

Deviations: Second Covenant



Elissa Malcohn

Deviations: Second Covenant

Elissa Malcohn

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

Copyright © 2011 Elissa Malcohn.
All rights reserved.

This e-book edition has been prepared by the author for a limited, free-distribution offer to the reading public. Author reserves the right to withdraw the offer at any time. Commercial and derivative uses are not authorized without express permission from the author.

Read, enjoy, and feel free to share this file in its entirety! And please consider supporting your local library.

**For more about the author, go to
<http://home.earthlink.net/~emalcohn/index.html>
(Web search: "Malcohn's World")**

Cover Design: Elissa Malcohn

Malcohn, Elissa

Deviations: Second Covenant/Elissa Malcohn

ISBN-13: 978-0-9819764-5-7

First edition

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

Also by Elissa Malcohn in the *Deviations* Series:

Volume 1: *Covenant*

Volume 2: *Appetite*

Volume 3: *Destiny*

Volume 4: *Bloodlines*

Volume 5: *TelZodo*

What people are saying about the *Deviations* series

"Love this book [*Covenant*] and the entire series."—Ian, on [Manybooks](#)

[About *TelZodo*]: "Read this book. Do read this book....start at the beginning of the *Deviations* series and work through....There are echoes here of the impact of modern imperialism in the 'real' world. Malcohn's World is also, of course, our own post-imperial, war-torn world in an era of dawning austerity."—apidi, on [Manybooks](#)

"If you are looking for something different with a great story line, I would suggest reading these books. They are very well written and draw the reader into the story, possibly against their will."—Rachel Baker, [Old Musty Books](#)

"This is a dark series with a hidden deeper meaning. Malcohn's books are a look at the world we live in. This is not an easy read but it is an important read."—Debra, at [Goodreads](#)

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

"If you're looking for a tale that clearly defines good guys and bad guys, this is not your read. But if you're looking for a story filled with immense heart, rich character development, vivid world building and -oh, by the way- is nothing short of great, old fashioned storytelling, you cannot do better than Malcohn's 'Deviations' series."—K.L. Nappier, at [Manybooks](#)

"The series is really good. While reading, I could see myself in the story. It was almost as if I could feel, smell, and touch the other characters. That has not happened for me in a novel in quiet a while."—David Bennett, at [Smashwords](#)

"[T]he social commentary that is woven throughout the story is thought provoking and makes you reevaluate what you think you know about yourself and society at large."—Lakisha S, at [Manybooks](#)

"The world is rich, believable and consistent. The situation is brimming with potential. And I, for one, have never read anything quite like it."—Scott T. Barnes, editor, [New Myths](#)

What people are saying about *Covenant*

"It's difficult to believe that such a well-written book could be free....I can't wait to read the next one."—Murray Gunn, at [Goodreads](#)

"I give this one an enthusiastic recommendation. Interesting characters, interesting moral quandary, and lots of responses to it. I was expecting one of two easy answers, but Malcohn quite bravely avoided them both....Well worth full paperback price, and I'm quite glad to have it for free."—Bard Bloom, on [LiveJournal](#)

"Without sensationalized graphic violence or the glamorized pornography of pulp romance novels, Ms. Malcohn achieves what good science fiction/fantasy is intended to do. She has created a believable world, with characters with whom you can empathize, in a good story that is well and eloquently told....I give *Deviations: Covenant* five stars out of five."—David Roth, [Examiner](#)

"Rich character development and fascinating central conflict quickly addict the reader to this story....the moral issues are so compelling, so thought-provoking, you'll thank the author for presenting this perspective."—Lady Emily, [Redbud Book Club](#)

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

"This novel is the first in a projected series, and there is definitely enough material for series of books, series of movies, television series, fan-fic, etc....I recommend the novel & the author."—Jean Roberta, in her [blog](#)

"This book is a must read for any literary enthusiast. Elissa does a wonderful job in creating this world where the Masari and Yata live in this symbiotic relationship that is based upon ritualistic cannibalism (hence the term *Covenant*). In spite of the subject matter the novel is not some horrific blood bath, but a thoughtful look into the relationship between these two people

groups. This balance that was created by the Covenant to preserve both races is threatened by forces from outside and within their own hearts to free themselves of this enslavement to their DNA and ecology, but may lose their societies should it be successfully destroyed. As heart wrenching as the Covenant is, extinction is worse. Join this journey of faith, doubts, heroic actions, and questionable ethics as this saga is played out upon the backdrop of this primordial world where anything can happen..."—[Glenda Finkelstein](#), in her [blog](#)

"This is just the kind of book I like: too good to put down, but when it's over, you wish there were more and are sorry to see it end ..."—Gypsy Wynd, on [Amazon](#)

"Malcoln has built a very interesting and very well developed central conflict, and the development of the story is second to none..."—Alan Petrillo, on [Amazon](#)

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

"This novel is, in a word, riveting"—[L.W. Rogers](#)

For all of us

Introduction/Acknowledgments

Welcome to the sixth and concluding Deviations volume.

For most of the series, I did not know whether a solution would be found to the problem of Masari dependence on Yata flesh. Would my characters struggle with the issue *ad infinitum*? If the curse of cannibalism were lifted, what would the mechanism be and what would it mean?

I got my answer while writing *TelZodo*. I have a comic strip to thank—specifically, the January 14, 2007, episode of Jack Elrod's "Mark Trail," which dealt with the balance maintained in predator-prey relationships. That strip fueled BrushBurn's predictions in Chapter 33 of *TelZodo*, and it underlies the conflict in *Second Covenant*.

Neither could I predict, earlier in the series, the effect that new technology would have on the region. *TelZodo* saw the introduction of the Iron Messenger, inspired by my years of association with the late Nelson G. Williams, an avid collector of standard-gauge model trains.

Again, I send a heartfelt *thank you* to every reader who has joined me on the Deviations journey, gotten in touch, and shared and/or written about the series. You make my day and then some.

Thank you again to everyone at the Citrus County Library and to all the event coordinators and volunteers who have helped me get the word out on this saga. To them are added Sandra Koonce and the GFWC Woman's Club for spearheading the inaugural Inverness Book Festival; Chris Coad Taylor and the Tampa Writers Alliance; Pat Rada, Jo Ann Ryan, and Margie Harper of the Crystal River Women's Club; and Susan Woolfe and members of the Kings Bay Rotary Club. It's been an honor and great fun to speak to and with these groups.

For their continuing work, thanks again to the MobileReads Forums, Matthew McClintock at Manybooks, Tony Stanton at Obooko, Susan Crealock at Online Novels, Ed Patterson at Operation E-Book Drop, Ellen Pekar at Books For Soldiers, Shadow Forest Authors, and Broad Universe.

To Tracy A. Akers, Belea Keeney, K.L. "Kathy" Nappier and her husband Richard Bullock, Loretta Rogers, Lakisha Spletzer, and Meredith West, along with many others for their support behind the scenes—I can't thank you enough for being there.

As always, I give my deepest thanks to Mary C. Russell, whose love, influence, and perseverance go beyond words.

About the Author:

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

Elissa's work also appears in anthologies that won awards in 2009. IPPY Silver Medalist *Riffing on Strings: Creative Writing Inspired by String Theory* (Scribner Press) contains her story "Arachne" (originally published in *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, Dec. 1988). Bram Stoker Award winner *Unspeakable Horror: From the Shadows of the Closet* (Dark Scribe Press) contains her story "Memento Mori." Hugo Award winner *Electric Velocipede* published her story "Hermit Crabs," which is on the recommended reading list in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 26th Annual Collection*. Her novelette "Flotsam" (*Asimov's*, Oct./Nov. 2009) is on the recommended reading list in *The Year's Best Science Fiction, 27th Annual Collection*. In 2010 her story "Judgment at Naioth" appeared in the Dybbuk Press anthology *She Nailed A Stake Through His Head: Tales of Biblical Terror*.

More publications news may be found on her website:

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

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

"Half a continent will be closed
to protect the possibility of one last tiger.
But the last tiger will be turning dust."
—Joseph Payne Brennan, "When Tigers Pass"

PROLOGUE

Common Year 21, Early Summer

TelZodo

HigherBrook died on a sunny day, beneath a sky scoured clean by a three-day wind.

He lay in a meadow off the worn paths tying Crossroads to Basc, surrounded by his loved ones and facing away from the factories. He was shriveled at the end, shrunken almost to Yata size, and embraced by so many people that the sun was setting before half of us had said our goodbyes. Only his hands, swollen with arthritis and knobby with bone spurs, looked gigantic as Ghost and Evit coated them with salve. My father and my best friend wrapped them in bandages for the last time.

My hands look nothing like his. How could they possibly do what his had?

I had come to him six years ago, wild with memory. The mnemonics TripStone taught me gave me details but no form. They snarled my head in knots of information, each knot a voice screaming to get out.

HigherBrook had tamed those snarls, quieted those screams.

His delicate handwriting grew rougher during those six years. His jerks and spatters mirrored my own, but for different reasons. More and more, his body stopped listening to his mind, all of his orderliness and clarity locked away.

He had told me all of his stories countless times, switching their details and shifting their perspectives until I swore I couldn't absorb any more. On the last day of his life, he changed all the stories again, peppering them with bad jokes.

And I laughed, and I cried, because I still resented him for making me work so hard. He worked harder, struggling as his lungs and then his lips betrayed him. A hush fell over the meadow as he battled for words. Little things, but they carried so much weight.

I was a sponge pulling everything in. Each moment burned into my brain: his many children and grandchildren trying to make him comfortable. The numbness in his daughter Bless as she prepared to lead Crossroads in his stead. Her full brother Psalm, standing at the head of his own enormous Yata family. My mother Piri, so tender in her drumming on HigherBrook's cheek that I wished I could look away. CatBird, dreadfully thin and almost as frail as Gria, one and then the other enfolding him as they all knelt together among the wildflowers.

And Zai, who with a single look and a curt gesture ringed the meadow with her soldiers, who as one opened their rifles and let their magazines drop to the grass in a salute of defiant peace. The silence echoing off the mountains in the absence of gunshot.



A path opened in the crowd for me, and I knew it was time. I don't know why they let me through, whether because I had taken on HigherBrook's mantle of scribe or because he considered me kin. I try to measure one against the other and I can't. Any more than I can measure Ghost's love for Evit, the son he never had, as I watched them labor together over my mentor's tortured hands.

I knew only that I was about to lose the father I never had, who brought me back into the world after I had died to it. All the pride in Ghost's face when he looked up to reassure me couldn't erase the emptiness we both felt at that moment.

HigherBrook's face looked drawn and hollow-cheeked. He'd been fasting, refusing to die with Yata still in his bowels. Nearby, Smoke curled her legs beneath her and sketched his final moments, scratching unbearable scenes with her chalk.

The Governor's voice startled me. For most of the day I had heard him from a distance, filtering out all the interruptions from warblers and crows, and then from mourning doves and night birds. Their tiny, unselfconscious voices drowned out a whole valley of Yata and Masari and people like me who

wandered between the two. More than once I thought I'd heard the meadow breathing instead of its citizens.

I knelt with my lantern and turned up the wick. Some part of me did the memorizing; the rest of me was gone. He spoke and I answered, tying everything into place where I couldn't reach it. I remember HigherBrook's lips moving and the way his brown eyes twinkled in the lamp light. I remember him telling me to be happy, because he was.

I grumbled, "You always tell me to do the impossible."

"Only because I know you'll try."

I had to hold still, layering him into me and digesting his life, when I wanted only to take him into my arms and bury my face in his sunken chest.

But I was slaved to his narration, so we embraced through that. Otherwise I never would have been able to let him go.

It fell to Zai's son, Abri, to kill him.

Abri knelt on the other side and turned HigherBrook to face the Rotunda, even though a wall of bodies blocked our view. The blue tattooed Preserver's band made me believe for a moment that it extended all around and stained Abri's skull, as though he'd been a killer of Masari since birth. He probably was. He'd known how to take Zai's gun apart and put it back together since before I could talk.

Abri looked from HigherBrook to the shadows, asking with his dark eyes and his quiet voice if we were ready. He asked the children and grandchildren in turn, the many carriers of the Governor's seed.

And the Governor cracked another bad joke to break up their dismay. We were convulsed in laughter when Abri made his move, slipping a sedative beneath HigherBrook's linen shirt and into the small of his back. Abri's face turned studious as he worked the tiny syringe.

Every detail from then on shredded me. My mentor's impossibly-long eyelashes fluttering as his breathing turned heavy. The little smile he wore as he died, when Abri loosened his shirt ties and caressed him with heart willow resin delivered in a single prick to that sunken chest. The chest rising and falling two more times, leaving behind only a dry shell with two bandaged lumps that hadn't fired a gun or written a story down in more than a year.

Afterward I hung onto Bless and stared at her dead father's Masari features taking control, for a day, of her mixed blood. I wept against her neck fur as she cried in my arms, because we couldn't weep against his.

I considered moving to Basc again, a mixed-blood living among the Yata, like Psalm. But that city had its own scribes, its own guild, and a tireless printing press. Its engineers had built vaults into the mountains to hold its own multiplying histories.

HigherBrook had left me his legacy to grow into, with my long fingers and their puny calluses, waiting for the stories around me to change.

Crossroads had so few people left to write about.

CHAPTER 1

I divided my time between the funereal shed and my dormitory. Bless and I erected a case in the Rotunda for HigherBrook's bones while my father prepared his flesh for consumption. We could have been sleepwalking, waiting for gods I didn't believe in to wake us.

Eleven days after HigherBrook's Remembrance I was rounding the barn, headed out of the Grange, when adolescent giggles stopped me. On any other day I would have known immediately what it meant. On this day, my other instincts took longer to surface as I stepped toward the rear and listened to the furthest thing from grief.

I might have joined in if I felt up to the task and if I were hearing different people. One of those three on the straw was my cousin WingLeaf. The young male with her sounded as eager to reach his prime as his orgasm. Joyful braying from Yucof's daughter HeadWind drowned them both out.

Wing and Windy had done almost everything else together, so why not this? Except that my cousin wasn't yet of age and HeadWind, ten years older, wasn't quite of mind. I don't know if Windy knew what she was doing, beyond the fact that it made her happy.

The male enjoying them by turns would have worked up a good thirst, so I waited for him at the tavern. I hooked my legs around the stool, leaned over the counter, and studied the froth in my mug.

His smell reached me before I heard him saunter in. At his age I had already given up trying to be a father. At that age I had helped deliver WingLeaf, whose musk now ringed him like a trophy. But he was a full-blood, slow-developing Masari. He still had growing up to do.

I drained my mug and slid it back down the counter. "I'll have another," I called. "And set one up for DirtBall."

I tried not to smile as his saunter became a prowl.

He took the stool next to mine, his ruddy neck fur only a little frizzed, and twitched still-downy chops. "No one's called me that for years."

"I hear you're still a biter. What are your intentions toward my cousin?"

A few patrons glanced our way, then returned to their business. His fingers hesitated by the brew, as though he wasn't sure whether to trust it. "You mean, do I want to marry her?"

I doubted he knew what the word meant. He squared his shoulders, exuding a scent that told me he was trying to be a gentleman.

"I'm not talking about marriage," I said. "How's your marksmanship? Can you provide WingLeaf with the meat she needs if you get her pregnant? And if you don't go on the hunts, do you contribute enough to support the Masari who do?"

He meditated over his mug. I drained mine and asked for a third. Aside from maturity, the only important difference between us was that I had no appetite for Yata. I would never have to make his hard decisions or risk my life for sustenance.

He took a long drink and set his ale back down. He cleared his throat and spoke with a voice that hadn't fully dropped, "I'm a level five *yatanii*, so my weaning is good for my age. I helped build our smelter and I'm learning to make guns." He tried to smile. "WingLeaf shoots better than I do."

I said, "You're a hard worker."

He shrugged.

"Your family belonged to the Masonry Guild, right?"

His chest swelled, as though the guild still existed, along with other antiquated traditions kept alive only in memories.

"What about children?" I asked. "Do you want to bring more Yata-eaters into the world?"

He looked at my prey-colored skin.

I said, "There isn't a right or a wrong answer."

He screwed up his face. "I thought there was."

"I used to think so, too. So, do you want Masari kids?"

His creamy skin flushed and his shy smile told me everything.

I squeezed his shoulder. "I'll tell my parents to treat you like one of the

family." I motioned the bartender over, still feeling distressingly sober. "One more for me, and another for my kinsman ClayPack."

CHAPTER 2

Bless

Sometimes I wish for the simpler days when I didn't bathe. My father once said that he had scrubbed himself to bleeding after his first Yata kill. That hadn't helped him, but it told me where I got my obsession with washing from.

I miss him, but there's no time for that. I should be grateful he prepared me to lead, because that's distraction enough.

Crossroads is still mostly Masari, but I remember Yata living here my entire life. I attended the first induction of a Yata into the Chamber. He was one of many merchants selling wares manufactured in Basc, but he didn't commute from across the valley. He lived here.

And Yata lived here before him, including my mother Kova, though I barely remember her. I was still little when she died in the hunt.

The Chamber members don't see my mother when they look at me. They see HigherBrook. I always knew that as long as the Chamber kept seeing HigherBrook, my station as Crossroads' Governor was assured.

But I couldn't rely on that. I couldn't be a leader who followed another leader, even my father. He had trained me to use my own judgment, even if it meant breaking from the traditions he himself had set in motion.

"It's better to destroy them yourself than to have them ripped out from under you," he said. "It's going to hurt like hell either way."

So did having my father ripped away from me, but he'd tried to prepare me for that, too.



I bound my breasts before I dressed in HigherBrook's re-fitted shirt and trousers. I plaited my hair, combed my chops, and watched both my parents' eyes staring back at me from the mirror. I silently asked them why I

felt so uneasy about the good news I was about to deliver, on what should have been a day of rejoicing.

The author of the letter I held didn't rejoice, either. BrushBurn had expressed no opinion in his terse message. He knew I was going to read his announcement aloud and he wanted to make my job as easy as possible.

I'd sat in on enough debates during the regional summits to know where he stood. Masari have struggled to end their dependence on Yata for longer than I've been alive. Hearing someone like BrushBurn argue against extreme weaning and in favor of a return to increased predation made more than a few people squirm, including me.

I slipped BrushBurn's letter into my vest pocket, slung a canvas bag with my more mundane agenda over my shoulder, and took my long walk to the Rotunda. One official task remained before I delivered his news. I had inducted another full-blood Yata into the Chamber and would spend a moment welcoming her to her first full session.

Our amphitheater had once sat three dozen bureaucrats. Now it was reduced to nine velvet chairs around an oak table. We had spent weeks debating whether to remodel the extra space, but my father always believed that Crossroads would repopulate some day.

The temporary partitions surrounding us bore one of HigherBrook's last official acts. His commissioned murals depicted this valley's mountains from long ago, when they were still green. The artist who created them, a hybrid woman named Smoke, had been a prisoner in the Marsh at the same time my mother had been a slave on the Cliff. Both had settled here in Crossroads.

I greeted my colleagues as they filed in past a painted stand of pine. The real thing was gone now, replaced by Basc's railway depot. Our two Yata legislators climbed stairs to reach their seats. I had inherited my mother's short stature, so I swiveled my own steps beneath the table.

Keep your lungs strong and your oratory firm. My father's advice became my own form of prayer as I intoned an invocation to the gods. All of my colleagues were older than I and most of them were taller, but they didn't have my training. They didn't have my bloodline. A few careful sniffs told me that their respect for me remained genuine.

I took a deep breath, thankful that I'd inherited my father's windpower, and turned my attention to the woman holding the large slate board on which she would drum or write her arguments. "Twenty-two years ago, Crossroads welcomed its first Yata citizen inside its borders. Since then we have become home to fifty-two Yata and fourteen hybrids, but our transformation began with Piri. After all this time it is only right that she is here to represent our people of Masari, Yata, and mixed bloods. Piri, may your wisdom and experience help guide Crossroads safely through these times of change."

I rose with my colleagues and our ovation echoed off the painted forest. The Yata beaming at me from farther down the table was almost twice my age. Gray lightened her coiled, straw-colored braid. The scooped collar on her tunic offset the branding on the back of her neck.

She'd been livestock before I was born. Now she was a member of Crossroads' ruling body, a testament not only to her efforts but to my father's vision and my people's fortitude. I felt dizzy with pride.

I remained standing and drew BrushBurn's letter from my pocket as the others took their seats. "Our first matter of business is as historic an event as Piri's arrival in Crossroads had been." Then why did I have so much trouble mustering a triumphant tone? I unfolded parchment, further elevated by the steps beneath my feet. "Yesterday I received word from Promontory. As you know, BrushBurn has spent more than two decades keeping a detailed census of Yata consumption and of population demographics in the arid lands. Some of you remember his past reports, so you are aware of the trends. His most recent communication is briefer than most because he wanted us to have this information as quickly as possible."

BrushBurn's normally neat lettering was even more exact than usual. I looked at strained perfection and didn't know why I felt so angry. My pique seemed wholly inappropriate to the occasion, but it kept my hands from shaking and it gave my voice the muscle I needed as I read his words.

"To the Honorable Governor Bless and the esteemed Chamber of Crossroads. This day, the fourteenth of Anvil in our Common Year Twenty-One, marks one full year since a Yata has been killed for the sole purpose of feeding Masari in the arid lands. Yata dying from other causes have satisfied all the hunger that remains. Promontory's Chamber has therefore put an end to the Death bouts and declared this day the establishment of Parity between Promontory and Skedge. Our citizens hope that you will join with them in celebrating an end to our long and troubled era of murder."

A great shout rose from the table. My colleagues rushed forward and suddenly we were one massive clot of people embracing and back-slapping against the artificial landscape. Two dropped to their knees to offer prayers of thanksgiving.

Piri's tears leaked onto my shoulder as she squeezed me. She found my palm and drummed, *BrushBurn wrote to me to expect this, but I still can't believe it.*

I answered, *Then you know that Parity occurred a year earlier than he had projected.*

She nodded.

I didn't know if Piri's confidante had expressed the same concerns to her that he'd expressed to me. Their relationship was far different. My mother had been a slave, but the woman who held me now had been raised by BrushBurn's family to breed and become meat.

If Promontory had conquered this valley, our comrades in Basc would have been herded into pens and kept perpetually drugged. No Yata would live here and no hybrids, only second-class Masari forced to sell off their culture.

Now Promontory had conquered its own history. If my father were still alive, he would have been overjoyed to witness this moment.

Then why did I feel sick?

I all but dove for my chair. I had a meeting to run. The sooner I sat, the sooner my knees would stop shaking. I swiveled my steps out with a swift kick, climbed onto velvet, slammed my hammer once against a resounding chime, and called for order. I listened to chairs scrape, marveling at how much my inexplicable rage sounded like spirited authority.

I didn't care where my authority came from. I just knew I would need it.

CHAPTER 3

Abri

A sitting rock rests at the eighth switchback on the Cabin Trail, about two-thirds of the way toward the stone marking where Ghost's secret lab used to be. The trail takes some effort to climb, but I have not found as good a view of this valley anywhere else.

Here, near the border with Alvav, I am neither a killer nor an enforcer of laws against the illegal drug trade. When the birds look at me they do not see the son of Basc's leader. They do not see a Preserver, or even a Yata. I am only a visitor on a rock.

Workers too small for me to see chop the mountainsides into terraces. New settlements spring up. The Iron Messenger looks like a toy as it whistles away from the Basc hills and over the Alvav Ridge. It chugs across the Cliff and roars through dark tunnels toward Skedge, tying all of our Yata communities together for the first time in our recorded history.

Summer green spreads across Resurrection Forest and darkens into the older textures of the far woods. Smears of clear-cut separate the two. Mighty smokestacks. My people are happy and boisterous as Basc continues to grow. They toil in their industry and raise toasts with the Yata of Alvav and of Skedge, their new trading partners across the mountains.

My people possessed almost no skills when I was a boy. Now, with the Iron Messenger under Yata control, this region is ours.

Crossroads' Rotunda sparkles in the sun, but the Masari move slowly compared to my people. They pass through a dreamlike world filled with quiet streets and empty houses. Even through my clarifier's lenses they are tiny from here. But they are also giants, sinuous as they range across the market square. Their massive shoulders rock in time with their long-legged gaits. Masari thin from fasting still exude power as the warm breeze lifts their fur.

The Masari treat me respectfully because I carry their deaths on my hands. When I look into the faces of my own people I read fear, as though they believe that I can see down to their demons.

I don't need their demons. My own keep me occupied enough.

I finally understand TripStone. I understand how she must have trembled inside when she stood before my father Ulik. I know the agony she felt when she made him into a god, confident in her abilities and damning herself as she lifted and aimed her rifle and performed her sacred duty.

She spoke to me six years ago as I dismembered her, peeling her sinews away from her bruised and mended bones. I could touch her powerlessness, her holiness. I loved her as she had loved my father, both of us grieving what we had to do.

I visit her bones in the Rotunda. Then I come to this high perch and gaze into Resurrection Forest, toward the spot where she killed my father and where, in turn, my mother killed her.



When I was little I was taught to pity the Masari because we were their gods. Then the massacre split our valley apart and we weren't their gods any more. During the battle for Destiny Farm, when none of us knew if the grownups of Basc would ever come home, the creatures who couldn't live without our flesh defended us with their lives.

If we had to kill each other I wanted their deaths to be as sacred to us as ours had been to them. That's why I became a Preserver, trained to murder Masari in the most compassionate way possible.

They died as fearlessly as my father had. There must be an afterlife, because I could never have done what I did without drawing on Ulik's strength. My father is still a god to me. But the longer I sit on this boulder, the more I find myself praying to the Masari.

TelZodo emerges from one doorway and passes through another. Sometimes he stops in his travels and looks toward the ridge, and I can swear he sees me. But then his head ducks down again, and again he disappears.

I thought he was only collecting stories, but it's more than that. When a Masari who has spoken with him emerges, a radiance glows through the fur and the gait becomes slower still. An odd peace descends. They can't be telling him the same things every day when each visit leaves them lighter and more diaphanous than before. They literally seem to vanish before my eyes.

That can't be, can it? It must be a trick of the distance and the light.

CHAPTER 4

Evit

I hadn't heard of MeadowRose until the day she died four years ago. She was a level six *yatanii*, which made her degree of weaning from Yata flesh just about average for a adult Crossroads Masari.

I found her records easily enough. I had trained for my profession in Ghost's lab, so I knew his filing system. Nobody thought anything of my prying because I practically grew up on the Grange, as likely to nap in a potato patch as to tend the latest corpse brought in from the hunting grounds.

MeadowRose hadn't been killed in the hunt but her husband had, one week before she died in childbirth.

He must have been terrified that she would need more Yata after delivering, and he had no meat for her despite his contributions to the Deliverance Inn. Everything she ate went to the child growing inside her, and in spite of a healthy diet she was courting malnutrition.

Her husband would have hunted in a group if he'd been thinking clearly. No Masari had a chance alone against a Preserver. But the Soala would have filled with mourners if he'd been thinking, and I would have grieved with the rest of my people over the killing of one of our own.

Someone had to die either way. That should have been all. Consign the unlucky to the afterlife and move on.

But MeadowRose had been a child during the massacre that Gria, The Honorable One, had led against Crossroads almost twenty-three years ago. That killing continued with my mother Zai's raids. I was frightened and hungry then, but I was little, and Uncle Ila's house was crammed with people. I didn't have the demons that must have plagued MeadowRose during and after those days of terror.

Her husband's death must have brought it all back. She should have rested, reclining on her pallet and seeking solace in a friend's arms. Instead, she tried to drive her demons from her soul and her child from her body at the same time. First during summer harvest at the Grange and then at Liberty

Farm in Basc, bending on swollen feet and huffing under the weight of her daughter.

Liberty Farm's fields teemed with workers. We should have overpowered her, strapping her down if we had to. But we were slaved to our own timetables, and no one noticed when MeadowRose sought out a remote corner of fallow ground, begging the gods to harvest her child from her.

She wasn't alone when she collapsed into labor, but the only other woman nearby was in no shape to assist her. Roia had kept to the remote fields, too, staggering on the loam when her back wasn't pressed and her legs spread against it.

Roia had crawled toward MeadowRose's moans. She stripped MeadowRose of her soaked clothing and gave comfort in a manner that hovered somewhere between midwifery and seduction. To this day, Roia doesn't remember everything that happened between them.

She knows only that MeadowRose had fallen limp, the skin around her pectoral fur cooling after the baby came out. Roia had sliced the cord and pressed a bloody, down-covered bundle to her breast. The first suck had driven her nearly mad with delight. The second had made her tremble, as though she were lactating from head to toe.

Destiny will do that to a Yata woman.



My first crime lay in making myself aware of that fact.

I had known about the Destiny patrols. My brother Abri divided his time between murdering Masari in the sanctioned hunting grounds and capturing Yata criminals in Resurrection Forest. I barely remember when that forest burned to the ground, only that I grew up with the smell of its ashes in my nose.

When the forest grew back, the raw ingredients for Destiny returned with it.

My mother had never taken Destiny. She lived in a state of questionable piety when the Covenant governed this valley. She despised that drug long before she had a reason to hate it outright, and once she came to power she wasted no time ordering those outcroppings slashed. Then she

assigned them a more insidious purpose, letting them grow as a way to trap the harvesters who formed a swelling underground. She questioned them, often uselessly, before banishing them to the hunting grounds and leaving them unarmed against hungry Masari.

Any formulas for making the drug here had been ferreted out and destroyed long ago, leaving guesswork as dangerous as it was profitable. Many who tried to recreate Destiny managed to poison themselves, saving my mother the task of sending them to their deaths. That should have been enough of a deterrent.

But it was no match for the Rotunda's ancient narratives. Those Destiny stories made us seem lifeless by comparison. No amount of wishing on my mother's part could destroy them, especially since the tales of those orgies were the property of Crossroads, not Basc. And they were interwoven with the rest of Yata heritage. That made them into sacred texts.

My people's quest to make the drug became as fervent as my quest to end Masari dependence on Yata. In their own ways, both promised liberation unimaginable to my generation.

I didn't like seeing my people die from their own stupidity and taking the innocent with them. Losing their lives in the hunt was bad enough. They didn't have to poison themselves needlessly besides.

That's what I told myself. That's how Yucof had convinced me to become an outlaw the year before MeadowRose died.



"You'd think a criminal would know better." Back then, I thought I was engaging Yucof in idle conversation as we sat outside the Meethouse, both of our chairs tilted and our feet up on barrels emptied of ale. He'd been an outlaw for most of his life, so I thought he'd have some insight. "I don't understand why the harvesters don't just travel to Promontory. The formula for Destiny is in the Warehouse over there and that's an open library now. Anyone can go and copy it."

The old trader linked his fingers behind frizzy hair that had turned from orange to white. He trained watery eyes on the dusk. "Sure, if you want to gather your ingredients out in the arid lands and in the Marsh. Different climate, different formula. Not to mention being stopped at the border for

inspections." He gulped from his mug. "No, they're going to have to figure out how to make it here."

His eyes held a light that I mistook for inebriation. Two of my wives were still inside, enjoying the attentions of our neighbors. Yucof seemed more drunk than aroused, and even older than his usual, decrepit self.

I felt sorry for him. His business was barely surviving, but he still peddled as much as his small cart could carry, as fast as he could run his wares over the mountains and past predator hybrids. The real trade steamed on rails across the region.

We watched a smog-colored sunset and listened to sexual revels muted through the walls. He swung forward and dangled his hands between his knees, so leathery he looked like living jerky. He eyed the Meethouse for a long time.

I tried to read his mind. "You know they don't use drugs in the Meethouse any more, Yucof. My mother's patrols practically live there."

He said, "I know."

He kept staring at the complex.

Then he said, voice low, "What would you give me for the intact writings of a Basc herbalist from the Covenant era? Everything you wanted to know about how Destiny was made in this valley, down to the exact detail?"

I laughed. "Do I look like I want to die? You're speaking hypothetically, of course."

He said nothing.

"Come on, Yucof. The old herbalists are long gone. Where would you get that kind of information?"

He stood up, white braid swinging against his shoulder. "I've got a deal to conduct in Rudder. I should turn in, get an early start in the morning."

His chair still wobbled on granite as he set his drained mug on the barrel. He shuffled down the path to where he'd parked his wagon on a broad plateau. I spent a moment watching him go, too stunned to move.

Then I sprinted after him in the growing dark. By the time I reached his cart, Yucof had lowered his awnings and bolted his storage compartments

shut, leaving only his living quarters open to the night. I hopped onto a flatbed and ducked inside.

He reached behind me and lowered a hinged door, leaving only a thin flue for ventilation. A single lantern threw exaggerated shadows around us until he raised its wick.

I said, "There is no deal in Rudder."

"No. Of course not." Bitterness edged his voice. "But HeadWind is almost out of Yata to eat and my scavenging hasn't been so good lately. I need to get her a body, and I can't think of a better source for Yata bodies than you, if you're amenable to a trade."

Ale soured in my stomach. "You're scaring me, Yucof."

"You think I'm scaring you *now*. Sit." He bent to his pallet as I settled myself at his table. I leaned forward as he plunged his hands into bed straw, moving bindings aside and making a mess on the floor. His braid became chaotic.

He grunted with a final reach and pulled out a leather pouch. "Bubbles wanted me to get rid of this, especially when I entered into legitimate trade. Thank the gods she died believing I had."

He sat opposite me. The leather cracked and flaked when he bent back its flap, but its treated lining still managed to preserve the parchment inside. He held his breath as he unfolded it.

The parchment was unsigned, but anyone in Basc would have recognized that script. I gawked at it. The writer simply could not have produced what I was reading.

I said, "This is a hoax."

He hissed, "I did not acquire that document secondhand. Ask Gria yourself if you don't believe me."

I stared at scribbles and spatters. "And get myself killed?"

"Why worry, if it's a hoax?"

Meticulous measurements offset the troubled hand. I was used to seeing blessings written by The Honorable One. They adorned everything

from my mother's proclamations to household decorations. "How is this even possible?"

"Gria's army sickened in Alvav on its march to Destiny Farm. That's not a well-known part of your history, though it's accessible to people interested in digging deeply enough for it. Zai couldn't suppress everything."

I watched Yucof piece his bed back together, as though he assumed I'd buy what he was offering. "I know they'd been delayed," I offered.

He whooped. "They were half dead, son. No match for the central valley's parasites. They would have become food for Rudder's Masari if we hadn't intervened, and back then we had enough black marketers and sympathetic *yatanii* to heal everyone. Then we detained them, until Gria convinced us to let her army proceed." He straightened from his pallet and jabbed the parchment. "That formula she wrote told us what *we* had been trading to Promontory. All that time we thought it had been medicines. That's what convinced us to let her forces go."

"This says The Honorable One made Destiny, herself."

"Of course she did, Evit. She was an herbalist!"

"She was a general."

"She was an herbalist before then. First she made Destiny under the Covenant and then she traded it for guns after she became an outlaw." Yucof dropped into his chair and sank his head in his hands. "Evit, you have no idea what went on here. Your mother has rewritten history because she wants to protect Gria. How can The Honorable One be a living god if she was duped into helping Promontory farm Yata? How could she have made Destiny at all, when she had been such a terrible victim of it? Even the massacre of Crossroads' hunters is downplayed, now that Basc and Crossroads have been partners for so long. Their alliance against Promontory had been such a *friendly* affair." He snorted.

I paged through the sheets. The Honorable One had specified everything. Chemical properties, mix ratios, rates of reaction. She'd even drawn the plants and insects. No matter how hard I tried, I could not reconcile what I was reading with the broken, scarred woman who had been sent into the afterlife and come back from it. Who had walked with the gods and was their unquestioned messenger. Who my mother loved more than her own life.

I whispered, "Does Abri know about this?"

"I imagine he was old enough to know at the time." Yucof's voice sounded far away. "He's close to Gria and he keeps secrets well."

"Ghost never mentioned any of this to me."

"Ghost had left Alvav by then. He was off in Promontory, keeping his own secrets and protecting his family." Yucof gripped my wrist with bone-breaking strength. "Now, do we keep my daughter fed or not?"

My head spun as my scientific curiosity warred with everything else. What else hadn't I been told? How much more was my mother's generation keeping from mine?

I growled, "I won't contribute to a revived Destiny addiction."

"Trust me, Evit, someone will find a way to make it again. With or without those notes." He leaned back and folded his arms, grained like the wood. His eyes flashed. "You get to decide how many people will die before that happens."

Including HeadWind.

This wasn't about science or ethics. It was about his child.

I could blame that slow-witted hybrid for my decision, but that would be lying. I never could blame HeadWind for anything.

I asked, "What do I do?"

"You'll set aside enough Yata meat for HeadWind's survival." Yucof folded and slipped the sheets back into their pouch, then pressed the monstrosity into my hand. "I will try to get back here to take it to her, but the road hasn't been kind to me lately. I'm traveling farther afield to maintain trade. You visit the Grange often enough to know HeadWind's rate of consumption."

"You want me to bring my own dead people to her."

He snapped, "I did it with mine." He patted my arm with skin that felt too dry. "She'll call you 'Daddy' when you do. It's the best feeling in the world."

One look at his stricken face and I believed him.



I had been making Destiny for a year by the time MeadowRose died and her daughter was born. I wish I could say that I knew then about the effect Roia's breastfeeding would have on a newborn Masari. The drug accelerated everything: rates of procreation, changes in the blood, lactation. Breastfeed a Masari baby on Destiny-laced Yata milk early enough and that child develops the ability to produce the nutrients it needs on its own. It doesn't need Yata flesh to survive.

Nobody knew that. How could they? The Covenant had segregated Yata and Masari in my valley. The central valley had stopped making Destiny altogether, while the arid lands had used it either as a weapon or as a tool of enslavement.

If I had known then, I would have had an ethical reason to start my own, covert production of the drug. But I became ethical in retrospect, when Yucof brought Roia to me and I stared at the furry baby in her arms.

Ghost would kill me if he knew what I was doing. That goes to show how much I've taken after that old Masari. He had risked his life performing experiments forbidden under the Covenant. Now I'm risking my life to continue his work.

He probably felt as frightened then as I feel now, but I don't dare ask him. His wife is a Destiny Farm Yata. She knows what that drug can do.

