?”

“Show her,” Thogre demanded, an impatience in her voice. A tell revealing her skepticism of Skii. “And summon our scouts.”

Orid gestured to the twin hills. Salsina and Coy hopped snowplanks and carved their way down, joining the group. Salsina acknowledged Thogre and Orid as a sign of respect, then she pulled off her head coverings and shook snow from her orange hair. She gave Skii an on-the-sly smile from her freckled face, which glowed red from the cold. Coy brushed white powder off her turban and nodded to Skii who experienced a touch of relief; at least she had friends by her side.

“Come,” said Orid.

As a group, they traversed the largest hill and dropped off into the entrance of the underground shelter. Immediately, the iciest places on Skii’s body began thawing. The warmth was nice, though the foreboding demeanor of her superiors kept her spine iced over.

They weaved through the lamplit tunnels and came to a connection point where the cavern split into multiple passages. They halted, and Orid spoke. “You are sworn to secrecy about everything you will see. *Everything.*”

Skii nodded, obedient.

Thogre added, “You talk, you die.”

Skii nodded again.

They took the passage farthest to the right. Salsina and Coy exchanged barely noticeable glances revealing a secret kept; they had been there before. This area was off limits to everyone in the tribe save for Thogre and her top generals... and their “guests.” Often people were brought here, but they never spoke of what they saw, or what happened inside. A mere mention of the event was a punishable offense.

Skii’s heart rate quickened as they passed the guard on duty. His eyes widened, shocked at who was being granted access. The passage grew larger, and then Skii could hear it. Smell it. And eventually see it.

A magnificent waterfall cascaded into a spring the size of a small lake. The crystal liquid flowed from an unknown source overhead and created an ethereal steam when it hit the pool. Hot water falling from above was an impossibility; heat *always* came from below. But something here was different. Skii took in the mysterious, misty ambiance and inhaled the scent of delicious musk.

Skii shook off the seduction of the environment and scowled; Thogre was keeping this place to herself. And it wasn’t just the privacy, luxury, and comfort of the cavern she was hoarding; there were *fish* in the pools of water. Huge, fat trout. It was a source of food that had never been shared with the rest of the tribe.

“**Num num,**” said Cassidy, in Skii’s mind. “**I wanna munch.**”

“Shh,” Skii scolded. The others looked at her, confused.

Skii feigned clearing her throat and covered her mouth. She whispered to Cassidy, “I need to concentrate. Take a nap or something.” Skii knew she had limited time in this place, and Cassidy’s commentary would be a distraction. Thankfully, her friend was ready for a snooze.

Skii scanned the environment. There were alcoves for dining, with freshly cleaned place settings for future guests. Fire pits for warmth. Shelves stocked with supplies.

And bedding.

Fresh, clean bedding.

Skii swallowed in disgust. *So this is where Thogre takes girls when they come of age.* It was a regular occurrence for her to call for them, but where they went—and what happened when they went there—was never discussed. Fear of Thogre’s wrath ran thick through the tribe. Her secrets were *always* kept.

But why was I never summoned to this place? Skii wondered with a mixture of relief and revulsion.

“This way,” said Dirke.

Of course. Dirke. That’s why.

By birth, Orid's son had status. Privileges. One of them would be a choice of mate. The prearrangement of Skii to Dirke may have left her untouched. For now. She shivered, then mentally scolded herself for doing so. She had to conceal the abhorrence running through her body. Her life depended on it.

Dirke ushered her away from the underground lake, and Orid led the group into a small passageway. Another guard moved aside to let them through, into a storage area.

"We had nowhere else to put them," said Orid. "We didn't want the others to know. Not yet."

"Not ever," said Thogre.

They walked inside.

Skii froze from the sight. Animals were sprawled across the floor. Dozens of feeble, pallid carcasses lay discarded in the dirt. Their bodies were crumpled and thin, pathetic and limp. Their unnatural state told of their vicious deaths.

She reached out to examine one...

"Don't," said the Cheebles brothers. Being clones, they always spoke in tandem. *Skeevy*, she thought. They added, "The animals are diseased."

Skii put on a pair of gloves and looked at the others for the go-ahead. Granted permission, she lifted a baby goat to examine it. It hung like an empty sack. Its eyes were cracked and crusty, devoid of color—or *leached* of color. She systematically squeezed various parts of its body and noted that all of its internal organs were there. Heart, lungs, intestines, stomach... but the liquid filling was missing.

No blood.

"What did this?" Skii asked. She held up the goat to the others, pointing out its neck. There were symmetrical puncture wounds on each side. Four holes. Perfectly round.

"An animal of some sort," said Dirke, anxious to contribute.

"Wrong," Skii countered, but she regretted the sass the moment it happened. While she loved making an ass of him in public, doing it in this particular company—in front of his father and the tribal leader—was dangerous. She adjusted her tone and said, "Most animals don't drink blood. It makes them sick. And look, no bloodstains. I'd bet there was no blood on the ground near any of these things. Was there?"

"No," said Orid, shooting a look of disappointment to his son for overlooking these clues.

Skii suppressed a gloat and asked, "Where did these animals come from?"

There were averted eyes. Feet shuffling in hesitation.

"No. Not that. Please tell me it's not *that*."

"They're ours, all right" said Dirke. "Every day there's another one dead found in the pens."

"How much of our livestock is gone?"

"Half."

"Half!" The exclamation slipped out. Those animals represented nine months of work. Nine months of grueling, rugged, manual labor spent tracking, trapping, and hauling. "And we haven't so much as caught a glimpse of what's doing this? What is it, the World's Best Magician? Or were our guards sleeping on the job?"

Thogre squeezed her walking stick. Orid opened his mouth to scold Skii, but, recovering, she jumped in quickly: "Has anything been reported? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"I was on duty one of the nights it happened," Salsina said. "And I was *not* sleeping." She shot Skii a look that said, *thanks a lot for that!* "I was wide awake. Waiting for it. Watching for it."

"Same here, on a different night," said Coy.

"What did you see?"

"Nothing," said Coy.

"Nothing at all," said Salsina, "except for the rest of the animals getting anxious. They suddenly started making a fuss. I took a look around and, sure enough, there was a dead chicken lying there. Drained of blood."

"I heard a sound though," said Coy. "Like a hiss. At least, I think I heard it. You know how loud the pens are. It's hard to hear anything in there."

"She's right. I thought I heard something, too," Salsina confirmed.

"Let's see the pens," said Skii.

They exited the small passageway and again walked through the chamber with the freshwater lake. She could feel Thogre scrutinizing her. Skii was standing upon the thinnest of ice, so she controlled herself. Eyes forward. Head down.

They went back to the hub of tunnels and this time entered the third one from the left. It weaved side to side, and sloped upward before angling downward into the livestock pens. The cave reeked of damp fur and feathers, stale air, and animal shit. The conditions were not ideal, but this was how they had to store animals during the coldest winter months. Goats, pigs, chickens... all kinds of creatures milled around the pens. They were all well-fed and healthy, but restless. Anxious. They clucked, chirped, and bayed, filling the environment with a nonstop barrage of chatter as they clumped themselves in the corners closest to the new visitors.

Skii raised an eyebrow, then studied the ground. She touched it and rubbed the dirt between her fingers.

"No tracks," said Dirke, leaning over to study the ground, as well. "I checked."

"Whatever you say," said Skii. She walked the perimeter of the circular cavern and the others followed. The livestock paid them no mind; they remained in their same corners as the visitors completed their lap.

Orid spoke, "Something is slaughtering our animals. They're getting picked off, one by one. If this keeps up, we'll starve."

"Will we?" Skii asked. The tone was accusatory. It hinted at the secret stockpile currently swimming around in Thogre's lake.

Orid ignored her comment and said, “We need you to find out what’s doing this. We’re at a loss. We’re stuck.”

“Why me?”

“You’ve seen more of the outside world than any of us. Maybe your perspective will help. Dirke tells me you’re one of our best hunters and trackers.”

“One of the best?” she said. Salsina’s eyes widened with shock. Coy rubbed her temples, frustrated with Skii.

“Such arrogance,” Thogre said. “An arrogance beyond your abilities. If you’re so gifted, why is there no bear on your back?” It was a slight. A tribal insult. It meant she wore no bearskins, as they were only donned by those who had completed The Grizz rite of passage by killing and skinning a bear.

Skii opened her mouth, then shut it. She wanted to tell them about the grizzly she had defeated, as her victory would have demonstrated that she was as skilled as anyone in the tribe. But she had no proof of this triumph. She gritted her teeth. Lowered her head.

“That’s better,” Thogre said. She grinned from her crooked face.

“You have been called upon to help The Grizz,” said Orid. “It is a great honor to be asked for such a thing. Will you rise to the challenge? Will you do it for your people?”