MeadowRose's daughter was weaned from Yata milk at three years of age, and at four years of age she still shows no Yata-dependence at all. No signs, whatsoever. She should be a miracle to Crossroads. Instead, she is a well-hidden secret here in Basc.

I don't know if she even realizes she's a full-blood Masari. The only one she'd ever seen was her dead mother, and I doubt she remembers that. But she is asking questions now, and sooner or later we're going to have to tell her. We have to give her a name and allow her to make friends. She needs a place to run around in, more than furtive trips to and then away from the forest trails.

Eventually we'll have to tell her who her real mother was, and why the only family she's ever known will die if she reveals our secrets.

I hate my job and I love it dearly, all because of this one child. This accident of discovery. One unsuspecting little girl and her sex-addled wetnurse.

For now I have only a theory, observed in a single subject. Ghost would kill me not only for making Destiny. He would kill me for my stunning lack of scientific rigor.

But obtaining a large enough sample size is difficult when my own mother and my big brother would execute me for real if they knew what I was doing.

CHAPTER 5

Mid-Summer

TelZodo

I went to the market square to buy ink and found a mob instead. Merchants and customers alike pressed toward a single trader I couldn't see, there were so many bodies in the way and too many raised voices to count. More people swept in from their houses toward the din.

The voices weren't angry. They were awed.

I broke into a jog with the rest and passed fresh wood still smelling of the forest. Most of the market's old carts and tents were gone and half the Crossroads square had been dug up for foundations and cellars. Now permanent stalls sprang up, leaving a maze of narrow alleyways and painted shingles hanging back to back. Hawkers congested those alleys, toting their wares on their backs or guiding the flow of business toward the shop fronts.

But not today. Today they'd abandoned the shops and left their shutters open. No one seemed to notice the wind unraveling bolts of cloth or the full sun heating shelves of hammered copper. No one paid attention to still-unopened crates stacked by the shop that sold canyon gems.

Everything remained on display and unattended. For a wild moment I wished I'd been a thief, but even the thieves weren't doing their jobs. The pickpockets seemed conspicuously absent inside a writhing mass that kept growing.

I hate crowds. A few other people stood off to the side, watching. We glanced at each other, waiting for the clot to loosen.

I asked no one in particular, "What are they buying?"

"I don't know." The Masari beside me spoke with a Rudder accent. He brushed dust from a faded indigo tunic that still sparkled with gold trim. It had once been a handsome piece. "I heard something about an import from Skedge coming in on the train this morning."

"Like the canyon stones."

He angled his red beard past me. "It's quiet by the canyon stones."

We listened to sounds of surprise and delight. Goods or coin had to be changing hands, but no one was leaving.

He asked me, "Is there a meat cart here?"

Several heads around us turned, neck fur raised. Away from the crowd the air crackled with a sudden jump in tension. The Masari beside me didn't look hungry, but his concerned squint told me exactly what kind of meat he meant.

He continued in a soft, resonating voice, "For those who don't hunt."

I growled, "We don't sell Yata here. If you heard otherwise, you were misinformed."

He wouldn't have heard otherwise. He resumed watching the throng. The rest of us guarded the abandoned stalls more closely.

He wasn't the first exile from Rudder to ask me that question. For the third time in as many years, the central valley had raised its level of weaning required for residency, while Crossroads kept its borders open. Every year more Masari sold their possessions and traveled to the Cliff, where they impoverished themselves buying slabs of dried Yata priced as high as the market would bear.

Then they caught the Iron Messenger to Basc and rode transports across the valley into Crossroads. We gave them cottages and simple furnishings, but they were responsible for the rest.

The man beside me could have cut the gold trim from his tunic and bartered with a hunter. He might still try, before being forced to enter the far woods or to find some other means to satisfy his appetite.

He squinted at the mysterious excitement with his head slightly cocked, smelling of curiosity and fear.

I asked him, "What did you do in Rudder?"

"I sang."

His back grew straighter as his lips pressed together.

"Your lung capacity will help you in the hunt."

At last some of the customers squeezed free, clutching cloth bags to their sides. Older Masari teetered toward home. They looked drunk, but not on alcohol. Others shuffled about, part pensive and part confused. Whatever the trader had brought from Skedge, it was a powerful commodity.

The man beside me said, "They look like they've seen a vision."

The Yata wore huge grins and some wept with joy. Older citizens made pointed gestures, painting invisible pictograms in the air. They chattered excitedly to children, young adults, anyone willing to listen.

Smoke's tall silhouette came into view as she wove through the Yata. She could have been a sculpted bust riding above their heads, as statuesque as the next Masari but without a scrap of pelt on her pale skin.

So, this strange fever struck hybrids, too. I had never seen Smoke so flushed. The red on her cheeks could have been painted circles. As she staggered out of the crowd I watched her hug a Yata woman, both of them laughing. They pressed lumpy cloth bags to their breasts.

The Masari beside me jolted forward and waved. "Smoke!"

Her gaze whipped toward us and her eyes widened. "SpiderLark!"

She broke into a lope. Her Yata friend sprinted to keep up.

Smoke and the Yata-eater from Rudder grabbed each other with ecstasy bordering on the obscene. Who was this man? I reached behind my head to smooth my neck fur, but the itch continued past my shoulders and down my arms. I was more than ready to fight him for her.

That surprised me. Smoke never particularly approved of me, and I decided years ago that I didn't care one whit about her opinion. She obviously saw something in the singer that I'd missed.

They let each other go, looking ridiculously delighted. Smoke still clutched her lumpy bag. I took pitiful comfort in the fact that whatever was in there, she liked it better than she liked him.

She brushed back her dark hair, caught her breath, and squared her shoulders. "TelZodo, this is SpiderLark."

"I heard."

"I painted his portrait eight years ago. It hangs in the Pavilion's Virtuosi Hall."

I wondered if he'd modeled nude for her. Better to distract myself with Smoke's Yata friend, who stood patiently off to the side, looking preoccupied. "I don't believe we've met."

"Roia." She flashed me a wan smile.

"What's in the bag?"

Her eyes began to water. "My great-great-grandfather's clavicle."

The words nailed me to the road. I managed to stammer, "Covenant bones."

"Yes!" She dropped to her knees laughing, rummaging in the cloth. "The old bones from the old times and the old religion. Skedge is trading them back to us for *food*!" She narrowed her eyes at SpiderLark. "*Real* food, grown in the ground on Liberty Farm. Not...not..." She bent quickly back to the bag.

I knelt beside her and eased my palms around her shoulders until they stopped shaking.

She whispered, "If you were a flesh-eater, I wouldn't let you touch me."

"I know."

In the distance I could see Bless mingling among Yata and Masari and hybrid, dependent and non-dependent citizens. They were all her constituents, and she moved in a whirlwind of backslaps and embraces. If this deal had been part of the last summit, HigherBrook would have been one of its architects, along with Zai. That meant a sister cart with more bones sat in Basc, ringed by an even bigger crowd.

Roia looked about my age. She would have learned about the Covenant only in stories passed down from the few people left who had actually lived through it.

I almost jumped back when she freed the curved bone from its canvas. From above I heard Smoke tell SpiderLark, "*Now* you know why I value these so highly. Have you ever seen such an art form?"

A Masari scrimshander had stippled the bone in inks that still looked fresh. As Roia turned the clavicle in her hands one color flashed against the next, drawing the eyes in different directions depending on the light.

The pictograms told a man's life story in a series of shifting designs on a three-dimensional surface. His household unfolded and wavered before me: wives and co-husbands, children and grandchildren. Relatives lost in the sacred hunt, when the hunt was still sacred, before he himself had been taken for sacrifice.

This bone had once hung on the wall of the Masari hunter who had killed him. The hunter had died in the massacre that ended the Covenant, or from the sickness and famine that followed. Starving survivors had then sold the clavicle to BrushBurn for a slab of Yata meat. Promontory had then traded it to Skedge, with countless other relics, in return for Destiny. The Destiny kept other Yata drugged and procreating, producing more meat for the flesh-eaters. In the beginning, the Skedge Yata had viewed the bones only as exotic artifacts.

Then the farm that had enslaved my mother was destroyed and that hellish drug with it. Now, in exchange for fruits and vegetables easy to grow in my valley, those Yata in the arid lands were sending these relics back home. Even today, so many years after the Covenant fell, we were still trading bones for food.

The symbol for Destiny almost popped out from the clavicle in searing gold ink. The slightest movement of Roia's wrist made it writhe like clustered serpents.

I pointed. "That drawing was near his heart."

"Of course it was near his heart. Destiny was loved here." Roia's voice turned hard. "It wasn't a forbidden substance then. It helped keep us alive."

She spoke as though she had imbibed it herself, but anyone who'd read enough of the Rotunda's narratives would sound like that. The testaments alone were enough to make one groan aloud.

Roia turned away and arched her neck. "Smoke! You have drawings for me."

"In my stall."

Roia's hand was clammy against mine as I helped her stand. Her ancestor's clavicle rested in its dun-colored bag, weighting a corner toward the ground. She offered a quick bow. "Excuse us."

"Nothing stops business." SpiderLark smiled after them as they departed. He asked me, amiably, "What do *you* do?"

"I'm a scribe." The crowd finally began to thin, drifting in a loose cloud toward the shops. I'd almost forgotten that I had come to buy ink. "Tell me enough about your life in Rudder and you might not have to cut away your hem so soon."

His eyebrows shot up. "You'd pay me to talk to you?"

"That depends on what you tell me."

Every year I saw fewer Masari around me. If they had to disappear, I wanted to make sure they left something of their lives behind. I didn't care if they'd been born in Crossroads or not.

He folded his arms across a broad chest. "Crossroads must pay its scribes well."

"Scribe," I said. "I'm the last one left. My family farms the Grange."

SpiderLark nodded. "You're a son of privilege, then, just as I was." He followed me toward the shops. "Even for you, fortune comes down to food."



"I thought you were going to write."

"I have a good memory." For a moment, the walls of SpiderLark's cottage interested me more than he did. "I can't gather information from you very well if I'm busy bent over parchment."

He murmured to my back, "You're not bent over parchment, you're staring at canvas. Did you come here for information about me or are you more interested in my art?"

Except for his walls, SpiderLark was a typical refugee from Rudder, reduced to simple housewares and a small wardrobe. He sat on a pine chair left by prior occupants who'd been killed by Preservers. His small table looked

rough enough to bruise his elbows. Refugee homes were a hodgepodge of different tastes that austerity kept simple.

The displaced's most prized possession remained constant. Most kept their trunks in their kitchens, others by their bed. SpiderLark's sat in plain view in what passed for his foyer. If it was full, that meant he possessed a generous supply of Yata jerky.

He could have sold that fine-tooled leather and brass accents for more meals. He could have sold the paintings on his wall. Yata meat might mean life to him, but it wasn't everything.

I asked him, "What level *yatanii* are you?"

"Eight."

"Your weaning is well above average for Crossroads."

His reply sounded half condescending and half homesick. "That does not comfort me."

The canvas surrounding us bore different variations of portraiture in Smoke's realistic hand. Intimate dressing-room sketches in vivid colors showed a younger SpiderLark applying stage makeup and gazing into a mirror. I could almost reach out and touch brocaded robes and snuff boxes, could almost smell flower garlands draped about the painted room.

Another canvas showed the view from far back in the Pavilion's balcony, where railings swept toward a spacious proscenium. SpiderLark was one among many actors on stage, but the others were all Yata. He stood out from their sky-colored tunics, a giant, tragic figure draped in dark silks.

I said, "We have nothing like this here."

"You have the Rotunda."

"We have nothing like these performances."

"I know." His voice clipped. "Pity."

He followed my movements around the foyer with a stealthy gaze I didn't need to see. I smelled the slight lift of his fur and a distasteful tang in the air. These depictions were all that remained of the opulence he'd left behind. Now they were set against a modest cottage of old wood planks and

cobbled stones. Nothing gilded surrounded him here, nothing melodic. Not even a dainty cup of tea to occupy his manicured, twitching fingers.

The portrait of a young boy stopped me. At first I thought it was the singer. But the shape of the eyes was wrong, and the skin tone. This was a mix-child, peering out from behind a crudely-forged breastplate, wide-lipped with laughter. "You can't see the stage in this one."

"There's no stage," SpiderLark said. "He wasn't in a play. That's real. "

"She drew this in Alvav."

"In the Marsh, to be exact, fourteen years ago. About a week before the Games, when they locked him outside the gates and he wound up dead. That was one of Smoke's earliest works." SpiderLark shifted in his chair behind me. "I didn't know her then."

The child must have been Yata-dependent if he'd been banished from the safety of the Marsh. A surge of envy gripped me and I drove it away. Even fathering a Yata-dependent child was better than fathering no child at all, but wishing wasn't going to change my biology. Shouldn't I have outgrown that pain by now? "I've encountered predator hybrids," I said, trying to sound gentle. "Smoke drew a lot of those children. She refused to sell me any of their portraits."

"She wouldn't sell me that one, either. She gave it to me," SpiderLark said. "That was my son. 'Predator hybrids,'" he spat. "What a stupid phrase."

I wished his pantry had tea. "I'm sorry."

He sighed behind me. "I was still a boy, too, part of a band of minstrels. He was conceived on a Thanksgiving day, when everybody mingled across the valley. The Marsh was still a prison then. I never really thought about it, much less considered that an artist like Smoke could have grown up there."

SpiderLark's chair creaked as he leaned back. Soft laughter resonated through everything. "The Marsh gave us the Games so that Rudder could have blood sport and fresh meat. The Yata on the Cliff shared our more refined tastes, so we never thought of them as food. That's what the prisoners were for. A Cliff citizen and her slave took a liking to me and I didn't say no. I was too flattered."

My stomach lurched. "The boy's mother?"

"That was the slave, of course. I never learned her name, and I don't know if she even had one. She didn't speak unless her owner commanded her to. More tantalizing, that way."

I turned away from the painted boy and toward his father. SpiderLark's creased face exhibited more wistfulness than regret. He probably missed the central valley's old class structure as well as its refinements.

My father's narratives had described that class structure. A slave pregnant with a mix-child would have been either executed or sent to the Marsh. "My mother was pregnant with me in the Marsh."

He smirked. "We all know what your parents did, TelZodo. We didn't share that kind of sentimentality back then."

The portrait on his wall and its prominent placement begged to differ.

"I had a youthful adventure," SpiderLark added. "It wasn't like a scene out of *River Crossing*."

I squinted at him. "I'm not familiar with *River Crossing*."

He stared at me. In moments his shock melted into a look of abject pity, reserved for dumb beasts who'd never learned speech.

CHAPTER 6

Bless

Keep me apprised of demographic changes, BrushBurn. Just because I oppose you doesn't mean I don't have an open mind.

I scowled at the words I'd written. Was my letter authoritative or just patronizing? I wasn't sure.

My father had told me to expect uncertainty and self-doubt. "You'll make mistakes," he said. "Your job is to make sure that Crossroads survives them."

If everything he said were true, then I should feel as though I was crazy half the time. The other half of the time I'd be too numb to know the difference. This was leadership?

I had laughed then, sure that HigherBrook was kidding me. He laughed, too, making light of assertions that chill my blood when I think about them, now that I am governing Crossroads.



Rudder had annexed Promontory the year I was born, the first of our Common Years. "That annexation made Rudder the dominant power in the region." How old was I when my father had told me that?

I remember picking a card out of a Death deck. I had played with Death as a toddler because every card told a story out of our history. HigherBrook dealt me more hands when I was older.

"That's new." I pointed to freshly-inked drawings. My fingers were still chubby. "That card. And that one."

"I'm adding to the deck."

My father and I sat on the floor in his office. It must have been Common Year Six, when Psalm was more interested in playing outside. Did all younger brothers prefer stupid games, wrestling and tackling, to puzzling out the mysteries my father embodied?

HigherBrook was a magician to me then. Especially down on the floor, where his document-filled walls towered above us along with his tall desk smelling of wood and ink and wax, parchment and leather. It was intimate and odd at the same time.

He lay on his side, still in his work clothes, and turned up another new card. Two trading carts converged. They teetered on their wheels, top-heavy with smiling vegetables.

I pointed to stylized rays on the left. "Is the sun setting or rising?"

"Look at the direction of the carts."

They faced his simple sketch of tall peaks, which meant Promontory. That made it morning, when merchants from the Grange and Liberty Farm took produce south.

"Promontory and Skedge were starving, so they needed food." My father turned up more new cards and explained our growing agricultural reserves and trade base.

We had put his expanded Death deck away by the time I was ten. My lessons in history and civics came directly from the papers on his desk, and I learned how the summits that year became famous for what happened *away* from the negotiating table. That's when I first saw the mountains across our meadow being blown up and thought the world was coming to an end.

Psalm also left Crossroads that year and became Abri's co-husband. It made him a full-fledged adult in Basc. I tried to fathom how Psalm had suddenly come of age before me, and what it meant for me to be related to Zai by marriage.

That alliance almost made me TelZodo's relative, too. But Tel had just returned to Crossroads after breaking his marriage ties to Abri's brother Evit and his household.

The years muddled after that. Tel's sterility made him half wild. Psalm fathered his first child and then everybody started looking at me.

No. Not at *me*. They were looking at my womb and picking potential suitors. Psalm had become a citizen of Basc, mating back to Yata, while I still had the potential to mate with a Masari. Was I fertile, too? Would I bear Yata-dependent or non-dependent children? Suddenly I wasn't a little girl any more and my people were obsessed with me.

I stopped bathing and I kept my filthy clothes on. I didn't want any of them near me.

My father's weight dropped. He visited Basc more often, and soon I heard about a history of half-brothers and half-sisters I'd never met, all of them free of Yata dependence. That's when I learned that my father had gone across the meadow for years, for more than talks with Zai and Gria or for visits with Psalm after our mother died.

He'd tried to relieve me from the pressure to bear a child. We concentrated on governance instead. I bathed only for Chamber sessions. I stopped hating Psalm and I started loving Crossroads as I learned about my people.

I just didn't want to be around any of them. Except for TelZodo, who was even more screwed up than I was. He and I had the most glorious fights.

Then it was Common Year Fifteen and TelZodo was gone again, this time to Promontory. Against my better judgment I missed my sparring partner.

"You said he's been helping you toughen up." My father had washed, but if I tried hard enough I could still smell his Meethouse trysts on him. His brown eyes twinkled. "Do you think you're ready for a regional summit?"

How did I know?

But that wasn't the right response. He bent back to his dinner and I spent a few moments scanning the woven Covenant narratives on our walls. Not reading them, just looking at their pretty colors and their stiff fringe. I also wondered how much more dirt my right thumbnail could hold. Maybe I should pick it out before it dropped into the stew.

I talked to the top of his head. The sprinkles of gray looked like stars in his brick-colored hair. "Yes, as long as I don't embarrass you."

"You've never embarrassed me, Bless." He looked up. His scarred cheeks dimpled above trimmed chops, making me want to scratch at mine. The pride in his eyes held me captive. "Just take a bath before we go and remember that you're still underage. Whatever you say or do in Rudder won't matter."

I flinched. The words stung, but I knew what he meant. I grumbled, "Stupid restrictions."

"Be thankful for them," he said. "They're saving you a lot of trouble right now."



My father had drawn circles on parchment to prepare me, one large circle for the round table and smaller ones for chairs, showing me where each person would sit during the negotiations.

"Zai gets placed at a right angle to BrushBurn and there's always at least one person between them." He drew a rounded square for Promontory's representative and a narrow lozenge shape for Basc's. He drew a diagonal line across the lozenge.

When I asked him, "What's the line for?" he answered, "That's Zai's gun," and he chuckled.

"You're telling me she wears her rifle to the table?"

"Oh, yes." He steepled his fingers and grinned at me. "Even when the rifle isn't there."

I was old enough to know what he meant, but he seemed to treat it all as some kind of private joke.

"They never, ever, sit those two opposite or next to each other," my father continued, "otherwise Zai would go after BrushBurn. With arguments if not with weapons. She'd kill him if she could, especially now that Gria's too ill to make the trip into Rudder."

I tried to puzzle out his crude sketch, in which he and I were silly stick figures and our hosts from Rudder were ornate pictograms smothered in flourishes that didn't mean anything. He drew my brother-in-law Abri as a skull.

I said, "That's what I don't understand."

His eyebrows rose. "What don't you understand?"

"Zai and Gria both hated the Covenant, and the arms for Destiny trade enabled them to destroy it. BrushBurn lied to both of them about what the Destiny was used for. Gria forgave him a long time ago, but Zai still holds this irrational grudge. Why?"

I was still young. What did I know about protectiveness and guilt?

In those days we still took old-fashioned transports over the pass. My valley didn't have a working railway yet, only scars in the mountains where the tracks were being laid above Basc.

My father had warned me about Rudder's Pavilion but I still stood dumbfounded before it with my mouth hanging open. Then I realized I looked like an idiot and clamped it shut, straightened my shoulders, and tried to feel like a leader in training.

The Pavilion must have once looked just like our Rotunda, but the Rotunda still had dormitories. The Pavilion had *suites*. My father laughed when he saw me looking for a chamber pot and pointed me toward the water closet. I could barely smell my own shit through the privy's aromatics.

He called out his concern about my digestive health before I was halfway done with counting all the ventilation slits.

"I'm fine!" I called back.

"Then get out of there before I soil my pants!"

I should have asked Abri about the summits. He'd been attending them for years. He was a full-fledged grownup and next in line to rule Basc after Zai and Gria. But he was also the skull in my father's drawing, the Preserver who killed Masari hunters and the enforcer who killed Yata criminals. At least he prayed over the Masari.

I couldn't get my father's drawing out of my mind. I giggled when I passed Abri in the hallway.

His blue tattoo furrowed. "What?"

"Never mind." I shook my head and hurried on.

I wore finery my first night in Rudder. Not the fine linens I wore to Chamber sessions, but silks and slippers. My father plaited my hair with gold-colored strands and draped a string of semiprecious stones around my neck.

I lifted beads of star quartz and shadow jasper. "Where did this come from?"

"Promontory." His voice behind me was businesslike. "It's canyon stone."

"I didn't know we had this."

"I just bought it." He grasped my shoulders when I tried to turn around. "Hold still. I'm not done yet."

I frowned as he finger-combed my neck fur over the clasp. "Why are we dressing up like this for a summit?"

"The negotiations start tomorrow," he said. His own silks smelled faintly of honey. "Tonight Rudder is showing us how cultured it is, so that we can ignore the brutality of its Games."

His voice was so smooth that I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.



I kept telling myself not to stare. It didn't do any good.

I wasn't used to seeing Abri out of his uniform. I was less used to seeing Zai out of hers. Like my father and me, they had dressed in formal attire, but one look at Zai and I could see the imaginary rifle across her back, even in the Pavilion's gilded foyer.

She looked ready to hunt down Masari among the chandeliers. When the taller people didn't block her from view, I watched her standing straight-backed, holding but never drinking from the silver goblet in her hand. She gestured with the other, jabbing holes in the air with tapered fingers as she spoke with a well-muscled Yata.

"Who is that?" I asked. "He wears his silks like armor."

"He wears his armor like armor, too," my father said.

"A Games fighter."

He nodded. "Go over and introduce yourself, and see what you can learn about warfare."

I would not see the fighter in our VIP box. Most Yata and Masari crowding the foyer were here only for the theater that night. I walked away from my father and through a pickled mist of alcohol and gossip, listening in on emotional reunions between combatants or bloodless duels between

intellectuals. Glasses clinked. A harp on the other side of the room played an aimless melody that all the voices drowned out.

I'd been holding my own goblet like a living statue. The liquid inside it looked like diluted honey, smelled much stronger, and would spill all over my fingers if I didn't lower its volume as I walked. I stopped by a marble staircase and sipped.

It almost spilled anyway.

"Easy." Broad palms steadied me as I choked on fire. I looked up at a blur and considered dragging my silken sleeve across my eyes. I was underage. Nothing I did mattered, right?

The blur pressed a kerchief into my free hand. I dried my tears and blinked at rusty gray curls and then at pretty blue eyes. A worn and gentle face. "I am indebted to you."

The man chortled. "You're as proper as he is." He nodded toward my father, who was engaged in his own conversation. "I've been watching you two. You must be Bless."

I nodded and choked, trying to muster my dignity. "You have me at a disadvantage. I don't know who you are."

He exchanged his goblet for mine. I looked down at water, then tried to douse the flames in my throat.

"BrushBurn," he said.

I caught my breath. "The rounded square."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind."

I wondered how much more stupid I could possibly get.



By the time of the next summit I had come of age. TelZodo was home again, TripStone was dead, and I was seated between BrushBurn and Zai, caught between his quiet grief and her quiet rage.

I didn't think she wanted to kill him any more. She had killed his wife instead.

Now my father is dead, too, and I know little more now than I did then, except that I should gracefully refuse goldberry brandy at the Pavilion.

CHAPTER 7

Evit

"The sap mites are breeding."

Abri sounded nonchalant, but I knew better. He walked beside me with his shoulders relaxed and his hands in his pockets. We could have been enjoying a peaceful little stroll, a nature walk on Resurrection Forest's well-tended trails.

But my brother wore his Reckoning strapped to his back and he was talking about what happened off those trails. Either the Honorable One had told him enough about Destiny for him to time his patrols, or he had followed the movements of my suppliers long enough to learn the details of their harvesting process.

Was he waiting for me to tell him that he was patrolling the forest too early? The larvae wouldn't hatch for at least five more days. The fire cups they ate would take another six days to become tattered and filled with molted carapaces. Then he would be back here, armed and ready for the harvesters.

He might have been testing me. Or he might have just been admiring a curtain of branches in the distance, so thick with orange lichen they looked like a wall of fire. Like a memory of the forest burning down again.

I studied the rifle on his back. "Are you executing criminals here, now?"

"Those who resist arrest." He studied tiny movements in the trees. "They're condemned to death either way."

"Was that Mother's directive?"

A little smile played on his lips. He bent to the side of the trail and snapped off a sprig of wild mint. He pressed green leaves beneath his nose, teasing scent from them with his fingers as he returned his attention to the curtain of fire cups.

He wasn't questioning me, so I wouldn't question him. My family and his would join for dinner under the hazy sky and speak of little things.



Over the past four years I had learned how to keep track of all the safe houses. All the tunnels and root cellars and hidden compartments. The Honorable One must have felt the way I feel, walking the paths of her village with her nose open to danger and trying not to smell like fear. Those were the days when she dispensed forbidden contraceptives and almost every house had a Destiny pot.

Not like now. All those pots have been smashed.

But you can't smash a cloth bag buried in a lab satchel. And almost no one was out and about in the predawn.

Roia met me at the entrance to a storage shed with enough internal light to let me extinguish my lantern. She led me past a maze of looms. My nose twitched with the scent of dyes before they registered Masari dander. Nothing else smelled strong.

I said, "She hasn't peed yet."

Roia's black mop bounced, her hair still uncombed. "She's still asleep."

By the look of Roia's wrinkled tunic I could tell the woman had just gotten out of bed. By the smell of her I could tell that she had actually slept. I was glad someone had.

The girl's pallet lay somewhere beyond shelves of skeins that had lost their colors in the dimness. I squatted beside a half-woven blanket, opened my satchel, and handed up a many-times-sealed bag of tied-off bladders. I didn't want any of that brown powder spilling on my walks.

Roia's eyes gleamed with rapture as she took the Destiny from me.

I growled, "Don't use it all up in one place."

"Give me another Masari baby to suckle and you won't care where I use it."

I didn't know if I was buying her current silence or her future cooperation. For the past four years I'd had trouble telling where one deal ended and the next began, and which wrong tug would unravel the whole affair.

A deep-throated yawn traveled past the skeins, sounding disturbingly like my third wife when she wakes up. I still have a hard time telling Masari children from Yata adults when all I have to go by are disembodied voices.

I wondered what I sounded like to the girl. Was I a grownup or a playmate to her?

I called, softly, "Good morning."

"Evit!" Bedclothes rustled along with parchment, a new combination of sounds. "Come see!"

I rummaged in my satchel as I headed toward the back. "Do you have to go yet?"

"Almost!" More rustling. Her voice turned studious. "I think so."

"What kind?"

"Both."

I handed an empty collection bladder to Roia. "Get me some liquid. I'll take a sample of the rest later."

The disembodied voice became pouty. "I can do it by myself."

Roia added, "We've been practicing."

I watched her and the girl vanish behind a privacy curtain. "She's only four."

"Yes, and Yata can gather their own pee for you at that age, so why not Masari? Don't tell her what she can't do."

Sometimes my legitimate lab work sounded more like a joke than anything else. Ghost and Piri collected bodily fluids in Crossroads and I collected them in Basc. It was easier and funnier than cutting up the dead. It still didn't point us toward a cure for Yata dependence.

Roia's Destiny-enhanced breast milk did. All I had to do was give Ghost a sample of that and then let my brother shoot me.

Roia emerged from behind the curtain and stood nearby with her arms folded. After a moment she reached back in and withdrew a half-filled bladder whose end was impressively if inexpertly tied off. It sagged from her fingers

as she reinforced the knot. The stream behind the curtain continued, singing against metal.

As I packed the sample in a case I wondered how many little kids equated the words "Good morning" with an inordinate interest in their wastes. Then I thought of TelZodo and almost laughed aloud. He'd hated it. This Masari child hidden in the shed seemed to take everything—my examinations, her constant moving among the safe houses—as a normal part of the day.

Roia gathered up the sheets of parchment scattered across the bed, along with laminated cards. I stared at the deck. "Don't tell me you're teaching her how to play Death."

"Of course not. She's learning to spell what the pictures are."

I read simple vocabulary words written in Masari and Yata alphabets that looked equally clumsy. The sheets also held sketches executed in an adult's hand. Quick studies. Scenes from Crossroads, the kind that Smoke sold from her stall in the marketplace.

The girl's crude drawings beside them told me that she knew exactly what she was. I heard her clean herself up as I paged through the parchment. She seemed to have no grasp of syntax in either language. "What is she trying to say?"

Roia said, "She's looking for her name." She called toward the curtain, "Have you decided on a name yet, sweetheart?"

"Uh huh."

"Tell Evit, then. He wants to know."

The curtain shushed aside and a girl more than half my size beamed at me. I looked at downy chops riding pale cheekbones. Her frizzed Masari hair falling about her shoulders was the color of raspberries. Just looking at her nightdress I could tell she'd grow up to be big-boned.

If the gods existed, she would grow up.

She sat on her pallet and made a sour face as she gave me her arm. I tied it with Masari sinew, found a delicate vein between swaths of pelt, and marveled at her fearlessness as she watched me slip my needle in.

As I pulled her blood from her she asked, "When can I tell people I'm FlyAway?"

CHAPTER 8

TelZodo

My young cousin WingLeaf would grow up to look like my aunt SnowMoth, according to my father. I barely remember SnowMoth. I think I once saw her lying in a field and meditating.

WingLeaf wasn't meditating at all. She hung off ClayPack's meaty arm as they strode toward the training field at the edge of the Grange. A stiff breeze ruffled her short lavender hair and floated her laughter back to me.

She wouldn't come of age for another three years, but she was already as tall as her beau. She'd need a new leather vest and breeches if she didn't stop growing soon.

And if she started growing in other ways, Crossroads would have to declare her an adult. From the way she acted around ClayPack, I assumed she would start growing that way soon.

They both smelled like gunpowder, and ClayPack's pants were stained from the munitions factory. He'd probably made the shiny new Reckoning WingLeaf wore. His StormCloud was older, but it looked reconditioned. He'd probably done that, too.

"Fewer Masari are dying in the hunting grounds."

I used to know when Bless sneaked up behind me. She stank, then. I kept facing forward. "That's because fewer Masari are around to enter the hunting grounds now."

She hurried beside me as a shot rang out. "I'll be thankful when we can lose that part of our culture. When our hunters are relics, like those bones."

My gun-toting kin were several paces ahead of us. "I'd be obliged if you didn't insult my family."

Bless peered up at me. I smiled back at her. Around us my family's squash crop heaved beneath its own weight.

She said, "For a moment, I thought you were serious."

"I am."

"What drivel is Promontory sending you?"

I'd have to write to BrushBurn and tell him he was *Promontory* now. "Do you know that ever since the arid lands reached Parity, I've never heard you call him by his name?"

She tried to ignore me but her neck fur wouldn't let her. I hadn't seen her bristle like that since we were teenagers.

I said, "I imagine he sends me the same 'drivel' that he sends you."

"But you think he's right."

I didn't know what to think, but I didn't have to tell her that. What was I supposed to say? That her mother's death in the hunting grounds had been a good thing? That my mother was best viewed as somebody's dinner? That my Masari cousin WingLeaf and her Masari boyfriend were bent on continuing the ancient tradition of risking their lives chasing down a meal and wanted to produce a child who would do the same?

"BrushBurn told me six years ago that Promontory will lose its Masari in two generations." I chopped the hazy air. "Masari are dying out over here, too. Your father's blood. My father's blood."

"BrushBurn's an alarmist."

"Is he?" I watched the two youths dwindle toward the windbreak's far end. We were close enough to hear the drill teams now. Shouting and scuffling. Who wouldn't want to put an end to war? Then we could all sing like the exiled virtuoso whose life story I was recording, until all the singers died out, too.

"Your father never hunted." Bless hunched beside me, scowling at the trees. "My father did, and I never knew if he was going to come back home alive. You'd better believe I want Parity here."

If that were so, then why was her fur still standing on end?



Evit's cart stood outside the farmhouse at dinner time. I peeked inside oiled canvas flaps and wrinkled my nose at the stench of preservatives. He'd brought body parts over here.

"Dozo!"

I looked up. HeadWind stood in the doorway, grinning at me and clutching a gob of meat. Her breasts swelled a greasy tunic. Someone had tied her carrot-colored hair back, but most of that had come loose and fell in strands about her diminutive shoulders.

I called out, "Hey, Windy!" and she brayed with unfettered joy. She grabbed my shirt and offered me a bite of Yata when I reached the threshold.

"Thank you," I said, "but that's yours."

Gore mashed against my chest. "Share, please!"

I bent down and smooched her forehead. "We shared a kiss, okay?"

She hugged me and sighed a happy sigh. Her voice sailed across the family table. "Zozo's here!"

A staggered chorus rang back, "Hello, Zozo!"

I called greetings to blood kin, adopted kin, and kin by association. HeadWind spun from me as I took my seat. She cuddled up to Evit and offered him a bite of Yata.

He smoothed back her hair. "I brought *you* that. Remember?"

She held the meat before his face, more insistent. Evit took it from her hand and held it for a moment, then returned it.

I raised my eyebrows at him as I reached for less potent stew. "Doesn't Yucof do that?"

"I supply her food when he can't." My ex co-husband helped HeadWind into the chair beside him and wiped grease from her chops. They'd both climbed on boxes to reach their seats.

I asked, "Why?"

"Cause she calls me 'Daddy' when I do." Evit winked as he took the proffered meat and passed it back to her again, a hint of strain in his voice. "Yucof and I worked out a deal years ago, Tel."

"Tozo!" HeadWind corrected. I wondered if she kept changing my name on purpose.

Bless and my mother were still working out their own deal. I asked my father, "Should I bring a plate of something to the lab?"

He shook his head. "They'll finish up soon. Bless still has four more Chamber members to visit."

"I don't recall HigherBrook making this many deals out of session."

"He did when you were little."

Evit returned HeadWind's meat to her again. "Eat it now, please."

I didn't want to guess where the body had come from. "Is Yucof all right?"

"Last I heard."

I looked from Evit to my father, who shrugged. Evit was Ghost's protégé, but they hadn't shared a household together. After two years of living in Basc I knew all the little Yata's worry lines.

Talk around the table turned to the crops and then to the hunt. Every time I visited here it seemed someone new had moved to the Grange or someone had been killed. I was beginning to wish I had dined in my dormitory.

Then I wondered if I had been dining in my dormitory too much.

CHAPTER 9

Abri

I am like Ata, killing my own kind to preserve the Masari. I never thought much about that ancient Covenant myth until now. It had always seemed outlandish to me.

But I can see what the Destiny is doing. It isn't about raising young for sacrifice any more, or about farming Yata, or even about the rape of Gria. That's not why I agree with my mother's directive to execute the harvesters.

We are outpacing the Masari now, and we'll overrun them if we don't stop multiplying. Once they are gone we will be unstoppable, and then we will kill what remains of the land. And then what?

Even as I enter the hunting grounds, still charged with culling our predators, I know that we cannot let them die out. We need each other too much.

And if they killed your children? Your mates? I can't make my views public when my own rebuttals keep ringing in my head. How could I argue for the slaughter of my own kind?

I drove those arguments from my head as I hid by a thatch of toad needle, listening to mating calls. If I tried hard enough I could pick out individual amphibians: deep burps from the midnight cloverfoot, while the russet toad sang with a sound like uneven gearing.

The pleasantness of those calls was my only tonic to the biting flies above the water and the stinging fish below. Any repellent would reveal my location by its odor. The toads didn't care about that, but my quarry did. This way the flies would feed on me and the toads would feed on the flies. And, with luck, I would shoot a harvester before daybreak.

My forest patrols were either a sacred task or heresy of the highest order. Without the Covenant I didn't know what constituted sacrament or heresy any more. I had to invent my own scripture. Sometimes, on these overnight watches, when I was devoured by creatures I could kill with a slap

of my palm, I wondered whether Ata had truly gone mad as the texts say he did.



She was no ordinary harvester.

Most times they splashed through the water, heedless of whoever might be listening. Either they didn't believe I waited for them, or they thought they had enough time to elude me. Toad needle root is easy enough to pick. They had only to pinch off the outermost segments branching through the mud.

I didn't know she was here until she was almost upon me. She waited until the amphibians stopped singing for the night and then she glided submerged, surfacing only to breathe and re-fill her air bladders. Another sealed bladder dragged against her side, barely visible in the light from phosphorescent algae. It held her revolver.

I knew then that she was a Preserver. As an elite hunter, she was entrusted with upholding the highest Yata principles. As a harvester of the ingredients for Destiny, she was already committing a heinous crime. And she was actively hunting me, a comrade-in-arms, because she knew that I was here.

I hated to kill her. I managed it only because I had more air, bigger lungs, more time, and more luck. She had to surface, becoming visible to me before I became visible to her. Then I dove in before she sank toward whatever creatures would feed off her shattered brain.

Without enough Yata to overrun this valley, the toads, the plants, the pond, and the forest would survive for another day.

I carried the harvester clear across Basc, my uniform sticking to open sores the flies and the fish had made. My rifle needed cleaning. My prey dribbled down my back from half a head.

My people were already afraid of me and my little march wasn't going to help matters any. Only The Honorable One seemed to understand my nature. The day Gria can explain it to me is the day I will be enlightened, because I scare myself, too.

The harvester would be a present for my brother, and she would also be a warning to him, because I could smell his involvement without having to

raid his lab. Irregularities percolated to the consecration room, where I prayed over those Yata and Masari who had died honorably.

Some days Evit's blades and mine sliced through flesh at the same time, his in research and mine in reverence. I knew what corpses smelled like, fallen in the wilderness or treated on dissection tables. I knew what chemicals Evit used to test the remains.

I also knew what to sniff for during the many steps of Destiny production. Gria had taught me what to expect as we spent long hours in her sanctuary. Her shaking hands told me how much she still craved that drug.

I cleaned the harvester's body, treated it with preservatives, and left it on Evit's dissection table. My mother would receive the revolver.

That should satisfy her.



When I no longer smelled like blood I left the lab. Light peeked out from Evit's family hut as I passed his home workroom. Like me, he had probably been up all night.

You and I are the reason for co-husbands.

How was my brother faring domestically? My wives had started gravitating toward Psalm after I began using a sheath. Psalm was only too happy to give them children. They smelled life on him and death on me. I decided not to go home.

My mother was awake, looking well-rested as she tended her herbs. I watched her weed. Bent over in her garden, she looked amusingly harmless.

Without looking up she said, "Join us for breakfast." It only sounded like a command.

I stepped past her and inside. The Honorable One reclined on a well-cushioned pallet. Outside, she was a living saint and the gods' unquestioned messenger, but she was Gria in the house she shared with Zai. In her Dirt People sanctuary she was my spiritual teacher, but here she was my second mother. Instead of vestments she wore loose linen clothing. Her tunic's colorless weave was the closest she could get to nakedness and still be covered.

I bent down to kiss a cheek whose raised veins seemed ready to rupture. Her cracked body looked like a bird's egg dropped from the nest. Even after all these years the gods still held it together.

I reclined on the pillows beside her. "I request an audience with The Honorable One."

"I can see that." Gria sank deeper into the down and closed her eyes. "Granted."

We'd have to talk in her sanctuary, not here. Breakfast time belonged to my mother, who carried aromatics in a small basket toward the kitchen. I rose to my feet and followed her in, reaching toward my belt.

A pleasant cross-breeze diffused the odor of chopped greens as she wielded a sharp little knife. Clacking from the printing press echoed across the courtyard. I asked, "Happy news?"

"Broadsides for Skedge."

Happy news. "What are we sending them this time?"

"Crop yields." She grinned down at her board. "Liberty Farm is peaking well."

"We're going to exhaust the soil if we're not careful."

"Don't worry, Abri," she said. "We're careful."

I slipped the harvester's revolver from my belt and dropped it next to the vegetables. "From Resurrection Forest last night."

"Take that away from the food."

I sat at a simple pine table, crossed my ankle over my knee, and waited. My mother turned from her greens and glared at me.

Our staring match was short-lived. She wiped her hands on her trousers, examined the gun, and muttered, "*Vyak*." Coming from her, the curse sounded benign.

"Hanza," I said. "Twelve Masari kills when you inducted her as a Preserver. Sixty-seven since." I eased my hands behind my head and leaned back. "Almost one Yata kill, too."

"She's older than you are. Her reflexes are slower."

"Her reflexes were fine."

She turned away from me and ran nervous fingers through her hair. She set the gun down and picked up her knife again.

Her chopping melded with the rhythms of propaganda from across the yard. "She was an accomplished hunter and we paid her well. She showed no signs of Destiny addiction. Why did she turn to harvesting?"

"Evit will perform an autopsy on her." Suddenly I was famished. "Maybe he'll discover why."

Maybe he already knew.



I was a boy the first time I stepped into Gria's sanctuary. On that day, my mother was almost as sad as when my father died. My brother whimpered, cowering from the sight of all the strange-looking pictograms, but I could tell he was being brave. He tried to avoid stepping on the drawings on the floor, but that was impossible. They were everywhere.

They glowed. No one believes me when I say this, except for The Honorable One. My mother and brother, who were there with me, shake their heads. And yet my mother spoke of Gria's face glowing after every trip into the afterlife, as though we were all in competition for some kind of sanctity.

We circled from one chamber to another that day, around and around, closing in on a central room. Our echoes pulled me deeper in because nothing else made any sound. The curved walls devoured our footsteps.

My mother drummed on my shoulder, *We're taking care of her*. I watched her drum the same thing on Evit's shoulder and she gave him a reassuring smile that I could tell was forced.

I studied the glowing pictograms, which flashed at one another as though carrying on their own silent conversation. I tried to listen in, but I couldn't understand what they were saying.

I remembered Gria from before the battle for Destiny Farm. She told Evit and me that the gods were perverse and then told us to ask our mother what *perverse* meant. Zai, muddy from drilling her troops in the rain, told Evit

to gather water and told me to clean her gun and then we all forgot the question.

After the battle, when I stepped into Gria's sanctuary that first time and saw what had been done to her, I knew exactly what *perverse* meant.

Gria was wrong. I would have called the gods cruel instead. If my father had indeed become a god, he must have had his hands full just trying to keep the other ones in line.

Evit and I helped our mother care for an old woman who wasn't really old then. As time went on I watched Gria become more and more disfigured, and somehow that made her more and more holy. When I told her that the pictograms glowed, she asked me, "What do they tell you?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

She said, "Let's learn together."

I decided then that she was in league with my father, because it would take both of them to keep the gods in line.



The drawings haven't glowed at me for a long time and they look much smaller now.

The Honorable One was asleep on her raised pallet when I entered the sanctuary. I lifted my lantern and watched the stitched symbols on her black vestments rise and fall with a steady rhythm. I made sure that the ventilation flue was open, then bent and lit a candle by the turquoise-colored bag of bones belonging to the woman who had been The Honorable One before Gria.

Erta had been her name. I don't remember her at all.

Inscribed Yata bones hung on the walls beside the pictograms, including some of the new bones returned from Skedge. The candle light made them all dance together, the way the sun played on ripples in the lake.

Before the lake silted up.

I reminded myself that was why I was here.

I tiptoed past Gria's bed. She and I still consulted the Dirt People pictograms, but she had also purchased a Death deck when I was a boy. She said its pictures suited her better.

I crossed to the far end of the room and a shelf set at shoulder height. It looked out of place jutting from the wall and surrounded by relics, calling attention to itself.

Now the objects on it could be called relics as well—the book of ancient Yata narratives from the Rotunda at one end, the Death cards and their accompanying marble cups at the other end. And, set in the center, the sealed stone box of twenty-three-year-old Farm Yata meat.

I gathered the oversized cards, which would feel small in a Masari player's hands. I moved the deck to Gria's table and returned to the shelf for the box.

It felt lighter every time I lifted it. There must be nothing but dust in there now.

Vestments rustled behind me. Gria still looked asleep when I glanced back at the bed, but I knew better. She was saving her energy, waiting for me to puzzle out what I wanted to say before she struggled to the table to examine the questions I'd dealt.

The cards slapped softly onto wood. I separated the Destiny bag illustration from the others and then the rifle card. They were obvious choices.

From there I had to improvise. The Marsh's prisoners had invented Death shortly after Destiny Farm fell, but they'd added nothing to symbolize events that had occurred in the intervening years. They had used the deck only to divine the outcome of their next Games. They couldn't have foreseen the changes in this region.

I drew a canyon card and laid it crosswise over a pine forest. Then I changed my mind and fished out the Death card itself with its scattered bones. I put the canyon card away.

My neck grew hot as I turned one card over after another, grasping for meaning. Nothing here indicated contraception, only attrition from battles and natural sterility. A dried-up salt pan. A burned-down forest. The hidden encampments of Gria's original Yata militia before the massacre.

Birth control had flourished in that camp because Gria was producing soldiers instead of children. There, the Covenant's sacred Destiny had been forbidden, replaced by the pastes that had made Gria notorious. She'd almost died spreading that sinister knowledge.

Now that knowledge was locked up in her brain and I had to get it out of her. Before the Destiny won and everything else lost.

I flipped through the deck again. Nothing. I swallowed a growl and dug into my pockets, pulling out one sheath after another. With each extraction I remembered gentle fingers touching mine, pushing my hand back toward my heart. Consoling kisses on my cheek. My bed left cold.

I could see the pictures in my wives' minds. Little Yata who looked like them and like me, clear voices laughing from hut to hut on the day when we'd hear no more gunshot in the far woods. Children raised to be *children*. Enough Yata to band more tightly together across the region, solidifying our alliances and our interdependence after our villages had been isolated from each other for so long. An army of workers and inventors. Of *course* we needed more children, because children meant progress.

We'd created firearms. We'd created Destiny. We'd created the railway that now united our communities, making us stronger with each run over the tracks.

Except that the Masari had helped us reach steam travel, and before that they had brought agriculture to Basc. Those contributions were easily overlooked, given the overwhelming evidence of Yata ingenuity.

The pictograms staining the walls, the ceiling, and the floor were no better than the cards. In ancient times we had been the ones dying out. Destiny had saved us from extinction. It had come to us as a gift of the gods, before the demons had taken it for their own uses.

Now the demons resurfaced. Were there no symbols around me that counseled restraint?

Yes, there were. But they weren't pictures.

I hurried back to the shelf and grabbed the marble cups, heedless of the rattling inside them. I knew that The Honorable One was awake and waiting for me to be seated. We already communicated with each other. My scent and my tension reached her as I huffed to the table and spilled out

stylized "bones" from cups meant to be used by two players. Fused canyon rock, green beryl on one side and orange quartz on the other.

For a moment I considered how I could update the game to show the hybrids. Then I realized it didn't matter. Psalm had come into my household with mixed seed, but his children emerged almost completely free of Masari traits. What did Bless call him? *A Yata with fur*. His progeny were hardly different from my own.

I wanted to leave those children something to live in besides silt.

The stones cooled my palm as I turned them over and set them opposite the Death card on the pines. I arranged them in a phalanx, beryl side up. Light green bones laid end to end. All the Masari left in the world, reduced to a fine line of pretty rocks.

I slapped the rifle card next to the rocks and the Destiny card next to Death, gathered up my sheaths, and dumped them on top of the whole lot before I realized I was out of breath.

The bed rustled again as I dropped into my chair. Gria's bare feet touched down. Her vestments dragged behind her as she hobbled to the table, leaning on her cane.

She shuffled around me, observing the pieces as though we were actually playing a game. Her swollen finger traced the string of beryl.

A thick nail tapped the laminated gun. "Zai would say you're a traitor to your people."

I muttered, "I never said I was arming the Masari. They have their own foundry."

She rounded my chair. The Honorable One smiled down at the sheaths and then sighed. "You're using old membranes, Abri. Any more brittle than this and they'll break."

"It doesn't matter."

"You've got smart wives. They might not push you away when you approach them wearing those."

"You make assumptions."

She jabbed the sheaths. "So do you." She sat down opposite me. "Your most dangerous assumption is that the gods are more powerful than Basc."

My voice turned heated. "And who is Basc, that it is more powerful than the gods?"

"Not your mother, Abri. And not I." Gria lifted and shuffled the deck. Her dark eyes gazed up and through me, as though she were staring down the divine. She took a deep breath and her lungs rattled.

I blurted, "At least teach me the old forbidden arts while you're still alive."

"You're clumsy with herbs," she said. "You're a terrible cook, so why should I trust you with contraceptives? Send your brother here."

I almost told her he was engaged in his own forbidden arts.

I stared at the stone box and tried to lose myself in its sinuous bas relief. The ancient symbol for Destiny ringed the granite like tangled snakes.

The Honorable One pulled a card from the deck and laid it on the lid of a vessel that had once held flesh. I lifted it up and faced a drawing of scrolls. At first I thought they represented manifestos she had written at the camp. The ones asserting that Yata and Masari were natural enemies and should abide by natural law, rather than by the Covenant's dictum of sacrifice.

The card's tiny print spelled out prayers and consecrations instead.

I frowned at the card and the box. "You're showing me opposites. The Covenant versus Destiny Farm."

She looked disgusted with me.

I tried a different tack. "You know what's going to happen if we can't control our population. Our progress will choke us." I pointed to the card. "We can't possibly go back to that old religion."

"I'm not asking you to," she said. "But if the gods told Basc to stop having so many children right now, Basc would turn against the gods. And right now, we *need* our gods."

"Powerless ones."

She shook with dry wheezes, holding a misshapen hand over her purpled mouth. Bronze skin reddened as she cackled.

"Abri," she gasped. "Don't tell me you've forgotten how to use your opponents' strength against them in the hunt." She clutched her cane and levered herself up. "Let the gods be helpless. Let our people exercise their power. Then you can shape and direct it after I'm gone."

I sputtered, "How can that possibly save us?"

The Honorable One reached for the Covenant card and pressed it into my hand. "Sleep with this under your pillow tonight." Then she turned from me and hobbled back to her bed, still laughing. Her vestments trembled on her thin frame.

I stared down at the card and shook my head. Part of me wanted to throttle Gria's cryptic messages into something I could understand. I swore that I would speak plainly and clearly the day I donned those holy clothes.

If I couldn't get simple formulas from her for contraceptives, I would try to get them from Promontory. That knowledge was open and accessible in the Warehouse.

For now I would do as Gria asked and sleep with the Covenant card under my pillow, only because it made me feel like a boy again. She'd always had me sleep with talismans of one kind or another during my training, whether they were messages she had written to the gods or strips of Yata and Masari skin twisted together into a pendant. Or a Death deck card.

She was a magical being and she glowed the way the pictograms once did. That wasn't a question of belief. It's what I saw. It's what I felt as my father's bone-handled knife grew hot on my belt, reminding me that the gods might be useless against Basc, but they still had power over me.

CHAPTER 10

Late Summer

Bless

I hear the Pavilion has scheduled another performance of River Crossing for our visit.

I groaned, "Not again," and scanned BrushBurn's letter to find out if we'd be watching male leads, female leads, or mixed.

Mixed leads.

I grumbled at the parchment, "I don't suppose you could tell me whose head gets chopped off at the end."

No, of course he couldn't. That was the whole idea of the play. You never knew whom to root for. Either the hunter from Rudder would emerge victorious in the Games or the combatant from the Marsh would. Up until that point it was the same Yata-Masari affair, taking what happened in much of the central valley and blowing up the facts into melodrama thick enough to choke on.

The central valley's betting parlors made at least as much profit from *River Crossing* as from the real Games. If BrushBurn knew who'd win, he'd be a rich man.

Plus a predator hybrid character. They're making it a love triangle this time.

I'd been planning to get a full night's sleep before the summit. Now I'd have to pay attention and not doze off in my seat. Blasted play.

The rest of his message was a grid of numbers that I dutifully copied into my ledger, detailing births and deaths in the arid lands. Yata now ran forty-six percent of Promontory's factories. Of those, seventeen percent were our direct suppliers.

If that trend continued, the Yata in Promontory would eventually press for independence from Rudder. I'd have to re-examine Rudder's trade balance,

too. The better I knew what shape our neighbors were in, the better I could look after Crossroads' interests.

For some reason, BrushBurn confided in me as though I served on Promontory's chamber instead of my own. Maybe his candor was the direct result of the Masari's minority status in the arid lands. How much more did they have to lose?

Regards.

Instead of signing his name, he had drawn a rounded square at the bottom of the page, copying my father's cartoon of him from years ago. It made me smile.



I oiled my father's leather satchel the day before I left Crossroads. When it was dry and supple in the morning I loaded it up with merchant accountings, lab reports, Grange yields and projections, factory production figures, negotiating points, and the latest anecdotes from TelZodo's roving narrative-collecting. People will do anything to get their adventures into the Rotunda's books, and our scribe took a perverse pleasure—well, any pleasure—in fact-checking.

Then I packed my pretty canyon beads and my creased linen trousers, my re-dyed silks and my re-tailored jacket, my hairbrush and my chops comb, and extra handkerchiefs for the play. I really wished they'd bring back the comedians.

I also wished that I could take an old-fashioned transport directly into Rudder, but our hosts were paying for our passage—to display the central valley and to eavesdrop on informal exchanges among the delegates. I'd have to settle for an old-fashioned transport into Basc instead. I hefted my satchel over my shoulder and headed down the flagstone path toward my runner and a pre-departure meal with my in-laws.

The meadow seemed broader with my father gone and the transport was too big, too quiet. Was my runner's cadence faster because he pulled a lighter load, or did he sense my loneliness? He gave no indication when I disembarked, and I kept our parting formal.

Abri met me at the door to his primary hut, looking as out of place as I felt.

I sniffed, teetering under my load. "Smells delicious. One of Evit's dishes?"

"No. Tezani's." He shot a furtive glance over his shoulder before unlacing a compartment on my back. He pushed folded parchment inside, then helped me off with the satchel.

I drummed on his arm, *What's that for?*

It's for BrushBurn.

Do you want to tell me what it is?

No. He eased my hand away as Zai strode over to greet me.

She looked no less imposing in her traveling clothes than in her uniform, and our brief embrace gave us an additional way to size each other up. I returned her friendly clinch as Abri added my satchel to the ones he and his mother would take on the train.

Then a flurry of youngsters greeted me with blinding rapidity and sprinted off toward the secondary hut and food better suited to their palates. Two of Abri's wives chased after the stragglers and herded them away, leaving a small core of his family to dine with us.

I peered at a dwindling cloud of shouts and laughter. "I think I've lost count."

"Twenty-six!" My younger brother's voice reached me from around bends in the adobe. "Twenty-three of them mobile."

Three babies, then. Abri had five wives and one co-husband and he'd been building his household for sixteen years. This place would be barren by Covenant standards.

My head hurt every time I tried to imagine the world my father grew up in. I reminded myself that he'd never seen a Covenant-era Yata household, either, just remnants after the massacre. Before then, only consecrated hunters had been allowed into Basc and only for somber ceremonies, not for social gatherings. Under that system neither I nor my brother Psalm, who already sounded well-fed for the day, would exist at all.

Psalm also sounded proud of accomplishments that were mostly his, though one look at the hearth and I could tell that our chef was Abri's biological daughter.

Zai murmured, "Twenty-seven, soon," as she led me to the table. Her noncommittal tone sounded forced. "And Tezani's had another child since you were here last."

Zai's cropped hair was still mostly black, but Yata looks could be deceiving. The straight-backed soldier ahead of me was a great-grandmother. I thought of my father's drawing and tried to imagine a Masari great-grandmother shooting around chandeliers. Did Masari great-grandmothers exist at all? Those people matured so slowly.

The doorways and the furniture were all my size, but even that felt strange. I'd grown up in Crossroads. I was more accustomed to giant chairs.

We were a table of ten. Tezani had come with one of her husbands, a hybrid who was probably a half-brother of mine from one of my father's excursions. Another of the older children served the meal. I looked up from Liberty Farm's spiced produce and watched Abri dote on his wives. After a moment I returned my attention to the food, trying to reconcile the tattooed Preserver with his apologetic ministrations. How many people had that meek man killed?

Psalm's expansive gestures offset small talk as he reclined. My brother acted more the patriarch.

Sitting beside Zai, The Honorable One seemed lost in one of her trances. Maybe Gria was just bored. For all I knew, she was drumming on Zai's thigh beneath the table, giving final directions before we left for the summit. Or giving caresses. I thought I glimpsed a spark of mischief behind all those scars.

Abri finally broke from his fussing and took his place at the head of the table. His invocation confused me, but all of his invocations did. His sermon rambled until I didn't know where the Dirt People turned into the Yata or where the Yata ended and the Masari began. His sprinklings of old Covenant scripture suggested that tithes still came here, Crossroads sustaining Basc as Basc sustained Crossroads, from time immemorial and forever more, blah, blah. Then everyone became trees and birds and pretty waterways and I had no idea what he was talking about.

I lifted my bowed head and sneaked a peek. Everyone else looked mildly indulgent except for Basc's living saint. Gria, the best orator I'd heard after my father, pressed her lips together in a little, knowing smile. Even cast down, her eyes flashed. She could have been performing calculations in her head.

The people around me swallowed sighs of relief as Abri sat. To his right, Psalm continued regaling the rest of the table with tales of domestic mishaps. My brother had inherited the astuteness of a politician and the twisted humor of an ex-slave and combined them into a patter that was equal parts commanding and seductive.

Tezani's cooking was almost as good as Evit's. I wondered where he was. Probably seated at Ghost's table, enjoying a good meal and chatting about gruesome things.



Steam already billowed from an idle Iron Messenger when we arrived at the Basc Depot. Zai's runner unharnessed and helped us unload our baggage before strapping in again. He guided his empty wagon down broad switchbacks, dwindling toward town.

Above and behind me was the ridge where Gria's archers had massed twenty-three years earlier, waiting to demolish the Covenant. I stood on a terrace blasted into the mountain and surveyed a meadow crisscrossed with trade routes that hadn't existed before the massacre. They tied Basc and Crossroads together like brown bodice ribbons.

Resurrection Forest curved beneath us, its canopy fully leafed out. In the distance lay the windbreak at the Grange. They formed green bookends on either end of the valley.

The railing I held onto had Dirt People pictograms chiseled into marble brought in from the Cliff. On clear mornings the Depot caught the rising sun, cutting a knife edge of reflected light into the hills. I'd thought the railway was on fire the first time TelZodo showed it to me, pointing beyond a narrow window as we stood high up in the Rotunda.

Crossroads and Basc glowed at each other now, the Depot at dawn and the Rotunda at dusk when the light didn't leave them looking flat in-between. High sun bleached the dome above Crossroads, driving the shadows from its

coffers as I waited for the call to board. It was a little ball in the distance, sitting in a pocket of rock.

I fished out wads of cloth and plugged my ears in time for the Messenger's whistle, then swung around and joined Zai and Abri in the passenger compartment. If I didn't stop myself I'd check to see whether Abri's message was burning a hole in my satchel and refrained from sighing aloud. Governor turned messenger girl was not my idea of how to start this summit.

Tezani's cooking and late summer heat made me doze off before we crossed Alvav Ridge on our way to the Cliff. I clutched my satchel to my chest and sank into leather and steel embossed in ancient Yata. The symbols were everywhere, as though there had ever been any doubt as to who controlled the tracks.



We forded the throngs at the Cliff's bazaar before it was time to re-settle ourselves on the cross-valley train. I looked for the stall that served smoky tea. BrushBurn had told me about the drink's stimulant properties, and I'd have to stay awake on the next leg of our trip.

The Iron Messenger from Skedge had already arrived and was cooling on its tracks. That meant the delegates from the arid lands were here, either seated for departure to Rudder or navigating the shops. Smells of tanning and charred wood mingled with overripe fruit and sizzling fats. I pried the wads from my ears and could hear merchants shouting above each other. Beads clacked. Coins rang. Skin and fur brushed against me no matter where I turned. I must have grown new muscles on my arms just from gripping my belongings.

The tea house flapped its gaudy curtains in the breeze. I procured a mug, then looked for Masari-sized seating and scanned the tables.

No sign of BrushBurn. I downed my purchase and sought fresh air, strolling past the observation posts ringed by white marble balustrades. Almost no one seemed interested in the semicircles of clarifiers, not even to sightsee. A quick glance at Abri's parchment confirmed my suspicion that he'd written his message in code.

I bent over one of the scopes and found elevated tracks descending a shallow grade in the distance. Then I swiveled the lenses to look at the Games field.

It showed signs of recent trampling, with smears of ripped wildflowers and huge clods uprooted. I wondered how many Yata had died in the Games this time, and how many Masari, and if any of our delegates had lost someone close to them. It explained why this part of the Cliff was deserted. That bloody spectacle was over, with all bets paid and all the bodies dragged off. Now the ground and the survivors had to heal. No wonder the Pavilion was staging *River Crossing* again.

Gravel crunched behind me. "Buy you tea?"

"I was already there. You missed me." I rummaged around the leather at my chest, fished out Abri's little missive, and pressed it into BrushBurn's hand as he stepped up.

He pocketed it without a word, as though we'd traded secrets every time there was a summit. I pretended to know what I was doing.

He hooked his arm over his briefcase and held it against his side. Bits of striped cloth peeked out from around its clasps. I asked, "Are you a merchant again now?"

"Nothing so ambitious." His blue eyes picked up the light as we turned back toward the stalls. "Skedge is designing a Farm museum and they wanted to know what the awnings looked like. These samples are the closest things I could find."

"A Destiny Farm *museum*?"

BrushBurn nodded. His voice dropped. "They're building it in the oasis where the Farm used to stand. I'd be interested to see how the Yata tell that history."

"The Cliff should have a museum." I pointed past the railing. "My mother's family died in those Games and she was property up here. Now this place is a trading post."

He smiled at me. "It's a *living* museum. Former prisoners own the land and former slaves make up the majority of the board."

I couldn't argue with him there.

The cross-valley train shrieked at our approach, summoning its passengers. BrushBurn squeezed my arm and ambled toward the only Masari entrance. It lay at the end of the platform, with higher steps and a doorway through which he wouldn't have to duck.

In minutes we were speeding east, across the Alvav clearing and toward the trestle bridge leading into Rudder. I glanced out the window and thought I spotted a predator hybrid camp alongside distant woods, but it might have been a waystation for the traders who still ran their carts across the mountains.

One of those carts was transporting Alvav's representative over the bridge. The rest of us, who acted on behalf of Crossroads and Basc, Promontory and Skedge, congregated around a marble-veneered work table bolted to the floor and began the business of unofficial deal-making. We managed to agree that our Masari porter was the spy chosen by our Rudder hosts to observe us.

It didn't matter. Most of our exchanges were meant only to catch up on each other's affairs. Without much fanfare and with gentle tact, the others welcomed me to my first summit as the new leader of Crossroads.

The difference didn't hit me until I showed the border guards my papers for the second time that day as we crossed into Rudder. With my father gone, BrushBurn was the only delegate on the train whose certificate bore a large, red, "Yata Dependent" stamp.

And, except for our hosts, he and I were the only delegates who possessed a pelt.

CHAPTER 11

Evit

The summits always threw my Destiny production into a frenzy, but never like this. Not with FlyAway's mounting impatience to be a little girl, with friends her age and a normal life, and who was I to take that away from her? My mother's and brother's absence granted me degrees of freedom that I had only a few days to exploit.

My nightmares about Hanza didn't help.

I remember Hanza. I remember the day she'd been inducted as a Preserver, when Abri and I stood at the back of the visitor's hut and the only thing I wanted to do was leave. My skin itched. The room was shadowy and full of torches, just like the Soala, except that everybody was happy at the induction because we were congratulating the latest crop of the best and most merciful killers in Basc.

Correction—not everyone was happy. HigherBrook had come over from Crossroads and he looked sick. For one wild moment I wanted to crawl into his lap and beg him, *Take me to TelZodo. I want to play with TelZodo...*

He'd have said no. Besides, Tel was still nursing and he was probably fast asleep. I should have been in bed, too, but inductions were special occasions. One did not embarrass one's mother on special occasions, especially since Abri and I were the only children allowed to attend the actual ceremony. He was mesmerized.

I knew then that he wanted to be a Preserver when he grew up. Even that far back.

When I found Hanza's corpse on my dissection table I almost threw up, and I don't get sick easily.

I didn't recognize her with her head and its Preserver tattoo blasted away. At first I knew only that she was one of my suppliers because of her brackish clothing. I suited up in my apron and gloves and undressed her bloated body, setting aside the ruined bits of her toolkit. Knives, twine wrapped in waterproofing, collection bladders, stoppered flask of heart-willow

resin, and a bullet left behind without a gun, stuck with her name inside a torn pocket. Abri knew how to communicate when he wanted to.

Then I *did* throw up. Because if my most fervent supplier had lived, it would have meant that my brother was dead. Hanza had killed for her beliefs as a Preserver, and she was ready to kill for them as my supplier, because she had met FlyAway. What started as a safe house raid had ended with a changed allegiance. She knew what Destiny could do.

The only thing more seductive than Destiny itself is a Masari free of Yata-dependence. I've experienced them both. I know.

I preserved what I could of Hanza and cut her up into portions to take to the Grange when HeadWind's other Yata meat ran out. Maybe my ex-supplier's genius still resided in her animalcules and would infuse those parts of HeadWind's mind that were stunningly blank. But where would that leave me?

Still in trouble.

I stored Hanza in my pantry. I visited the Grange and drank too much. I gawked at FlyAway's animalcules beneath my lenses and wanted more than anything to show them to Ghost. Unlabeled. Undocumented as to causality. Something to make my teacher proud. *Guess what this is!*

It was a little girl ready to run away from her hiding place at the first sign of carelessness if I didn't do something soon.



HeadWind wasn't out of Yata yet, but I made my delivery early because summit time was precious and I could spend that time living in the lab. I could gather my far-flung ingredients from the caches I'd hidden all over Basc. For a few days I could tend to my Destiny batches without looking constantly over my shoulder. All I had to do was eat, shit, lose sleep, and mask myself against the effects of that sweetest and most horrible gift of the gods, and then put everything back as it was before the Iron Messenger brought my relatives home.

I threw Hanza's remains into my cart, strapped in, and ran across the valley, grateful for my habit of turning up at the Grange unexpectedly ever since I was a kid. Outside the farmhouse I fumbled free of my harness and listened to a dinner already in progress. Warm lantern light filled the windows.

Laughter. I'd never witnessed that kind of closeness in Basc, no matter how big the Yata household I'd lived in. Dependence or no dependence, Destiny or no Destiny, I'd lost track of how many times I wished I'd been born a Masari.

I had almost caught my breath when the door opened and Yucof's daughter screamed my name. Did she recognize the sound of my cart pulling up, or was she following her nose?

She clomped down steps too tall for both of us and ran into my arms.

I gasped, "You're as tall as I am."

She pressed harder. Full breasts, rounded hips. Physically she'd been an adult for years. I hadn't taken Destiny in weeks but I could still feel its residual heat. I called up images from my Hanza nightmares to keep my body from responding. Thank you, terror.

I said, "I brought you a present."

"I know!"

I followed her as she ran to the back of the cart.

She lifted wrapped pieces of Yata meat and clutched them to her as though they were edible treasures. Which they were. "Thank you, Daddy!"

I was only three years older than HeadWind, but she followed her own rules. Blood relation didn't matter and age didn't matter. Her Daddy brought her food, so that's what I was.

I murmured, "You're welcome," as she loaded her dress with as much Hanza as she could carry, gathered her hem in her hands, and waddled back to and up the tall stairs. She negotiated them surprisingly well, trumpeting my arrival as she crossed the threshold.

I was home. The newest member of the clan fetched steps for my chair as I returned greetings. ClayPack. He looked even more chipper than usual.

I didn't see Ghost or Piri around. "Is Tel here?"

HeadWind called, "Dozo!" toward the kitchen.

TelZodo peeked out, took one look at her, and motioned her in. She scurried toward him with her dress full of Yata. I climbed into my chair and waited for the tension to drain from my shoulders.

Fly Away should be here. The thought kept hammering against my skull. They'd take her in. This family took everybody in. She'd be no trouble. No one would have to hunt for her. Instead, she was isolated in a shed, and then another shed, and then a root cellar. Lonely miracle child.

I must have closed my eyes. When I opened them, Ghost and Piri had arrived and he was helping her into her chair. They'd scrubbed themselves free of chemical residue. TelZodo strode from the kitchen with bowls of thick broth for his parents. In a moment he had fetched me a third and drummed on my shoulder, *You look exhausted.*

I said, "Yep," and called to Ghost, "Come from the lab?"

"The morgue."

A lively voice replied, "Yuck."

The young woman who had spoken cuddled up against ClayPack as though they'd been stitched together. HeadWind sat on her other side, twirling the fur on both their arms, orange against lavender.

I recalled the name after a moment. "You're WingLeaf, right?"

She beamed at me. At least I had some memory left.

My former co-husband bustled about the Grange's table, maneuvering his long limbs in a room crowded with diners. I envied him his reach when I wasn't fighting vertigo.

WingLeaf blurted at him, "Sit down, Tel."

"I've eaten."

"I don't care. Sit down."

She looked ready to bust open with excitement. TelZodo shrugged and took the seat next to mine. He drummed on my wrist, *It's about time.*

I answered, *About time for what?*

WingLeaf crowed, "I'm pregnant!"

HeadWind piped up, "Me, too!"

I shot a glance at Ghost, who gave a quick shake of his head.

The table turned festive. Everyone was congratulating ClayPack and WingLeaf on their good fortune and HeadWind just because. TelZodo drummed on my arm, *Does your daughter still make dolls?*

I nodded.

His fingers added, *Wing and Windy do everything together. Tell Ijil we'll need a doll.*

One look at HeadWind's behavior around ClayPack and I guessed Yucof's daughter was sterile. The young man blushed from more than just an expectant father's pride.

As I downed my third ale—or was it my fifth?—I realized I could help him. I could help WingLeaf. All I had to do was line up a wetnurse when the time came and then let the demand for freedom from Yata dependence make me legitimate. Maybe even Piri would forgive me for reviving the drug of her enslavement. Maybe Ghost would forgive me for manufacturing his wife's worst demon.

I smiled as more foam crested the top of my mug. Drunkenness made anything possible.

CHAPTER 12

TelZodo

I caught Evit before he fell out of his high Masari chair. He clung to me with the same affection we'd shared in our communal marriage bed thirteen years earlier, a lifetime ago on the other side of the meadow. I redirected his straying hands and murmured, "Let's not upstage the other happy couple."

He giggled and said, "Winglee can put me to bed, then. And Claypee can shap...shap..."

"Chaperone."

Evit gave me a little smile and his gaze turned inward. He wasn't as inebriated as he would have me believe.

I drummed on his arm, *What's going on?*

He tapped back, *Later.*

His head lolled against my chest as I lifted him. Behind the reek of alcohol I smelled the stink of fear. His embrace wasn't exaggerated, this time.

At least half the people around us were melting into their seats. Most everyone had spent the day toiling in the fields and were lubricating their joints along with everything else. WingLeaf's face had turned ruddy and her gestures grandiose, though not from drink.

HeadWind became our second slider. My father caught her before she hit the floor. ClayPack knelt by the barrel in the kitchen to draw another pitcher of ale. His voice boomed around corners. I tried to think through banter that turned louder by the minute.

I told Evit, "I'm taking you to my old room."

He pretended to sleep as he hung onto my neck. I followed my father, who carried HeadWind to her bed, and called forward, "I never expected to be the sober one around here."

Ghost laughed. "Neither did I. Not after the work your mother and I just did."

I didn't want to ask him how many bodies they'd dissected or what kinds of people. I didn't want to know whether the causes of death had been peaceful or violent.

I asked anyway. Evit's head shifted against my shoulder, his ear facing forward in order to hear better.

My father's voice flattened as he gave the numbers. He added, "I'm looking forward to watching life develop, this time."

"Even if that life will have to hunt."

The head before me shook. "We'll have reached Parity by then."

His voice wavered somewhere between triumph and desperation, and for the first time I realized that my father was drunk on hope. Had been, for a long time.

Maybe BrushBurn was wrong. Maybe only Promontory's Masari were doomed to die out. Across our meadow the Yata were burgeoning, which meant more of them would die from causes other than predation. That meant more food for Crossroads. With less fear of starvation or death in the far woods, wouldn't more Masari behave like WingLeaf and ClayPack? We wouldn't have to choose between a prey culture and a predator culture as long as we maintained a culture of balance.

HeadWind began to snore. I smiled at her unconscious contentment before I turned away and carried Evit into my old room.

My dormitory at the Rotunda was too small for most of the furniture I'd grown up with, but I preferred those cramped quarters to this. My tall bureau and long bed held no sentimental value for me. I'd spent most of my life under other people's covers and was used to my feet dangling over the edge of a pallet. My childhood room at the Grange had been only a waystation.

Evit probably slept here more often than I had, dwarfed by everything around him. My wash basin sat on a low stool now. Step-up crates dotted the floor like oversized play blocks. I stretched out a foot and nudged a box against the edge of the pallet before I lowered my best friend onto straw.

"I know you can hear me," I said to his closed eyes. "I'm shutting the door, and then you're going to tell me what this is all about."

He was sitting up by the time I turned back from the threshold. Cushions behind his shoulders, knees almost up to his chin. Huddled like that he looked like a child, but his face was older than I'd expected. His cheeks had hollowed and he seemed more haggard than drunk. For a moment I was his "little brother" again in a childhood bond of mutual adoption, looking up to him for guidance even when I was physically looking down.

He forced himself to face me. "Tel, I need your help."

I listened to a tight voice that held no trace of its former slur.

He asked, "How soon can you take WingLeaf and ClayPack to your dormitory without anyone missing them? I'll need only a short meeting."

He was a trapped animal cornered on the straw. We could have been in the hunting grounds instead of in my bedroom. "A meeting about what?"

He looked away, struggling.

"Hey." I knelt by the side of the bed. "We've seen all of each other's warts, Evit. This is pretty bad if you can't talk to me."

He was barely audible. "I don't want to compromise you."

"You want to involve my kin."

"We've loved each other since we were little, Tel. Please do this for me."

"That's not good enough." My fur bristled and I sounded more fierce than I wanted to. "You've never kept secrets from me before, and the gods know how often we've covered up each other's mischief. What's wrong?"

"Tel, *please*—"

He'd never begged me before, either. I smelled acrid sweat and lowered my voice. "They're young, Evit, and very eager. They steal away all the time."

"Good." He turned breathless with relief. "Tonight, then. After the others have gone to sleep."

"I haven't agreed to any of this."

His shoulders remained limp, and I realized I was looking at a man

resigned to whatever awaited him whether I said yes or no.

I couldn't say no. "I'll probably have to roust them, too."

"Do it." He rolled to the edge of the bed, found the box, and stepped down. I grabbed his arm as he swayed.

He patted mine. "You make good soup. Do you have any more of it?"

"I'll bring you another bowl."

He nodded, looking through me in a way that made me doubt that was what he wanted. I cleared the stool of its wash basin and arranged more boxes into a makeshift dining table. Evit loosened his shirt ties as he sat. His bronze skin was pasty and his black cowlicks drooped.