My people. Skii rolled the phrase around in her brain. *The hell they are.* It was true that they took her in, but they needed *her* way more than she needed *them*. These tribal leaders were harboring an overinflated view of themselves; it was her that kept The Grizz fed. Most of the animals in the pens were her doing. And that didn’t even include the stockpile of frozen meat in the ice caves that was also because of her talents as a hunter.

She was already in a state, but Thogre’s next words lit her neck on fire: “Prove your worth, child.” Skii’s furious heart slammed against her ribs. After everything she had done, she now had to further prove her worth?

Fine, Skii thought. I’ll show them.

“Here.” She shoved her hunting sack into Dirke’s chest. “Here’s some more meat that I brought in. Me. Two pheasants and a gopher, to help feed *my* people.”

“It was a mistake to include her,” Thogre said to Orid. “Selfish little brat.”

“Selfish!?” Skii snapped back. This was beyond an insult. She opened her mouth to fire off words she knew she’d regret...

But she stopped.

And clamped her lips shut.

Because she noticed something.

She felt lighter.

Too light.

“Hold on,” Skii said to Dirke. Softer. Backpedaling.

Everyone stared at her. She did not know what to say. But she needed her sack back.

Din-Din was in that sack.

"I'm sorry," said Skii. "I didn't mean it. I'll fall in line. I'll behave. Here, give back the bag. I'll take the meat to storage." She reached her hand out...

"Wait," said Thogre. "Let me see that sack."

Dirke's outstretched arm hovered between Thogre and Skii. Skii begged Dirke with her eyes to help, but he had been given an order by their leader. In front of his father.

Dirke handed the sack to Thogre.

Who looked inside.

And sneered.

"Forget something, did we? 'Two pheasants and a gopher for the tribe,' but no mention of this big fat rabbit?" She snatched the hare by its rear legs and showed it off to the group. Din-Din flailed. "Shame on you, child, for hoarding this piece of meat!"

"No!" said Skii. "That's not what I was doing!"

Thogre's eyes turned to slits. "Then why did you keep this creature a secret?"

"Because..." Skii's pupils darted around. She knew her panic was betraying her, but she couldn't help it. "Because..."

"Take it away," Thogre said to Dirke. "Give it to our cooks. I feel like rabbit for dinner."

"Because she's pregnant!" Skii blurted out.

Everyone went silent.

Skii went on, "Look at how plump she is. That's not from eating. It's because she's got a belly full of babies. And if she can pop 'em out, that'll be ten more big fat hares for us by the time winter's in full swing. I was going to take care of her, and make sure she gives birth."

More silence.

"May I?" Salsina asked Thogre, calmly reaching out her hands. Her gentle demeanor was dissipating the tension. "I know these animals well." Thogre handed over the hare.

Salsina delicately took Din-Din by the scruff and studied the fur ball's belly. It relaxed. Sniffed her hand.

"Well?" said Thogre.

"She's pregnant all right," said Salsina. "There's a whole litter in there."

Thogre pondered. Tapped her walking stick on the ground. Then, to Skii: "I'm giving you one more chance. You *will* capture the beast that is stealing our food. If you fail, there will be consequences." Her eyes grew larger. "Punishment." She added, "Do I make myself clear?"

Skii nodded, obedient.

"One last thing," Thogre said. Her eyes traversed Skii's body... inch... by... inch. They widened with desire as she probed every line, every curve, every ripple of Skii's form. But the desire... it was not for *her*. It was for her *tribe*. Thogre was calculating

Skii's procreant value. She was scrutinizing her shape, analyzing her value, and letting her greed escalate with each of her enticing findings.

"Come here." She reached out a hand to Skii.

Skii walked slow. Took Thogre's hand.

Thogre pulled her close, then pressed Skii's cheek to her rock-like bosom below her crooked head. "I know what's best for you," she whispered. "I do. You are a defiant child, but you are still one of my children."

Skii's body wanted to rage, to reject the motherly embrace from someone who was *not* her mother. But she remained. And trembled.

"Learn to obey," Thogre went on. "You must learn to obey. Bad girls get punished. Good girls get rewarded. Don't you want your... *reward*?"

Thogre pivoted so they were facing Dirke. She smiled, imperious with the procreant deal she was brokering.

Skii glared at Dirke.

He looked away.

"I expect a thank-you for my kindness," Thogre said. Her grainy lips brushed Skii's forehead.

"Thank you," Skii said, powerless.

"Good girl." She pet Skii's hair, then let her go.

Thogre walked off, trailed by her guards. The Cheebles brothers acknowledged Skii as they left. Orid's parting glance did not mask his disappointment in her.

Dirke lagged behind. "I'll help you find the creature," he offered.

"I'm good," Skii dismissed. He shuffled away, shoulders low, leaving Skii with her friends.

They all exhaled in relief.

Coy swatted Skii on the back. "You're insane! No one has ever crossed Thogre like that. I can't believe you're still alive."

"You and me both."

"You may be safe for now," Salsina said, "but you better know how to pull baby rabbits from your ass." She handed Din-Din back to Skii, who nodded a heartfelt thank-you to her friend.

After all...

...Din-Din was a boy.

FIVE

“The only thing more dangerous than an animal backed into a corner is a starving animal backed into a corner.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside the township of Dulleste

“It’s just you and me now.”

No response.

Animal odor filled the air, paired with a cacophony of babble from the livestock pens. Skii tested the sturdiness of the makeshift barricade she had thrown together; bundles of hay, crates, and feeding equipment blocked the only exit to the cavern. It was not anything permanent or fancy, but it served its purpose of trapping Skii inside...

...along with the blood-lusting creature.

From the moment she had entered the cave, Skii knew that it was still inside. And, she had a plan on how to drag it out of hiding. It meant a battle of wits with a hidden adversary. A dangerous game with her life on the line.

“I know you’re in here,” Skii said. “Dirke is a moron. He said you didn’t leave a trail. But you did. Trails are more than markings in the dirt. They can be a pattern, or an anomaly, or anything out of the ordinary. And you left a big one.”

No response.

Skii slid her back down the wall until she was sitting on the floor. She placed Cassidy on her lap and petted her, pretending to stare into her not-crooked eye. But Skii was not focused on her bear, it was a ruse. She was secretly scanning the periphery for any kind of movement.

“I have a feeling you’re misunderstood. I guess we have that in common. Besides my best friend Cassidy here, no one understands me, either.”

No response.

The animals kept chattering. The air kept stinking. She sniffed, as if emotional, but was actually trying to catch a whiff of anything disturbing. Anything that smelled like a killer.

"I don't know why you drink blood, but I'm sure you have your reasons. You're a hunter. So am I. These animals, they're your prey. Just like right now, you're mine."

No response.

She feigned calm—though she was anything but. She was goading something on, a force she did not understand. Her skin tingled with unease. She was used to suppressing fear in the wild, but this... this was something different. Something unpredictable. Something unknown.

“Don’t be scared!• Cassidy’s voice filled Skii’s head. •I’ll protect you. I’ll bite and claw and growl and stomp and—•

Skii scratched her teddy bear behind the ear to quiet her down. Her scratches were the best there were, and she knew Cassidy would not want them to stop. Sure enough, it did the trick.

She continued her one-sided interrogation, "Found yourself a nice buffet in here, huh? Pretty clever. And you're staying hidden, which means you're capable of thought. You're not a monster. They think you are, but I know better."

No response.

She decided to adjust her strategy. She had no idea if the blood thief could even understand her, but she tried anyway: "Our tribe can be as dumb as socks full of rocks. Well, not Salsina and Coy. They're rock solid. Snick-of-a-lot smarter than the Cheebles brothers, that's for sure. Those guys never say anything interesting. I guess that's what happens when you split one brain between two people."

No response.

Skii stretched dramatically. "Can you believe that none of them noticed the pattern? Dummies." She pointed to each animal pen with showmanship. "Look at how they stay clumped in the corner of their pens. Livestock never does that. They always get closer to people, not farther away. They love it when people show up, they know it's feeding time. But right now, something's bothering them. Any guesses what?"

No response.

Skii's pulse increased. She was about to tip her hand. To take a major risk.

"It's you. You're scaring them. The animals know where you are. Which means that I know where you are. You're right there." Skii pointed in the direction farthest from where the livestock was gathering. She returned her hand to Cassidy, this time her finger nearer the trigger. Waiting for the being to expose itself.

No response.

Dammit, Skii thought, knowing this meant she was in for the long haul. She took a conceding breath and said, "Don't worry, I'm not going to sic Cassidy on you. I'll wait until you're ready to talk. That is an option, you know. To talk things out."

No response.

"Think it over. Get comfortable with the idea. But you may not want to wait too long. At some point you're going to get hungry—err, thirsty—and this buffet is closed. These are *my* animals, I caught them, fair and square. They have to feed an entire tribe over some pretty cold months. If you try to take a bite outta them, Cassidy's gonna take a bite outta *you*." Cassidy growled in agreement.