I muttered, "Take care you don't burn your tongue."

He whispered, "Too late."

Doubt dogged me as I left the room. I don't know why I went through the motions of ladling out more broth. Most of the farm hands had left the table. So had our young parents-to-be. Dinner's levity had deflated, leaving the last, tired exchanges of the evening to peter out. My mother, who never drank, had cleared her section of the table and focused her attention on Chamber proposals.

I glanced over her shoulder at arguments and counter-arguments. "Which is harder to deal with, the dead bodies or the living ones?"

She chuckled with forced mirth and waved me off.

I shouldn't have been surprised when I returned to a vacated room, or when I looked out the front door and saw empty space where Evit's cart had been. Pulling away that quietly on a loose gravel road took skill and sobriety. Bloodshot eyes or not, my former co-husband knew how to call up reserves of both in that little Yata body of his.

I looked down at the still-warm bowl in my hand and decided I'd best fortify myself.



WingLeaf and ClayPack needed no rousting whatsoever. They'd accomplished that all by themselves. My cousin answered my short raps on their door by opening it a crack and whispering, "Are we being too loud?"

"No," I said, "you've got it down perfectly." I added over her giggles, "I need you two to come with me."

Her eyes widened. "In the middle of the night? Why?"

"I don't know, yet. But don't take too long getting dressed."

"With or without guns?"

Her tone was so matter of fact I almost didn't realize what she was asking.

"No guns," I said. "We're just going to the Rotunda."

She pursed her lips for a moment. Then she nodded, said, "Okay," and closed the door. Through the wood I heard her joking with ClayPack about a surprise for the baby, followed by strangled squeals and laughter. If we were lucky, they'd be dressed before breakfast. I closed my eyes and made a game of guessing where their hands were wandering.

Then their ruckus dropped into silence. I blinked to attention to find their door half open, their stealth was that good. I'd be dead if I were a full-blood Yata and if this were the hunting grounds. I looked from thick wood beams to their smiling, earnest faces.

I whispered, "Was that real or pretend groping going on in there?"

WingLeaf slapped her mate on his rump and mouthed, *I win*.

They glided ahead of me by the light of ClayPack's lantern. He lowered his wick and I squinted at their slightly bent knees and off-kilter steps before I realized they were avoiding the looser floor boards. I heard only my own footfalls and my own clothing rubbing its fabrics together. Farm tools threw crooked shadows on us as we passed the last bedroom and turned away from the common room, toward the harvest chute. WingLeaf pressed her hands and boot soles against its metal walls and proceeded to climb a steep gradient.

They'd turned our excursion into another training exercise. I struggled to hold my admiration in check until we were away from the farm house. First

they had to wait for me to maneuver my long torso over the lip of the chute and drop down onto packed straw between empty baskets.

I gasped, "When do you get to climb chimneys?"

ClayPack murmured, "Already have." He launched into a soft-voiced treatise on the strategic uses of hollowed-out snags.

I loosed a low whistle. "This town is still alive because of people like you."

They hardly needed the lantern, judging from the way their faces lit up.

We angled over to the main road and listened to cricket song. The breeze had died down completely, leaving us with humid, slightly fruity air. WingLeaf drank the aromas in through her open mouth. She and ClayPack held each other around the waist now, transformed from predators back into young sweethearts.

I looked toward a starry hoof beginning to rise. It hailed us from a cleft of mountain near the Rotunda. "Sheep's coming up." The farm hands would awaken for breakfast in little more than an hour.

WingLeaf followed its curve toward the unhinged gate of the Great Wagon dipping past zenith. "You said you don't know what this is about?"

"Nope."

"But it's in the Rotunda, you said."

"Yep."

She lowered her voice to mock menace. "We should have brought the guns."

If they had, they'd probably end up carrying a Yata home with them after all, dead of fright. I said, "Evit has something he wants to tell us."

ClayPack laughed. "He was passed out cold."

"No, he wasn't."

The young man raised an eyebrow. "Good faking. He should teach me that."

"To help you hunt his people? I don't think so."

We left the fields behind. Dirt and gravel yielded to cobblestones and then to a smooth granite walk curving in toward the dome. I wanted to run up its hulking steps, then down its narrow staircase to my little room with its too-small desk and too-short bed. My strip of window. My mess of parchment, my scribbled notes scattered on the floor.

We entered through the main doors and stepped onto a high platform. My wide-eyed companions leaned over the railing and pointed toward the rows of great tomes above and below us, massive up close and deceptively tiny in the distance.

I'd left a few of the filigreed lamps burning. They hung beyond the railings on different-length chains and wove pretty reflections around everything. One was guttering out, sending a wisp of black smoke up toward the oculus. I made a mental note to hook it in and replenish its oil.

ClayPack snuffed his lantern. "You *live* here? Alone?"

"It's not as fancy down below."

With HigherBrook gone, I'd become the books' last guardian. Sometimes I felt the old man's spirit patrolling the stacks, with pages rustling and leather bindings slipping against each other. I chased echoes and found no one. I climbed to the upper ring and talked to his bones, when Abri wasn't up there talking to TripStone's.

Now I led my charges down past the older stacks until we reached a narrow granite hallway. Less light reflected as we left the marble façades behind. A sharp whiff of heightened alertness tickled my nose as the kids behind me flexed their muscles for pretend stalking.

I glanced behind me and murmured, "Good. I could use more people hunting for papers."

Masari smell funny when they blush. I pressed on.

I'd removed the doors from two rooms in the dormitory row. My paltry collection of Crossroads narratives filled one. Two volumes lay on their sides in the second, waiting for more to help hold them upright on their low shelf.

If BrushBurn's predictions came true, those books would stop coming.

Yellow light flooded the hall up ahead. The next moment a dark silhouette shot out the open door to my quarters, too small to be an adult Yata. Shrieks of joy reverberated off the stone.

"They're *Masari*, Evit!" Shoes clattered against granite as a dress hurtled toward us. "You brought me Masari! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Evit's reply sounded equally high-pitched. "I brought you *to* Masari. Remember our long ride?"

"You took me on long rides before!"

She stopped before us, panting. I'd never seen a grin so wide. I couldn't help returning it as I waited for my ears to stop ringing.

Behind me WingLeaf dropped to her knees, as breathless as the child. "What are you doing here so late at night? What's your name?"

The girl lifted her chin and threw her shoulders back. "I'm *FlyAway*!" The gleam in her eyes dared us to presume otherwise. She stared up at me and wrinkled her nose. "What are *you*?"

I smiled at her raspberry-colored curls and downy chops. "Confused."

"I should think so!"

She grabbed my hand and scraped around my pelt with a diligent thumbnail.

"I'm half Yata," I explained. "My skin is like Evit's. Nothing comes off."

She gripped me more tightly and dragged me to my room.



"Tell your family that you found her." Evit paced before my bureau with his arms folded. He looked ready to snap in two. "Tell them that she wandered in here."

I growled, "Those stairs are almost too tall for *you*. What makes you think FlyAway can climb them?"

"Then make something else up."

"Why?"

WingLeaf asked, "What happened to her parents?"

"They died," FlyAway said. She snuggled further into ClayPack's arms. Her feet rested on WingLeaf's thighs. Without thinking, my kin and I had formed a cocoon around the child on a bed that barely fit me. It would collapse under our weight if we weren't careful.

FlyAway pointed toward seven burlap lumps sitting on my bureau's top shelf. "Are those dolls?"

I nodded. "Old dolls. Evit's daughter Ijil made them for me when I lived in Basc."

"They're too high up to play with."

"They represent my brothers and sisters," I said. "Do you want—"

She grabbed my trousers before I could stand and pulled me back down. "What are they like?"

"I never got to meet them."

"Like my parents."

I looked from the girl's open face to Evit's pensive one. His hands dropped to his sides and he shoved them into his pockets.

ClayPack asked, "What do you want from us?"

"Not much, really," Evit said. "It's whether or not you want something from me. If you do, then we can talk." He turned away from the bureau and stepped up to the bed. "FlyAway, you know what's special about you, right?"

She nodded vigorously.

"You can tell them."

She leaned into ClayPack's chest, looked up at him, and intoned, "I don't eat Yata."

ClayPack's arms tightened around her. We stared at Evit, who said, "She's a full-blood Masari."

WingLeaf whispered, "You've never eaten Yata?"

"Uh-uh."

"How old are you?"

"Four and a quarter."

ClayPack's voice quavered, "You're very smart for four and a quarter."

Evit rested a hand on my shoulder as he addressed my kin. "Still want to raise a hunter?"

Tears of joy welled up in my cousin's eyes. She stroked her belly as if to reassure her unborn child. Her free hand grasped ClayPack's as he cradled FlyAway.

Something was terribly wrong. Crossroads would have given anything for a child like this. We should have been shouting in the streets, but instead we were huddled in secret. FlyAway's exuberance gave way to silent obedience as she waited for permission to say more.

"Evit," I asked, "what's so dangerous—"

His hand moved from my shoulder as I turned. Something pricked me beneath my neck fur.

He said, "Sorry."

I would have yelled if I could feel my lips. Instead I floated between watery tones of alarm and reassurance, grasping at muffled words that faded away. My bed shifted beneath me as the others got to their feet. My indistinct ceiling replaced blurred faces.

Small fingers stroked my hair before I blacked out, but I couldn't tell whose they were.

CHAPTER 13

Bless

The Pavilion was packed for *River Crossing*. Below our VIP box, people filled dizzying rows of red velvet seats that I'd given up counting long ago.

Three thousand, four hundred, and twenty five.

I wouldn't have made the attempt in the first place if I'd known that I could just ask BrushBurn. He counted everything. He'd watched me peering over the brass rail with my handheld clarifier when I was here for my second summit. Then he leaned forward and whispered the number to me at intermission.

We had watched acrobats that year, and even though I had come of age I was still the youngest in the group, seated between my father and Abri. Zai and BrushBurn sat on opposite ends of the second row. Our hosts from Rudder had arranged all the delegates in a careful balance of Yata and Masari and me. I learned quickly that our seating for the entertainment was as critical as that for the negotiations.

I'd watched those seating arrangements change twice, first when a Yata from Skedge died in a Death bout and then when one of our Masari hosts lost her life in the Games. My father's death marked the third recalibration. This time I sat in the second row, with BrushBurn to my left and Alvav's representative to my right. Zai and Abri relaxed in the front row, diagonally across from us. And I was still the youngest in the group.

The Pavilion's frescoes had been retouched and its statuary polished. Below us sat tall Masari hunters dressed in lace and compact Yata warriors trailing elaborate embroideries, but hardly anyone wore full formal dress for this performance. Only a few combatants covered their scars with fabrics. Most revealed their arms and legs along with broad backs and torsos. Stitched gashes melded with tattoos of climbing vines and many-branched trees, not just once but in multiple layers. Puckered skin looked like bark, especially where extensive damage had prevented Masari fur from growing back.

Brown inks darkened Masari skin to Yata coloring, and subtle lightening did the reverse for Yata. Even close-up in the foyer, I couldn't always tell where wounds ended and art began.

The fighters didn't gird themselves this way for the acrobats or the comedians. They gave their scars full display for *River Crossing*. During the course of my lifetime, the Games had turned from a symbol of class oppression into a commercial venture profiting both sides of the central valley. All that remained was to romanticize those horrid deaths.

Below me sat a microcosm of the central valley, half-naked Games combatants beside natty-suited merchants. Guards on and off shift dotted the theater in green uniform tunics. Prostitutes attended in modest dress that would fall after the final curtain did. Other theater-goers literally wore each other's skins. Half the time I didn't know if I was gazing at tall Yata and short Masari, blood that was mixed like mine, or well-crafted illusions.

This was *River Crossing*. It didn't matter what we looked like or who we were.

On stage, the actors playing Rudder's bare-chested hero and the Marsh's compact heroine looked like twin forests, their skin alive with old ink. Those scars weren't made up, they were real. The leads might have battled each other in an actual Games. Their impassioned duet reflecting off the life-sized frescoes might have required no acting at all. We wouldn't know for certain until after the show, when all the bets had been tallied.

The Yata and Masari actors knelt on opposite sides of a broad runner woven out of deep blue silk. Hidden stage hands made it billow.

To my right, Loet lifted a kerchief and dabbed at his eyes. His own tattoo extended down from a ripped cheek and ducked beneath his high linen collar. The hand at his face lacked a finger. A new leaf inked beside his ear told me that the delegate from Alvav had recently killed another Masari on the trampled ground I'd viewed from the Cliff.

The music's volume swelled and decreased in time with the billowing cloth. Sniffing and an occasional sob rose from the audience. And this was only the first act, when the Yata and Masari principals realized they loved each other. They called their vows across the silk water, setting the stage for the tragic ending everybody expected.

The actors on stage mirrored their audience. I wondered how many mixed couples sat in this theater, and how many affairs were destined to end with one partner murdering the other.

Everyone shifted their clarifiers at once to stage left. I grabbed hold of mine.

The play's new character made his entrance naked. He clutched at crimson abdominal fur, as starved for meat as for affection; but a true predator hybrid wouldn't have been chosen to play that role. Real predator hybrids would never have been allowed past Rudder's border. They were too hungry for Yata, too neglected and rejected, too dangerous. None of them had ever seen the Pavilion, which was interested only in adding their unfortunate ilk to its repertoire.

The actor at stage left spotted the Yata warrior and moved his hands to his heart. I felt sorry for the female lead. Given the right set of circumstances, both her lovers would want to eat her, which meant that this version of the play could go in myriad directions. The betting parlors must be steeped in wagers.

The lovers' aria bounced off the frescoes in three-part harmony and my eyes watered. BrushBurn grabbed hold of my hand and held on tight. At first I thought that emotion had overwhelmed him, too, but then he pressed a wad of folded parchment to my palm and folded my fingers around it. He tapped on my wrist, *For Abri*.

We were in the middle of a *performance*, for heaven's sake! I was here as my father's heir and successor and as the new leader of Crossroads, not as anyone's lackey. I wanted to hit him.

If anyone saw my neck fur frizz, they probably thought the song was responsible. I glanced at Promontory's representative. He seemed wholly engrossed in the drama unfolding ahead of us, but I knew better.

And I knew where his room was.



I pulled off my pretty canyon beads and all but ripped the shiny ribbons from my hair. They didn't go with the pressed linen trousers and tailored shirt I yanked on, after I bound my breasts tight enough to make me look flat-chested. I squelched the urge to stomp down the corridor. If

BrushBurn were a reasonable man, he would let me in and I wouldn't have to pound on his door in the middle of the night.

He answered after my single, decisive rap.

I pushed into his room and waved the unfolded, encrypted parchment before his face. "This is completely unacceptable. I am here as a negotiator, not as a courier." My voice climbed before I could stop it. "This is not a schoolroom. I am not a schoolgirl, and I am *certainly* not in the habit of passing notes across seats, under desks, in the dark, on the sly, or in complete ignorance. Do I make myself clear?"

He laid his large hand over mine and put a finger to his lips, then pointed to a section of gilded molding in the shape of wide-mouthed flutes. His attention to the pretty decorations seemed odd, until I realized the purpose behind them. I tried to guess which of our hosts listened in at the other end. The Pavilion's pipes ferried more than just sewage.

Do you want to talk through touch? his fingers asked my wrist. *Or outside?*

BrushBurn was still dressed for the evening. The silver stick pin at his collar marked his sole bow to opulence. Otherwise, he looked ready for the next day's business.

I jabbed back, *Outside*.

He linked his arm in mine, half-hunched as we strolled through a quiet foyer. The last few patrons cradled their glasses and gazed into their liquor. Attendants dressed in light blue robes swept torn betting tickets into mounds for re-pulping. In a corner littered with empty glasses, scholars from Rudder and Alvav debated hotly over the latest variation of this valley's longest-running theme.

We made sure no one followed us as we headed downhill, toward the real river. Behind us rose a city awash in lanterns, enough to illuminate our walk and whiten BrushBurn's hair. Benches filigreed in wrought iron lined the path by the water's edge.

A line of wagons and pedestrians returned to Alvav over the old footbridge. A shot rang out in the darkness on the other side and I flinched. "That sounded real."

"It was." BrushBurn steered me away from the bridge and past occupied benches. I couldn't tell whether a predator hybrid had been shot or

just warned away from Yata traveling home from the play. I wanted to ask if the play rang true, and if those hybrids now partook in the Games, fighting for whatever side offered the better promise of a meal.

The coded message to my brother-in-law was more important. "BrushBurn, I will not ferry notes that I can't read. If you want to negotiate away from the table, you'll either involve me as a full partner or you'll deal with Abri directly."

He nodded. "Fair enough."

I waited for him to make the choice. "Until then, that note remains with me."

He tensed, and I realized our arms were still linked. He must have been mincing to match my stride.

"Bless, you're asking me to involve you in a family dispute."

I almost laughed. "It's my family."

"By marriage, not by blood." He looked out over the water. "Abri and I are in agreement about population trends across the region. He is looking for ways to slow Yata growth, which places him in direct opposition to Zai. Zai already views me as her greatest threat, so it is not wise for me to be seen in direct talks with her son."

I stared at him. "BrushBurn, I know Zai hates you for your involvement with Destiny Farm and for your part in the massacre, but that was decades ago! How in the world are you a threat to her *now*?"

"I'm not a physical threat to her or to Basc at all. We're allies." He guided me to an empty bench. "And my past involvement isn't the issue. I'm a threat to her legacy and to the history she *wants* Basc to have."



I tried to picture the entire Basc army penned inside Destiny Farm, but not by Masari wanting to breed them for meat.

All those Yata had penned *themselves*. Zai had taken over command from Gria and led their forces on a mission to liberate the Farm Yata, who had managed to liberate themselves beforehand. Then Basc's soldiers had closed the gates, barricading themselves against Promontory's shooters. All of

them—including my mother—were left with no place to go but deeper into the canyon, following in the footsteps of escaped livestock. Either that or they would have become livestock themselves, the very fate they had fought so desperately to avoid.

Without intervention from Masari, the militia from Basc would never have returned home. TripStone had argued for their freedom, but she had been a citizen of Crossroads. Her words held little weight in Promontory.

As the last surviving adult from the Destiny Farm dynasty, BrushBurn had proved more persuasive, with a little help from Crossroads' and Rudder's combined armies.

He sat on the bench next to me, his hands dangling between his knees

I said, "You helped to save Basc."

He nodded.

"My father never told me the fine details."

"HigherBrook knew that Zai was cornered. He didn't know how badly, because he was too far back. Promontory's shooters were positioned between him and the Basc militia, but TripStone and I were right there at the Farm." He leaned back against iron and linked his hands behind his head. "What was left of it. We witnessed that mess."

Lanterns glided on the other side of the river and for a moment part of a wall lit up. The Alvav Yata had shut themselves up inside an enclosure, but they had done so for their own protection. They were free to leave it to attend plays like this one.

I tried to imagine an army imprisoned in a place of helplessness and slaughter, freed by the heir to the family that would have farmed them.

I whispered, "Zai hates you because you're an embarrassment to her."

The soft slap of water against the banks almost drowned him out. "Embarrassment doesn't begin to describe her feelings. I'm an affront to her reality." He motioned me toward him. "Unfold the note. I'll tell you what it says."

How long ago had he and Abri worked out a code between them? How long had it taken, and at what risk? The numbers on the parchment were a

compressed shorthand, similar to the branding sequences used by Destiny Farm itself. I could have been looking at the back of Piri's neck.

Instead of births and meat yields, these numbers told Abri how to get the contraceptive ingredients he needed and how to combine them. The arid lands possessed a different pharmacopoeia than what grew in my valley, but the end result would be the same. Nothing was contraband. In and of themselves, none of the components would be stopped at the border.

A number sequence off to the side was structured differently than the rest. I pointed. "What does that one mean?"

Promontory's representative squeezed my shoulder in a gesture half affectionate and half frustrated. "That means: *It won't work.*"

One look into his steel-blue eyes and I realized it had nothing to do with chemical reactions and everything to do with Yata identity. Contraception wasn't outlawed any more, it was just ignored. Yata didn't need Destiny to procreate, only the hope of a new and prosperous future. If Abri believed the Masari were threatened and needed to be preserved, he'd have to find another way to save them.

CHAPTER 14

Abri

I lay in bed that night with BrushBurn's answer reduced to ashes and the theater's screaming ovation ringing in my ears. I needed a clear head for the next day's summit, otherwise I'd have joined the debates in the Pavilion's foyer, where a smattering of theater-goers dared to address the true meaning of hunger. I could have interrupted those academic arguments fueled on brandy and told them what real famine was like. Even when the Marsh was a prison, its inmates had been well-fed.

Only the predator hybrids—the real ones across the river, not their romanticized proxy onstage—experienced anything like starvation in this valley. Few lived long enough to enjoy a heart-rending love triangle. They used temporary alliances to attack trade wagons, and those caravans had dwindled with the growth of the Iron Messenger. Yata flesh lay farther and farther out of reach with each passing year, but that didn't stop Games combatants from falling in love and adding risks to the ones they took on the field.

I don't sleep well in opulent rooms. The brocaded battle scenes hanging on my walls were short on strategy and long on pathos. I was thankful our meeting room dispensed with art in favor of neutral paneling and narrow windows admitting natural light. Rudder conducted its summits with minimal distractions, leaving us to forge our battles using rhetoric and deal-making. It didn't stop us from discussing *River Crossing* over breakfast.

I focused on Rudder's black bread and the Marsh's paté and kept my opinions to myself. No one wanted to hear them, except for BrushBurn, who refrained from calling this valley's outcasts a form of population control. Predator hybrids were considered vermin, except for when they were fictionalized into lovable, tragic rogues.

The first time I saw his census figures for Promontory, during the summit of Common Year Fifteen, I overlaid Crossroads on the numbers and finally understood what was happening in Basc. I choked as though I were drinking our own, silted lake. I smelled our smog on my clothes. I read Zai's report between the lines as Liberty Farm cleared more ground for its crops

and swelled its yield reports, including inedible wastes in the volume. The closer we tilted toward Parity, the worse the damage became.

Only BrushBurn spoke out in favor of predation, but his views were unheard-of, especially that early. He had been a sick flesh peddler and always would be in the eyes of most delegates. His predictions were suspect.

But his numbers showed us how to survive. I *had* to believe in him. While my mother was off in clandestine meetings to plan the railway that year, I tracked BrushBurn in the Pavilion's gardens until I could corner him, out of sight.

When I did, an explosion of light filled my head. I dropped to the dirt, hugged his knees, and moaned, "Help me." And when he nestled his fingers in my hair I felt chosen.



As we gathered around the negotiating table, I realized that among the eight of us, Bless was the only person who had never killed anyone.

PondHawk, Rudder's junior representative, wore the scars of a former Games combatant, but becoming a merchant had turned some of her muscle to fat. Whenever she gestured, her fingers drew my attention with glittering rings of canyon stone, a more genteel form of intimidation than firearms.

The rings kept me from watching BrushBurn too intently. He sat beside her, going over a blueprint with Tylie, the Skedge delegate. Tylie's broad frame made him an imposing Yata, even hunched beside BrushBurn's chair.

Did Tylie ever feel he'd inherited his aunt's crimes, the way I sometimes feel I've inherited Zai's? Or was the genuine warmth he and BrushBurn shared a sign that they had moved beyond the grief Jirado had caused them?

Bless sat beside BrushBurn and listened in, taking notes. At a comment from Tylie she raised her eyebrows and asked, "Did Destiny Farm *have* a shrine?"

BrushBurn shook his head. "No. But it didn't have a ticket booth, either. Part of the museum's purpose is to show how different the Farm was from places like Crossroads, where the Yata were worshiped."

"So, some of Crossroads' relics are still being held over there."

"They're *loaned*, Bless." Beside me, my mother's clipped answer shot across the table. Zai scowled at the man from Promontory. "I've released some of my ancestors' remains to the museum. For all their inscriptions, they mean the same thing as all those naked bones on the canyon floor. Dead is dead, and meat is meat, no matter how pretty you try to make them."

"The museum makes that point as well," BrushBurn murmured.

Tylie frowned. "My aunt never cared for the Covenant bones, either."

"I know. She told me."

Bless turned from BrushBurn to the Alvav delegate seated by her other elbow. "Loet, I don't see anything here that represents the Marsh."

"We're donating trade manifests of what we sold to Farm concerns. They list what we once thought were medicines."

I nodded at the Yata warrior. "You didn't know they were Destiny ingredients."

The tattoos on his cheek crinkled as he laughed. "Consider yourself lucky, Abri. You already know what *your* smugglers go after."

"That doesn't make killing them any easier."

"No, of course not."

My cheeks itched. An image of Hanza popped into my head and I tried not to feel sick. My mother busied herself arranging her papers.

Rudder's senior representative took that as his cue to call our meeting to order. SnailBud pulled his silver chime away from Loet's notes, struck it with his hammer, and told Tylie to take his seat. The Skedge representative climbed into the chair beside mine.

"Tylie, we can continue where you and BrushBurn left off." SnailBud's skeletal finger jabbed his papers. "You're first on the agenda."

Tylie flashed a quick smile at BrushBurn before addressing the rest of us. "Skedge and Promontory began preliminary talks toward creating a Destiny Farm museum a year before Parity was declared. Before she died, AgatePool committed her Frontier Peace members to the project. They helped us organize the effort, not just locally but across the region, because of the volume of resources needed to complete it. Building a museum like this

requires years of labor that we already use for manufacturing and for meeting Rudder's demands."

The blueprint traveled around the table, but I was more interested in the notes Tylie consulted. Support for the museum was the least of his considerations.

"With Parity's onset and the discontinuation of the Death bouts, Yata in the arid lands can now travel abroad for extended periods of time." Tylie's voice rattled. "This freedom is especially important to Skedge. Many of my people lost family to Destiny Farm during its final days."

He leaned partway across the table, his eyes haunted. "I may never know what became of my father because of that. Erecting a museum is only the first step in our recovery. My cousin Adalora is leading an expedition to search for any surviving canyon Yata, her mother among them. People captured from Skedge and people whose bloodlines had been farmed for generations. They are all our kin."

PondHawk's rings sparkled as she leaned forward. Gold strands dipped from her short claret hair and made loops against her neck fur. "Rudder recognizes your need for closure, Tylie. We are prepared to underwrite twenty percent of the canyon expedition in return for several trade concessions."

"I would expect no less from Rudder," he answered, smoothly. "On behalf of Skedge I thank you for your offer. But since Promontory is already under Rudder's control, Skedge will make no concessions to you. The arid lands and their installations were once Yata property, and some day they all will be again. My people have voted to accept aid only from our Yata neighbors and from Masari free of any conflict of interest."

I must have flushed with the other three full-blood Yata. A thrill ran through us as we glanced at each other. Tylie relaxed into his chair and waited, his body coiled like a wrestler's.

Skedge was hardly in a strong economic position. It possessed little arable land and most of its citizens sought work in Promontory's factories and mines. Basc and Alvav already provided the mesa city with a significant portion of aid.

In a single declaration, our comrade challenged us to provide even more, and added a veiled threat of conquest for good measure.

PondHawk's neck fur fluffed, raising her gold strands. She faced Tylie with forced composure. "You're not proposing a return to the ancient conflicts, I hope."

To her left, BrushBurn leaned back in his own chair and eased his hands behind his head. "Not when Yata form Promontory's majority. They're already conquering Masari. That isn't war, PondHawk, it's attrition."

SnailBud scowled across the table. "*You're* a Masari, BrushBurn. I'd advise you to remember that fact."

"I remember it well, Chairman." His gravel voice dropped. "I'm making an observation, not a recommendation."

"Your 'observation' recalls a recommendation that is an affront to this gathering. Your opinions have been out-voted before. Couching them in euphemisms does not help you."

Beside BrushBurn, Bless twitched her brick-colored chops. Her expression smoldered before she brought her temper under control. That interested me, but I guarded against getting my hopes up. I doubted she agreed with BrushBurn's theories. She was just his friend.

He chortled. "Who would you rather feel threatened by, Chairman? Tylie, or me?"

It was not the most diplomatic reply to a decorated veteran of the battle for Destiny Farm. The Chairman bent his thin frame over the burnished grain and answered with quiet menace, "You've argued for increased predation only because you can't wean from Yata fast enough to be allowed into Rudder except by special dispensation. Do not test that allowance."

My mother held her breath beside me, waiting for her nemesis to get himself booted from the summit. Rudder relied on BrushBurn's statistics to monitor Promontory's economic health and therefore its own. But those numbers came with BrushBurn's population trends and projections, which almost no one wanted to hear, least of all a longtime *yatanii* like SnailBud.

I believed in those trends, so I kept quiet.

Bless returned to her notes as Loet looked past SnailBud and announced, "Alvav commits five percent of its considerable Iron Messenger profits, and we also pledge as many medical supplies as the Marsh harvests can sustain." He grinned. "Real medicines, this time."

The nod that passed between Loet and Tylie told me that they had rehearsed this moment. I reached beneath the round table and tapped on my mother's forearm, *Alvav has allied with Skedge to help Promontory regain its independence.*

Zai didn't answer. Instead, she said, "Basc will increase its food aid to Skedge by thirty percent if Crossroads commits another ten percent from the Grange harvests."

Bless straightened directly across from me, startled. I didn't envy her.

My sister-in-law frowned at her notes, then raised her eyes from the parchment and studied each of us in turn. HigherBrook's death had elevated her to governance, but I remained my mother's assistant and understudy. I could offer Crossroads' leader no help.

She adjusted the linen shirt and vest that had once been her father's, as though trying to wrest some wisdom from his clothes. She had tied her bindings particularly tight, changing all her curves to angles, trying to look more like him.

"The representative from Basc makes an interesting proposition." Bless steepled her tan fingers and peered over trimmed, immaculate nails. "Crossroads enjoys a fair and profitable exchange with Rudder, and we would not want to see our neighbor economically threatened by a Yata monopoly. Without the generosity of our hosts twenty-three years ago, our people might have been wiped out during an unfortunate conflict of our own."

PondHawk's fur returned to its unruffled state. Beside me, my mother visibly tensed. Two decades had passed since Basc's atonement to Crossroads. Our ally from across the meadow had never referenced the massacre at home meetings, let alone at a regional summit.

Bless had BrushBurn's full attention now, and I thought I detected a whiff of surprise and admiration from him. HigherBrook had taught his daughter not to shy away from unpleasantness.

"We also enjoy a very close relationship with Basc and with its Yata allies by extension," Bless continued. "I am physical proof of that intimacy. My mother, Kova, was born here in the central valley and found refuge in Basc. Likewise, many refugees from Rudder have found a home in Crossroads."

She looked past Loet and smiled at SnailBud. "Our extension of sanctuary to poorly-weaned Masari has contributed to Rudder's economic success and has helped Rudder maintain close relations with Alvav. Those relations have allowed for such peaceful multi-cultural events as *River Crossing*."

SnailBud said, "Your point, please."

"I'm getting to it, Chairman." Her gaze moved past him, to Tylie. "Tylie, if BrushBurn's projections are correct, then Rudder's Masari will also suffer from attrition eventually, and the Yata of Skedge will enjoy their conquest of Promontory in a matter of time. Perhaps longer than you are willing to wait."

Tylie scowled, his voice tight. "I was not advocating hostilities."

"Good. You are planning only a museum and an expedition, then. What will all those Yata departing for the canyon do to your state of Parity?"

"Parity will remain unaffected."

Bless looked to her right. Her eyebrows shot up as BrushBurn nodded confirmation.

I could have told her that the Skedge Yata were indeed multiplying that fast, especially since our aid shipments gave them no incentive to practice any population control. But BrushBurn was already sending her those figures. She just chose not to believe them.

Tylie wanted to see his people reclaim Promontory as much as my mother wanted to solidify Basc's power in the region. All else being equal, nothing could stop Yata from outpacing Masari. We matured faster than they did. We raised larger families. Without controls in place, we could claim their resources and destroy them by the sheer force of our numbers.

Bless struggled for breath. "BrushBurn, what would a Yata expedition do to Promontory's labor force?"

PondHawk interrupted, "BrushBurn has given us those estimates because Promontory is an extension of *Rudder's* labor force. It would result in an eight percent drop in productivity."

Bless nodded. "Then since we are talking about *Rudder's* labor force, I suggest that Rudder send its less-weaned citizens into Promontory rather than into Crossroads to make up the shortfall. Unless an influx of Yata-dependent

Masari laborers would endanger Parity."

The table erupted in yells. Beside me, my mother said, "I don't believe this. She's allied herself with *him*."

I tried to think quickly. "You know that Rudder has sent its undesirables into Crossroads for years. Some of them manage to kill our people in the hunt."

"That doesn't matter, Abri. She's alienated everyone now." Zai was barely audible through the din. "Everyone but BrushBurn."

I held my tongue.

"Tylie." Bless leaned across the table, fighting to make herself heard. "I am not arguing against either the museum or the expedition. Neither am I arguing for increased predation in the arid lands—"

He was deaf to her, bickering with PondHawk about Rudder's attempt to compromise Skedge with trade concessions, which meant railway usage. What else could Skedge offer them? Rudder had no other way to gain power without jeopardizing its own valley's stability.

And yet, by shunning Masari who hadn't reached a pronounced level of weaning, Rudder contributed to its own shrinking. SnailBud jumped out of his chair and was challenging BrushBurn in loud debate.

Promontory's representative refused to be provoked. Rudder needed BrushBurn's expertise, but it wouldn't tolerate much more heresy from him.

My mother spoke with Loet off in a corner of the room, both of them glancing back toward the table. They schemed quietly in a negotiation that they expected me to join. My mother glanced back at me and I slowly began to gather our notes.

Then I dropped the parchment and joined BrushBurn, who dove after Bless as she sank beneath the table.



I hissed at him, "Get out."

BrushBurn shook his head and tapped on my shoulder, *Zai doesn't suspect you of colluding with me, she suspects Bless. Just pretend you're here in your*

mother's interests.

If I were truly here in Zai's interests, BrushBurn would be dead. "I'm related to Bless. You're not. This is her guest room, and it is not proper for you to stay."

Bless had tied herself up so tight I was surprised she could have breathed at all. Loosening her bindings as the Masari watched had been bad enough. I wanted to rush that limp body from its ornate bed back to Crossroads and then hurry on to Basc. If I didn't watch myself, I'd tell BrushBurn my suspicions about Evit and his Destiny lab.

I was still wrestling with that secret, trying to formulate a way to confront my brother without killing him. My fellow delegates weren't the only people unwilling to face an unpleasant truth.

"It's better if we're both here. That way, one of us can stay with her and the other can go for help if necessary."

At first I thought BrushBurn had come here only to avoid Zai. Then I saw the depth of his concern for my sister-in-law.

A sound half sigh and half moan rose from below. BrushBurn knelt beside the bed as I leaned over it.

Bless opened her eyes and winced. She blinked at me and then at BrushBurn, looking puzzled. "What did I do?"

I said, "You fainted."

"I know that much." Her voice was perturbed. "Before that."

BrushBurn spoke up before I could figure out how to tell her. "You convinced everyone that you agree with me and that you're in favor of increased Masari predation."

Bless glared at him. "*Vyak*." She turned to me. "Your mother put me in an awful position, Abri."

I nodded. "She's good at that."

"I have to set things right."

She pushed herself upright and swayed. BrushBurn caught and steadied her.

"Thank you, BrushBurn, but I still disagree with you."

"Fair enough."

"I don't understand you at all."

He smiled. "I'm the rounded square, remember? You're not supposed to understand me."

Bless giggled, then laughed aloud when she saw my look of complete confusion. "My father drew BrushBurn as a rounded square when he first taught me about the summits," she explained. "In the seating plan." She laughed harder as her finger traced an oval with a diagonal line. "He drew Zai with a gun across her back."

I nodded. "That's accurate."

"And you were—"

She slapped her hand across her mouth and crowed. Her chops stiffened as her face flushed.

I couldn't help grinning. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

She struggled to get the words out. "You were a *skull*, Abri."

Her laughter was contagious. "That's accurate, too."

Anyone walking in at that moment would have seen the three of us steeped in hilarity. Some Rudder agent must have been listening in through the Pavilion's network of pipes. If we were collaborators, if we were heretics, then we were enjoying some very funny transgressions. For a moment I was a little boy again instead of an executioner. Up in the air, swinging from Ulik's arms as our glee echoed off the walls of our little, unsuspecting hut at the edge of Basc.

And, oh gods, it hurt. I looked at Bless, she looked back at me, and we saw in each other's faces the ghosts of our dead fathers.

BrushBurn's large Masari arms came around both of us. His gravel voice strained. "Let's get back to the table."

CHAPTER 15

Evit

"Oh dear gods," I cried. "Freedom."

The thought alone was as intoxicating as the Destiny. I opened the door of a dilapidated shack and gazed on abandoned, rusted tools. Sucked-dry dirt covered the brittle wood floor beneath my feet. Wind whistled through the gaps around cracked resin plugs, and outside lay the buried remains of a footpath long lost to thatch.

I didn't care. I had riches. And despite my brother's love of scripture and death I had the gods on my side. I could save the Yata from the Masari and the Masari from their hunger. No matter what my mother decreed or what Ghost abhorred about the path to our liberation, everyone—*everyone*—wanted what I could give them.

Crossroads had passed no laws concerning Destiny. No executioner peered over my shoulder. I would replace the farm tools with my own. I would sweep out the dirt, repair the floor, build steps, build shelves, and get back to work.

First I had to find my mask again, so that I could concentrate on my job. For now, I didn't care what I breathed in. "We have to check the other bladders."

"I know." Roia climbed after me into the shed and lowered her pack to roughened planks. We'd have to get storage crates and canvas coverings. We'd have to line our compartments with felt. So much to do.

For now we untied laces and opened our bags to make a quick inspection. I sweated as dozens of shiny, slippery, tied-off membranes slid between my fingers. Brown powder filled them almost to bursting.

One had popped as we'd hiked through the Grange in the dark. We'd heard a soft *ploff* and smelled a strong whiff as our bags shifted, causing a sac to pinch and a seam to open. Part of our precious cargo spilled into the field beyond retrieval, but there was nothing we could do about that.

We almost went after it, not to scrape up the dregs but to bury our noses in the ground and grind into each other. Somehow we managed to fight the urge. Moving beyond that cloud of scent was almost impossible. I watched Roia struggle with the weight on her back, her spine arched and her knees apart as we edged down and then off the trail, following the map that ClayPack and WingLeaf had given us.

Roia watched me, too. We carried that holy drug toward its sanctuary, when all we wanted to do was lay our massive bags on the ground and writhe until we had split all those membranes and crawled inside the powder.

Now, finally, we were at our destination, tucked away in a remote corner of land on Crossroads soil. Almost nobody would find us here unless we let them.

Roia cinched her bag shut and sat back on her heels. Her laughter thickened. "It's still in my nose, Evit."

"Mine, too." No sense letting lust go to waste. I rummaged in my vest. "I should have a sheath—"

"Don't bother," she said. "I'm filled."

I couldn't tell, looking at her loose clothes. "When did you get pregnant?"

"I have four husbands, Evit. When am I not pregnant?" She loosened her trousers and hiked her tunic above her hips. Her stomach glistened like oiled bronze. "Half the time you didn't even know when I had a child, but that was good. You were busy." She crawled over and dropped beside me, grinning. "Don't worry, everything's fine. I thank the gods for my co-wives."

"I thank the gods for my co-husbands." My breech ties finally gave way. Her belly was a furnace beneath my palms. I whispered, "Just make sure you have enough milk for the Masari."

"I'll have plenty," she cooed. "We have six wetnurses in waiting now."

A thrill ran through me. "They've tried the Destiny?"

"Yes. And they know to keep quiet."

"WingLeaf knows two pregnant Masari and one is birthing soon." I could barely breathe. "She's talking to women. ClayPack's talking to men."

Roia squealed with pleasure, "You know what this means."

I don't know what swept me up more, the Destiny or the knowledge. I forgot where the floor was. I forgot I was in her. The drug wasn't finished with me and our job had just begun.

She spasmed and gasped, "It's started. One more generation, Evit. Maybe two."

"And then no more hunts."

"No more hunts." She surged.

It was real now. I plunged with unbearable joy. Roia's baby was so close, just beyond my tip. I could almost touch a child who might never know war. I dove toward a future we hadn't dared imagine and Roia raced me to it, screaming against my chest, our breeches hanging off our ankles and everything else soaked.

"I can find Chamber members," I panted at her ear, beginning to harden again. "Find who they are, find who to talk to. We don't have to wait for Parity." My balls clenched beneath a spine on fire. "Everything's going to change, Roia."

"And Alvav." She gripped me tighter. "All those children. No more predator hybrids. We're going to nurse those babies." Exquisite nails raked me. Blood tickled my back. "Let's free those babies, Evit."

No dependence. *No dependence*. No senseless deaths. No more of our people pulverized and served up in the Deliverance Inn. No hacked up bodies. I'd have to find another profession.

I laughed and came and cried and then I laughed again. I whispered my dreams to Roia's belly and shook. I cradled her breasts in my hands and worshiped them. Through those dark berry nipples would flow enough Destiny-saturated milk to recreate the world.

For the first time in years, maybe for the first time in my life, I wasn't afraid.



I lost track of the number of times I ran my cart that day through the windbreak separating Crossroads from Basc, from the Grange to my

laboratory and back. The dissection tables stayed behind. The shelves TelZodo had built stayed behind, and the tissue grinders, and the larger hand drills, and my stunning collection of fecal drawings. I left my compendium of Yata and Masari anatomy and its accompanying selection of clamps and knives. Staying behind in Basc were all the copious records of my life's work, built on Ghost's life work, which stretched back over decades.

He had been fighting his people's accursed hunger since before I was born. I would finish the job on his land.

I carried away my most incriminating equipment, loading my burners and vacuum extractors next to desiccants and blending spoons. I re-locked empty cases to make it look as though nothing had changed. I ran through the sweet smell of pine at our open borders, to where the weeds grew high and the ground lay fallow north of the granary.

There used to be enough Masari around to work this entire farm. Now Yata came from across the valley, leasing more and more neglected tracts. Some moved to Crossroads permanently and became its citizens.

Basc's Destiny laws no longer applied to them, either. No one told those tenant farmers what they could and couldn't grow. I had to talk to them.

I washed off in an irrigation ditch, let the sun dry my clothes and warm my aching joints, and walked to the Rotunda. My best friend had been unconscious for more than a day while I settled in. He had to stay that way for just a little while longer.

Tel hardly stirred as I slipped more sedative into his vein. I could have stayed with him for hours, caressing his broad cheekbones and combing back his wine-colored chops. I tidied the plum hair kinking about his shoulders. His Masari features had always jumped out at me first, ever since we were little and he was the most wondrous creature I had ever seen.

A drop of his mixed blood beaded up on skin almost as dark as mine. I withdrew my syringe and wondered if he would ever forgive me for this.

His dolls stared down at me, even though they'd all lost their eyes a long time ago and were nothing now but lumps of straw in burlap. What must it be like to have had seven Yata brothers and sisters, all born on Destiny Farm, and nothing left to remember them by except branding numbers? Those dolls on their high shelf had been the closest he could ever get to them.

He lay on his back, his eyelids stilled in a dreamless sleep. His chest rose and fell, filling and emptying massive, Masari-sized lungs. I had to move quickly. I had to find the right people to join my cause and guarantee myself a solid base of operations.

Tel's notes covered his writing desk and spread out across the floor. Every time he committed a life to parchment he disappeared from the outside world. He wouldn't be missed.

Except by me.

I kissed his cheek, retrieved my bag, and continued with the task of moving in.

CHAPTER 16

TelZodo

I awoke to the most beautiful and the saddest music I had ever heard. It echoed through the empty dormitories and swirled around me with such force that I thought my parchment sheets would lift and ride eddies of sound.

But that was impossible.

The singing was impossible. So was FlyAway, the little girl who had been on my bed and was now gone. And Evit, drugging me as we sat with WingLeaf and ClayPack and that strange child in the middle of the night. None of it made any sense at all.

If it made no sense, I wouldn't have to get up. I blinked at the ceiling and told it, "I'm dreaming."

The music didn't stop. It transfixed me. I had to force myself to move, and then I nearly screamed from the pain in my head. I still wore the same clothing as before.

How long before? The last thing I remembered it was night, but my small window was darkening, which meant it was getting to be night again. My stomach complained that I hadn't eaten for a while, though my headache eased as I sat up.

I stumbled out of bed and followed the sound of love song lyrics filled with marriage vows and entreaties to the gods for a sacred, eternal union. But the music was a slow and mournful dirge. Exclamations of joy floated down to me in the form of a funereal chant.

On impulse I laid my palm against the wall, which remained solid. The floor beneath me didn't tilt. My arm hurt when I pinched it. This *should* be a dream. Why wasn't it?

Years ago I had heard voices in my head and was sure I was losing my mind. Now I entertained that possibility again, but curiosity won out over panic. That had to be good sign. I took the stairs up the dome two at a time to

where Crossroads' great tomes encircled the Rotunda. One step onto the main walkway and the music opened up, filling everything.

I wiped tears from my eyes before I realized I was crying. As my vision cleared I saw that I still needed to hook in the lamp that had guttered out and replenish its oil. That memory, at least, was real.

WingLeaf and ClayPack had been with me then, so they must have been real. We had come here to meet with Evit, so that part was real, too. Then the little Masari girl ran toward us, down the hallway...

I wiped my eyes again. The song came at me from everywhere in a numbing mixture of elation and grief. How could such a sound even exist? I shook my head, trying to make it go away. Maybe HigherBrook's spirit would chase it off, leaving me with the echoes I was more accustomed to. Phantom footfalls and whispering pages.

Above me the oculus darkened a shade further. The music stopped, its echo trailed away, and I wasn't weeping any more. A gleam moved not far from the apex, near the Rotunda's glassed-in cases of Masari remains. A glimpse of indigo cloth.

"SpiderLark?" I flinched as my call broke the silence.

"TelZodo?"

"Yes."

I sounded awful. I hurried to retrieve an oil tin and my pole, busying myself as SpiderLark rounded the upper level and descended a curved staircase.

He reached me in time to watch me hook the darkened lantern in. In a minute, secondary tethers secured its long chain to the railing. I separated the lamp, set it on the walkway, and opened its filigreed door.

He knelt beside me as I refilled the reservoir. Music still clung to his voice. "I thought I was alone. How long have you been here?"

I wish I knew. "I awoke to your singing." At his befuddled look, I added, "Dormitories down below." I reattached and lit the lantern, loosened the tethers, and eased the chain back into place. It swung in a tiny arc when I withdrew the hook, throwing exaggerated shadows until it settled.

On impulse I asked him, "Did you see a little girl in here?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

Everything felt wrong. I couldn't tell what was a secret and what wasn't, what was dangerous and what wasn't. Suddenly my village was as perilous as the hunting grounds, surrounding me with traps I'd never been trained to see.

I said, "I heard somebody was lost."

One of us was lost, FlyAway or me. Or Evit, who'd seen fit to knock me unconscious rather than confide in me even after all our years together. The Masari next to me was lost, but for the moment he seemed to have found a home. Good for him.

SpiderLark gripped the railing, his red beard catching the light as he gazed upon lanterns hanging at different levels. We could have been standing in his Pavilion, but with an audience of books. Instead of live theater-goers, he'd sung to life histories left by sacrificed Yata.

He murmured, "This is an acoustic paradise, TelZodo. I envy you your dormitory."

I envied him his dead son. A shiver ran through me as I hurried to put the pole away.

His melody started up in my head and followed me from one platform to the next. After a few minutes of trying to drive it away, I realized I didn't want to.

I rejoined him at the railing. "This structure once housed twenty-two scribes and more than fifty clerks and census takers. Almost all those rooms down below are empty now. I can petition Bless to let you live here after she returns from Rudder."

"You would do that for a parasitic Yata-eater?"

"Yes, if you'd deign to live with an uncultured Crossroads bumpkin."

His smile rode neatly-trimmed chops. "Agreed."

"And you'll learn some of our harvest songs. You might not be a hunter, but you won't be completely parasitic. Your hands are going to hurt like hell while they get callused during the Lacuna."

I touched my own hand to his delicate fingers and left him to his acoustics.



FlyAway wasn't lost at all. I found her tumbling with HeadWind in a fallow field, both of them screaming with laughter and groping through the growing dark. I turned away from their tickle war and jogged to the farm house.

WingLeaf and ClayPack should have returned by now. Who else would have brought that child here? The chalk board in the main hall would tell me the chore rotation and where the farm hands were. We'd have one last shift in the greenhouse before night, one last feeding and watering of the animals, and all the mending and cleaning we could fit into the rest of the day.

Everyone would have already eaten, and my growling stomach sent me toward the pantry. One step into the common room outside the kitchen and my legs buckled.

I was used to seeing my mother bent over her papers, but not like this. Her coiled braid had come loose and hung askew by her cheek. Chemical stains streaked across her rumpled tunic. Otherwise, she devoted her usual attentions to Chamber business, nodding her silent greeting as though nothing were out of the ordinary.

If nothing were out of the ordinary, then why was she drinking cold tea? "What happened to you?"

At first she seemed not to understand the question. Then her lips bowed into a little smile and she shook her head.

"Where's Dad?"

She tapped her answer on the table, her fingers jaunty. *I left your father on the floor.*

"What do you mean, on the floor?" I stared at the stains. "In the lab?"

"Mm hm."

She turned back to the parchment. I doubted she could read anything.

"Is he hurt?"

Oh, no. Her nails spasmed against the wood, stinking of preservative. She had never before come to the communal table without scrubbing. *I couldn't work in my office, so I came here. I'll be fine.*

I would have sworn that she was tipsy, but my mother didn't drink. I curled my lips back and sampled the air. It held no trace of alcohol, but a scent I knew all too well lay behind the preservatives.

I stared at her again. She'd always shown discretion in those matters, too.

I left her to her afterglow and hurried to the lab, forcing myself past the anteroom's vials and dissections and down a ghoulisn hallway. Everything on the shelves still terrified me, but they were my old demons. They were nothing compared to the ones that had just cropped up.

"Dad?" I flung the lab door open and called, unable to take my eyes off a blood smear on the floor.

"Over here!"

His bark held more worry than fury. I followed the sound of his voice and tried not to look at the counters to either side. More fluids surrounded the lenses my father peered into. And other extractions.

I asked, "What's going on? What happened to Mom?"

"I don't know!" Those delicate lenses were the only things stopping his fist from slamming down.

It was hardly an objective answer. "You suspect something, or you wouldn't be so upset."

"I have no *evidence*, TelZodo!" he roared. "I've looked through everything I've drawn from her and I have *nothing*." His eyes blazed. "I examined Gria after SandTail raped her. I can tell you exactly what Destiny looks like when tested for. Piri shows no trace of it whatsoever. Except in her behavior."

He gritted his teeth. His entire body flushed as he stepped away from the lenses, and I realized he wasn't wearing any clothes.

"She tore them off me," my father muttered. He pointed to a pile of shredded linen. "That by itself is not an outlier. *Nothing* we did can be considered an outlier. It was *how*—"

He stopped and turned toward a bench. "You're our son, TelZodo. I shouldn't be telling you this."

"Yes, you should." I sat beside him. "I've been to the Farm. I've seen Mom's branding number in the ledger, and the numbers of my brothers and sisters. That's part of me. Whatever is happening to her, I probably carry it, too. If Destiny has long-term residual effects, then I should know about it."

My father rubbed a red spot on his arm, around tooth marks where bits of graying plum tuft had been ripped away. "The Skedge medics showed me their case records of exposure, from when their Destiny factory still ran. Compared to the Farm, those effects were mild." He waved his arm over the floor. "We have classic circumstantial evidence," he snapped, "and no Destiny in her body to show for it."

"Do you know where she might have been exposed?"

"I haven't a damned clue! I checked our latest waif for traces, but that's because she's new here and I checked her for everything."

I looked at him. "FlyAway?"

"That's the one."

"The one who doesn't eat Yata."

My father screwed his face at me. "*What?*"

"Nobody told you?"

"She's a full-blooded *Masari*, TelZodo."

Somehow my head ended up between my knees and I thought I was going to pass out again, but not from Evit's drugs. I groaned, "There's too much correlation and I don't know what it means."

Ghost's body stiffened beside mine. "Then give me all your variables," he growled. "One at a time."



My father poured tea from a steaming pot. Normally my parents would have been in the lab this late in the morning. Instead, we huddled together in the common room, which sat close to thirty at the beginning and end of a day's work. Now its emptiness dwarfed us, and we were surrounded by bright hooks and lightened wood where tools had been taken off the walls.

The rest of the household went about its business. I listened to shouts from the nearby fields and the rhythm of wagons being run to market. Gunshot cracked from the training grounds. Children tumbled in and around the barn, chasing chickens or dodging goats on a crisp, late summer day. The world around me could have been taken from the old harvest tapestry hanging in my father's office. It bustled with a jollity that only made me feel worse.

I'd spent the night in my old room, wondering what had gone through Evit's head when he slept here. By dawn I had journeyed to Basc, looking for him. Now I was back home, with nothing to show for my sleuthing.

"We have a non-dependent Masari child." My father sat opposite me at our long table and counted off on his fingers. "We have an attack on TelZodo by his best friend in the presence of the child and of ClayPack and WingLeaf, who brought FlyAway to us, claiming they'd found an orphan."

I wanted to vanish into the wood grain. "They were making some kind of a deal with Evit. I don't know what it was."

He faced my mother. "And we have what happened to you."

My mother held the tea before her face, white-knuckled. She had pinned her braid tight and dressed in a spotless tunic and trousers. She stared into space with smoldering brown eyes and tapped on the table, *Where is Evit now?*

"Missing," I said. "He's not at his lab in Basc and he's not with his family. And WingLeaf and ClayPack are spending most of their time at the training grounds."

Convenient.

The smell of her soap was almost enough to cover fear. I looked at skin scrubbed red.

TelZodo, WingLeaf is still underage. You'll take charge of her.

"She's not underage any more, Mother. She's pregnant."

She hasn't delivered yet. Her nails hammered on the wood. Crossroads' laws are inexact on that point and are open to interpretation. You will treat her as your ward.

It was an impossible request. What was I supposed to do, impose a curfew for when my cousin could be with her husband? Tell her when she could and couldn't chase down her own food? And how was I to enforce those rules with young Masari who'd grown up to be killers?

I wanted Evit, not her.

My father said, "Being WingLeaf's guardian gives you the right of full surveillance," and I realized I'd spoken with my hand. If I couldn't find Evit alone, maybe I could find him through her. But WingLeaf was the tracker. She'd detect me in an instant.

"Son, how old did FlyAway say she was?"

"Four and a quarter."

My father scribbled on parchment. "You said her parents were dead. Maybe the records will give us some answers."

My mother reached to her side. She pulled a sheet to her, positioned pen and ink, and began to draw. I watched her sketch the Grange's layout, pausing over an abandoned trench silo, then moving her nib back toward the legumes. Her pen touched down, crossed a walking path, touched down again. An uneven line of dots formed.

I whispered, "Places of exposure?"

"Mm hm."

After a moment I realized that she was also charting the wind. "Everything would have dispersed by now."

She laid down her pen and frowned, then swept her hand above the table.

My father translated, "It was dispersed then, too."

My mother stood and began to pace. She gestured, sculpting shapes in the air. For a moment she seemed to be dancing. Her chest heaved. I would have called her exuberant if it weren't for the pain in her face.

I looked at my father, then looked away and whispered, "Tell me what's going on."

"She's pantomiming," he said. "It's how the Yata at Destiny Farm communicated with each other." His voice sank. "This has struck her more deeply than we'll ever know."

I forced myself to watch and together we puzzled out the motions. My mother was not like the Basc Yata who had imbibed Destiny freely in the days of the Covenant. She wasn't like the people taking the drug in secret now, no matter how much or how often, and she hadn't been overdosed to toxic levels like Gria.

She explained how her chemical changes had begun in infancy, not just from nursing but from breathing Destiny fumes. It permeated everything, even when she was too young to breed. After she entered the pens it was in every bite of food she took and in every drop of water she drank. Escaping from its influence had almost killed her.

Another Yata might have walked through that same dispersal cloud and become mildly aroused, but my mother had been assaulted. One breath had transported her back to the Farm, not to the ruins I had found but back with the other livestock. Not wanting to escape, but craving more.

She showed us how much more, circling the common room with her mouth wide open and filling her lungs with minute chemical traces that slammed into her like bullets. That was what walking in that dispersal path had been like. By the time my mother reached the lab, the sight of my father had ripped away her last remaining shred of self-control.

She climbed her step stool and dropped exhausted into her chair.

"Piri."

She turned red-rimmed eyes to my father.

"This won't happen to you again."

I looked into his eyes and realized that he would torch the Grange if he had to.

CHAPTER 17

Bless

For the rest of the summit I was ready to strangle my mother-in-law with BrushBurn's awning samples. Instead, I agreed to offer a generous aid package to the canyon expedition in the form of camp supplies. Food aid from the Grange was well and good if it went to support actual explorers. But if Skedge was planning to liberate Promontory so they could retake that land for the Yata, I wanted evidence my agents could track.

That mollified Rudder, but SnailBud and PondHawk had to acquiesce. They'd managed to wheedle some reduced fees for their merchants on the Cliff, but the concession was more a consolation prize than anything else. Our hosts had been Masari, but this summit clearly had belonged to the Yata.

I could have used some of those expedition supplies for the trip home. Instead of taking the cross-valley train and then the Iron Messenger into Basc, Zai let slip at breakfast that a hike over the Alvav Ridge via Rudder Pass would do us good.

I sipped goldberry juice to keep from gritting my teeth. Beside me, Abri gazed beyond our dining balcony and watched the river sparkle. I should have known what to expect when I saw him outfitted for rugged travel, his pack by his side.

"I don't think I ever truly appreciated the longevity of your Masari trade network." Zai's dun uniform swallowed the morning light. She speared a morsel of fresh-caught shieldfish. "You had your roads when we had nothing. Not even footpaths." She turned to SnailBud. "Your infrastructure's already in place. Why don't you lay down tracks?"

The chairman nursed his tea. "For joint ownership of your invention, I'll discuss it with Rudder's Chamber. For the time being, our slow roads suit us fine."

"I suppose. I've wanted to study your slow roads. The Honorable One's army passed through Alvav when we liberated Skedge and then Destiny Farm. All we had to go by was an old smuggling trail." She shot BrushBurn a pointed look.

Passed through Alvav. My father's desk held an old communiqué from Gria explaining just how sick her army had gotten in Alvav. They all would have been locked up in the Marsh if it weren't for people like SnailBud coming to their rescue.

And Destiny Farm had liberated itself. BrushBurn's practiced neutrality complemented an indulgent smirk from the chairman. Abri continued his meditations on the splashing fish and watched the fountains regurgitate.

The summit was over, but Zai's posturing remained in session. Gods forbid she should afford me another moment alone with the delegate from Promontory. I was under no obligation to travel with her and Abri, but to ride the train with BrushBurn now instead of walking over the pass and directly into Crossroads would call my own agenda into question.

After breakfast I returned to my room and changed into traveling clothes better suited for soft passenger seats than for a day's tramping up and down the mountain. I hauled the satchel with my paperwork and jewelry and my more dainty clothes over my back. I adjusted leather straps across my chest and opened the door of my suite to find a going-away present lying at the threshold.

The oiled canvas pouch held a mineral crystal, two extra water bladders, and a head scarf, along with strips of dried rabbit. Its inside flap bore a rounded square drawn in chalk.

I mouthed at it, *I still don't agree with you.* BrushBurn might have bought the supplies in Rudder, but I suspected he had never stopped traveling like a smuggler.

CHAPTER 18

Abri

My mother had not traveled on foot through Masari land since the march to Destiny Farm, and then she had seen only the outskirts of Promontory on the day of the battle. She had told me about the Warehouse, its stockpiled arms and Destiny and the smoked Yata hung on hooks around the dome.

Back then I was still young enough for my mother's war stories to give me nightmares. I awoke in sweat-drenched sheets at home, blinking away visions of helpless slabs ringed all around me, calling my name. They were my family and my neighbors and even the Honorable One, herself. All I could do was run, around and around, unable to protect my people at all. I couldn't even reach them, they were stuck so high on those granite walls and in so much pain.

BrushBurn's note described the present-day Warehouse as a library whose helpful Yata staffed reference desks. I could find all the information about contraception that I needed—everything except how to change my people's behavior. I had trained as a Preserver to shield them from Masari in the hunting grounds, but how could I protect them from their own self-destructive acts?

One look at my mother and I realized that first I would have to remove their fear.

She walked stiff-shouldered all through Rudder, which wasn't even remotely threatening. Its marketplace was just like ours, except that the stalls were bigger, the steps were taller, and the goods on the higher shelves had been manufactured to fit larger hands. With the exception of a few Yata merchants and the occasional mixed-blood, the crowds were overwhelmingly Masari. Now that *River Crossing's* run was over, almost all of the Yata had gone home.

This wasn't like Crossroads, where everyone mixed together every day. The Yata in Alvav stayed in Alvav, either high up on the Cliff or behind the Marsh's walls, rather than run the gauntlet of predator hybrids.

We were surrounded by big people, who by sheer force of will and creative nutrition had trained themselves to eat fewer people like us. Outside the Games, killing a Yata was punishable by death. Anyone who was that hungry went to the Milkweed on the other side of town.

Voices carried across the market square with low booms that made my own sound squeaky. "Do you know where their real power lies?" I asked. "It lies in their ability to alter their nature so radically, down to their very core."

My mother, distracted, asked, "Who?"

"The Masari."

She glared at me, not into my eyes but at my forehead tattoo, as though reminding me that it was still my job to kill them in the far woods.

She grumbled, "They're obsessed with combs."

"You would be, too, if you had a pelt." Bless huffed on my other side, her head wrapped in a kerchief. Sweat dripped into her chops and we hadn't even started climbing yet. She pointed to the stall in question. "The chops comb has fine teeth for styling. The neck comb is stronger because that's where the fur is thickest, especially in winter. Pectoral fur is finer than abdominal fur."

Zai snorted. "I suppose you have one for pubic fur, too."

"No, that's hair, like what Yata have."

I caught a glimpse of my sister-in-law's pensive brow and almost choked. "She's joking."

Bless pursed her lips. "It's an interesting thought."

I didn't know if she referred to our topic of discussion or to my mother trying to be funny. Zai's shoulders relaxed a little, but she still looked nervous. I could tell she wanted to carry a rifle on her back very, very badly.

So did I. With a start I realized that I was just as apprehensive as she was, both of us unarmed and surrounded almost entirely by our natural predators. The Masari were like a tall forest of ravenous trees, except that they weren't. They were too busy haggling over prices and inspecting merchandise, including seeds and textiles imported from my own valley.

And Reckonings, produced in Basc's smithy. Now that the Yata were making guns again, Masari numbered among our customers, buying our firearms so that they could shoot us. My mother's fingers twitched as we heard a magazine slide into its buttstock.

Beside me, Bless seemed unconcerned. She'd grown up surrounded by big people, inside Crossroads where it was safe.

The crowd diminished as we began our ascent. Trade between Crossroads and Rudder still relied mostly on carts and runners, and we stepped to the side whenever we heard the rhythm of long strides and clacking wheels half our height. My mother refused several offers of transport, choosing instead to rest at the overlooks and survey the landscape.

"At least they're paved now," she murmured. "Bless, did you know your friend and TripStone took two days to get here from Crossroads because the roads were so poor?"

Bless hunched over on a sitting rock, massaging her feet. She slurred around a mineral crystal, "Bad weather, my father told me."

"And a heavy load to pull, I might add." Zai frowned toward the far-off Promontory range. "And in addition to that insult, BrushBurn seduced *her*, too."

In a single statement my mother had managed to invoke BrushBurn's old flesh-for-bones trade and to call my sister-in-law's virginity into question. She must have still been smarting from Bless's reference to the massacre, when my people had reversed reality and slaughtered the Masari.

Bless secured her leggings over tufted toes and reached for boots. "And *TripStone* carried a gun." Her eyes danced with laughter when she looked up.

My mother snorted again and continued uphill.



Nothing hindered our descent into Crossroads, but green-suited guards stationed at the pass checked the papers of everyone entering Rudder, regardless of bloodline. We watched as one pulled a skinny Masari aside and guided him into a tent for further questioning.

I looked at a scowling Bless, who said, "Sustainer glutton. I warned him not to try this."

Zai said, "He must think the guards can't read."

"He misses Rudder. But you're right." Bless shrugged. "He hasn't eaten Yata for two years, but it's a false weaning. Eating Sustainer Masari still means dependence, and some people can't change their bodies. My father was never good at it, and I saw how hard he tried."

I said, "HigherBrook hunted."

"Yes, but he also ate Sustainer Masari, so that Crossroads could see it had choices."

My mother raised an eyebrow. "Bad choices."

Bless's neck fur fluffed. "We took what we could get."

A merchant cart rolled up to the checkpoint. Its runner kept his harness on and waited patiently for clearance to continue into Rudder.

"I wouldn't say 'we' if I were you, Bless. You're neither the hunter nor the hunted."

"I'm still the leader of Crossroads, Zai. I identify as much with my people as you identify with yours. And I didn't have to kill a religion to gain their acceptance."

"You wouldn't have had to," my mother said, softly. "Because if that religion were still alive, you would never have been born."

I tried to hear what transpired in the tent, but we had too much wind. "The gluttons have their own form of bravery," I said. "I've killed Masari in the far woods who clearly couldn't hunt. The only reason they tried was because they preferred to take that chance rather than eat untested Masari meat. The gluttons get fed, but they never know whether they'll live or starve."

"You call that bravery," Zai said. "I call it laziness."

Bless returned the runner's greeting before the cart rolled on. "Either way, they give Ghost data. Piri's proposed that we encourage more Masari to try eating Sustainers, as long as they don't spend their incentive to buy Yata meat from the hunters. Who knows? Maybe the end to dependence lies with the gluttons."

"Maybe it lies in Evit's lab instead of in Ghost's."

Bless shot my mother a scathing look. "I don't care where it lies," she answered hotly. "If a Yata's discovery ends dependence instead of a Masari's, then Crossroads is more than willing to increase your profits."

I was thankful for my hiking clothes. They hid the goosebumps that suddenly covered everything and that reminded me to pay my brother a visit. Whatever he was doing in his lab right now, I strongly doubted he was searching for an end to dependence.

Zai murmured, "Would you care to put that in writing, Bless?"

I grumbled, "Let's not be premature."

The glutton emerged from the tent, pocketing his papers. Behind him, Rudder's guards shook their heads and snickered.

He spotted Bless and crimsoned. "Governor."

He gave us all a little bow and hurried back down the slope toward Crossroads before she could reply.



At home I traded my diplomatic notes for my Reckoning and strapped it across my back before I realized what I was doing. I was off to find my baby brother, not execute him. With a sigh of chagrin I slipped the rifle off and hung it back on its hooks.

Even in Basc I craved a weapon. No wonder my people were afraid of me.

I could immobilize Evit if I had to, but it would take more than holding him at arm's length while he threw pudgy punches. Things were simpler when we were boys. We only had to deal with famine, our mother's imprisonment for atrocities, and the threat of being hauled off to breeding pens.

At least then we had known what the dangers were.

No one was grieving inside the Soala when I passed it. Our hut-of-need enjoyed a sunny day free of death. Instead, children raced each other around its black adobe walls or sprinted toward Liberty Farm. Did they hear the pile

drivers echoing off the mountainside? Could they see the avalanche of topsoil streaking red into the lake?

In principle I agreed with BrushBurn, which meant that I should want the Soala to be filled with the cries of mourning. How could I call this protecting my people? I might as well just step into the hunting grounds and offer myself up as a casualty to prove a point, instead of killing the predators as I'd been conditioned to do. But then, who would be left to preach to this unwilling congregation? Who would hear the vanishing waters and the dying mountains if nobody wanted to listen to them?

Saying the gods are perverse is an understatement.

Evit's lab was quiet, but somebody shuffled around the complex. The sound came from the consecration room, which my brother almost never entered. I'd left that room spotless before the summit, draping it in the scent of aromatics, but now I sniffed preservatives. The body inside had been recently cleaned.

Death, after all. Likely another Preserver had killed another Masari. That explained why the corpse was here and not in Crossroads, though all bodies found their final resting place there, for consumption of one kind or another.

Jotha met me at the door. He had stopped being a Preserver when I was a boy, and most of his tattoo was ripped away along with much of his face. In time he had grown to treasure his scars, along with CatBird, the woman who had given them to him.

My mother had taught me all about weapons. But when Zai went off to war with the other adults, CatBird had taught all of us left behind how to protect ourselves.

The resignation in Jotha's eyes made my throat close up. "No."

"You saw how thin she was."

"Yes, but she had always grown her nourishment before."

CatBird had grieved in the Soala every time she reabsorbed her child, and she had been getting pregnant and devouring her half-Yata fetuses from within for twenty-one years.

Jotha and his comrades had begun that vicious cycle. If they had followed their rules of engagement instead, CatBird would be twenty-one years dead instead of a day, just another casualty of our controlled war for survival. And generations of Yata children, including the ones she had adopted and whose parents she had killed, would never have known and loved her.

The scars on Jotha's face skewed. "She stopped being fertile in the winter."

"Then for the gods' sakes, why didn't you just *feed* her?"

"I broke the law with her once." He led me inside. "And I did so again, but she refused me."

He rolled up his sleeve to show that he had tried to feed CatBird not once but several times over the course of two seasons. His carved arm was as puckered as his face.

I stumbled to the consecration table, where jutting ribs and hip bones dwarfed wisps of dulled roseate fur. CatBird was already a skeleton, with a ravaged womb that finally lay empty and flat. The stump from her amputated leg looked hardly different from the limb her attackers had left intact. Both had been reduced to scraps of flesh and graying pelt.

She blurred in my vision. "I never saw her naked before."

"There isn't much left to see."

I looked away from desiccated breasts that had swelled but never suckled. "When did she die?"

"In the night." He touched her chops. "In her sleep."

I finger-combed hair back from her forehead. "She taught me all the hymns they sang when they were—" I tried to smile. "Butchering us."

"I know," he said. "That's why I waited for you."

"When we were their gods." Golden light breached the windows and swirled around the sanctification knives. A shining mist hung over our heads. I could tell he didn't see it. "I don't feel like a god, Jotha. Do you?"

"I was raised to be." He followed my pointing finger and began gathering herbs. "I admit I made a pretty poor one sometimes. You were too young."

"My father is a god. But so is she, now." Azure eyes forever closed. "Think about it, Jotha. For decades the Masari have beaten their bodies with fasts. They've sacrificed their lives for us the way we sacrificed ours for them."

The light sank into wall tapestries woven with the stories of my father's life. My mother had dictated those stories to TripStone when I was barely able to walk. Now Ulik and his killer both spoke to me from the afterlife in whispers I couldn't understand. Lettering glowed on the hangings ringing the room, so bright they hurt my eyes.

Jotha caught me as my legs failed.

"No, let it happen." I could hardly breathe, so much rushed through me at once.

"You're ill."

"This land is ill." I peeled his hands away. "It's tilted, Jotha. We're spilling over the edge of it because we're killing our gods, just as they'd killed us."

His palm covered my tattoo as I dropped to the floor. Above me, CatBird shimmered in a room alive with lightning.

"You're not feverish," he said, "but you *are* in shock."

I marveled at blinding rays. "You don't see anything."

"Abri, I know you loved CatBird. I did, too. And she deserved that love, and all the respect that comes with those Covenant hymns. I can grant her that, and in the end I did. I can grant the Masari that." His arm was still around me, holding me upright. "But not worship."

In one numbing vision I was part of an overarching, sacred body, when the gods fed the Masari and the Masari fed the soil in return. And I returned into the soil so that I could feed my people. And the rivers ran clear and the mountains shone green, and the afterlife was only a moment between spilled blood and spilled seed. My father had walked into that afterlife unafraid. TripStone had passed into it unafraid. They were the same.

"Jotha." The letters faded back to yellow on red as my head cleared. The mist above us dissipated, sucked out the window by the relentless pull of pile drivers. I smiled at the shell of CatBird, who had cherished us as her own and then had died for us. "You're wrong."

I was a shell, too, but I wasn't wasted away. I was filling with light, absorbing the Masari woman on the table, who even now in death was giving birth to me.

Jotha would pray over CatBird, but I would pray *to* her.

CHAPTER 19

TelZodo

One knock. Two knocks. One.

I prayed that Evit's imagination stopped at his chemicals. I had grown up with stories of my father's legendary cabin and his forbidden experiments until I couldn't stand to hear them any longer. Evit was different. He so wanted to be like Ghost. If he were making secret drugs, he must have a secret hideaway to house them in. If he had a secret hideaway, then he was probably using my father's old, secret signal, too.

That's what I told myself. It made me feel better than trying to follow WingLeaf and ClayPack, who had become adept at night maneuvers. They hardly showed up at the farm house any more. Half the time I followed false trails of scent.

The dots on my mother's map led me to locations that were now benign, at least for me. If Destiny exposure had the power to affect me at all, I didn't feel it. I still had to tame my fear as I lifted my mask and bent to the ground, seeking clues.

We had no hard evidence of anything, and all that FlyAway told us was that her parents were dead and she didn't eat Yata. In WingLeaf's absence, FlyAway became HeadWind's new best friend. For all my troubles, I couldn't stop watching in amazement the slow-witted, Yata-eating hybrid bent on sharing flesh with a precocious Masari who didn't need any.

If that had anything to do with Destiny, I had no idea what. All I had were coincidences. FlyAway's arrival and my mother's exposure had occurred at the same time. The child and my now-elusive cousin were part of a deal. One moment my ex co-husband was huddling in my room like a trapped animal and the next moment he had knocked me out cold.

If I couldn't track WingLeaf, then I would prowl the Grange. "He's here." Maybe I could convince the corn if I repeated myself enough times. Evit wasn't in Basc and his household seemed only mildly concerned, which told me that his mates were being secretive, too.

I had spent two years sleeping with those people. They'd been my lovers as much as his. I had helped raise their children and now they treated me like a stranger. What's worse, I couldn't tell whether my Yata or my Masari blood had made them skittish.

One knock. Two knocks. One.

My father had grown up on the Grange and he had never learned all of its hiding places. I'd grown up here and I knew even fewer. I had no idea how much land my family controlled, because no one ever spoke about ownership.

The Grange was Crossroads' communal farm. It belonged to us all. Not just its plowed and fallow fields, but its tracts of tall, wild grasses extending toward the foothills. On a bright day I could spot reflections off the roofs of old shacks half-hidden near the mountains.

This was a bright day, and every silvery gleam made my pelt stand on end.

One knock. Two knocks. One.

I had a Promontory-issue revolver tucked neatly in my desk drawer instead of on my belt, and the farther I got from familiar ground the more I felt like an idiot. But what was I going to do, shoot him? Not long ago I would have laid down my life for him.

Evit had syringes and drugs.

I had a mask.

That was hardly fair.

On another day I would have been mesmerized. Grass shushed against my breeches with every step I took. All the old paths had grown over, so I used sight lines, following mountain outcroppings to find my way, zigzagging from one abandoned shed to the next. When nobody answered my knock I opened each door in turn and smelled rust.

All in all I was having a pleasant day except for the rage boiling ever higher inside my skull. It never occurred to me to think that I might be wrong—that Evit wasn't on the Grange somewhere, or that he hadn't appropriated my father's signal for his own use. I knew that little man.

If he hurt me, it was only because I let him hurt me.

But he had done more than that.

I passed from grass to thatch and a line of broken stalks. And then a sudden path, cleared as though from a lightning bolt. The boot print overlays on hard-packed earth were mesmerizing, too, made from Yata-sized and Masari-sized soles. Feet placed close together and farther apart. Short and long, narrow and wide, mixed. There must have been at least a dozen different kinds of imprint.

If I had taken the time to ponder what that might mean, I would have turned around and headed right back to the farm house. But it only drove me on, huffing in earnest. My knuckles were more than ready to pound wood.

No, not pound. My fist had to suggest a *friendly* visit. One from a member of his underground, who knew the code.

Late afternoon sun shone on a canted roof up ahead and lit a door above Yata-sized steps. Years ago my father had hidden his cabin in tangled foliage, but that had been up near Alvav Ridge on the far outskirts of Crossroads. This hideaway on the Grange was tidy, with patched and planed walls and a rebuilt chimney. Evit knew how to make himself at home and he had done so quickly, with plenty of help.