No response.

"Oh, and while I'm in a sharing mood, I'll share something else. I had a huge meal before I locked us in here. I know you haven't had any blood in a while... so, yeah. In terms of who starves first, I'm definitely gonna win that contest."

No response.

"I can see you're not the chatty type. But I am. I spend a lotta time hushed up in the wild, so when I get the chance, I can be one hell of a chatterbox. I think you might just show yourself to shut me the hell up!"

No response.

Skii yawned. A giant one.

No response.

"Just kidding," she said. "I can go days without sleep. That wasn't a real yawn. Yawning is contagious, and I thought maybe you'd fall for it. Damn. You get another point. Yeah, I'm keeping score."

No response.

Hours passed.

Then more.

Then more.

Skii lost track of how much time had gone by. In the cavern, there were no indicators of day or night, and no windows to the outside world. Only the lanterns kept things bright, and they could last for weeks.

Her eyes grew heavy, the first sign of fatigue. But she did not find it distressing. Quite the opposite. If she was feeling depleted, her foe would be feeling it worse. Since she was unable thus far to lure it out with mind games, fatigue or hunger would have to do the job.

Yet, a thought would not leave her. One of her father's teachings rang in her ear, a phrase that gave her pause and kept her senses heightened. "The only thing more dangerous than an animal backed into a corner is a starving animal backed into a corner," he had once said.

More hours passed.

And more.

Then more.

Skii's eyes threatened to close. Cassidy's rhythmic snoring in her head was doing her no favors. She had to distract herself. Had to keep sharp. And, more than anything, she had to unstick her mind, which was locked onto something she *really* wanted...

...to piss.

Wait, Skii thought.

She rose. Walked to the livestock's water trough. Picked up a tin cup beside it. Dipped it in...

...then poured it back out.

Dipped it in...

...then poured it out.

Again...

...and again...

...and again...

...until, where her foe should be, a puddle appeared on the ground.

"You're done!" said Skii, cocking Cassidy. "The game's up! Betrayed by your own piss! Show yourself!"

Something grabbed hold of her shotgun. She held tight, trying to wrestle it away from the invisible force. It kept fighting and fighting... but suddenly let go.

Skii swung Cassidy like a bat. She hit only air. She tried to follow the sound of footsteps on the dirt beside her. Tried to track what could not be seen.

Something shoved her from behind. The push toppled her into a pen of hens as a shockwave of energy flew from Cassidy's mouth from an accidental trigger pull. The animals went nuts.

Skii rolled over to face the barricade blocking the exit. It was flying apart, bit by bit. Wood and hay shot away from the stacked pile of wares. Skii got to her feet, darted toward the pile, then leapt at it. But it was too late. The invisible foe had fled into the tunnel.

"It's coming your way!" Skii shouted down the corridor.

"I don't see it!" Coy answered, before she was barreled over. Salsina readied herself. Pockets of dust rising from the ground indicated something approaching, but before she could react, she, too, was shoved aside.

Skii ran past her friends. "Come on! It's getting away!"

They got to their feet, and the three charged down the corridor.

"It's gonna reach the outside!" Skii shouted. "There's nothing stopping it!"

But this was a lie. And the fleeing invader took the bait. It ran carelessly into a trip-line.

And fell. A cloud of dirt rose from an impact with the ground. "There!" Skii shouted. Salsina and Coy tossed a net over the invisible foe. With each thrash, it grew more tangled.

"Stop your tantrum, or my bear's gonna pound ya!" Skii cocked Cassidy.

The movement slowed.

SKII: FURIOUS HEART

Stopped.
And the being...
...it whimpered.

SIX

“You’re not free in the outskirts. It is an expansive hell, a breathtaking gauntlet, a cruel paradise where everything wants to kill you.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Before the Trayne-Wreg pass

“It worked! We did it!” Salsina said, darting outside to get the others.

Skii moved closer to the captured foe—but Coy put a hand on her shoulder. “Careful, we don’t know what that thing is.” She unsheathed a dagger and pointed it at the net which appeared to hover, raised up by an invisible form.

“We caught you,” said Skii. “Which means you’re as good as dead. This is your last chance. Tell us what you are, or my friend starts slicing.” Coy flashed her knife. Skii’s threat was empty, Coy couldn’t hurt a fly. Nonetheless, the intimidation worked.

Light flickered from the being, strobing the tunnel. Static appeared and coursed around its form, flowing over arms, legs, a head, a torso... a shape was drawing in—a humanoid shape—as if being painted by digital noise.

Whatever this thing was, it had been using an extraordinarily advanced type of cloaking technology. As it neared the end of its deactivation cycle the flickering halted, the pattern waned, and the masking switched off.

Revealing...

...a girl.

Small. Young. Just shy of Skii’s age. Strips of sleek, synthetic material comprising the camouflage bodysuit wrapped around her delicate body. Her trembling hands pulled back a hood. Waves of black hair fell below her shoulders. Her skin was pale. Her eyes were dark. Her lips were blue with chill.

Skii studied the prisoner, transfixed.

“Stay still,” said Coy as she cut the girl out of the net. When freed, she dropped to her hands and knees.

"Hey," said Skii. No answer. Except for a whimper. "You can get up."

The girl shook her head. She began to cry. Small, gentle sobs.

"Oh, get up." Skii put her hand under the girl's armpit and raised her to her feet.

She was shaking, cowering from Coy's knife. "Lower it," said Skii.

She did.

"Can you understand me?" Skii asked. "Do you speak the language?"

The girl nodded, though her eyes remained locked on the floor, in submission.

"What's your name?"

She wrestled with speaking.

"Come on, tell us," Skii urged.

"Vranx," she finally said.

"Are you from around here?"

The girl shook her head.

"Where are you from?"

The word came with incredible effort: "Tithe," she said.

"Heard of it?" Coy asked.

"Oh yeah." In her travels with her father, she had been to many dogmatic townships. And while she had only seen the outside of them—only her father would go inside—she knew the stories of each. Skii pointed an accusatory finger at the girl. "The tithe are murderers. Cannibals."

"No!" said the girl, between teary hiccups. "I'm not."

The cave was suddenly full. Dirke and Orid stopped shy of the intruder, stunned by what lay before them. But Thogre approached with fury. She clamped her hands around the girl's neck.

"Steal from us, will you? No one steals from The Grizz. This is *my* tribe! These are *my* people! That's *my* food you took!"

Her fingers squeezed harder. Vranx's already pale skin lost the rest of its color. She twitched with asphyxiation.

"Stop it!" Skii shouted.

Thogre glared at her. "I don't take orders from a little shit."

"Little shit!? I caught this girl when no one else could!"

"Always so full of yourself!"

Skii's head spun. Her heart froze with shock. After days without rest, sustenance, and without anyone harmed, she had captured the prisoner, taken her alive, and protected the tribe's food source from any further losses. She could not believe what she was hearing.

Dirke stepped forward. "Let me, Thogre. Remember, it's diseased. It tainted our meat."

She let go and wiped her hand vigorously on her bearskins. Dirke put on gloves, then restrained the girl.

"That suit of yours," said Thogre, to the captive. "So long as you're wearing it, you're a threat to us. Off it goes."

Vranx did not move.

Thogre whistled to her guards. They approached. Raised their claw-like knives. "You either take it off, or we slice it off," Thogre threatened.

Tears fell from the girl's eyes. She touched Dirke's arm, a signal that she would submit. He released her.

She stripped off the layers of material piece by piece. Each intricate section contracted when separated from her; it was made of some kind of biotech that expanded when placed upon the skin and shrunk when removed. To Skii, the fabric appeared to have the same crystalline quality as the holo-sheets used in Land Escape. She had loved the displays as a child; somehow, similar technology was being applied here to flawlessly recreate the surrounding environment on the surface of the material.

Dirke gathered up the pieces of the bodysuit. Thogre demanded, "Destroy it. Tech makes you lazy. And it will fail you when you need it most."

Dirke nodded in compliance.

"Now, little thing, let's have a look at you." Underneath the camouflage, the girl was covered only by a sheer undergarment. "Lose the rest," Thogre demanded.

"Why?" said Skii, defensive.

"She may be hiding a weapon. All of it comes off. *All* of it."

Skii looked at the others for support. They gave her none. Besides Salsina and Coy who had no choice but to stay in line, and the Cheebles who were obedient by nature, the rest of the group seemed to be concealing excitement about the show they were about to get.

Vranx's lips trembled. Skii noticed her lack of teeth, save for four: two on the top, two on the bottom. They had to be implants; they were too large, too white, and too sharp to be natural.

The prisoner stripped off her garment and covered up as best as she could. She shivered violently from the cold. And from the exploitation.

"That," Orid said, pointing to the girl's midsection. "What is that?"