I swallowed bile, mounted those tiny steps, and employed my dainty tap.

One knock. Two knocks. One.

He was so eager to open the door.

He wore a mask like mine. Blood gushed through it as I connected. Twice, three times, yelling epithets I didn't think I knew. For one delirious moment it was just the two of us, before my tunnel vision cleared and the room filled with shouting as ClayPack pinned my arms behind my back and cinched my legs with his.

A Yata woman hurried to clean Evit up. At first her mask made her hard to recognize, but then I remembered the clavicle she'd bought. Roia. The Masari who handed her a clean mask for Evit was my new ward, WingLeaf. Beside WingLeaf a hugely pregnant Masari sprawled in the arms of a wary mate.

Another Yata woman. Another Masari couple. Two members of Crossroads' Chamber. And Smoke, who looked disturbingly beautiful even with her face half-hidden.

Only the full-blood Masari among us lacked protection from fumes. Around us all hung shelves stacked with the poison that had reduced my mother to a near-mindless breeder of meat for almost half her life.

Roia said, "His nose is broken."

"Yata heal fast." I wished I could break ClayPack's hold, too. "I want every one of you out of here and every grain of this Destiny destroyed."

Behind me, ClayPack said, "This laboratory stays."

"The hell it does!" I spluttered. "You haven't the authority, DirtBall!"

He hadn't the authority, but he had the muscle. I didn't care. I managed to graze his instep before he shifted his body and twisted my ankle. The pain only made me madder.

"Tel—" WingLeaf's face showed a mixture of triumph and contriteness that was hard to watch. She stepped toward me. "Evit has temporary clearance from the Chamber, pending a vote. He can stay."

"To make *this*?" I shouted. "That's preposterous!"

Evit had dropped onto a low stool, his new mask puffing in and out as he breathed through his mouth. I wanted to rip it away and let his handiwork throttle him.

WingLeaf said, "To end dependence." Her eyes gleamed. "That's why FlyAway doesn't have to eat Yata. Roia nursed her while taking Destiny."

I balked. "And?"

The others in the room looked at each other.

"Is that all you've got? One case?"

"BrokenThread was one case." Evit's congestion made him barely intelligible. Fresh blood spotted white linen. "Now you have Sustainer Masari because of her."

"And we can't measure them reliably." Was everyone here witless?
"Sometimes they can substitute for Yata and sometimes they can't. Half the time the Masari who eat them starve anyway!"

I stood in a den of drugs and cockeyed science. My pinioned muscles began to ache, my ankle throbbed, and I stared into faces filled with defiance and pity.

Including Smoke's. I told her, "He's bamboozled you, too."

She leveled her gaze at me. "Said by a man who's shot children."

So had she, but for a moment it didn't matter that those children would have killed us otherwise. The images of heartbroken predator hybrids made my legs buckle, even more than her milky, furless skin and Yata-black hair.

I said, feeling sick, "Do you know what your enterprise here is doing to my mother?"

"She can present her arguments to the rest of the Chamber."

The speaker seated near Evit was a well-dressed official who had told me her life story two years earlier. I had written and bound her narrative with dozens of others in my small but growing library of Masari preservation.

She had lost her husband and one child to the massacre, her other child to the hunt, and had taken her comfort with me, on and off, for six years. She'd been one of many who had seen my sterile body as a balm. As her own, private Destiny.

I had helped them escape their grief for a while, but I hadn't given them hope. Evit did.

He wasn't a cornered animal any more. He was a little man with a broken nose and followers ready to defend him to the death. And they had granted him asylum on Crossroads' communal farm.

With a sinking heart I realized what true ownership meant, and how my kin's land was never really ours.

CHAPTER 20

Bless

You will be asked to make hard choices.

My father believed that governance was best taught during dinner, when I was relaxed and sated enough to pay attention and when everything sounded palatable. Breaking his Yata fast in the Deliverance Inn had left him haggard, but in-between those agonies we enjoyed the Grange's produce and simple, guiltless flesh.

Now I only remembered his voice as I sipped bland tea and listened to my stomach roil.

They will be hard because your alternatives will be twins, more often equally despicable than equally tempting. You may never know which is the right decision, even in retrospect. When that happens, remember these two truths. The first is that after you have heard all the arguments, those decisions are yours alone to make. The second is that you are making them first and last for Crossroads, whatever Crossroads happens to be.

I wish he had told me instead how often he shook beneath these clothes I'm wearing now. How often his meals had run right through him and filled his chamber pot with half-digested remains, and how he could function on so little sleep.

I probably wouldn't have understood if he had. Ever since I returned home to find the missives from my colleagues and petitioners, my discomfort at the regional summit seemed a brief blip of indigestion compared to the extreme nausea I now felt.

But a governor does not look dignified vomiting, so I bound myself up a little less and took the chance of looking a bit less severe and a bit more my age. Then I headed early to the Rotunda, bypassed the corridor leading to the Chamber, and climbed toward the oculus and its glassed-in cases. I knelt before my father's bones and for the first time wished they didn't look so pristine.

I whispered, "What if the twins are equally despicable *and* equally tempting?"

That didn't eliminate the two truths. It only made them nastier.

The Chamber's nine velvet chairs had increased to thirteen and Smoke's murals had been moved back, making the false landscape look even more grandiose. My colleagues still filed in, along with the guests of our assembly. Two of my legislators flanked Evit like bodyguards, hovering over him as he climbed into his seat. A bandage spanned his crooked nose.

TelZodo entered with a wooden box of writing tools under his arm. This wouldn't be a narrative or a remembrance, nothing he would sculpt from memory into story. He was here as a recordkeeper for the Grange, to document events as they transpired.

Just as important, he was here in a show of his family's strength.

He nodded at me, his expression neutral. "Governor."

I nodded back, wanting terribly to tell him how much I still valued our friendship. But I was here to gather information in the most unbiased way I could. At this time, and in this room, I could not be his friend.

He sat opposite Evit and arranged his implements, then trained that same neutral gaze across the table. The Yata met it, held it, and then turned his attention elsewhere.

I perched at the head of a broad oak table affording me an unobstructed view of all the participants. I could see who leaned forward or back, whose sight lines shifted and whose expression changed.

And at every juncture I knew that they all gathered that same information about me.

Our newest Chamber member strode into the room. I clamped down my surprise at seeing Piri empty-handed, without her sheaf of notes or the blank slate board against which she drummed or wrote her comments. She wore a plain shift rather than her usual tunic and trousers, and something else about her looked different as well. She seemed shorter.

The coil at the top of her head was gone. She had lopped off her braid, leaving her head shorn.

In the manner of livestock. TelZodo had told me that. I glanced at him as the thought surfaced and saw him eying the doorway.

Opposite him, Evit did the same and flinched.

Ghost followed his wife into the room as Piri climbed into her chair. The look he gave Evit was far from neutral, with a fierce calm that went beyond rage. His protégé appeared stricken but otherwise unmoved. They were equally dug into their positions.

I hadn't realized before just how tall Ghost was, even hunched over with a large, wrapped object strapped to his back. It could have been one of the tomes from the Rotunda's shelves, from just outside the room.

But it wasn't. Faced with anonymous canvas, I felt ill.

A third truth is that Chamber sessions are best approached after only a light breakfast, and difficult Chamber sessions are best approached with no breakfast at all. Satisfy your hunger the night before.

My father had held up a bite of mutton at dinner for emphasis and then popped it into his mouth. Advice was best remembered after a full meal. The memory of cider soured in my throat.

Predictably, the Chamber's other Yata member strolled past Evit and squeezed his shoulder in a sign of support. So did one of the Masari. The others either hid their biases or were genuinely neutral, waiting to see how the debate unfolded.

The thirteenth chair, placed opposite mine and the only seat on that side, remained empty as our attendant left the room. He bent almost double before closing the door, smiling and speaking words I was too far away to hear. But that brief action told me the height of his listener, who was considerably shorter than an adult Yata.

I swallowed bile, lifted the hammer my father had held, and struck the chime beside my notes. "This meeting of the Crossroads Chamber is now in session on the thirty-ninth of Wain, Common Year Twenty-One."

I would make my decisions for Crossroads, but I was still trying to learn what Crossroads was. I governed a perpetually moving target.



We sailed through the measure establishing a memorial service for CatBird, who had many mourners on both sides of the valley. Allowing

SpiderLark to reside in the Rotunda took longer. In the end I brought TelZodo's petition to a vote, knowing it would pass. We approved it with dissension from three legislators who argued that such was a show of favoritism.

Perhaps I was trying to be Tel's friend after all, offering him some support regardless of how I decided the final issue on our agenda.

Evit and his two sponsors presented arguments in favor of his application for Crossroads citizenship and the permanent establishment of his new laboratory. While the rest of us listened in respectful and uneasy silence, they proposed cordoning off an unused portion of the Grange and developing crops to supplement and duplicate the resources growing wild in Resurrection Forest. They outlined sustainable harvest plans. Their blueprints included a barrier against unwanted exposure to the drug.

At first they did not mention Destiny at all. They didn't have to. We had no laws against it here. Nothing in our pact with Basc pertained to any reciprocal enforcement. Still, with the exception of his Chamber sponsors, Evit made his argument alone. He kept his collaborators uninvolved, save for the small and innocent one who waited outside, getting an eyeful of the big Rotunda.

"I am not here to foster an addiction, Governor." He spoke over tightly-clasped hands. Most petitioners faced each Chamber member in turn, but Evit focused his stare on me while everyone else studied us both.

He continued, "We have a chance to attain a state of freedom that most of us have never dared dream of. We can argue means to an end. We can argue history. My esteemed teacher can tell you that this valley has had its share of banned practices that were later embraced as a necessity."

I glanced at Ghost, who didn't respond. His face had become a mask.

"My experiments use a substance that was once *sacred* here." Evit leaned forward, his gaze intent. "We didn't know how sacred. We didn't know until now that we had a way to end the abominable hunger that has torn this region apart since antiquity."

My father had never told me how many different smells there were for fear. Instead of a single, pungent bloc, it floated around the room in waves, joining sweet odors of hope and desire. Try as I might, I could not untangle the weave.

When Evit finished, giving his counts of nameless supporters and volunteers, Ghost stood. He unstrapped the monstrosity from his back as Piri rose beside him. She did not descend from her chair but remained on its swiveled-out step. It made her almost as tall as her husband.

He unwrapped and handed her the ledger from Destiny Farm. Its size dwarfed her despite her elevation and she had to support it with her arms wide. She held it before her heaving chest and then she let it slam onto the table, where its bindings exhaled the scent of dried Yata skin. It breathed out of cracked, decades-old leather.

Ghost sat, but Piri remained standing. She bent, opened the book to one of eight placeholders, and drummed directly on tattered parchment, *You say you know what Destiny is. This is Destiny.*

She trained her gaze on me and then on the rest of the table. Her tapping nails brought us back to the page. *I come before you not as a member of this Chamber but as an animal. As a number. I come to you as meat-bearing meat.*

Her index finger slid down a cramped column, stopping near the end. *This is what Destiny made me, this figure here. It says that I have produced product seven times and it projects that I will yield twentyfivespring of edible product when I am slaughtered. I have no name, no purpose other than that.*

Evit looked as sick as I felt, but I doubted he would change his mind. No one here was unsympathetic, but none of us had lived through that nightmare. Not even Tel.

Piri caressed the other placeholders with her finger, then drummed again. *The meat that I produced was ripped from between my legs and taken away. Six years ago I learned what numbers were branded onto my children's necks when their tongues were cut, and these parchment strips point to where they were recorded. Those numbers are all that I have left of my Farm babies.*

Evit speaks of an experiment. I stand before you as an experimental result, proven over and over for dozens of generations. Evit has a sample size of one, with almost no longitudinal record.

Her hand shook. *This ledger lists one hundred forty four thousand primary samples, with secondary cross-references to another one million, seven hundred twenty eight thousand, four hundred sixty two. Taken together we have produced a projected forty one million, seven hundred fifty five thousand, nine hundred two point sixspring of meat, plus two-thirds that amount of inedible but useful byproduct.*

That is all we were. That is what Destiny made us. We weren't Yata. We had no name. We had no people because we weren't people.

Her other palm rested on the page. *This book was one of twenty-six that the only son I've ever known found at the Destiny Farm ruins. We have since learned that the chest holding them was one of many repositories.*

Her tapping was broken only by the ceaseless scratching of Tel's pen. His face was expressionless, his fingers moving at the speed of hers with flicks of his own shorthand.

She shut the ledger. *Evit can guarantee you nothing. I guarantee you this. I yield the floor to my husband.*

Tel leaned back as his mother sat. For a moment his eyes looked dead. Then he blinked, leaned forward again, and dipped his nib.

I wondered how many times Ghost had rehearsed this moment and how much effort it took him not to lunge across the table and grab his former student by the throat. He remained seated, his hands clasped as tightly as Evit's.

He was soft-spoken at first. "What my wife hasn't told you is how she has thrashed in her sleep every night since her exposure and the violation it caused. She hasn't said that she wears a filter mask whenever she must step outside, or that her body remembers what it struggled so hard to forget. Evit, you say you don't want to foster an addiction, but you have reawakened one that is decades old, and all to pursue your anomaly. Now you ask to keep torturing us where we live, and where we were kind enough to give you a home and your training."

He worked his fingers free of each other and sifted through notes. "But we are not here to discuss matters of ethics, are we? By coming here you've dodged your people's laws, and since they have not established your criminality they cannot extradite you. Congratulations for escaping the condemnation under which I once labored."

Ghost lifted a sheet and leaned back, reclining and coiled at once. The sudden hardness in his voice made us all jump. "What will happen when FlyAway reaches puberty? Do you know? Will her hormonal changes bring about the dependence she is so blissfully free of now? Will she be able to reproduce? And if she can, then what about *her* children? Will they need Yata wetnurses, too? And if they do, what if their generation becomes habituated

to Destiny's effects? What about the generation after them? What other variables have you considered, what parentage, what other Masari families, what traits? What data do you have that you can trend out, with your paltry documentation of a single little girl and your mockery of research?"

He slammed his sheet back on the table.

Evit asked, quietly, "Did you think of all that when you ate BrokenThread?"

"That was at her behest, Evit, and you know it."

"And based on your sample size of one, you ate your nephew VineSong, too. Was that at his behest as well?"

TelZodo laid down his pen and blurted, "He was *dead*, Evit, killed by one of yours! He wasn't a toxic cloud destroying the living!"

"We're not talking about dead or alive, Tel, we're talking about scientific evidence." Evit turned back to Ghost. "Are we not?"

Ghost answered through gritted teeth, "The use of Sustainer Masari has decreased the need to hunt by eighteen percent. There's your evidence."

"If the Destiny milk works, it will decrease that need by one hundred percent." Evit looked around the table. "How many hunters are in the Crossroads Chamber? Four, is it?"

Heads nodded.

"I can tell by the injuries. They're somewhat more pronounced than my altered nose. MoleBark, I met you at a Remembrance. You killed Sataden. He was a drinking buddy of mine." He shrugged. "Good shot."

Neck fur fluffed all around the table. I fought to keep mine in check. "Evit, that approach won't help you. We've all lost people."

"That may be, Governor. But with all due respect, you haven't hunted. And you haven't entered the far woods as prey."

"Neither have you."

"True. And I am grateful for the exclusion, though I am pained to see my friends die. Ghost, you and Piri enjoy that exclusion as well." His gaze shifted. "Tel, you don't have to march into that hell, either. And despite all our

rituals and the profound respect our peoples have when they kill each other, the far woods are still hell. My brother Abri could tell you all about that, except that right now I am not in the best position to invite him."

One look around the room and I saw how a vote might go, but whether or not to send the issue to ballot was my choice. "Evit, you are asking for more than asylum and experimental freedom here. You are asking us to establish a policy that goes counter to the one enacted by Basc. Are you willing to risk jeopardizing relations between our peoples?"

Three of my colleagues gave tiny nods to echo my question. Of the remaining five, four seemed unconcerned and one leaned forward. I revised my internal estimate.

Evit closed his eyes and massaged his temples, but I doubted he was in that much distress. It was a way to keep from looking across the table, to where his adoptive family sat wearing grave expressions of betrayal. I had trouble looking at them, too.

Finally he said, "My mother never tried Destiny, even when almost every hut in Basc kept a pot of it. She hated that drug long before we'd ever heard of Destiny Farm. That made my family outcasts under the Covenant. If Zai hadn't left Abri and me with our uncle Ila and his family, I might have grown up with that same hatred. Gria, The Honorable One, was almost executed for her beliefs in contraception, and she also hated Destiny long before she fell victim to it."

He turned to Piri, wincing. "You're right, Piri. It has terrible potential. I can't undo what it did to you. I can't undo what I've done to you, however inadvertently, and I don't know if I can ever forgive myself for that. But I couldn't forgive myself if I stopped pursuing my line of inquiry because of that, or because of anyone's policy."

His gaze traveled to me. "Governor, you speak of relations. If the massacre had succeeded in its original intent, Crossroads and Basc wouldn't *have* relations. Destiny Farm made us allies because its atrocities were even worse. If Destiny, used correctly, can help end the Masari's dependence on Yata, then it can only help relations." He spread his hands. "We have precautions in place now. My sponsors and I have briefed you on them. We have Yata willing to be wetnurses and pregnant Masari willing to offer their newborns for suckling. The only way I can gather more evidence is if you give me a chance to do it."

For a few minutes I looked past faces and studied Smoke's renditions of this valley and its mountains as they once were. She had painted them from other people's memories, including my father's. Everything looked bucolic and peaceful.

I had never known a world without war.

I had never known a world without smog, either.

I couldn't be seen as supporting BrushBurn's call for increased predation if I permitted this laboratory, could I? If Evit succeeded, we could do away with the need for Masari to prey upon Yata altogether. But appearances didn't matter. What mattered was Crossroads.

Parchment rustled around the table, some in earnest, some in a polite gesture to pass the time.

I had to force down a burp before I could speak. "BrushBurn sat before this Chamber, once. Even in the midst of famine, this room sat three times more people than are inside it now. That's how much more of Crossroads is gone."

I tried to imagine it, then tried to extrapolate the numbers to the village streets. I couldn't.

If I steepled my fingers, I wouldn't start picking at my cuticles. "BrushBurn had been a flesh trader then, and other things. We all know what he did and how despicable his actions were. But that also means Crossroads has survived to remember the stories that its citizens have passed down."

I forced myself to look at Piri, who had no trouble returning my gaze. "BrushBurn's proposal disgusted my father, but this town stayed alive by consuming Yata bred and butchered at Destiny Farm. HigherBrook could not condone the sale of that meat, but allowing BrushBurn to set up his cart ultimately saved Crossroads. Most of our citizens didn't know where that food came from because many would probably have refused it if they had. They would have either starved or gotten killed in the far woods. And if that had happened, Promontory would own Crossroads right now and Basc wouldn't exist any more, because its citizens would have become livestock. Including you, Evit."

He gazed down at his papers. Across from him, TelZodo's pen perpetually scratched, his eyes half closed. I wondered if he'd ever speak to me again.

I took a deep breath. "The floor is now open for discussion, pending a vote. Let's see what the child has to say for herself."

Two loud raps of the chimes alerted the attendant outside. The door opposite me opened and FlyAway marched in as though staking her claim to the room. She smiled at the murals, grinned at Evit, waved to her desolate adoptive family, and homed in on the empty chair. We all waited as she climbed into it.

If only she weren't so enchanting, so articulate, and so devastatingly happy. But if my decision proved correct, then she could be all those things and whatever else she desired.

Our discussion droned on, its arguments fallen flat into practiced clarifications for some and abject numbness for others. I tried to weigh the equations of making new friends with those of making new enemies. Was I following or redirecting the current of a changing Crossroads?

FlyAway watched intently as the attendant distributed ballots to my eight colleagues, holding mine aside in case we needed a tie-breaker. She craned her neck to follow his movements as he collected and tallied them.

My ballot was unnecessary. Evit's petition passed by a count of six to two. Even if Ghost and Tel had been able to vote, they would have been outnumbered. I vaguely remember announcing the results, attending to last bits of business, and adjourning the session.

Then I gathered up my papers and descended from my chair on rubbery legs. Shoulders back, spine straight, I passed between two painted partitions and entered the small Governor's Study attached to the meeting hall. My notes dropped onto the desk.

Then I dropped to my knees behind the desk and embraced the Governor's Chamber Pot, blowing dry heaves into the brass.

CHAPTER 21

Mid-Autumn

Evit

Word sped through Crossroads in the weeks following my hearing. At least half the village must have turned out to clear weeds, lay down brick and stone, build new roads, and seed the ground with whatever we could transplant from Resurrection Forest. We diverted a stream and flooded a meadow to coax plants and insects to the Crossroads side of the border. We made cultivars out of forbidden fruit.

WingLeaf's pregnancy pushed her tunic before her. Seeing the desperation in her eyes and in ClayPack's were like looking into a mirror.

My harvesters and suppliers included Masari now, and so did my producers. Every day brought me new volunteers. WingLeaf and ClayPack had begun the recruitment, but it quickly built its own momentum. Soon we had to work the land in shifts and rotations.

Farming songs began the day and teaching circles ended it. Masari, even those who had read the Rotunda's narratives, still wanted to learn about how Destiny affected the living. Their bodies were dead to the drug, so they couldn't imagine its effect on us. Sure, they could observe us, but that was only the sex. Destiny grabbed our souls in ways the Masari could never experience for themselves.

Just being able to talk about it made us lightheaded. We sat around campfires on crisp autumn nights, answering questions as Masari leaned forward almost into the flames, their eyes glowing with a hunger for knowledge. Yata could teach them, this time, openly and fearlessly.

More Yata spilled across the meadow with petitions for Crossroads citizenship. We lined up Masari sponsors and enough testimonials to secure the Chamber's approval. We published the formula for Destiny and brought it into the light.

While hunters trained within earshot of my lab, new herbalists who could end that hunting trained under my direction. Most of them already had

extensive farming experience and could preserve and sustain the plantings we had fought for. Every nine days I translated our detailed records into reports for Bless.

She thanked me, cordial and stiff, and remained that way through her occasional inspection of the grounds. In addition to new fields and wells and my expanded lab, we erected an orientation center where mothers-to-be could pair with Yata. We added a nursery for Masari preferring to deliver here instead of at home.

One already had, drowning out the distant gunshot as we gathered around, all of us in tears from the sheer momentousness of the moment. We watched, holding our breath as a purebred Masari baby pushed free, yowling and covered in down. Up until that point I had seen only my own people deliver. I had never witnessed a birth with so much blood-matted fur and so many big bones in motion. We snipped the baby's umbilical, wrapped him in linen, and handed him to his Yata wetnurse. She was still flushed from Destiny and let loose with sultry moans as he latched onto her nipple and sucked on a miracle.

His mother's milk stayed locked inside. Bless reached down and cupped her with a gentle hand, and I couldn't tell whether they wept together from joy or from sorrow.

We laid down a wide barrier of bare ground between two stone walls and hoped it was enough to separate our work from the rest of the Grange. It quickly became Crossroads' version of a Meethouse. Yata rutted beneath the stars while under the influence of Destiny. Masari rutted under the influence of what the Destiny promised. The walls had been a good choice, cooling my back while the rest of me heated up.

I was so busy and impassioned that on better days I almost forgot how miserable I was.

I never saw Tel or his parents. They didn't send word, and I shouldn't have expected any. The road from my complex to the center of Crossroads passed well beyond the farm house, jogging toward the mountains that fairly hung over me, now that the ground was cleared. Half the time I wondered if I avoided my adoptive kin as much as they were avoiding me.

Roia's pregnancy was also well along and normal for Yata. She would give birth before the winter. Her kin remained in Basc, and she brought news

from my relatives across the meadow, now that I was an exile. I kept my letters home upbeat and newsy when all I wanted to do was to tell my wives, co-husbands, children, and grandchildren how much I missed them.



FlyAway visited me on the better days. Before long she could scamper from Ghost's household to my new address without WingLeaf having to show her the way. My furniture was more her size, anyhow.

I could always tell when FlyAway arrived, studiously wiping her feet and brushing her coveralls down. She peeked through a half-open doorway and asked, "Am I clean enough?"

"Perfect," I said.

"You're not wearing a mask."

"Not today. I'm updating records. Come on in."

She was always careful around the lab, more careful than I had been around Ghost's beakers when I was her age. Maybe it was due to the materials we worked with. Ghost's lab held cadavers and bodily fluids, while mine turned less recognizable ingredients into powder.

Maybe she was just a more conscientious kid.

She climbed beside me into a chair that left her legs dangling off the floor and pointed to my papers. "Can I see?"

I handed her a sheet. She wrinkled her nose at it.

I asked, "Does Piri still wear a mask?"

"Uh huh."

"Inside the house, too?"

"Uh huh. Ghost says he doesn't smell anything, but it makes her feel better."

"Then she needs it." I watched FlyAway's brow furrow between her strawberry curls, her growing brain puzzling it all out. "You okay?"

"Yeah." She pointed to the sheet. "What's this?"

I leaned over. "Lacuna. It's a special name for the big harvests and plantings, when everybody from Crossroads and Basc joins together. It means there's no war for a few days, because we need all the workers we can get." I tapped the numbers. "Destiny isn't made from fruits and vegetables and the steps to make it are timed differently. I'm letting Bless know that I don't need as much labor over here."

"It's a funny name."

"It was invented when I was younger than you are. Yata and Masari had never worked the farms together before then. It's like living in another world, not hearing any guns."

My hands turned numb and I almost dropped the parchment when she gave it back. We were bringing an end to the war, not just for a few days out of the year but for good. FlyAway's generation might be the first to walk into the far woods without fear since the Covenant fell.

I said, "We could come up with a new name. So, tell me about your day."

She tidied downy chops and reached for another sheet, just to hold it. "SpiderLark sang for us in the Rotunda and ClayPack gave me mud that I can build things with. I picked twenty-two yellow bugs off the trellis. They don't smell good. Do you use yellow bugs?"

I shook my head. "Not the ones on the trellis."

"SkyBee showed me her bullet mold. She's nine. And I delivered five baby dolls."

"You've had a busy day. Who are the mothers?"

"Just HeadWind. She sticks it in her dress and I pull it out, and then she gives it Magic Milk." She rolled the sheet into a tube and peered through it. "Why does everything look bigger if this doesn't have a lens?"

"It's not bigger, there's just less to see around it so it looks bigger."

"Huh." A green eye peered at me from the end of a tunnel. "Then Windy sticks the doll in her dress again and I pull it out again. It's make believe."

"It's probably a little real for Windy."

The parchment clarifier swiveled. "Like Piri's mask."

I didn't know how to answer that. I asked, "Does HeadWind still have enough Yata meat?"

"Yeah. But her baby doesn't need it."

"The doll."

"Yeah."

For a moment it all seemed real to FlyAway, too.



My staff had gone to bed by the time I finished my report, and I headed toward my sleeping quarters set among a cluster of sparsely outfitted rooms. More than once I almost looked for Tel to let him know we both slept in dormitories now, and wasn't that funny? Then I remembered that we weren't speaking to each other.

Sometimes I wanted to slam my fist through a wall. If I were working with any other substance, this estrangement wouldn't exist. I could visit with my family. I could pop in for dinner at the farm house and visit that other dormitory in the Rotunda. But the gods had sent me to reclaim a demon—and prejudice, ignorance, and fear kept me apart from the people I loved.

Gria and Ghost had both gone into exile for their beliefs. My exile was sanctioned and much more comfortable, but it was still exile. I was condemned by the very people in whose footsteps I followed.

So be it. I would retire to my pallet and stop feeling sorry for myself. The gods had given me a gift, just as they had given a gift to whoever among the ancient Dirt People had discovered Destiny in the first place.

I was still consoling myself with that thought when I stepped into my room and my breath was knocked from me. One blow, one spin, and I was wrapped in muscle. My lantern swung out of my grasp and dropped to the floor. It wobbled, but remained upright.

"Hello, Evit." Warm breath tickled my ear as a hand traveled up my shirt and rested a sharp point against my chest. I would have answered Abri if his other hand weren't pressed against my mouth.

By all laws, he couldn't hurt me here. But Preservers didn't always follow the law.

He added, voice low, "Don't struggle."

I already knew that much. He had poison, lethal or not, aimed at my heart. Even if I could feel my legs I wouldn't be able to move them, he cinched me so tightly. I tried to think past the blood rushing through my head and the hammering in my veins and decided to focus first on slowing my breaths.

"You can shout if you want. I made sure the others were sleeping well."

He moved his hand from my mouth and settled it against my cheek. The slight pricking at my chest remained.

I whispered, "You don't want to kill me."

"No, of course not. Not after what we've been through together."

He turned my head to the side, toward my bed. I took one look at the body laid upon it, closed my eyes, and tried not to gag. My mouth turned to cotton. "This is grisly even for you, Abri."

"I didn't inflict those scars, the gangs in Alvav did. Yucof had to feed predator hybrids before he could feed his daughter; it was his price of passage. I guaranteed HeadWind's safety and gave him a peaceful death in return for his full confession when I found him searching for you."

The corpse on the bed looked half-eaten. I forced myself to study a badly puckered torso and misshapen limbs, a testament to how often Yucof had used his own flesh to continue running his trades. The incisions left from Abri's cleaning and preservation were almost invisible.

Despite his injuries, Yucof seemed asleep. He could have been naked and drunk inside one of the Marsh's brothels, and I desperately wished he would start breathing again. "It must have been hard. You liked him, too."

"He's with BubbleCreek now." Abri's free arm encircled my waist, turning his hold into a terrifying caress. "That confession supports evidence of your criminality in Basc, along with its history. I can't execute you here without severe consequences, but I can drug you unconscious and carry you back across the border. A conviction there would grant me full power of enforcement."

He increased the pressure on my chest. One sudden move from either of us and his needle would break skin.

I ached to see his face, but I couldn't turn around. He smelled of nothing except composure, but Preservers were trained to hide their emotions well. Any feelings would squeeze into their sweat and carry on the wind. The most callous were the best camouflaged.

I didn't care what I smelled like and I made no attempt to cover the moan in my voice. "This wasn't why Mother joined the militia, was it, Abri? It wasn't why she left us after Father died. Everything she did, all that loneliness, was so that we could stay alive." My legs burned as I struggled to keep standing. "If I have to die, don't let it come from you, Abri. I love you too much to let you do that."

I don't know how long we stood that way. Part of the experience was ridiculously pleasant. My big brother had me in one of his wrestling holds. In a moment he would let me go, muss up my hair, and crush me in a protective hug that made me forget he had bested me again. Then he'd ask me to tell him what I was learning from the lenses. As we grew older I had taught him how to cut into people like Yucof, even though he had killed only Masari in his early days as a Preserver.

"I'll miss our walks." His hand withdrew and left me gasping. "A lot of us are going to miss your cooking."

I staggered away from him and grabbed onto a chair to keep from falling. Behind me I heard a cork being pulled.

"Can you hold a cup?"

"I'm a big boy, Abri. You don't have to help me drink any more."

He was already seated by the time I pulled my chair around. I took the brandy from a steady hand. His tattooed face looked more haggard than usual.

He raised earthenware. "To Yucof."

"To Yucof." I glanced back at the bed. "I almost want to invite him to join us."

"He will. Where he is." Abri tossed the contents back and refilled. I stared down at my liquor, overcome by nerves.

After a moment my brother pried my cup from my fingers and replaced it with his own. I watched him drown his second brandy. It didn't matter which vessel he drank from. He could still slip something into any cup at any time.

I shrugged. I might as well take my share before he finished the bottle. I tilted the fire back and waited for my muscles to release their death grip on me. "If we were in my lab, we might be more evenly matched."

It was an empty boast, but I had to try. Any drugs I had would fall into his hands more quickly than into mine.

He poured. "Does it make you feel better to know that in some ways, you frighten me far more than I could ever frighten you?"

"No, it makes me feel worse. You were my hero, once. I worshiped you."

"That's a terrible thing to do to me." The cup tipped. "You're my baby brother, so I suppose it was your job. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it."

"Ghost was my hero, too, and now I frighten him." Heat rose to my cheeks. "Abri, it's an *irrational* fear. I can understand Ghost's. He's married to a former Farm Yata, so it's personal with him. But Destiny has never hurt you, or anyone in our family. Uncle Ila used it all the time. He died fighting against Destiny Farm, but he never equated what happened over there with the way we used it here."

Abri refilled my cup. "It's not the Destiny that frightens me. It's what you're making it do."

"Now you've got me completely confused." I watched him glare into his brandy and refused to believe the suspicion taking hold. Then it grew too big for me to keep inside. "Abri, don't tell me you want the Masari to stay Yata-*dependent*."

"What I want doesn't matter."

"What kind of a monster *are* you?"

He laughed and leaned back as though pleading with the ceiling. "I don't know yet."

From the tone of his voice, I could have been asking him what he

wanted to be when he grew up. But he did know. He wasn't looking for guidance, he was arguing with it.

I watched his face working. "Tell me what this battle is about, Abri. Don't keep it a secret from me."

"You kept secrets from me first." He leaned forward again and reached for the bottle, the cup in his hands unwavering. "More?"

I couldn't recall when I'd drained mine. I grabbed hold of his chin and saw the circles under his eyes flare into sharp relief. "Why, Abri? I refuse to believe you're that much in love with death. We've got a real chance to end all this killing and I'm going to take it as far as I can. You can haul me back to Basc and execute me, but you can't stop what I've started here."

"I know." His eyes pleaded with mine, now. "I hear about it every day in the streets at home. Your experiments are changing Basc, too."

"Not policy."

"No. But your underground is building at home." He tossed back another drink and cradled his head in his hands. "At least that will mean HeadWind stays fed. I'll bring you the harvesters and the other violators I catch. That way, we can keep our bargains with Yucof, and you'll know which of your followers are no longer available."

The implications made me dizzy. Basc's ban on Destiny gave my brother the license to murder our own people, whom he would donate to keep Yucof's daughter alive. I tried to find a link between his ruthlessness and his compassion and I couldn't.

He sighed and reached into his vest. "Promise me something." Folded parchment passed into my hand. "Safeguard this information and use it when you can."

He took my cup from me as I unfolded the sheets. Letters and numbers blurred. How much had I been drinking? Wasn't this the formula I'd bought from Yucof? So much swam before me that I couldn't tell, only that the handwriting was the same.

I blinked at terse, angular strokes. "The Honorable One wrote this."

"Yes, she did."

I fought to keep everything from dancing. "Contraceptive techniques." I chuckled. "These are vastly unpopular right now."

"They were illegal under the Covenant. Now that we're in power, everyone is excited about raising children for purposes other than slaughter. Think of the potential for progress." He set my cup down. "That's all our mother can see."

I wanted to ask Abri what *he* saw, but the sheets fluttered away from my hand. Abri retrieved them from the floor and tucked them into my shirt.

I tried to trace the ink on his forehead. "When did you get the other two bands?"

"Around the time of your fourth cup. It's also when I got my other four eyes."

"You're right." I couldn't look at him any more.

"You'll have trouble talking in a moment. Just stay quiet."

I let him tuck me in, wrapping me in blankets on the floor. We were at Uncle Ila's again, crowding into a big hut full of children and screaming babies. I couldn't see over anybody, so I just huddled in his arms as the grownups passed from room to room. Terrible smells came from the kitchen, but I couldn't stop my stomach from grumbling. We ate whatever we could catch. It was the middle of winter and we were all so hungry.

I must have whimpered.

"Ssh."

Abri held me against his chest, just as he had always done. I wanted to cling to him, but then I remembered. We were on the floor because somebody else was in my bed.

Yucof. When did he get here?

The dead trader was still with me when I awoke and re-lit my lantern. Abri was gone, but my room was in shambles, my drawers pulled out and their contents scattered. I tried to ignore my pounding head.

My lab was also in disarray, though my Destiny supply remained intact. My instruments stayed neatly arranged. My notes were out of order and lay in piles. Abri had gone through my cabinets here, too.

I made a thorough search. The original formula for Destiny, the one that Gria had written out for Yucof decades ago, was the only item missing.

It didn't matter. Many people knew how to make Destiny now, and more trainees kept coming to learn. Dozens had copies of Gria's instructions, and they contained all the necessary information for production. They lacked only the handwriting that revealed their origin.

Abri had evidence of my purchase and my culpability, but he was my protector. Now he was The Honorable One's protector, too.

CHAPTER 22

Abri

Ata's bloody hand print is smaller than mine. It is like a child's.

It isn't real blood, of course, and it isn't his real hand print. It's a red dye painted and re-painted over many, many generations, just inside and to the right of the entrance to The Honorable One's hut. The first time I came here its outline still showed around my own fingers when I pressed my palm against the wall. Touching it was like making a friend, before I learned the meaning behind the image.

Ata had been the most grotesque of the Dirt People. If the Covenant hadn't been destroyed, I would have learned about him long before I actually did.

My mother jerked me away from the hand print at first, but not because it was sacred. The pictograms all around us were meant to be touched. We walked on them and leaned against them, the curved adobe walls so like a cave. More pictures arced overhead, leading us through chambers that circled farther and farther in, toward the center, where Gria had lain in her bed unable to move.

Then, when Gria finally did move and could walk with us outdoors, she saw me reach out to the hand and told my mother, "Let him." And my mother, who worships The Honorable One as much as she loves her, obeyed.

Now the hand print burns into my back whenever I enter the hut. As I am about to leave, it tells me to stop and think, when all I want to do is look away. But no one can exit this place of sanctity without being drawn to the reminder of our people's first and greatest abomination.

It says, *Don't forget me.*

Now that I'm grown, I must squat a little to lay my palm over the print. And although it is only paint, I feel as though I am making contact with Ata back in the Cold Time. The Honorable One has been to the afterlife, so why shouldn't Ata be there and waiting for me as well? According to scripture that

no one reads any more, that deranged man and his daughters all thought they were Masari. Their delusions drove them to murder their own people.

We are called Yata to remind ourselves of his sin. To remind ourselves that we are not, cannot, can never be Masari.

I know what it is like to be cold. I know what it's like to be starving, cooped up in a hut filled with other starving children because Uncle Ila and his wives and his co-husbands produced so many of them. More than once I'd wanted to strangle my cousins just for a bite of a vole or a rat, or a bird dead from sickness. But I was too small. My hatreds flared up and died down again, and I was too exhausted and too weak to do anything but fantasize. It's a wonder that Evit and I survived.

Then I plunged Ulik's knife into TripStone's thigh, and when I smelled her blood I knew the hunger she felt when she shot him. I knew nothing then about her remorse. I was too young to understand the Covenant or its sacred guilt, but old enough to know that it had been destroyed and the world would never be the same again. All that mattered was carving what I could out of TripStone and feeding my brother and me, doing to her what she had done to our father.

Ata had been hungry during the Dirt People's long winter, just as I was during mine. Nowhere do the scriptures say that he killed his own kind because there were too many of them and not enough else to eat, but what if that were so? The scriptures say that Ata believed his wife had been a Masari who had starved to death, not that she had been prey taken by a Masari hunter.

But what if she *had* died of starvation?

My people's history is rooted in one family's madness. But what if it wasn't madness?



"I heard you moaning."

I whispered, "That was the wind."

"No, Abri. We're inside. There's no wind here. That was you."

I turned away from Ata's hand print and those of his daughters, but my

palm stayed pressed against the wall. The Honorable One's face recalled all the suffering our people had undergone, but that was from the scarring. Behind it lay more curiosity than concern.

I don't remember when I knelt or when my vision took hold. I was climbing the mountain Ata had climbed, dressed in heavy furs and hides and many-layered boots. Snow whipped around me as I clung to icy rock, following him toward the caves.

Gria lowered herself beside me and took my other hand in hers, and a great shock jolted me. Suddenly my body was a bridge tying the Dirt People to Basc's living messenger to the gods.

I was no one. I was nowhere. I didn't know what to do. Except that I did know, and that realization was unbearable.

I gasped, "You shouldn't be on your knees like this."

"You'll help me up."

Her black robes fell in folds around her. I tried to follow the embroidered pictograms to where they ended at the floor and then continued in paintings beneath our feet. I could read it all, but nothing made any sense. Ata's hand and his daughters' below it were the only pictures that meant anything to me, the only images that weren't an abstraction. The other symbols had meanings that combined with each other along dozens of sight lines, interpreted one way in one context and a different way in another.

Ata's blood-colored print remained unambiguous. It was what it was. He reached into me through the painted wall, icing my veins, while Gria's grip on my other hand struggled to warm them.

"He won't let me go."

Gria's voice grew sharp. "Even Ata is no match for me, Abri."

For a moment I believed her, this former general who was now a frail old woman. It made me laugh, and when I laughed I was able to pull myself away from the wall. She enfolded me and I wanted to bury myself in her chest, cradling my cheek against a soft, velvety nap.

She must hold my mother like this. That picture is hard for me to imagine, even though I can still remember when Zai had once been soft.

Gria's breath warmed the top of my head. "Abri, I am The Honorable One only because the gods have grabbed me by the throat. SandTail was their instrument. Destiny was their instrument. Back in the Cold Time, Ata was their instrument, and now he is again. Did you think your succession to my position was going to be easy?"

I groaned, "You don't know what he asks of me."

I wanted her to swoon into a trance, the way she used to when I was a boy. I wanted her to slip through a shimmering portal again and into the afterlife, just so she could track Ata down and pull him aside, the way drunkards collared each other in the tavern. Insistent and belligerent, demanding an explanation. Gria was a messenger of the gods. She had that power.

She said, "You're going to tell me what he wants you to do."

I shook my head. "It's too horrible."

"Yes, and it's also inescapable. So you'd better talk to me while you still can."

The finality in her voice shook me. I clutched at her robes and whispered, "You're going to die."

"Of course I'm going to die, Abri, maybe not today but soon enough. You know I haven't been well. To be honest, I'm surprised I've lasted this long, but seeing you like this tells me why I have. The gods aren't as powerless as we thought they were, yes?"

You can't leave now. Not you, too. I almost said it aloud.

I was a little boy again, standing outside Ila's door, watching Teza carry Evit inside the big hut when the weather was still warm as it is now. My mother knelt before me, still a little plump and having never seen battle. She pressed her shorn braid into my hand, curling my fingers around her thick black hair and saying goodbye to me with tears in her eyes. *I have to go on a trip, and I'm going to miss you.*

And then she abandoned us.

I huddled in Gria's embrace. It didn't matter that my daughter Tezani had just made me a grandfather for the second time. I was a lost child again, in the days when we had no war in the far woods. No Preservers hunted down

Masari. No Parity existed anywhere. I had yet to touch a gun for the first time. Everyone around me was blissfully ignorant of what was to become of us all.

My father was dead, my mother had gone away, and every time Evit looked up at me I wanted to cry. We lived in a home teeming with strangers even though they were family. Then the Masari were slaughtered, the Covenant fell, and Zai returned to reclaim us. And for the first time, I was terrified of my own mother, more than I had ever been terrified of Ata.

But not as much as I was terrified of losing Gria, who had become my mother in spirit. She had been to the afterlife and back so many times that part of me never thought she would some day step into it for good.

Her swollen fingers combed through my hair. "We have work to do, Abri. Help me up."



Gria leaned against me as we circled in toward the sanctuary. Before the battle for Destiny Farm, she had been tall and straight-backed, and Zai had become muscled like her. Now my teacher hunched over, hobbling. I couldn't remember when she had gotten so small. The robes hid her thinness, and even without them she had always looked more imposing than she did now. "Does my mother know?"

"The state of my health? Zai always knew. You've seen only part of how much she takes care of me." She gripped my waist. "And Zai knows only part of how much I've told you."

I had to smile. "I get my protectiveness from her."

"Yours is the protectiveness of a disciple, Abri. Hers is more complex."

"I know."

She laughed. "No, you don't."

We entered the central chamber. I had visited here countless times before, but now I hesitated at the threshold. "All those times Evit and I were told to wait outside, we pressed our ears against the door, trying to hear what our mother was doing with you."

"Of course you did. What did you hear?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

"The sanctuary receives sound, not the reverse. One of you boys kept shuffling your feet." Her crow's feet crinkled as she looked at me. "I'd always thought it was Evit."

I tried to will the heat away from my face. "I'm the protective one, remember?"

"He is, too, in his own way. He's trying to catch up to you."

"He's lucky to lag behind." Against my better judgment, my hands balled into fists. All of my training in self-control fell away when I was here, naked before my gods one moment and before my demons the next. No matter how much armor I wore, this place stripped it away.

I helped Gria into her chair and watched her lean against the table. "I delivered your formulas to Evit." Up until now, she had shared her contraceptive knowledge orally, in whispers and in exile, under pain of death. Now I feared it would draw only the pain of ridicule. I added, "I told him to safeguard them."

"There's no reason to destroy them now," she answered. "They no longer pose a threat."

"And I brought something back." I sat opposite her and pulled the cracked leather pouch from my vest. "Evit purchased it from Yucof, whom I executed two days ago."

Confusion flashed across her face as she removed the parchment. "Yucof was an ally."

"Yes, he was."

"Without his help, you and I would probably be dead."

I whispered, "That's true."

My arms and legs had turned to lead, so I just waited and watched as Gria unfolded the old sheets. Her breathing quickened as she read. In a moment I realized it wasn't from shock. Somehow I was able to reach over and pry the pages from her fingers as her nostrils flared. If any residue from Evit's lab remained on her formula for Destiny, she could smell it.

Her voice became sultry. "I remember when I wrote that."

"You wrote it to save our lives," I said, quickly. "You didn't know it would be used like this."

"Give me a moment, Abri, and don't turn away."

She licked bruised lips that curled into a little smile as her eyes took on a faraway look. Sweat beaded on her forehead. She blinked drops away as others rolled down her cheeks, diverted into the channels her purpled veins made.

I couldn't tell how many demons inside her had been roused from sleep, or whether they had ever slept at all. Watching Gria do battle with her cravings, I understood Zai's hatred of Destiny and the reason for our laws against its adherents. The fusing of joy and suffering in The Honorable One's face was terrible to watch.

She looked at me in a way that made me squirm and said, "Abri, bring me the Farm box."

I was afraid to stand, afraid that she would look between my legs. I wanted to wear her vestments if only for their power of concealment, before I realized that they couldn't conceal scent. Not hers, and not mine.

She croaked with the tension of restraint. "It's all right, Abri. You begin to understand our opponent."

She could have been referring to the drug, or to Evit. She could have been referring to our own people, or to ourselves. I couldn't separate them. I stood and she did look. I forced my attention to the stone box, begging its contents to kill my arousal.

All I could think about were my wives and how happy I could make them at that moment. I had never imbibed Destiny, but it still reached into my pants and stroked me, channeled through a broken saint. Nothing could soften me, not the thought of Hanza's splattered brains, or the dying lake, or the metallic air and the mountains turning from green to gray.

Not even the container I lifted, with its hacked-off, maggot-ridden slab of Destiny Farm dead. If anything, that pitiful image hardened me more. I was a beast alive with nothing but want and the thrill of fulfilling it, over and over and over.

I twitched helplessly, my shame dribbling down my leg. But then I could walk again. Once again the vessel felt ridiculously light in my arms, as though the Farm had never been anything but a bad dream.

One glance back at Gria and I remembered how real it was.

"Do not feel so bad, Abri." Her voice was still thick. "When I first came to power in this room, I anointed myself with vomit." She pointed to my belt. "Remove Ulik's knife and break the seal."

I froze above my chair, suddenly unmindful of my stained pants. "After twenty-three years?"

"No," she said. "After eight."

Her face glistened with fresh perspiration that I wanted to wipe away, but I was afraid to touch her. Instead I took my father's bone knife in my hands. For the first time I noticed the layers of resin around the lid. Its seal had been cracked more than once.

The thought of what I might be setting free chilled my bones. At least my erection was gone. I bit down a nervous laugh.

Cutting through the seal had the opposite effect on Gria, who did not tell me to look at her, this time. I listened to her heavy breathing and sliced the lid free, and only my extensive training kept my hold steady.

She moaned, "Open it."

I lifted the stone cover and stared at more parchment and a florid penmanship I didn't recognize.

"Read it."

I don't remember when I dropped into my chair, or when I realized the letter was SandTail's. I knew only that I sat in the holiest place in the world, surrounded by the voices of my ancestors, and feeling the brunt of The Honorable One's hunger as I read the sadistic proclamations of the Masari who had...

Who had been a tool of the gods, according to his victim sitting at the other end of the table.

Had I the chance again I would stuff you with Destiny just as I had before. Your body would be against the Warehouse blocks, my gun would be between your legs, and I

would pull the trigger. I tell you this not out of malice but because of my love of Promontory, whose citizens I would do anything to protect.

That sentimentality is my greatest flaw because I believed my people would endure. Does it surprise you to learn that we share the same fantasy of Masari survival?

From across the table a voice filled with longing said, "He knew."

I choked, "Gria—"

"It's all right, Abri." She pointed to the other sheets. "Put my formula for Destiny back in its pouch and seal it up in there with him."

As I staggered past Erta's bones and retrieved the resin pot next to the hearth, she said, "I waited until Zai was off at a summit. I sent a messenger to fetch Piri. Together we brought the Destiny Farm flesh to the outskirts of Liberty Farm and buried it."

I stared into the flames and watched brown paste liquefy. "It must have been awful."

"Our masks didn't block everything, but they kept us from swallowing flies. Cleaning the stone afterward took days." Her sigh rattled behind me. "If it were up to Zai, both SandTail's letter and the formula I wrote would be destroyed."

"My mother is right."

"No, Abri. Your mother is afraid. The gods are perverse, but they are not liars. Erasing our own history only makes us suffer more." She waited for me to gather the box and papers from the table. "That is why you are going to tell me what Ata has told you."

Pungent sap drove away the odors of sex and I could breathe freely again. I heard Gria's relief as I tucked our terrible truths into the stone and began the careful work of entombing them. Concentrating on my task distracted me from the ugliness I spewed out—that Yata had to die in order to live. That our most vilified ancestor had been horrifically sane.

That I had been called upon to continue his blood-drenched mission.

"I'm already doing what Ata did." Resin spattered my hands, making them burn. "I'm executing criminals and bringing them to Evit, not for research but because HeadWind needs Yata to survive. I'm killing Yata to feed

Masari! But that's only the beginning, Gria. Crossroads has more people in need than one brain-damaged woman. How do I decide who lives and who dies? And what's worse—" A laugh burbled up. "What's worse is, the Masari are jumping at the chance to have their children live free of dependence. They're accelerating their own destruction because right now we are already out-competing them for everything. And they're the only force that keeps us in check and stops us from destroying the land."

For a long time only the flames crackled. Bits of ash rose through the flue as the first line of resin hardened. I poured a second line, and then a third. More than once I was ready to lift the melting pot and tip its contents down my throat, but in the end I settled for the blisters on my fingers and wrists.

I was a numb lump staring into the hearth when wool *whooshed* onto my shoulders.

I groaned, "No."

"You don't have a choice. Get used to it now."

Gria turned away from me, leaning on her cane. Her plain nightdress stuck to her, lines of fresh seepage criss-crossing as they soaked into the weave. Droplets coursed down her legs and trailed along the floor. Light streamed from the back of her head.

I shut my eyes and whispered, "Are you bleeding?"

"A little."

I forced myself to look again. The light had vanished, her hemorrhaging was gone, and only bits of her were spotted with red, where old lacerations had reopened. I glanced at the cloth between her legs and looked away.

I said, "I'm no saint."

"Not yet. And CatBird never expected to become a god, but you have made her one."

She settled into her chair as I brought the newly-sealed Farm box back to the table. She eased her palm against the cooling stone. I wanted to cover her bare, ravaged skin with the vestments she had given me, but their friction would only make her bleed more.

"SandTail is waiting for me at the portal." Her fingers caressed granite. "Not to brutalize me. We are done with that. We understand each other's history, which is easier to do when you have passed beyond the world."

I squinted at her. "You're seeing him now."

The Honorable One nodded. "The portal hasn't come to me for many years, Abri, but it is here in this room. It's been with me ever since I began praying to the gods to let me die in your mother's arms."

"I don't see it."

"You have your own visions to endure." Her gaze shifted to a place beyond my shoulder. "SandTail is out of pain. I see nothing but patience in him."

I didn't dare turn around. "And the fate of his people?"

Gria fixed me with a sudden stare that said, *That's up to you.*

For a moment I thought she had spoken aloud. Then I wasn't sure whether she'd looked at me at all. Her nib scratched on parchment that I didn't recall her gathering. "That ink didn't just appear on the table."

"No, of course not." Her script flowed in Yata, followed by its translation into Masari. Her voice turned clipped and businesslike. "My body is to remain in Basc. I am willing it over to Piri for study. She will work in Evit's former laboratory, assisted by Ghost." Gria's nib tilted toward the pictograms. "You will live in this hut."

Everything was happening too quickly. I blurted, "How can I be The Honorable One if I've been commanded to murder my worshipers?"

"I can't answer that question. I have too many of my own." A wry smile spread across her bowed head. "The gods love a good argument. I daresay we will both keep them busy."

"I'm nothing, Gria."

She nodded. "So I have always been. Don't you dare show them blind obedience, or I will strike you down."

I didn't know if she was trying to be funny or not.

She pushed more parchment toward me. "Record your visions or find someone to tell them to. Let Ata's story be known as you have heard it, even if every other voice says otherwise."

I reached for my pen. "That makes me a heretic."

Her smile broadened. "There are no heretics in a dead religion."

I tried to face the blank sheets down. Finally I gave up and watched my second mother scribble in two languages across page after page, leaving explicit instructions for her own Remembrance.

CHAPTER 23

TelZodo

Son, I need your help.

I laid my thumb against neat lettering. Would Ghost ever be that solicitous with me? BrushBurn wrote to me the way he wrote to my mother, sparing none of his feelings.

He could have been my actual father under different circumstances. Piri and I were his foster family on the other side of the world, now that he had lost everyone else.

I read further and realized how much more had been taken away.

I have already written to Bless about my position here, but I cannot put her in political jeopardy by requesting her help directly. Asking her for asylum is as far as I can go.

I cannot write to Abri at all. Even if he is Basc's spiritual leader now, Zai still leads the military and holds the power of law. She would have me killed if she knew I was setting foot inside Basc, but my best chance of escape is on the Messenger.

BrushBurn had lost more than just his standing as Promontory's representative to Rudder. Being blocked from the summits would not have forced him to leave his homeland. Neither would being a second-class citizen, now that Promontory possessed a clear Yata majority. Sedes, BrushBurn's replacement, was in fact sympathetic to Masari, which explained how this letter could have reached me at all.

He just wasn't sympathetic to BrushBurn's theories. Nobody there was. Neither was Bless, but she kept Crossroads' borders open, including to dissidents.

BrushBurn's news about the latest purges in the Warehouse made me groan aloud. He took excruciating care to inform me about every book burned and literal tons of history erased. That destruction made the atrocities conducted during the frontier wars one-sided. Now, Yata forgiveness of Masari aggressors shone as testament to one people's superior compassion.

The Yata cited that compassion as the reason for their current control of land and industry after generations of injustice.

TelZodo, do you remember how afraid you were to even step into the Warehouse at first? You knew only about the Farm Yata whose bodies were smoked there, before it became a library. I've witnessed both, and now I have seen and smelled both, combined. Not only have those idiots torched their past, they've incinerated the skins of their ancestors by burning the book bindings. If they wanted to preserve only Masari atrocities, wouldn't you think the leathers would be among their most compelling evidence?

I'm saving what I can. I'm hiding what I can. There are still a few of us here who believe in preserving the truth, even those people who reject my predictions. We've been able to rescue the diaries SandTail's ancestors kept, and others from the time of the frontier wars. The drawings made by Masari children abducted and raped by the Skedge Yata are buried deep in the canyon, because I still know how to get to places no one thinks to look.

We couldn't save FlitNettle's diaries. I'm sorry, son. I know how important they were to you.

"She was your kin, BrushBurn." I tried to touch him through the parchment. I mourned the loss of Flit's words, but I had never met her. My grief couldn't come close to his.

Needless to say, the Farm ledgers are being fully restored for the museum.

BrushBurn's letter became terse on this matter. After all that he had shared with my mother and me, I doubt he was afraid of offending us. More likely he was keeping his rage in check. The Destiny Farm Museum prided itself on its objectivity in consulting a genuine member of the original farming family.

That hideous legacy was being painstakingly preserved, while everything else on the other side of the balance was being summarily wiped out.

But even that abuse of BrushBurn's knowledge and experience wouldn't have been enough to drive him out of Promontory.

Son, I need safe passage for my cargo. I am arranging to travel with a trade shipment and have made sure that I am overlooked at the checkpoints on Skedge and on the Cliff. My Yata-dependence is the only issue in those places and I have recently broken my fast, so I am not a danger to anyone. Basic is different.

Do what you can. I will wait to hear from you before I make my final plans. Gods willing, I will see you and your family again soon.



I didn't have the heart to tell him how much time my parents spent in Basc these days. At least my father came home from time to time, holding sway as patriarch of the Grange and performing his own experiments in his Masari-sized lab. My mother now lived and worked in Evit's former laboratory, returning to Crossroads for Chamber meetings. Most times I saw her only when she entered and left the Rotunda.

But the dark circles under her eyes were fading and she tapped on my shoulder that she was sleeping well again. She waved away my complaints that Evit's Destiny lab had driven her from her home

I can continue my work. That is what's important. She reached up and took my face in her hands. Fingers drummed lightly on my cheek. *Bless has accommodated me by making me ambassador to Basc, especially now that Destiny has caused a diplomatic rift. Zai and I have agreed that any harvesting on our side of Resurrection Forest is considered poaching even if done by Masari, and we will deal severely with violators.*

I was momentarily confused. "Our side of the forest is under Bless's jurisdiction, not Zai's."

The fingers paused. *I meant Basc's side of the forest.*

I watched my mother continue around the dome to her meeting, and wondered how soon she would petition Zai for Basc citizenship.

As interest in Destiny revived, so too did interest in the Rotunda's books. Platforms throughout the dome filled with Yata, most of them visitors from across the valley. SpiderLark had an audience he could sing to, but they were focused more on the ancient narratives than on his music.

We stood near the oculus and gazed down at noisy groups. Giant tomes littered the floor with up to a half-dozen people clustered around each, flipping pages back and forth.

He growled, "They're not even reading."

"Wait a moment. You'll see." I pointed to several heads bent over a passage. "Over there. That group found one." If we listened hard enough, we could isolate their gasped commentaries from the din.

"Is that all they're interested in? The sex?" SpiderLark smirked, his red beard twitching. "Obviously the context of those orgies is completely lost on them. I would be bored silly if all I had to read about was fucking."

I shook my head. "That's no ordinary fucking."

He gave me a pitying look. "TelZodo, I've read some of your 'literature.' You are a very generous people. Your Covenant was admirable, if a bit bizarre. But its literary output is tripe. Girl meets boy, girl and boy meet mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers." He gestured above the railing with false melodrama. "Girl and boy take Destiny and screw. Girl screws other boys, boy screws other girls, lots of babies ensue. The Masari get hungry, a sacred hunt is held, many dearly beloveds bless the hunters and get shot. New gods are born! The survivors go off to the Soala and banish their demons long enough to sit before their relatives' killers and narrative *every single insipid detail* they can remember about the deceased. And with rare exception, it's all the same, no matter how many generations back you go." He leaned over the railing and pursed his lips. "Maybe the sex *is* the only part worth reading."

I waited to see if HigherBrook's spirit would hurl a lantern at us. "At least it's authentic," I argued. "Not staged."

"A hangnail is authentic, TelZodo. You don't see me treasuring mine." SpiderLark gave me a sideways glance and smiled a little. "You agree with me."

"I was born after the Covenant fell. I admit I don't understand that much of it."

Little, excited shouts rose throughout the dome as each Yata group found its book's most titillating pages. Backs bent for several breathless minutes and then straightened for more flipping. From up high they looked like bronze-colored petals closing and opening again.

I said, "You're telling me *your* life story."

"Yes," he answered, "but you're paying me for it."

I couldn't blame the people below us for their selective interests. As long as they lived in Basc, reading these first-person accounts of Destiny-laced

copulation was as close as most would come to the experience. "I wonder how many risk trying the real thing before they go back home."

"Better watch out," SpiderLark murmured. "If it's as good as advertised, they'll be moving here and taking up all those cottages you've reserved for us Rudder rejects."

"Basc wouldn't risk losing its labor force like that, not after fighting so hard to establish one."

He surveyed the concentric circles of stacks. "Basc would be *expanding* its labor force. How old did you say you were when you reached adulthood? Nine?" He shrugged. "And you're only half-Yata. Not even purebred."

"Zai hates Destiny as much as I do, SpiderLark. I seriously doubt she'd use Basc's ban of it as a tool for conquest."

"Then tell me why you're gripping the railing."

I looked down at knuckles topped with frizz. My hands ached when I forced them open.



Liberty Farm celebrated its Lacuna first. Crossroads' citizens lay down their arms, changed from their hunting clothes into coveralls, and boarded transports in the middle of the night for the trip across the meadow. I listened to drizzle pelting oiled canvas as we wheeled along the paved road and mentally prepared myself to spend several days covered in mud.

The thought of SpiderLark working hard in the muck made it all worthwhile.

He sat opposite me, next to Smoke, who held his full attention. She had bound her hair up for the harvest, and all I wanted to do was reach into that thick black mass and free it from its clips.

Why did I even want her? I bit down jealousy that had no right to exist. She and the singer weren't lovers, and I could tell just by looking at them that they weren't about to start.

They were snobs, which was worse, carrying on a debate about Ozal's "Ballad of the Trees." What they quoted made the Rotunda's "tripe" sound superb. I couldn't decide which was more dense, the poem or its cultural

allusions, which I was sure only someone from the central valley would know. Soon their derivations became so convoluted that I wondered whether they were still speaking Yata.

Beside me, my father muttered, "No wonder I had to go to prison to learn the language."

Smoke broke from her discourse long enough to say, "I learned the ballad in prison. It retains a completely different meaning there."

Bless turned away from her conversation with the runner. "It always read to me like a justification for slavery."

"It was, on the Cliff," SpiderLark said. "We learned it strictly as a nature poem in Rudder."

Smoke snorted. "You did not."

"Don't tell me what I didn't learn."

"My mother learned it as a political treatise in Rudder. What school did *you* go to?"

I turned to my father. "Wasn't this the tapestry hanging all over Shabra's compound?"

The others all said, "Yes."

My father's scowl had less to do with their debate than with the thought of Evit having free reign around the Grange. Somebody had to watch over FlyAway and HeadWind. Everyone who could work the harvest rode the transports. My ex co-husband didn't dare return to his village, any more than my mother would dare returning home. They were effectively stranded on each other's land.

I would feel as sore as my father looked if I thought about that too much. I watched Smoke instead as she gestured in lantern light, which made her pale skin look warmer. It even made her hair glow a bit, otherwise she'd be as black and white as one of her charcoal sketches. Sometimes I watched her long enough to be startled by color when I finally looked away.

The lack of fur is a recessive trait, my father drummed on my arm. *Like your mother's light-colored hair.*

Maybe my attraction to her was recessive, too. Had my father noticed that as one of my own traits, or was he just giving me a straightforward biology lesson? I tapped back, *You can't tell me that her skin color is common.*

Sure, I can. It's typical Masari pigmentation. It just looks lighter without the pelt, and lighter still next to the Yata hair.

Across from us, Smoke shifted her long legs and leaned in closer to SpiderLark, jabbing her palm with a finger to emphasize a point of interpretation. SpiderLark leaned back against the transport wall and yawned.

The only debates I'd shared with Smoke concerned the predator hybrids, about whom she cared as much as I did. I still hadn't told my father about the ones I'd had to shoot, and I wasn't going to raise the topic at a time when this entire valley abandoned the hunt for as long as it took us to get our vegetables out of the ground.

Bless called back, "We've crossed the border."

My thoughts snapped away from Smoke and toward Abri. I wouldn't have to worry about finding him in the mob filling Liberty Farm. Even dwarfed by Masari, he would stand out in his killer's tattoo and mystic's robes, giving his invocation on a raised platform.

I'd have to get him alone and see if BrushBurn had any chance of surviving passage through Basc.

My last trip here had been to attend Gria's funeral and Abri's first official act as The Honorable One. Even more transports had traveled from Crossroads then, because all the children came with us. We'd spent days saying goodbye.

Evit had left his lab during that ceremony, but he had stayed on the Grange. My family found him in the farm house. The meals he prepared could have fed half of Crossroads on our return. He'd been jittery, waiting with red-rimmed eyes for us to pass judgment and wondering if we considered his entry into the house a form of trespass, now that he had betrayed us.

He couldn't go to Basc, not even to grieve with his own family for a woman who had become his kin. I saw a man uprooted, and for the first time my father waited to see what I would do instead of the reverse. I had shared a bed with Evit, and among my own kin I had known him the best. Or so I believed.

Back then I had gestured to him to sit at the table, to eat some of the food he so generously prepared, and I didn't say a word to him all through the meal. Instead I watched him pick listlessly at his good cooking and wished I could hug him without feeling like a traitor to my bloodline.

Making my peace with Bless was easier because her hand had been forced. But the informality we once shared with each other was gone. She was my Governor, and as Governor she had hurt my family.

At least I could still talk to the snobs.

And I had to talk to Abri, once I could get him away from his duties, out of his vestments, and as far out of Zai's earshot as I could.

CHAPTER 24

Bless

"Commander."

Zai gave me a little bow. "Governor."

When had Abri's brown eyes darkened? They looked blacker than his mother's. "Honorable One."

My brother-in-law said, "Welcome back to Basc, Governor."

Soon we would all stink together. We would have dispensed with our formalities if this were any other Lacuna, but this was the first harvest since Gria's death. Her body lay preserved in pieces not far away and only the gods and maybe Abri knew where her spirit resided. I could have been bound up as tight as a stick and Zai could have been in a pressed uniform instead of us both sporting coveralls. It wouldn't have made any difference.

Abri wore his work clothes beneath his vestments. The robes that had made Gria look ethereal made him look like a terrifying force of nature, even without the shadows our lanterns threw. Compared to Masari he was short, but my brother-in-law towered over most Yata. His vestments only made him look taller and broader, adding rather than concealing muscle.

He turned beneath the drizzle and led me past my parked transport, through Liberty Farm's wooden gate. We advanced on a fallow field, where a platform had been assembled for his invocation and for Zai's call to begin work. In several days I would give my own, short speech at the Grange, at our first Lacuna since my father's death.

Abri had sent HigherBrook into the afterlife with love and respect, but it still hurt. I wished I were taller.

Zai walked behind me. I curled back my lips and breathed the situation into my glands. Humidity made the air more pungent. Waves of tension eddied from them both, more than a simple masking of grief. The emotions around me were crisp and raw and included my own. They were hard to untangle from each other.

Abri glanced to the side, to where Tel and Ghost reunited with Piri. Surprise flashed across Tel's features for a moment when he looked back. I don't know why. I couldn't see Abri's face, but something passed between those men.

Better to concentrate on the pictograms spread across the broad shoulders in front of me and figure it all out later. I couldn't ask anyone anything now, and the embroidered Dirt People symbols were not informative, either. They smelled only of wet wool.

My father had looked to those pictograms for guidance whenever he had come to Basc, but I gleaned nothing from them. Had our ancestors given up on us, or was I just being obtuse?

Not obtuse. Abri, Zai, and I had all lost people close to us in a little more than a season's time. We were in pain.

And now we all had to be happy. The Lacuna was our triumph of growth over decay, life over death, peace over war. We walked straight-backed and proud to our predawn ceremony as our peoples massed behind us. Soon they were close enough to drown out the cock crow. No matter what happened or how we felt, we would work together to keep this valley fed.

To the Honorable Governor Bless. I write this letter to you as an official request for protection in Crossroads.

BrushBurn's letter, with penmanship more cramped than ever, lay in my bottom desk drawer at home. He had signed his name this time, dispensing with the little cartoon of the rounded square. Whatever trouble was happening in Promontory, his letter contained only enough information to support his petition.

It would become a public document. The less said in those, the better.

Of course I would grant his request. For once I was thankful that my decision had already been made for me. My father had opened Crossroads' borders and I wasn't about to change that policy.

I marched in mud behind a man who agreed with BrushBurn's theories and in front of a woman who wanted my friend dead. Whichever way BrushBurn arrived in Crossroads, I would wait until then to file his request with the Chamber. I trusted the loyalty of my Yata legislators, but I wanted no hint of BrushBurn's travels getting back to Zai.



Psalm's presence distracted me from my problems. My younger brother eased up beside me in the crowd and slicked his wet hair down with a meaty hand. He smiled as his co-husband climbed between hanging lamps under tarp onstage to begin the invocation.

I murmured, "You've gained weight."

"Yes, and you've lost it." Psalm patted his stomach. "I love Abri, but I eat better with him out of the house."

"You get all the attention now."

His smile broadened. "Wait until the winter, Bless, and you'll see how much more attention I'm getting."

That meant more babies were on the way. "Are you competing with Father? Or are you just making up for me?"

"Just being a good citizen."

A good citizen with impressive family ties and no leadership responsibilities except for his household. I bit down a momentary surge of envy. It wasn't hard to do, he looked half drowned.

Psalm's wives, children, and grandchildren also stood close to the stage, their arms around each other. Abri, their absentee patriarch, seemed not to notice. Or was my brother-in-law purposely ignoring them, detaching himself from a past life?

The black robes before us shifted and everyone quieted until we heard only the roosters and the rain. Abri wore an odd little smile directed at no one, and I wondered if he had simply detached himself from everything.

CHAPTER 25

Abri

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

Twenty-one years ago I ran and fetched a cart for my mother to stand on at our first Lacuna, so that she could see over the heads of all the Masari. Evit and I had joined her on the flatbed, and my brother had stepped before Zai's shaking knees so that no one could see how nervous she was.

Her vulnerability was more awful than Gria's had ever been. My teacher had honored her needs and her weaknesses, while my mother battled every day to be strong. She still does.

As we preserve the Masari, so do the Masari preserve us.

Now Zai waited for me to address the gods, but they had called upon me first in a show of divine impatience. Gria's gentle laughter fell with the rain. My father stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders, the way he did when I was little and he was still alive.

I thought at him, *My mother needs you more right now.*

I am with her, too, Abri. I am always with her.

Does she know?

His presence faded, and I didn't know what to think. I was still growing into my robes. Ghost would call the specters products of my imagination. So would Gria, who even now whispered in the center of my head that she wasn't real.

The gods are more than perverse. They possess a bizarre sense of humor. Why else would they have created me with prayers in one hand and my gun in the other? Ata's people hadn't followed him. They'd fled from him.

Nobody was fleeing from me yet. I was Gria's chosen successor and Basc had loved her. Maybe they thought her robes had tamed me, that I was harmless because I left my weapons behind on this day.

I couldn't see detail beyond the front of the crowd, but even in the wet and dark I could tell how far outnumbered the Masari were. Did nobody notice that more and more of them kept disappearing?

I don't remember what I said, only what I wanted to say and couldn't. That dictation would have to wait until I could meet with TelZodo and let my visions pour out of me, into his uncanny memory and out onto parchment. Even now he studied me in the low light and looked perplexed, enough to make me wonder if the gods had forewarned him of my need.

Bless scrutinized me with a worried look while Psalm grinned beside her. My wives were fully his now, why shouldn't he grin? My new standing made no difference. I had slept alone long before I moved into the Dirt People sanctuary. My family had also disappeared before my eyes, but they remained in plain sight and incomprehensibly happy for me.

I stepped to the side for my mother's brief welcome before our labors began. The drizzle turned into mist, the sky began to lighten, and we all grabbed baskets to fill. I slipped my robes from my shoulders and plunged into the harvest.



"I request an audience with The Honorable One."

I nodded at TelZodo's earnest face. "I know."

I was on my knees and filthy, pulling turnips out of the ground. They came free of the mud with a sucking sound that repeated as I lifted my legs and crawled down the row. Straw mulch climbed inside my clothes and stuck to my skin. I wore more of it than the soil did.

TelZodo's long limbs squished beside mine. I didn't envy him his matted fur.

I added, "I was expecting you."

He gave me that confused look again and whispered, "I can't talk here."

"Of course not. We'll go to the sanctuary." I grasped bedraggled greens and hauled. "Prepare to do a lot of writing."

He looked up from the thudding in his basket. "I don't dare write what we're going to talk about."

Work songs sailed through the air. Yata and Masari slogged around us, ferrying filled baskets in one direction and distributing empties in the other. TelZodo's face pinched as he exchanged his load, his sweat ripening.

I said, "I was referring to scripture."

His shoulders relaxed and he shook off a nervous laugh. "I wasn't."

"News about my brother, then?"

"No."

The growl in his voice told me that he still hadn't reconciled with Evit.

Low clouds prepared to spill again, hiding the ridges and softening everything. The harvest plopped around us. The mud made everyone work harder but in good humor, laughing at the messes we had become. Periodically I heard a loud slap of bodies hitting the ground and sliding, high-pitched glee followed by half-hearted reprimands. Even TelZodo smiled at it.

He freed a bulbous root, grunting. "You gave a good invocation."

"Really? I don't remember it at all. You'll have to tell it to me some time."

I stopped to scratch my chest, which only moved bits of straw around and worsened the itch. It was better than the numbness I'd felt at Gria's Remembrance. I recalled everything about that invocation, but it was like recalling a dream. Nothing remained solid.

Gria had spent her last days with my mother while I moved into the sanctuary. I couldn't sleep on straw that still carried my teacher's scent, but I didn't want to change it out. Even from deep inside I heard the hut's outer door open and listened to Zai's guard rushing through the chambers. I was in my robes by the time he reached me, his face glistening with tears.

Gria's spirit floated to me, looking as she had when I was a boy. She linked her arm with mine and laughed into my ear as I followed the guard. She was still laughing as I stood before the bed she shared with my mother, as though she'd never had anything to do with the stiffened husk resting in Zai's arms.

My mother, dry-eyed, gave me a look of such emptiness that for a moment I thought she had turned immaterial, too.

Now Zai worked in the cannery. I pictured her washing all these turnips clean and dipping them in warm wax, surrounded by sweetness and bubbling preserves. She should be out in this muck instead, distracted by the elements. The dirtier we all got, the more purified our ridiculousness made us.

For a moment nothing mattered. Not people, not land. Not Psalm plowing the mates I'd lost. Not Evit camped on the Grange, who had more followers than I did. I could step outside the world and chortle with my helpless gods.

TelZodo paused in mid-pull. "What?"

The turnip dangled from my hand. I must have been holding it suspended in mid-air.

I dropped it into the basket. "The afterlife is a funny place."

Then the world snapped together again. The mud grew cold, the straw pricked my skin, and I quickened my pace to keep from shivering in the mist.

CHAPTER 26

TelZodo

I had never stepped inside The Honorable One's hut when I lived in Basc. Why approach Gria with my problems when I could fuck them away in the Meethouse or scream them out in the Soala? My problem had been biological, not spiritual.

That's what I told myself.

Now the new Honorable One and I scrubbed the filth from each other in a tub of heated well water. Our coveralls dried by the hearth. We had tracked mud from chamber to chamber as we circled in toward the sanctuary, and it occurred to me that we had become dirt people for real. I glanced over the lip of the tub, toward brown streaks on the floor. "Isn't this a desecration?"

"No," Abri said. "This is my home."

I couldn't read the stippled bones hanging all around us or the drawings crowded around them, strange shapes with only a few recognizable symbols. "Not my choice of décor."

He laughed. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not being afraid of me."

I scraped around his shoulder blades. "You don't hunt me down and I'm not a religious man. Why should I be afraid of you?"

He sighed above steam. "I've spilled a lot of blood, TelZodo, and I'm going to have to spill more. I thought the gods had sent you to me so that I could tell you about Ata. But that's not the reason you sought me out, is it?"

"No. I don't know who Ata is."

He stretched further, resting his chin on the metal. I frowned at the mole above his left buttock. Evit had one just like it. I covered it with my thumb before I knew what I was doing.

Abri whispered, "I miss him, too. I forgot where he was and kept looking for him in the fields today." He cleared his throat. "Turn around and tell me why you're here."