A perfectly circular, flesh-colored plating was dug into her stomach. Dirke poked at it with his gloved hand. "It's a device," he said.

"A converter," the girl corrected. And then, embarrassed: "To digest blood."

"I've heard enough!" said Thogre. "Kill this creature!"

The guards raised their weapons.

"You can't!" Skii said. "She's a person!"

"She's a monster!"

"She's not! She only killed animals! We do the same thing!"

"But we are not thieves!"

"I'm sure she was just desperate. What happened? Did you lose your way?"

The girl nodded.

“Do you drink humans?” Skii hoped for the correct answer, which came: Vranx shook her head. “Let me take her home,” Skii pleaded to Thogre, who guffawed. Skii turned to Orid and Dirke. “Please?”

“We can’t let you leave camp,” said Orid. “Winter is here. You’ll freeze to death.”

“I won’t! I’ve survived way worse storms. Please let me take her home. If you kill her, that will be on me. I’ll blame myself forever!”

“You really want this?” said Thogre, her voice thick with scheming. “If I grant you this wish, I suppose it only fair that you grant me mine?”

Skii nodded, already resigned. Already knowing what was coming.

“I’ll gamble your life. I’ll do this in hopes of getting a few more lives out of the deal. You may go on your foolish quest. But if you return... you shall carry child for The Grizz.”

Skii recoiled.

“And not only one,” Thogre continued. “I want a full litter. Your stomach isn’t that big, but we’ll stretch it out. After all, *bodies over burden*.” Thogre leered at Dirke with a crooked smile. “Lucky boy,” she said.

He averted his eyes, embarrassed.

“Do we have a deal?” Thogre asked.

Skii’s face burned, steaming from the injustice. She wanted to rage, to spit back at Thogre, *If you’re so obsessed with babies, why didn’t you ever make your own?* But she bit her tongue, as hard as she could, knowing that the last person who said similar words had lost *their* tongue.

“Fine,” Skii conceded, infuriated that she was getting penalized for doing the right thing, when all she was trying to do was save a life. Her anger consumed her as the unfairness wrenched her insides. She had rescued her tribe from starvation. She had shown them bravery, courage, and selflessness. She had fed them, protected them, and trained them. She had given her soul to The Grizz, and now, apparently, that wasn’t enough.

Now they wanted her body.

SEVEN

“Of course you have a tribe. I’m your tribe.”

- Gyse Fliyr

At the edge of Scorp

Though she hated them, Skii wrapped herself in beaver pelts given to her by the Cheebles brothers. She preferred to be nimble in the wild and even though the extra layers would slow her down, in this case, she had no choice. Skii had built up a tolerance against cold temperatures and could keep her body temperature high by moving fast, but in the upcoming expedition, she would be escorting someone inexperienced in mountaineering. Tithe was weeks away, so a sprint was out of the question. Skii and her companion would have to move slow, steady, and stop as often as needed.

The Cheebles also prepped Vranx for the journey. They clothed her, booted her, wrapped her in hides... but then tied her hands together. It was cruel, but their intentions were good: protecting Skii. She said nothing when she saw Vranx, but knew she would release her bindings once outside of Grizz territory. Though a captive, Vranx would need her hands for balance, scrambling, and climbing.

Skii loosened Cassidy's strap to account for the extra padding. Once satisfied, she double-checked Vranx's footwear and gloves, and then her own. The Cheebles presented one last thing to Skii. “Here,” they said in unison. “From Dirke.”

They handed her a rucksack. There were three frozen chickens inside.

“Ew. No. They’ve taken on Dirke’s stench.” The clones did not react. Clones hardly ever reacted. There were a handful of them in The Grizz, as Dulleste—the township responsible for human cloning—was relatively near their camp. Skii returned the rucksack to them and said, “I’ll be fine. I just need one big fat piece of meat, not these three little skinny ones.” She tapped her hunting sack, which woke Din-Din from his nap. “But I appreciate you looking out for me, you looney clonies.”

The brothers nodded. They had no sense of humor. Nor did they seem to understand the playful digs Skii consistently lobbed at them, always trying to get a rise.

“Good luck,” they said. “Be safe.”

“Thanks, duds. Get those brains checked while I’m gone. I think one of them is broken.”

They nodded in agreement. *Skeevy!* Skii shook her head in exasperation.

Salsina and Coy accompanied Skii and Vranx to the edge of camp. They spotted Dirke in the distance who watched them, but he did not approach.

“Could do worse,” Salsina said, tilting her head in Dirke’s direction.

“Not interested,” said Skii.

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it,” Salsina said. It wasn’t a taunt, or meant to be lewd. It was advice offered through experience. Though younger than Skii, Salsina was like her big sister. She exuded a worldliness that only motherhood can create.

Coy replied. “And... you might actually like being pregnant. I did.”

Skii was respectfully silent. On two separate occasions, Coy had carried children... both times to miscarriage. After the second incident, in a rare showing of compassion, Orid released her from any further pressure to carry a child, and she was allowed to serve exclusively as a scout.

“How do we keep in touch?” asked Salsina. “In case you, you know, *need us?*” She side-eyed Vranx.

“I won’t,” said Skii. “I’ll be fine. Cassidy will protect me.”

“She always does.” Salsina kissed Cassidy on the nose. “She needs a bath. She’s starting to stink.”

•Hey!

“Naw, that’s me,” said Skii. “It’s self-defense. Keeps me from being too appetizing.”

Salsina pulled Skii a few feet away and whispered. “Vranx is poisonous. Don’t forget that. I don’t know why, but she made those animals rank. Promise me you won’t let her near you, no matter what.”

“I promise,” said Skii.

“Here,” she said, handing over a gift. “For protection.” It was a delicate silver chain, a necklace with a simple charm attached. A cross. A religious symbol from before The Shift.

“I’ve never been one for jewelry, but thanks.” Skii put it around her neck. It felt strange against her skin and, although minimal, it created extra weight, which she disliked. Yet, Salsina was her friend. She would not insult her by rejecting the gesture.

“Keep your one good eye on her,” Coy said to Cassidy. Then she patted Skii on the shoulder and added, “The tribe’s going to miss you. You do a lot for us. Everyone knows that.”

“Not Thogre.”

“She’s harsh,” said Coy. “But she keeps us alive.”

"It's not that hard to stay alive. She's just convinced you that it is."

"We need her," she snapped back.

"The hell we do. She doesn't appreciate us."

"She's our leader."

"Not mine," said Skii. "And not yours if you don't want her to be. No one is forcing you to follow her. I'm sick of doing everything for the tribe only to have Thogre hide in her love nest and hurl insults at me."

"You're a wild animal," said Coy with a smile, her voice trying to disarm the tension. "You'll always be Grizz."

"Lucky for The Grizz. Maybe not for me." Skii glanced at Dirke, who was lurking in the distance.

"We'll make sure he doesn't follow you," said Coy. "And who knows? Maybe while you're gone, we can set him up with someone else. Someone prettier. Someone more... *refined*."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Skii said, scratching the crack of her rear.

They laughed... but a darkness had grown in Skii's heart. The discussion led to a painful revelation: that tribal life had imprisoned her—imprisoned *all* of them. The connection to others, the comfort of safety, the desire—no, the *need*—to belong... they had all taken hold and become an addiction. An infection. A curse.

And, at what expense? By harnessing the strength of the tribe, was she sacrificing her own? In hopes of contributing to something larger than herself, was she losing her independence? Her frustration turned to bitterness; her life was a mere commodity to Thogre, no more than a body to be used as seen fit. And this was somehow... *okay*? Somehow *normal*?

Skii wanted to express all of this to Salsina and Coy, to make them understand... but an understanding would only bring them so far. It wouldn't get them to come along, and it wouldn't get them into the wild, past the reach of The Grizz. They were tethered by the bonds of seeming impossibility; Coy felt indebted to the tribe for the "kindness" Orid once showed her, and Salsina had a child of her own to think of.

So, instead, Skii said what she could in the form of powerful hugs she slammed onto them. Which they lovingly accepted.

"Let's go," Skii said to Vranx.

The two descended the hillside.

And began their journey.

Vranx was delicate. She recoiled every time the wind grew cruel. Skii let her faint moans slide for the time being, as they were still in safe territory, but farther into the wild, she would have to shut that down. While only The Grizz knew how to survive the harshness of the current environment, other tribes stalked the borders of their turf. Just one stray sound could mean death. Or worse.

Skii cursed her fur coverings as she pulled back her sleeve. Once exposed, she rubbed a shoulder-to-wrist tattoo. The motion created a phosphorescent glow from within the inked spirals, lines, and symbols.

Vranx watched her, intrigued. “Is that a map?”

“I know where we’re headed, that’s all you need to know.”

Vranx withdrew and took a step away.

“I’m sorry. Yes, it’s a map. All the places I went with my dad in the outskirts and habitable zones.” She noticed Vranx was still averting her eyes. “Look,” Skii offered, “I don’t want to be a captor. It makes my mind all weird. Having someone tied up is as bad as *being* tied up. It means I’m as trapped as you are.” Skii pointed to Vranx’s wrists and said, “If I’m going to cut you free, you gotta promise me something.”

“Yes?”

“That you won’t eat me.”

“I would never do that. But,” she looked down at her feet, “I will have to feed... on something.”

“I’ll hunt for us. You get the blood, I get the meat. Deal?”

“Yes,” said Vranx. “And I... I have to feed every day.” Her posture shrunk, ashamed. “Just thought you should know.”

“It’s fine. But remember, I catch you drooling over me, Cassidy gets *her* meal.”

•Num num!•

Vranx nodded.

Skii undid the girl’s bindings, then handed her the rope. “Carry this. We’ll use it to make traps. I’ll show you how, so you can practice. That way, if you ever find yourself alone in the wild again, you can hunt. Way safer than stealing from a tribe of grouchy nomads.”

The corners of Vranx’s mouth raised a touch.

It wasn’t quite a smile.

But it was close.

EIGHT

“If you refuse to walk in the cold, the cold has already killed you.”

- Gyse Fliyr

On the edge of Grizz territory

Their travels were brutal.

The snow fell hard and mean. The wind was spastic, unpredictable. A charcoal fog clutched the wilderness and would not let go.

The chill permeated their animal hides and moved into their bones. Skii had a good twenty pounds on Vranx, so she could only imagine how debilitating the cold must have been to the girl. Still, she couldn't go easy on her. If they slowed down too much, they would be susceptible to hypothermia.

At first, evenings were spent in the shelters previously discovered by Skii while hunting for The Grizz. But their numbers decreased as the distance from camp increased. Soon, Skii had to rely on her tattoo, the map that documented her expeditions with her father. However, the spirals, symbols and swooshes represented general zones, not exact locations, so finding reliable stopping points was not without effort. And, on one particular evening, shelter was nowhere to be found. Maybe her father had been too vague with a marker, or perhaps what was once a sanctuary in this region had been destroyed by nature. Either way, they had to camp in the open.

The night spent exposed to the weather was harsh. As a result of the frigid, restless eve, Vranx had taken on an unshakable chill. Skii knew a fever would come next, then pneumonia, which was as good as death. So, she elected to backtrack to a previous shelter to play it safe, and to give Vranx a few days to recover.

Within the clump of boulders that served as protection against the elements, Skii built a fire. Fires were never a good idea in the outskirts, but in this case, it was a necessity. Vranx huddled by it.

"Sit farther back," Skii said. Vranx looked puzzled. "Just at first. Let your body slowly adjust by heating yourself more evenly. Don't let one side get too warm if the other is cold. And try to hold in the shivers. Movement burns energy, which releases heat."

Vranx slid back a touch and tried to resist her tremors. But many still slipped out.

Skii plopped down. She cracked open Din-Din's sack which was his cue: he hopped out and his fat, furry body jiggled as it landed. "That leap of yours is like an earthquake!" Skii pet him gently, then gave him a nibble of food before he scurried off to explore.

Vranx watched Din-Din with concern. "Don't worry," Skii said. "He won't go far. He knows I'm his best bet for warmth and snacks. Plus, it's better that he's not here to see this..."

She removed a coney from her hunting sack. Using a rock, she slit the carcass down the side, then de-skinned the animal in one yank. She gave it a proper field dressing by removing its guts, tossed the meat onto the fire, then reached into her sack to pull out another. "Like it warm?" Skii asked.

Vranx nodded, her black eyes widening. Skii heated the body by the fire without cooking it, turning it an inch at a time. Finally, Skii held it out.

Vranx lunged. Skii pulled back.

"Sorry," Vranx said, lowering her head.

"It's fine. Just relax." Skii handed over the coney.

Vranx opened her mouth wide. A hiss came from behind her throat, like a simultaneous exhale and inhale. The converter in her stomach was activating.

Her lips parted to expose her fangs. She bit down on the coney's neck and steam rose from the punctures. The white cloudiness turned red, and sizzles from the bite mixed with the converter's hiss. Blood emptied down Vranx's throat as the carcass grew thinner... thinner.

Her eyes rolled backward.

In bliss.

The juice ran out with a slurping sputter. Vranx whined, longing for more. She pulled the drained body from her teeth with a fleshy *pop* of released suction.

"Well, that was awful," said Skii.

Vranx breathed deeply. Rhythmically. Overcome. She folded herself into a fetal position next to the fire. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just so thirsty."

Skii watched Vranx writhing slowly—so slowly—in the dirt. She had never experienced a sensation anywhere *near* what Vranx was currently feeling. She studied her with a fascination she didn't know had inside of her. It was a strange combination. Alluring. Revolting. Enticing. Upsetting.

Eventually, Vranx's euphoria waned. Back to reality, she noticed she was cuddling the coney's body. It was a ghastly kind of pale and hung limp. She held it out, embarrassed. Skii did not take it.

"I'm not touching that. It's tainted. We have to get rid of it."

“The fire?”

“I don’t want to breathe the fumes. Go bury it. Deep, so no other animals get diseased.”

“It’s not a disease,” Vranx said, defensive. “It’s a chemical. It comes out of my teeth and makes things sleep. That’s all. Just sleep.”

“Don’t care, don’t wanna know,” said Skii. “Off you go.”

Vranx wandered into the forest as instructed. Skii was not worried about her escaping; like Din-Din, she would not make it far on her own. And if she tried, she would be ridiculously easy to track down.

Sure enough, minutes later, Vranx returned. “You must think I’m disgusting,” she said, freeing her hair from its covering. Her silken black strands shimmered, reflecting the firelight.

“I don’t think that,” said Skii. “You’re just a picky eater, that’s all.”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I deserted Tithe because I refused to drink from a person.” Vranx’s voice was clearer now. Healthier. Her lips were no longer blue, and her posture was less meek. “They were not happy about that.”

Skii nodded, *I get it*, understanding what it meant to challenge authority.

She pulled the last coney from her sack. Vranx perked up, and her eyes seemed to say, *Please?*

Skii shook her head. Instead, she cut a hole in its side. She drained the blood into a leather bladder, filled it to the top, and plugged it with a cork. “Here. Save this. I know it’ll be hard to resist, but you have to. There may be a few days where the hunting is shitty-shit.” She tied it off with a string, making it into a lanyard.

Vranx nodded. She accepted the bladder and placed it around her neck.

“Put it under your shirt,” said Skii. “Your body heat should keep it from freezing. Unless, of course, you like slushy blood.”

Vranx stuck her tongue out in disgust.

Skii did the same, in agreement.

And the two girls laughed.

NINE

“Don’t ask me when it’s safe to talk. Ask nature. She’ll tell you, if you just listen.”

- Gyse Fliyr

At Nijel Falls

“They don’t let you drink human blood. Not at first. Not for years,” Vranx said.

They shuffled through the snow. It was thinning. Becoming easier to walk. The storm had eased up, and their conversations had warmed alongside the temperature. Skii had decided on a brief detour, and they were headed toward a special shelter she knew of. It was a bit out of the way, but worth it. It was rare for her to have company in the wild, and to have someone to share her discoveries with was a treat.

Vranx continued, “You have to strengthen your resolve first. You have to get used to the idea of drinking from someone. It’s more emotional than physical.”

They approached a frozen stream. Although Vranx had gotten better at traveling and the conditions had gotten easier, Skii still offered her an arm to assist her in traversing the terrain.

But this time...

...this time it was different.

Vranx took Skii’s hand instead.

A warmth spread through Skii. Her skin heated and her fingertips tingled.

And once they crossed the stream... neither let go.

Vranx explained, “I think that’s why I could never do it. The emotion... being connected to someone *forever*... I panicked. And I ran. I deserted Tithe and its people. And now... now they’ll never take me back.”

“No second chances with townships. Everyone knows that.”

Vranx’s eyes lowered, mournful. “I don’t know the point in going back. They’ll never let me in again.”

But Skii was not concerned. She had a plan. She would lead Vranx back to Tithe, sure, but once outside the gates, she would give her a choice: to make the attempt to rejoin her people... or to stay with her.

"There are other options," Skii hinted.

"Who else would take me in? I'm a monster, remember? Your whole tribe thought so."

"Well, for a start, why don't you stop drinking blood? Go back to regular food."

"I can't. It's too late. Once the converter was installed, I changed forever. I became a Familiar. My body changed. My blood changed. I was now primed for a Mentor, that which a Familiar is bonded to."

"What do you mean?"

"The converter not only helps us digest, it makes blood taste richer. More potent. It's intoxicating to a Familiar, and to the Mentor who is to drink from me every day."

"That's awful."

"It's beautiful," Vranx corrected—a bit too fast for Skii's liking. "We tithe our blood to connect our souls. And we do it to save lives."

"Save lives?"

"Our bodies regenerate blood. Did you ever wonder why? It happens for a reason. It's a divine gift. Two people may feed upon each other in a balanced cycle, forever and ever. The Tithe were the first to discover this." She rubbed her neck where there were four circular scars and sang gently, "*If one is weak, then she shall drink. Her love will soon refill to peak.*" When Familiar and Mentor form a perfect circle of giving and receiving, when they tithe lifeblood to one another, that is the day they become Kindred. The day they are bonded forever."

Skii was silent.

"Tithe is beautiful, the people are beautiful," Vranx continued. "They have learned to live without harming anything. *Anything.* Not humans, they care not for war. Not animals, they need not their flesh. The tree may keep its fruit, and the flower may remain unpicked... Tithe's people are sworn to do no harm upon the earth. They sustain themselves only through the love exchanged with one another."

Skii stopped walking.

"Is everything okay?" Vranx asked.

Skii let go of Vranx's hand. Grabbed her arm. Pulled her to the ground.

Dumb as my bum! Skii scolded herself for having gotten lost in conversation. "We're being hunted." She made gestures to indicate, *Stay down. Stay silent.* Vranx nodded.

"Cassidy," Skii whispered, barely audible. "I'm going to reach for you now."

"Oh, now you need me! Shoulda thought about that during cuddle time with Din-Din. And when doing cutesy-talk with the bloody-boo!"

"Don't argue with me, now's not the time!" Skii slid Cassidy from behind her back. "Now give me a nice, quiet cock."

•We'll see.♦

SKII: FURIOUS HEART

Skii slowly pulled back the pump-handle of the shotgun.

Shlick! It was way louder than it should have been. *Shlock!* Now Cassidy was just rubbing it in.

But then:

Skii's face slammed into the dirt. Hard.

Vranx ran.

Skii struggled to right herself. Scanned the woods.

There was nothing.

Nothing.

Then her back exploded with pain. Struck from behind. She landed face-first in the snow. She scrambled away—but something grabbed her dress. Panic took hold. Something was attacking her that she couldn't see. Her eyes would be no help.

So she closed them.

The sound of footsteps. Behind me.

She rolled to the side as a force impacted the ground. It left a footprint in the snow. Skii kicked out where the leg should be. Her boot connected.

A painful howl came from the air. The snow dispersed where a body fell.

Shlick-shlock! Skii cocked Cassidy. She aimed at the invisible being—

Thud.

The world went red.

Skii's body collapsed.

Everything went dark.

From the blow to the back of the head...

...dealt by Vranx.

TEN

“When you’re dead, the memories of your loved ones will resurrect you.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Overlooking The Basin

“She’s awake,” Vranx said.

“Good,” said another. “Let her watch.”

Skii’s head pulsed with waves of trauma. The squealing in her ears waned, replaced by new sounds.

Slurping. Sucking.

Pushing through clouds, her vision came into focus. And she saw it...

A woman in a skintight camo-suit was embracing Vranx, her hands grasping Vranx’s silken hair. Their faces were pressed together, a tangle of tongue and lips. Blood oozed from the lacerations on their mouths; each greedily lapped up the mess on the other.

Skii was nauseated. From the sight. From the concussion. And from the betrayal.

“I tried... I tried to...” Skii stammered.

The woman pulled her lips from Vranx’s tongue and turned her attention to Skii. Vranx continued licking the woman’s smile.

“I tried to help you!” Skii shouted to Vranx.

“May I address the girl?” she asked the woman.

“You may, my love.”

“You did help,” Vranx said to Skii. “More than you know.” She was holding the woman’s hand. Skii’s heart wrenched at the sight. The hand that she had held.

Skii thrashed, but to futility: her arms were raised above her head, bound by rope to a tree.

The two moved closer. Skii turned her head in disgust. “Do not look away,” Vranx said. “Look upon the beauty of my Mentor. Look upon Dyyna.”

Skii stared daggers. Dyyna's toned body was wrapped in strips of camouflage same as the ones Vranx had been discovered in. Her face was angular and harsh, like it was sculpted.

"Of course my Mentor would find me," Vranx continued, "as our souls are bonded by blood."

"Your souls are bonded by scuzz, you skeevy freaks!"

Dyyna pressed her fingers into Skii's cheeks and squeezed. "Nasty little twirp," she said.

Vranx laughed.

A tear formed in Skii's eye. She tried to kill it with blinks, but failed. Dyyna shook her head in a way that said, *Pathetic!* "How far is her home?" she asked Vranx.

"The nomad camp is a few weeks back. But the trail is hard." Disappointed, she added, "I'm not sure I can get us there."

Dyyna nodded at Skii. "This little twat will guide us."

"And we can drink from her along the way!"

"Such a rule-breaker," Dyyna said slyly. "It's what I love about you. Such spicy blood in such a sweet little girl."

"You love the way I taste. Admit it."

"Never," Dyyna vamped, as she ran her hand down Vranx's thigh. "How many are there, back at their camp?"

"Two hundred. Maybe more. They'll be of tremendous use to the Tithe. Plenty of candidates to make Familiars. Plenty of blood to fill our bellies."

"The Elders will reward us!" Dyyna smirked through her sharp face. "How do you think the tribe will taste?"

"Meh," Vranx dismissed. "They have wildling blood. Too thick for my liking. They're strong, but stupid. Though what they lack in taste they'll make up for in supply. They will be easily lured to Tithe."

"Will they, now?"

"A trail of drained children is all it will take. Trust me, they'll come running."

"And once they're at our gates, our people shall scoop them up, and we will claim our reward!" Dyyna cheered. "We will drink from Elder blood, my love. We shall live forever!" Vranx hissed with pleasure and leaned in for a kiss. But Dyyna stopped her. "Wait. How did they capture you, if they're as dim as you say?"

"This little bitch," said Vranx, pointing at Skii. "She's clever, I'll give her that. She's not one of them. She's from Land Escape."

"Ah. Well fed, well bred. Whatever the case, she's ours now. She'll lead us back to the nomads, and then we'll suck her dry and leave her as bait."

"She'd make a good Familiar."

Dyyna playfully—but dominantly—slapped Vranx's cheek. "Still so naive. She's too wild. Look at those eyes. There's nothing in them but fight. This one can't be tamed. It's not worth the risk."

"I understand," said Vranx.

"You have much to learn. Like a baby lamb. Come here, little lamb. Let me suck your lip. I'll do it the way you like."

Get a room, Skii thought as she analyzed her predicament. Cassidy was nowhere in sight. Her hunting sack had been removed. The tree branch she was strung from was thick, and her bindings were tight.

Skizzbutts.

Then, a rumble rolled through the woods.

Vranx and Dyyna studied the sky.

"Thunder?" said Vranx. "A storm must be coming."

Dyyna nodded in agreement. "How far is it?" she asked Skii.

"Closer than your boogers, you shrew."

Dyyna smacked Skii's face. It rattled the air.

Skii shook off the blow. And spit in the dirt.

"One more chance." Dyyna flared her lips, revealing her fangs. Long. White. Sharp. The hiss of her converter came from behind her throat.

"Get skuzzed!" Skii said.

The teeth got closer.

Closer.

Their tips tickled Skii's neck.

"Stop," demanded Vranx.

Dyyna hissed in anger—but paused. She smiled at the realization that Vranx was pointing Cassidy at the moving lump inside Skii's hunting sack.

Din-Din.

"Don't!" Skii said.

Shlick-shlock! Vranx cocked Cassidy.

"Fine!" Skii shouted. "It's about ten miles away. It'll be here at sundown. It's going to be bad. The worst storm yet."

Vranx dropped Cassidy in the dirt, along with the sack. She bit her finger at Dyyna and said, "I thought you said she couldn't be tamed."

"You're full of surprises," Dyyna conceded. "Come, my pet. Let's find somewhere warm. Somewhere... private."

"Where is that shelter you were leading us to?" Vranx asked.

Skii nodded in the direction of the nearest mountain. "Quarter-mile away. There's an entrance at the base."

"Let's go," said Dyyna.

"What about her?" Vranx asked, about Skii.

Dyyna looked up. "The snow might cool her down a bit."

"Don't you leave me out here! Vranx, I saved your life! You owe me!"

"I owe you? The only thing I owe you is revenge. You caught me. I caught you. We're even."

Vranx took Dyyna by the hand. And Dyyna shrugged at Skii naughtily.

They walked away.

Skii wasted no time. She knew the clouds would soon part and reveal the truth: no storm was coming. It was a lie. The rumble had not been thunder, it was an avalanche in the distance, harmless from their position, but still loud as hell. Skii's improvised deception had worked; it sent her captors scrambling to find shelter.

“Skii!” Cassidy said. **“Are you there?”**

“Cassidy! I’m here! Are you okay?”

“No! You’ve gots to do something!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m in a pile of muck, and I hate it!”

Skii rolled her eyes. “I’ll get right on it.”

She shimmied her body. Rocked back and forth. Thrashed in twitchy bursts.

Come on, she thought, shake after shake. Finally, the cross around her neck popped free from under her shirt. It dangled loosely from the chain.

Okay! She thought. *Now we’re getting somewhere!*

She opened her mouth wide, hopped up and down, and thrust her frame forward, over and over, over and over, until the cross finally swung into her mouth. She pulled down on her wrists and the tension raised her body upward. Her chest approached the tree branch above her bound hands. Her body shook from supporting her whole weight.

She swiveled and rotated her body, the cross sticking out from her teeth. The tips of her fingers were close, and she tried desperately to snag it. It was so near... all she needed was one good spit to give it that extra inch...

Got it!

She clutched the cross in her fist and let her body drop back down. As she had hoped, the clasp broke loose, leaving the charm and open chain still in her hand.

Skii rubbed her fingers around the cross. She found a portion with a chipped edge, and carefully placed that area against her bindings. With her thumb and index finger, she slid the charm back and forth against the rope.

“Hurry!” Cassidy panted.

“Why? Are they coming back?”

“No. I’m just lonely.”

Skii’s arms went numb. Her wrists stung from the tension. Her fingers throbbed from soreness. Sweat coated her palms, but she kept her grip firm on the charm. She couldn’t drop it... if she did, she’d be screwed. *Don’t drop it*, she repeated in her head, over and over. *Don’t drop it. Don’t drop it—*

She dropped it.

“Shit!” Skii shouted. She stared down at the charm, between her feet.

She gritted her teeth.

And groaned with anger.

And fought against tears.

Because she knew she was dead.

ELEVEN

“In the wild, you have one goal. Survive. Just one more day.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Outside the township of Brayzen

Wait, she thought. I still got this.

Skii shuffled her feet to each side of the charm. She pressed them together, clamping the cross and chain between the toe tips of her boots. She then slowly... raised... her... legs... up... until they were waist-high. Her thighs burned, but she kept her toes pushed tight.

Higher her legs raised... higher...

The rope against her wrists scorched like fire. She took a deep breath and held it, as she could not risk unnecessary movements. She had trained her body for years to twist and turns in ways it shouldn't, to get into places she wasn't supposed to. But this... this was a physical challenge past the brink of her abilities, something she had to push through.

Higher her legs raised... higher...

Her boots were now by her head. They inched slowly toward her bright red face, and her open mouth...

Got it!

She laughed a disbelieving laugh through gritted teeth, then quickly repeated the process to get the cross to her fingertips. She exhaled with relief, but knew she was not safe. Not yet.

This time, as a safety measure, she threaded the chain through her fingers, chastising herself for not doing that in the first place. Her head pounded. Her arms threatened to fall off from a lack of circulation. She stifled her misery and continued cutting away at the rope.

Skii heard voices.

Vranx and Dyyna.

She sawed quicker and harder, even though her wrists and fingers begged her to stop.

Snap!

The rope separated. Skii dove onto her hunting sack and slung it around her neck. *Gotcha, Din-Din!* she thought. She cocked Cassidy.

“Let’s scrap!” she growled.

“Yes, let’s,” Skii answered, turning the betrayal in her veins into fuel for a fight.

“Bitch got loose!” shouted Vranx.

Dynna pulled on her hood and activated the camo-suit. Like a display flickering on, the crystalline wraps took on the look of the surroundings and made her invisible.

A hiss shot out of Vranx’s throat, and her eyes lit up. She charged.

Skii’s focus was split. She aimed at Vranx while attempting to track Dynna. But the shifting dirt was too subtle. Desperate, she cocked her shotgun.

Vranx was upon her. Skii’s finger was on the trigger. One blast would be all it took to break the girl in half. She deserved no less.

But she couldn’t do it.

Dammit.

Instead of a direct shot, Skii aimed downward. The force of the blast launched particles of soil and ice into Vranx’s face. She twisted, disoriented from the debris, and fell.

Skii cocked Cassidy and listened for Dynna. There was a crunch nearby, the sound of feet compacting snow. She fired. A shockwave of energy slammed into Dynna. The camouflage spasmed from the impact, and she flew backward. She took a hard landing twenty feet away. Her head thudded against a boulder, and she went limp.

Skii pivoted—too late. Vranx collided into her, shrieking with rage. They tumbled to the dirt. A rock clenched in Vranx’s fist smashed into the side of Skii’s face. And then into her forehead. And her nose.

She choked on her own blood.

Vranx straddled Skii’s midsection and pinned her arms. She opened wide, brandishing her fangs. Saliva coated her gums. Her tongue flailed with longing.

“Don’t!” Skii cried out. She struggled, but her strength was sapped. Breath wafted from Vranx’s mouth, hot and bitter with the odor of toxins. Her converter hissed and her throat squealed in a horrific harmony.

Vranx lunged for Skii’s neck.

Skii thrashed, one last time.

In the shuffle, her hunting sack cracked open.

And Din-Din hopped out.

He landed on Vranx’s leather bladder, which had fallen upon Skii’s chest. The weight of his fat body popped the cork out. Blood spurted onto Vranx’s lips. The unexpected taste threw her senses off. Engulfed by intoxication, her body loosened.

Skii sensed vulnerability. She thrust upward, dislodging Vranx. And rolled free.

Vranx greedily lapped up the splatter on her face, helpless to the satiation. Skii snagged Cassidy by the barrel.

“You don’t understand,” said Vranx. Her eyes sparkled with the tears of ecstasy. “You’ll *never* understand.”

Skii swung the shotgun like a club.

Thud.

Vranx fell. Out cold.

Skii heard a rustle—Dyyna was stirring. Skii raised Cassidy again and cracked her in the back of the head. Knocking her out.

Silence.

Skii dropped to her knees.

She heaved. Sucked in air. Put pressure on her heart, trying not to hyperventilate.

She calmed herself. Breath by breath.

She scooped up Din-Din and kissed him.

She placed Cassidy on her lap and cuddled her, as well.

And with her friends by her side...

...she wept.

TWELVE

“The memories of your mother are your birthright.”

- Gyse Fliyr

Within the bog of the Freehorn Wastes

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” Skii said.

“Where am I?” Vranx groaned.

“Amongst friends. Amongst your kind.”

Vranx fully awakened. To the sound of squeals...

...from the bats in the cave.

In their blackouts, Skii had dragged Vranx and Dyyyna to the special shelter nearby, a mountainside cave. The cavernous chamber, barely lit by Skii’s fire, was beautiful and mysterious. The walls sparkled with minerals, and the ground was splotched like paint—though from dung. And the ceiling... the ceiling was black. Black with the bodies of thousands of bats. They stirred, made anxious by their new visitors. But they kept their distance.

Skii checked the tension of the ropes binding Vranx and Dyyyna together. Satisfied, she headed toward the exit.

“You’re going to leave us here?” said Vranx.

“That’s the idea.”

“I didn’t peg you for a killer,” said Dyyyna.

Skii looked at her. Then Vranx. Then the bats. “We’re all killers.”

“We only feed to survive,” insisted Dyyyna.

“Same as me,” Skii said. “Same as them.” The bats squealed louder. “But,” she continued, “There’s one difference between you and us.”

Vranx and Dyyyna looked up at her.

“We don’t play with our food.”

Dyyna struggled against her ropes. Vranx started to panic. "Skii..." she said. Sweetly. Gently. "Please don't leave me."

In response, Skii kicked out the fire.
And walked outside.
And sealed the cave shut.

"That's cold," said a voice.

Skii cocked Cassidy and pulled the trigger. She hit air. She fired again. Nothing. "Easy," said the voice. "It's me."

Dirke switched off his camo-suit and materialized from digital noise. He removed his hood.

"Nice outfit," Skii said. "I thought Thogre said to destroy that thing."

"What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"How did you find me?"

"First, why don't you tell me about the two you've fed to the bats?"

"They'll be fine."

Dirke's gaze did not waver.

"I mean it. They're ice bats. They eat grime, not people. And I didn't tie their ropes right. They'll get free. But by then, I'll be a ghost."

"You're putting them through hell. What did they do to you?"

"I'm giving them far better than they deserve." And then, accusatory: "How long have you been stalking me?"

"I picked up your trail a few days after you left." Goading her, "I told you I could track you."

She wasn't having it. "You tracked Vranx. If I didn't have her tagging along, you wouldn't have found me in a skillion years."

"Skii..." His tone shifted. "It's time to come home."

She said nothing.

"You made a promise."

"No, I made a deal. And I'm welching on that deal. Sorry, no baby Skiiis for The Grizz. Tough tits for them."

"You gave us your word."

Skii shrugged. "Oh well."

"Thogre knew you'd do this. That's why she sent me. Either you're coming back, or..."

"Or what?"

"Or I'm taking you back."

Skii cocked Cassidy.

"Don't," said Dirke. "I don't want to fight."

"We don't always get what we want."

“It’s your home. We’re your people. Come back to us.”

“You don’t give a shit about me! You’re using me! You’re *all* using me! It’s not fair!”

“This isn’t about what’s fair. It’s about what’s best for the tribe.”

“Nuts to that! Just leave me alone!”

“I... I can’t.”

“Think for yourself, you dumb oaf! Just think for a damn second! Be more than just a follower. Have a brain!”

“You don’t understand. It’s not because of The Grizz. I can’t let you go because...”
Silence.

“Spit it out!”

“Because I love you!”

“Oh, *god!*” Skii screamed with exasperation, burying her face in her palms.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“You don’t know a thing about me! We hardly talk, other than you passing along your daddy’s orders. All you do is obey, suck the ass of whoever’s in charge, and breathe through your mouth. Name one freakin’ thing I should love about you.”

Dirke looked down.

“Look. I’m sorry. But I don’t love you. I barely even *like* you. And I’ll tell you this, if you don’t let me go... I’m definitely going to hate you.”

More silence.

More.

Then...

Dirke put on his hood. And started to walk away.

“Wait,” Skii said. “Thank you.”

Dirke stopped. Glancing at the cave, he added: “Those two are going to go after you. Them *and* their people. You’re going to have an entire township on your ass.”

“I know how to evaporate.”

“What should I tell The Grizz?”

“Tell them...” She thought for a moment. “Tell them I’m dead.”

“They won’t believe me. Especially Salsina and Coy. They’ll come looking for you.”

He was right. Skii looked down—and noticed what she was doing. She was playing with Salsina’s charm around her neck. A habit she had picked up at some point, but she couldn’t say when. *Funny*, Skii thought, *it already saved my life once. Now it's gonna save my life twice.*

“Give this to Salsina. Tell her you found it on my body.” She handed over the cross, but kept the necklace for herself. *This way, I'll always have a part of my friends with me.* She put the chain around her neck. *It feels naked though. It needs something. Another charm.*

She knew *exactly* the one she wanted.

A mischievous grin appeared on her lips.

That grin. Like an old friend, it had returned. It hadn't spread across her face in so long. So very, very long. She searched her memory for the last time it had. As a child. At home. In Land Escape. When she was safe. When she was free. When she was loved.

No, she thought. *It was after that.* When traveling with her father, Gyse Fliyr. It was during their relentless journey through the wild. Always searching. Always hiding. Always surviving. One time that grin had appeared on her lips... one time she tried to remind her father to laugh. To be free. To play.

And he smacked that smile off her lips. And cursed her. And terrified her with his anger. "Never again," he said, when Skii's harmless practical joke had thrown off their pace. "Never again."

And never again had that grin appeared...

...until now. It was time to reclaim her birthright. No matter what it took to do so.

A bat flew overhead, breaking Skii out of her introspection. She said to Dirke, "If those two in the cave ever make it home, they'll tell their people where The Grizz camp is. Warn the others. Don't fall for their tricks. That suit you're wearing? They may have more of them. Be prepared."

He nodded, then shifted his tone, "Can you remember this spot?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will you remember it? How to get here? Mark it. Mark it on your tattoo."

"Why?"

"On the last day of winter, I'll come back. I'll do it every year. Maybe you'll come back, too. Maybe we'll see each other."

"No, we won't. Don't waste your time."

"It's my choice. I do what I want. I think for myself."

"Finally," Skii said.

He nodded to her.

She nodded to him.

He pulled his hood over his head.

And walked away.

And turned invisible to her.

All over again.

THIRTEEN

“Whether above or below, your mother will be waiting for you. If you see her before me... tell her I’m sorry for failing you both.”

- Gyse Fliyr’s second-to-last words to Skii Tavee

Outside the township of Crash Town

“Nomad or wanderer?” said a voice, over a loudspeaker.

“Wanderer, I guess. I mean, it’s complicated. You see—”

“Deserter or cast-out?”

“Deserter. But it was a mutual thing! Here’s what happened—”

“From?” After a pause, there was a crackling sound over the speakers embedded in the trees. A wrapper opening. The preamble to a snack.

“I’m not supposed to say. My old township *really* doesn’t want people to know they exist. Can I please come in? You know I used to live here, right? I was such a good resident! I mowed my lawn every day, and always paid my taxes—”

“Dogma?” The question was asked over munching and lip smacks. The sounds echoed off the massive gates leading into Land Escape, the last dogma-free township.

“I believe in helping others. I’ll do anything to be a good citizen. Please let me in.”

“Tribute?”

Silence.

The voice on the loudspeaker repeated: “Tribute?” The bluish leaves in the surrounding trees rustled. Within the foliage, an arrow drew in a bow. A gun loaded. A blade unsheathed. Several conspiring voices whispered to one another.

“Umm...”

“Tribute?”

“What is this, a shakedown? Do you have any idea what it took to get here? C’mon, let me in!”

“Wrong answer.” The wrapper crumpled, signaling more than just a snack being finished.

“Hold on! Wait! Can’t we talk about this?”

Too late.

“He’s all yours, fellas,” said the guard, to the people concealed in the trees.

The man standing before the gates, who had fled from his previous township in hopes of finding sanctuary in Land Escape, had spectacularly failed the guard’s test. He was being turned over to the nomads. To do as they pleased.

They converged. In mere moments, the man was beaten. Robbed. Stripped bare. And dragged off, screaming.

“And that,” Skii whispered to Cassidy from their concealed position in the forest, “is why we ain’t taking the front door into Land Escape. We deserted here years ago with dad. No second chances, with townships.”

•So how we gettin’ in?• Cassidy whispered back.

Skii’s eyes ran from the bottom to the top of the enormous walls that encompassed the city in a perfect circle, angling inward to an open apex.

•You’re kidding, Skii. Tell me you’re kidding.♦

“You’re gonna boost us up, all the way to the tippy-top.” She pointed to the center of the stronghold, a huge opening that let in fresh air, fireflies, bots, and birds.

•But there’s snipers on the walls!♦

“Those drunks? They couldn’t shoot an elephant off a fly’s back.”

•But my snout is so snarly when I jump! They’ll hear me!♦

“Then I guess we’ll have to be quick, won’t we?”

•Skii! You’re crazy!♦

“Takes one to know one, pretty girl.”

Skii heard Cassidy’s rascally sigh of resignation. **•I hope they have good munchies in Land Escape. I better get a treat for this!♦**

“Speaking of, how you doin’, Din-Din? Feel like going for a ride?”

Skii patted her hunting sack, which was twice as heavy as it used to be...

...because of the hare’s new girlfriend, who was also inside.

“Tell Supper to keep calm. Once we get into Land Escape, I’ll set you both free. You’ll be safe in there. And you can make a buncha babies for the kiddies in the city to play with. They’ll love that.”

Skii took a deep breath.

“Ready, Cassidy?”

•Ready!♦

“Ready, Din-Din? Ready, Supper?”

The two fur balls settled in the sack.

Skii’s mischievous grin appeared. “Let’s go grave robbing.”

She cocked Cassidy. And pointed down. And pulled the trigger.

Her body lifted up from the force...

SKII: FURIOUS HEART

...her hair plastered back...
...her feet skimmed the surface of the wall...
...and she skied upon the air.
Straight into Land Escape.

The adventure continues in...

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AUTHOR. PHILOSOPHER. CREATOR.

Of Tears and Blood is a journey into the creative consciousness focussing on those who have spilled blood, sweat and tears in relentless pursuit of their craft. This podcast features intimate interviews with talent who have created and performed on the public stage, and facilitation of those who are working through their deepest challenges. The host and his guests unapologetically take the most honest, raw, and vulnerable approach possible to the topic in a way others never have.

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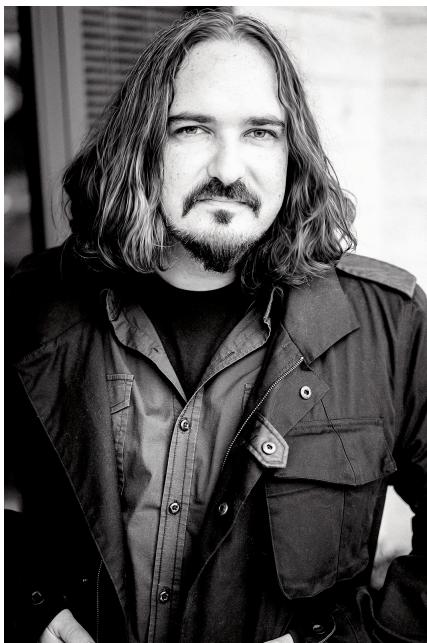
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