I passed the scraper forward and swiveled, careful of splashes. "Are you sure that sound doesn't travel out of this room?"

"Yes."

I still lowered my voice. "I need to get BrushBurn to Crossroads safely, past the Basc checkpoint."

The blade hesitated by my spine. "That means Promontory is lost, then."

"Yes, if you're a Masari."

I dunked my head into the water, but my eyes still stung. I grieved for a city that once would have killed me, but it was my city. I was born there. Worse, I'd had to murder children to return to it. The Honorable One wasn't the only man wearing blood guilt.

I held my breath as Abri finger-combed mud from my back. A muffled sound reached me as his scraper hit the floor.

He eased me upright, out of the water. "Lean on me." His arms draped about my waist. "Relax."

I rasped, "Can you help him?"

"Yes. I'll get BrushBurn safe passage. But you must help me, now."

His body smelled like Evit's, only sharper. I said, "Name your price."

He talked until the bath water grew cold. We emptied buckets outside and heated more, and I listened through the night while our countrymen slept in the fields.

I couldn't sleep if I wanted to. The more Abri told me his visions, the more I saw him working his way through Basc, slitting throat after throat in the service of preserving Masari. It was almost enough to make me believe in the gods. How else could so many people of my generation have turned out so twisted?

The Covenant bones all around us were benign in comparison. Skilled artisans had taken those ghoulish bits of anatomy and made them beautiful and mysterious. Now the relics wavered in light reflected off the water, trying to look spooky, but they couldn't come close to the man behind me in the tub.

Those bright inks and polished whiteness were far removed from the bodies my father dissected in Crossroads and ones my mother now dissected in Basc. From what Abri was saying, my parents' work was just as misguided as Evit's. Masari dependence on Yata was a blessing rather than a curse. His visions turned a devastating weakness into a sacrament. Feed enough hungry Masari and you could save the world.

His hands gestured before my chest, as though shaping the air would convert me. I let myself go limp against him as I listened, otherwise I would have gripped the sides of the tub. Closing my eyes let me hear the relief in his soft, awestruck voice, and for a moment I thought he only needed somebody to talk to.

"Abri," I said, when he had finished, "If this is what you believe, if this is what your gods or your demons or both are telling you, then why are you still hunting Masari down in the far woods?"

He sagged against iron. "I took a sacred oath."

"You're making no sense at all."

"Not to you." His voice grew so deep, its overtones sounded Masari. "I am a tool of the gods, TelZodo, but I am also a tool of Basc. My people don't see what I see, but they trust me to protect them as a Preserver. I must be their warrior now, otherwise I will never be able to guide them later."

"To do what? Embrace their own deaths?"

"We once did."

"You had no choice!" The water was cold again. My fur stiffened from goose bumps. "Basc couldn't support itself. Your people didn't have the skills they needed, so they had to look to Crossroads. You traded bodies for tithes. You were alive then, Abri. You know that history better than I do!"

"I know we can't go back to what we were." He sounded dreamy again. "We've got to find another way. I envy you your sterility, TelZodo."

I jammed my elbow back and into his ribs so hard his head flopped past my arm.

"I don't care if you can kill me with your bare hands." Small waves splattered against the floor. I grabbed Abri's hair as he struggled for breath. "You will not insult me like that ever again. I didn't go through years of suffering for you to covet it."

He tried to shake his head, wincing. "I meant no disrespect."

"You just sliced open a festering wound in me. If we're to work together, you'll kindly leave me out of your meditations."

"Understood."

I let go and stepped shivering out of the tub. If this was what it was like to be naked before the gods, I wasn't impressed. The blanket I plucked off his bed fell barely past my knees as I wrapped myself. "Still thankful that I'm not afraid of you?"

"Yes, actually." Coming from behind, he sounded meek. "And you're right," he added. "I could have killed you with my bare hands."

That didn't impress me, either.

CHAPTER 27

Evit

FlyAway tried to peer around a corner. "Where are we going?"

"No place in particular." My answer vanished into narrow cobblestone channels as we walked between tightly-clustered houses. Yellow light shone from only a few windows. Behind them rested the old and the sick, children too little to help at Liberty Farm's Lacuna, and the Masari who watched over them. The lanterns made little dots of warmth on a gloomy day.

Other than the broken rhythm of our boots and our own breaths, we hiked in a bubble of silence. Almost no one was out on the streets. FlyAway and HeadWind strolled to my right, both of them in dirt-stained coveralls, their hair unbound. Their clasped hands swung in wide arcs back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

FlyAway pressed further, "Why are we walking, then?"

Because I couldn't bear to stay on the Grange while the rest of Tel's family was gone. Because I had to get away from open fields and the stink of ripeness. Because meandering on gray roads beneath a gray sky and surrounded by brick and stone made me feel less lonely somehow. I really didn't know.

I asked, "Are your legs getting tired?"

She pouted up at me. "No."

I pitched my voice above her head. "How about you, Windy? Are you getting tired?"

HeadWind stopped walking, jolting the rest of us to a halt. Her arm still swung but more slowly, while her free hand held and pressed her doll to an uncovered breast. The front flap of her coveralls hung open to her waist.

She squinted at all the architecture as if seeing it for the first time. Maybe she was. Nothing slid behind us, now that we were standing still.

After a minute she said, "No," and set us back in motion. She nodded at the houses until I could almost see them as she did, bobbing up and down with the rhythm of her steps. The doll's head had shifted beneath her nipple, leaving creamy skin and orange pectoral fur exposed to the chill.

I said, "I think your baby is full."

We stopped again, waiting for HeadWind to decide whether to button back up.

She turned to me. "Hold, please."

In a moment I was cradling stuffed burlap against my chest and patting my own daughter's handiwork as though it were a real child. I wanted so badly to go home, but my fellow exiles and I all faced a death sentence if we returned to Basc, even for the harvest. We stayed in Crossroads, working our cordoned-off plots and gathering at suppers in a tightly-knit community of expatriates.

My followers were more than just resigned to their fate. They were joyous. Liberating the Masari from needing our flesh was at hand. Our mission outstripped everything else, even family, especially since nothing prevented our kin from crossing the meadow and visiting us.

I joined those people at almost every meal and ached for different company. Abri could pinion me, Tel could break my nose again, and it would still be better than this.

Now I gave thanks for the claustrophobic streets, the roofs and chimneys blocking my homeland from view. Across the meadow my kin spent their days in mud. I had to hold on until I could see them again. Once they had finished with Liberty Farm, they would come to pick the Grange clean. I would be with my household for the duration of Crossroads' Lacuna. We'd have days of hard labor and nights in each other's arms.

And then they would go home.

HeadWind finished dressing, took one look at me, and squealed with delight. She called to her doll, "Stay with Daddy!"

FlyAway studied me as I settled the doll against my shoulder. I mouthed at her, *Make believe*. She gave me a long look, then shook her head.

Then her skepticism vanished as she grasped HeadWind's hand again. We swung our way through the empty village, counting blank windows and worn doors and kicking stray pebbles into echoes.



"FlyAway, did anyone ever tell you about the Covenant?"

"Yeah," she said. "The bone people."

We had marched to where the streets opened up into dilapidated houses and overgrown fields. A few cottages must be occupied again, close to the Governor's. I spotted weeds whacked down. A few flagstone paths had been cleared.

Beyond Bless's house lay the road to Rudder. Across the meadow were hills shaved clean, where the train ran. Between them the mountains still grew wild.

I gestured toward the overgrowth by our feet. "These used to be the training fields for Covenant hunters. Hunting used to be a lot different than it is now. It was part of a religion."

"Hm."

I had daughters and granddaughters. I knew when little girls were just trying to be polite. FlyAway's feigned interest made me wonder if she even knew what "religion" meant.

None of us dared take her to a Remembrance when we kept her in hiding. This valley had so many different rituals now that I wasn't sure if we could call anything a religion any more. We had hymns and recollections and talk of the afterlife. We had Gria's holiness and now we had my brother's bloodthirsty sanctity. But we were no longer in agreement as to who the gods were any more.

My attempted history lesson came to an end with a sharp crack in the air. We all jumped at the gunshot.

I spluttered a string of curses to keep from shaking. "What the hell are they doing? It's the *vyakkek* Lacuna!"

No one was supposed to shoot anybody. This was harvest time and we had a universal, imposed peace. We needed as many hands in the fields as we

could get, even though I didn't dare go to Liberty, myself. I almost wanted to laugh. If anyone was ripe for execution, it was me.

For one wild moment I was afraid my followers and our Destiny crops were under attack, but those were on the other side of Crossroads. And we were *protected* here.

The air cracked again and HeadWind grabbed my waist. We both shielded her doll while FlyAway squeezed between us and screamed, "Stop it!"

I tried to shush her. "FlyAway—"

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

Even while clutching us she strained forward, her face purpled and frizzed like a puff ball. She wasn't frightened. She was furious.

Dear gods, they wouldn't shoot a kid, would they? I didn't even know who "they" were.

Two more reports followed in quick succession. I tried to focus my hearing past FlyAway's rage and smelled a whiff of urine from HeadWind. I was close to peeing, myself. "Girls, I won't let anything happen to you. That's a promise. Just quiet down. We are going to turn around and leave."

They remained rooted in place. Windy held onto me so hard that I could barely breathe and her doll was a hard lump against my chest. FlyAway shook between us with her fingers curled into fists. I was glad she was free of Yata-dependence, otherwise she would be a very scary hunter when she grew up.

The humidity made tracking difficult. The shots seemed to come from everywhere, but then the guns fell silent and it was just the three of us again, huddled together.

I hated to close my eyes, but I had to. My sight distracted me too much. We were unarmed and small, and the best way I could protect these girls was by listening. I heard our heartbeats and ragged breaths first, then the tall grasses blowing about our feet. If the sky could sound heavy, I heard that, too. If enough people sang a work song out at Liberty and sang it loud enough, I might even hear that. But they were busy with other things.

My body tensed at the sound of scuffling and indistinct shouts. One more shot and I realized the firing occurred up on Alvav Ridge. I blinked my eyes open. "It's happening in the central valley, not here."

FlyAway looked up at me. "Then why are you whispering?"

"It's not just guns. There's a fight nearby. Stay close to me and turn around."

They wouldn't budge.

"Don't make me have to carry you both."

The shouting grew louder and I scanned the horizon, tracking the rhythm of pounding boots. HeadWind screamed when I tried to guide her away.

"Don't move!"

I froze at the command. Big bodies surrounded us, fanning out from behind. It took a moment for the border guard uniforms to register, and longer for me to believe the sight of StormClouds raised into firing position. But they weren't aimed at us. "What the hell is going on?"

The Masari growled, "Be quiet and let us protect you."

The girls and I must have looked ridiculous, craning our necks to get a good look at the soldiers while I clutched HeadWind's doll. Outnumbered, FlyAway and Windy stayed quiet.

If they listened hard enough, they would learn some choice vocabulary. Sputtered curses and the sounds of struggle grew nearer. I heard a mixture of Yata, Masari, and an odd patois of the two.

Then the stink hit us.

I forgot my revulsion when a beaten body hurled itself at me with a roar and was just as quickly hauled back by the Masari on either side of him. The guns around us stayed raised, but they made no difference. The prisoner strained against his bindings as his captors led him past us.

I murmured, "He needs to be treated for mange."

The guard to my left chortled. "I'd like to see you try. He'll rip your arms off first."

"That's not just filth I smelled, it's infection. What happened?"

He gave me an indulgent, disgusted smile. "Clot and his comrades thought they'd break into some homes and steal some meat. We caught him. The others returned empty-handed to Alvav, where they were intercepted and dispatched." He raised his StormCloud over his head in a stretch, then replaced the rifle on his back and called to the others, "Return to your posts!"

FlyAway blurted, "Guns aren't allowed now!"

"Neither are raids, sweetheart. And guns are allowed for border patrols."

I took one look at HeadWind and tucked her doll into the crook of her petrified arms.

"They always think Lacuna's the best time to invade," the guard continued. He shook his head. "I will never understand predator hybrids. All they have to do is apply for citizenship here and join a legitimate hunt, but they'd rather get themselves killed. This one's lucky. He only gets incarcerated."

He squeezed FlyAway's shoulder and loped back toward the ridge.

The sun had set by the time we reached the Grange. The songs from across the meadow carried in the quiet night, interrupted by whistles from an Iron Messenger pulling in. I could imagine my people loading crates of fresh produce into freight cars for the journey to Skedge. I could imagine campfires surrounded by field workers resting exhausted limbs, and Yata and Masari collapsing together inside tents erected on Liberty's fallow fields. The rain would have soaked into the soil by now. The mud would have abated.

I would weep from homesickness if I wasn't careful. I busied myself cleaning up the girls and washing off my own remnants of fear. We all slept in TelZodo's old room. I almost yelled when HeadWind's teeth clamped down on my arm in the middle of the night, but she wasn't hungry. My flesh served only as a pacifier.

Yata heal fast. I smiled at Tel's voice in my head. Windy's bite hadn't broken my skin, and the marks were gone by morning.

CHAPTER 28

Bless

During the six days between Liberty Farm's Lacuna and our own, I had planned to thaw my joints, unkink my spine, and pamper the blisters cracking my hands. A six-day soak should begin to loosen the dirt from beneath my nails and the muck from around my fur. And the Chamber, as exhausted as I, would table our debates until after our collective recovery from the harvests.

I heard the gods laughing even before we'd reached the Crossroads border. The more civilized my intentions, the more likely they were to burst open like a pod scattering seeds of chaos. At least my father was now among the ranks of the entertained, observing me from his front row seat in the afterlife. Head thrown back, wiping tears of mirth from his chops, while Gria crowed and clapped him on his spectral shoulder.

After five days and nights in the fields I could imagine anything. All it took was seeing the captain of the Alvav Ridge guard sprinting toward my transport, his face aglow from the sun setting behind Basc. He was not happy.

I told my runner to halt, then disembarked and exchanged a few words with the guard. He assured me that my broken windows had been repaired and my belongings were intact, including the ancient, single-shot rifles that had attracted the attention of our would-be invaders.

The predator hybrids had managed to vandalize two other houses in their attempted theft of Yata meat. That was the problem with exiles from Rudder, who came here bearing their own, hoarded food on their back. They made easy targets, especially those living near the Alvav border.

Crossroads maintained its open door policy, but we also had rules. Our border patrol forced seven gang members into retreat and into the sights of the central valley's sharpshooters, who enforced their own policy. The eighth thug was locked up in the Rotunda.

Even before I checked the damage to my cottage, I carried out my first official duty following my return to Crossroads. I let Tel and his friend SpiderLark know they had a new housemate. My second official duty was to make my acquaintance of the wretch.



Our unconscious prisoner looked more pitiful than dangerous to me.
"His name is *Clot*?"

"They rename themselves when they join a gang." TelZodo nodded toward the body on the floor. "AgatePool's pelt was also black, but she had a Yata body type."

From inside the cell, Evit muttered, "You can't tell dependency by appearances." He worked more salve into the man's skin, parting fur made spiky by medicines. Collection vials holding bodily fluids lay in a bag shoved into a far corner. "Bless, you can tell your troop leader that my arms are still intact."

He didn't mean guns. "Just keep timing your sedatives right."

Beside me, Tel grumbled, "No problem there."

SpiderLark's aria drifted down from above. Interesting, that the father of a predator hybrid wanted nothing to do with this one, but his singing sounded more impassioned than usual. I didn't think that was possible. Good thing it was muffled by three layers of granite.

I envied Clot, who managed to stay asleep. The tension around me was worse than the music.

The prisoner had been awake when I first saw him, pacing his cell when he wasn't kicking his chamber pot, unmindful of the mess. His rags had been burned and replaced with clean clothes, which he'd managed to keep wearing in-between Evit's treatments. From Evit's report, Clot had mended considerably in the few days between his arrest and my return from Basc.

The predator hybrid had reserved his attention for TelZodo and especially for me. Clot had hugged the bars, his crotch pressed between them. He ogled mine before his gaze traveled up to the level of my bindings. A moment later he slid insensate to the floor, giving Evit his cue to enter the cell, retrieve his dart, and divest Clot again of those new clothes.

When I saw our prisoner naked I realized why a handsome, well-fed actor had played the predator hybrid role in *River Crossing*.

I asked TelZodo, "Were the ones you saw in Alvav this emaciated and sick?"

"Most of them." He leaned against the bars with a slouch I hadn't seen since we were kids. I couldn't tell whose presence upset him more, Clot's or Evit's.

He turned from me. "I'll get something to clean the shit."

"Don't bother," Evit called. "I've done this for days now. I've worked out a system."

At least the men were talking to each other again, however brusquely. For a moment I entertained the thought of keeping the bars between them. "Tel, how do you feel about being a warden?"

He shrugged. "I've done it before."

"Not with this kind of prisoner." I pointed at Evit. "Not with that kind of doctor."

"All the better for me to keep an eye on him."

"Which one?"

"Both."

The Yata behind bars quirked a smile, still bent over his patient. I thought I saw a flicker of relief.

The rest of the cell block lay empty. These had once been the Rotunda's storerooms, two levels below the dormitories. Before I was born, when Promontory's advisors crawled all over Crossroads, my father had converted this wing into a prison and waited for the chance to arrest our occupiers.

After Promontory fell the cells lay unused except for rare violations, usually excessive drunkenness or fisticuffs. On occasion refugees from Rudder tried to steal each other's meat, in much the same way as the miscreant from Alvav passed out on the floor.

I tapped on Tel's arm, *Do you think he can smell the Yata stored below?*

He nodded.

No wonder he's belligerent. I'd have to see if Clot could survive on Sustainer Masari. Yata rations were earned in the hunt.

Evit had brought his own cleaning supplies. He transferred Clot's wastes to a stretched and cleaned Masari stomach and cinched it closed, then lifted his other bag and stepped up to the bars. "He'll dress himself when the paste dries."

I freed my citizen, then snapped the lock back in place. TelZodo studied the sleeping hybrid, black fur against copper skin riding over ribs. My friend was slouching again.

Evit touched his arm. "Tea?"

"No." He still stared into the cell. "I'm expecting someone. Narrative dictation."

"I'll see you in the morning, then. Have me summoned if he gives you any trouble."

"Has he given you any?"

Evit paused in mid-turn. "No."

He shifted the bag in his arms, hoisted the Masari stomach over his shoulder, and left. SpiderLark's singing fell around Tel and me like a mournful lullaby. Beyond us, the naked Clot looked innocent and peaceful, while the medicinal salve made a thorough mess of his pelt.

I asked Tel, "Whose narrative?"

"Abri's."

"You're kidding." I expected Psalm to dictate his exploits, he could embellish them so well. But my brother-in-law? And Basc had its own printing press. The Yata there didn't need Crossroads' old-fashioned scribe and our limited methods of production.

I must have smirked. "Narrative, Tel? Or strategy?"

"Strategy is your specialty." He forced himself away from the bars.

I jogged to keep up with him as he hurried to the staircase. "What does The Honorable One tell you that he can't tell his own people?"

"Plenty." TelZodo's sandals slapped on stairs taken two at a time. He paused at the curve of the flight, halfway to the dormitories, and called down to me, "Go home, Governor."

Backdropped by SpiderLark's pathos, it made for the gentlest insubordination I'd ever experienced. Lucky for Tel, no one else was within earshot, otherwise I might have put a second jail cell into service.

I reminded him, "Scribes create public documents."

"Yes. When they're finalized. Until then, they're confidential."

I couldn't argue the point, but something told me that finalization wasn't coming for a long, long time.

CHAPTER 29

Abri

From outside, the Rotunda's great bronze doors filled my range of vision. Their bas reliefs were all about Yata, portraying us as larger than life, taller than the Masari themselves. In those images we wielded the powers of life and death from our skin down to our bones.

Yata were never supposed to see those Covenant-era carvings. How could we? As gods we merited this idolatry, but as prey we couldn't possibly survive in the midst of our predators. Their legendary willpower was no match for our temptations then. Sacred hunts or no, we would have been ripped to pieces if we'd set foot inside Crossroads.

The Masari loved us and we feared them. Remove all of its other trappings and the Covenant boiled down to that. We kept each other alive through a tidy division of labor. They produced and gave us the food and material goods we needed. We produced children.

It was up to the gods to decide which children would grow up to be sacrificed, pass through those Masari bodies, and be deified through digestion. Zai would love to see these doors melted down, but the more I passed through them the longer I wanted them to stand.

I had climbed toward the oculus at dawn, the doors shrinking behind me. Curved stairways swept down from the platform rings and embraced the dome. The air tasted of leather and oil. Light fell in a shaft that traveled across the course of a day, illuminating one section of book bindings and then another, as though the gods never grew tired of reading the same material over and over.

They must have trouble believing it all, too.

The bones of Masari gods rested around me on the top platform ring, as varied and contradictory as their people. BrokenThread, the first to be interred in her velvet-lined, sweet-smelling box, had surrendered her body as my people had. She nourished and lived on in Ghost, which meant she also lived on in TelZodo.

Her child's skull was smaller than mine. She died hoping for a world my brother believes he can make, but that world will never come to pass without Yata restraint.

Peaceful coexistence and plenty of food and land for everyone. BrokenThread harbored the dreams of a child. Didn't we all?

The bones in the next box were those I had cut away and polished, myself. They were broken and mended, bruised. Deformed from TripStone's bouts of fasting as a girl.

Sometimes I lay next to her shrine and listened. Sometimes I wanted to lift the glass and crawl inside, but I am convinced now that TripStone isn't here. She infuses the mountain bedrock. She grows what is left on these hillsides, even as their slopes are hacked away and shackled. Every day I see new blasts shaking her to her core. I see how our careening toward domination strips her away, along with the blessings my father bestowed on her in those last moments of his life.

I see her living on in TelZodo, who carries her secrets with every step he takes. He doesn't visit her bones up here. He doesn't have to.

The third and last box holds the remains of the man I killed, one of my hardest executions. HigherBrook died with a smile on his lips, on a day when the gods had granted us clear skies and gentle breezes that blew the smog almost out of reach.

With Bless's ascendancy to the head of the Chamber, no pure-blood Masari held governance in this valley any more. Now CatBird and Gria are gone, too, and this new world is ripped asunder while my mother revises history. What would Gria think if she stood where I stand now, on this high perch, and watched the great hole being blasted in the hillside she so loved? Nothing there now but a great pock blown away, between the Basc depot and our choked lake, awaiting the marble shrine my mother will erect to her. It will rival the Rotunda when completed.

Gods or mortals, who among us is more perverse?

I wish I possessed SpiderLark's trained voice, but despite the robustness Ulik gave me I will never speak with such rich timbre. On other days the singer stands where I am standing, because the best acoustics lie here, just beneath the apex.

Today he grasps the railing by the first ring of Yata stacks, his back to the narratives, his gold hem brushing the marble veneer floor. His tremolo swirls into and out of the Rotunda's coffers, races around the lanterns, splits and rejoins. Tiny flames waver in filigreed cages under the force of his breath. SpiderLark's barrel chest fills and empties, his red beard an arrow pointing the way.

He doesn't see me. He doesn't see anything. His gods are different from ours, known not by bones or by deed, but by sound and vibration. He measures perversity in dissonance.

His technique had faltered when the bronze doors opened to let Bless, TelZodo, and my brother inside. I could have been looking at them through the wrong end of a clarifier, they were that tiny in the distance. Evit took the lead, descending toward the prison. TelZodo lagged behind, and for a moment he looked up, not at me but at SpiderLark, who offered a slight shake of the head and aimed his music back toward the light.

Later Evit returned, his steps uncertain but gaining force as he climbed toward the doors. Bless, who had sanctioned his crimes, followed in his wake with slow, measured steps, her arms folded across her strapped chest.

I can't blame her for her decision. HigherBrook would have made the same choice. He had seeded more citizens of Basc than of Crossroads. In a world of Parity and Destiny, where eradicating the Masari's dependence on Yata is possible in a few short lifetimes, I am the traitor here.

Like her father, Bless is entrusted with saving Crossroads.

But I am entrusted with saving the gods.

That certainty followed me as I descended toward the dormitories.



SpiderLark's music echoed to us from above. TelZodo spread our work in piles across his pallet and on the floor, setting fresh parchment on his desk beside a line of differently-colored inks. "Should I tell him to stop?"

I shook my head. "No. It's perfect."

He smiled. "I'll let Lark know you're one of his backwater admirers; there aren't many around here. He'll need to rest soon. He won't go on for much longer today."

"Pity."

My attempt to mimic the singer's hauteur registered as a squeak. TelZodo turned from his papers, laughing. "You surprise me sometimes, Abri."

"Maybe I'll become the joking executioner."

He mulled that over for a moment. "No."

Smoke's portrait of HeadWind smiled openly at me from the wall to the left of TelZodo's dresser. To the right hung her portrait of SkyBee, both of them completed about five years ago. Between them on the dresser's high shelf stood seven old dolls my niece had made from burlap.

Tel insists he can't have children, but I disagree. They just take different forms than what people expect.

Parchment covered the wall to the right of SkyBee's likeness, divided up into grids with color-coded sections. TelZodo had begun the chart in my sanctuary during Basc's Lacuna. Every day we'd picked more of Liberty Farm clean, and every night Tel had followed me into the Cold Time that my sanctuary quickly became. I didn't need to touch Ata's hand print to reach him any more. Ata settled into me the way he had once settled inside his caves.

His presence terrified me, but TelZodo knew what to expect before I did, maybe because he'd experienced his own visions growing up. He continued his note-taking, filling his grid with more numbers after each of our sessions.

I stared at the wall. "That's looking more like a ledger and less like notes on scripture."

"It's encoded to save space." TelZodo stepped into his side alcove. Water spilled into a teapot and scented the air with rose hips. "I based it on BrushBurn's census books, which relied heavily on cross-referencing."

So had the Destiny Farm ledgers. Both detailed the numbers of bodies and how they were to be used. We were designing the consumption of words and ideas through that same system of numbers.

The abstractions showed me the gods in motion. Ata wasn't just a hand print and a curse. He was a digit, a code, a color. He was a dust particle set in motion by breaths massed into a storm. His actions split him into a hundred directions, a hundred different vectors, building in force and intersecting not just his world but all the worlds to come.

He affected everything from the Yata narratives captured above us, to the gold rubbing off SpiderLark's worn hem, to TelZodo's Farm blood beating under his pelt, to the hungry prisoner pacing two levels beneath us.

And to the girls whose portraits smiled out at me. One lived and loved in simple ways. The other survived her biological mother and the foster mother whom Tel had once loved, if only because BarrowBow had treated him as more than just a body.

They all became numbers on that grid, with differently-inked lines tying them together, all the way back into the Cold Time. By our own actions, TelZodo and I added more breaths to the wind and more vectors to yet more dust, while Evit and his followers manufactured their Destiny on the Grange.

Rose perfumed the room, more thickly now. Tel stood above me, a mug in each hand.

I didn't remember dropping to my knees. I am aware of everything when I track Masari in the hunting grounds and the harvesters in Resurrection Forest. But one touch of the gods and I disappear even to myself.

I stood and accepted the tea, touching my earthenware to his. "The beverage of heretics and unbelievers."

"I call it a good growing season. So, what did Ata drink?"

His question caught me unawares. Our talks had given Tel the uncanny ability of guessing when I was about to shift, and I'd learned not to fight it any more.

"We scratched minerals from the rocks." Memories flowed into me with startling rapidity. Another man's sensibilities. I shrugged to adjust Ata's heavy coats on my/his thin frame. They were spectral, nothing Tel could see, any more than the icy drifts, frozen stone, and barren landscape eclipsing his dormitory.

Crossroads' scribe turned from me and walked through a gathering blizzard, upright and oblivious to the wind, to sit at his desk.

My father's bone-handled knife flew into my grasp. I examined it with the eyes of two men. "We used tools like these to pry into the seams, and round-bladed knives to collect what we'd ground into powder. We mixed that with melted snow."

Ata had not known summers. No heady, fruited air. No fattened vegetables dragging their vines toward the ground. "Was there a tree line?" I shook my head. "I don't remember a tree line."

Steam rose from an open cavity on cleared granite. I knelt before a red maw with a heart, lungs, and liver, that had once been a kinsman but that wasn't a kinsman any more. "My daughters and I warmed our hands in blood after we made a kill, then drank it as it cooled. But all those stories about us believing we were Masari are wrong."

"What about the fake Masari pelt you tattooed on your body?" TelZodo's question tunneled toward me from a far future, and it floated to me from across the room. "What about the way you painted your daughters, Ata?"

The knife slipped back into its sheath. "That didn't mean we thought we *were* Masari. Even in this time Zai had painted herself before the massacre, to symbolically steal the Masari's strength. She wasn't trying to become Masari, and neither were we. When Gria marched on Destiny Farm, her soldiers wore pieces of Masari pelt in a show of communion."

A chill bit the arm I extended from my coats. Dark designs suggesting fur ran beside patches of frostbite. "My daughters and I worshiped the Masari, TelZodo. Our predators kept us from overpopulating, but they were dying, too. We helped them. And my daughters were also tattooed, not painted. That's another lie." The bone needles, heated and inked, had brought as much comfort as pain.

I swallowed more tea while TelZodo sat at his desk on the other end of time, writing notes in neither Yata nor Masari but in his own shorthand. It let him keep up with my changes as I hovered between the worlds, not wholly Abri and not wholly Ata.

Sometimes my visions threatened to muddle. If I didn't focus, I would imagine my Dirt People daughters' tattoos on Tezani, or mistake my ancient prey for a modern-day harvester. Births and deaths eons apart became inseparable.

"Did you know that Ata was the first Preserver?" The thought itself was laughable, given the ways it bent. "I was inducted as a Preserver to kill Masari, of course, but that makes no sense. A Preserver keeps his people alive. You don't kill what saves you. It would be like cutting off your head."

"So you cut off your arm instead," TelZodo said, softly, "to keep the rest of the body intact."

"Yes!" I gulped the tea and drew my coats tighter around me, settling my hood over wind-whipped hair. The short scratches of Tel's nib overlaid a howling gale. "TelZodo, it should have been a time of *rejoicing*. We had amassed more food and more time by killing our own kind. Those who survived gained another toehold on life because of what we did. We'd have died out otherwise because there wasn't enough to go around." The tea shook in my hands. "Dear gods, our people hated us."

I moved papers aside and sat on TelZodo's pallet. For a while we just listened to SpiderLark, while my coats and the snow around my boots melted into nothing and I had only my bare arms to consult. I floated in the Cold Time for a moment longer and then washed back up on Common Year Twenty-One.

TelZodo was a hybrid of Yata and Masari. I was a hybrid of present and past. I didn't know which was worse.

He retreated to his dining alcove, returned with the pot, and refilled my mug.

I clutched the cup for warmth. "You don't believe any of this, do you? But you let me go on. You know when to call me by his name."

"You're asking me if I believe in voices, Abri. Trust me, Shabra would show you a thing or two if she were still in my head."

"But you never *became* her."

He laughed. "That's a nightmarish thought."

We drank to SpiderLark up above, before he trailed off into silence. We drank to Clot and his muffled protests down below. And after I left the dormitories, I descended further.



The Rotunda's only prisoner was awake, lying on a stained pallet beside an empty bowl. My nose twitched from the faint odor of urine. One look at Clot and I questioned the wisdom of healing a predator from one set of ailments, only to create others by denying him the nutrition he needed.

The chunks of Sustainer Masari did nothing for him. Loosened black tufts and the exhaustion in Clot's eyes were clear indications of Yata deprivation. His nose twitched, and he groaned aloud when he smelled me.

I asked him, "Can you stand?"

I removed my shirt when he didn't answer. The bars were spaced widely enough so that I could slip my arm inside. Nothing felt more right at that moment.

He wheezed with laughter and emitted a string of curses as creative as they were foul.

"Say what you like, but I'm offering you an honest meal."

He stretched and nudged the chamber pot with his foot. His stomach vanished, hidden by the rib cage straining his shirt. Maybe he didn't stand because he couldn't. Squatting brought my arm closer to the floor, to his level.

I pushed harder against the bars and tried to reach him.

Clot had no reason to trust me. I could pull my arm out before he'd gotten near it. The disgust in his eyes labeled me as a torturer, the latest in a line of abusers beginning with whatever Yata parent had shoved him outside the Marsh's walls when he showed the first signs of dependence.

He growled, "I know your kind, meatcock."

"And what kind is that?"

He was on me in an instant. I twisted as he aimed for an artery and a quick kill, but that had only been an attempt to frighten me. He was content to rip into my flesh once he'd gripped my arm and bent it across the bars.

I must have gasped. The first bite made me flush. The second made me lightheaded as my arm began to burn, but I wasn't losing much blood. I'd swoon if I wasn't careful. I had expected to understand what it was to be consumed, to understand what my father's sacrifice really meant, to see the

world through the eyes of Ata's victims. I needed to experience the effects of predation if I was going to kill to support it.

My ecstasy shocked me.

My surprise gave Clot pause. He chortled around a mouthful and swallowed. "You're a *vyakkak* virgin!"

His moan as he bent to feed made me ache for my wives. No wonder Yucof looked as he had, half eaten away. A Yata could die courting this kind of thrill.

"You're right," I managed to say. "I've never done this before."

"They're shallow wounds," he purred. My arm strained. Another nip opened my shoulder. "Don't worry."

I slid further. "I'm not worried. Just confused."

"A little more exciting than you expected, eh?"

"I want to keep you healthy," I said. "Nothing more."

"Charitable of you."

He pulled more flesh from me, massaging with teeth and tongue. He straightened my arm out from the bars and scooted closer.

I pulled my hand away before he could guide it between his legs. "That's not part of the meal."

"Your breeches could have fooled me."

He bent back down and nursed an open sore. I'd suffered more damage in battle, and battle had been nowhere near as pleasurable as this. My limb became a delicacy in Clot's hands. For an insane moment I contemplated offering him my shooting arm.

He traced a bloody edge that had begun to knit. "You mend fast."

"I'm trained to mend fast."

Clot grinned. "More for me."

"You're not getting me again. I'll bring you other Yata." I added, "After I've killed them."

He sat on his heels, wiped his mouth, and stared back.

My arm was on fire as I eased it out of his cell. Clot had shown considerable restraint, probably hoping to seduce me into giving him regular feeds. "I admit, I'd expected something more spiritual."

He gave me a look of amused pity. Then he shook his head and snorted. "I heard this valley was nuts."

"You heard correctly. I need you to help save it."

He lay back down. "Free me, then."

"I'll see what I can do." I pulled myself to my feet and draped my shirt over my shoulders as best I could. A drop splattered on my boot before my bleeding stopped completely. Clot's gaze was rooted to the ceiling while he ignored the smears on the floor.

I had never met a predator whose hair and skin tones were like mine. Without his pelt and height, Clot could be mistaken for a Yata. He was the farthest thing from the lovelorn hybrid portrayed in *River Crossing*.

I asked, "Which parent did you get your dependence from?"

His eyebrows jumped. "I don't know. I was put outside the walls before I found out. Why?"

Predator hybrids weren't known for charity. "I'm surprised you're alive."

"Don't be." He eased his hands behind his head. "I let *you* live."

"I'm sorry about your gang mates."

"My gang mates didn't starve. Alvav's sharpshooters dispatched them cleanly and painlessly. They were lucky."

He rolled onto his side and faced the far wall. I don't know how long I watched his back, the scapulae shifting under his bespattered shirt.

CHAPTER 30

Early Winter

TelZodo

Our neighbors poured in from across the meadow, turning the Grange Lacuna into a Yata affair. For as long as I can remember, Basc's people had overrun us to help with the harvest, but never had so many remained in Crossroads afterward.

They came for the Destiny. To produce it. To take it. Petitions for citizenship flew across Bless's desk.

My mother's petition for Basc citizenship sailed through its own approvals, and I finally understood how my parents must have felt when I left Crossroads to marry into Evit's household thirteen years ago. It didn't matter that our villages shared a valley, or how closely we mingled with each other. Piri resigned from the Chamber and was no longer part of Crossroads. When my father and I went to see her, we arrived as guests.

Unlike Evit's household, which moved here.

FlyAway divided her time between touring the Destiny fields, delivering HeadWind's many doll babies, and accompanying WingLeaf on her walks through town. My cousin laid down her rifle with the onset of winter and began her search for a Yata wetnurse. ClayPack labored in the munitions factory when he wasn't hunting.

At least now, when Abri became Ata in the Cold Time, the weather outside came closer to matching his world inside. But unlike the bloody carcasses his ancestor handled, the meat Abri brought to the Rotunda's prisoner came discretely wrapped. I sneaked the rejected chunks of Sustainer Masari to SpiderLark. He had more of a stomach for them than Clot did.

Bless spent most of her days wrangling with the Chamber over Crossroads' increased development. We decided she didn't need the added problem of knowing what we were doing. Meanwhile, SpiderLark avoided Clot, I avoided Evit, and Smoke accused us both of being fools.

CHAPTER 31

Bless

Rain still sheeted down the mountains when the Iron Messenger pulled into Basc, but I was gladdened by that awful weather. It kept all the merchants focused on their goods, making sure their tarpaulins were secure instead of dawdling. I had my own cargo to retrieve, and my goal was its quick and safe transport back across the valley to Crossroads.

BrushBurn's lettering was so orderly it looked polite. *The last shipment of Covenant bones is assigned Car 48 on the night run. Jotha is the inspector on duty. The bones will remain with him and will be processed through Basc. Wait for his signal giving you clearance to remove the rest.*

Below the instructions was an equally tidy drawing of a rounded square. That message now lay tucked into the back of my desk drawer, next to the train schedule.

My boots splashed through slush puddles as I barreled across the platform at the depot, swerving around crates and clusters of people. I couldn't tell where steam ended and fog began.

Merchants and distributors shouted to find each other, their lamps all but useless. The thick soup and distorted lantern light around me made me thankful for the station's high railings. I leaned toward the din coming from the tracks and told myself not to fall off the hillside.

Car 48. Water beaded up on the sign. Now that I had stopped running I began to shiver from the pelting rain. I held my breath when I saw the large cargo doors already open. All I could do was hope that the inspector inside was Jotha and to wait for his signal.

I tried to distract myself from the chill with happy thoughts. This beastly weather had gone on for days. The air had smelled cleaner and less metallic for so long that I'd almost forgotten we had any pollution at all.

Halting the silt runoff from our clear cuts was probably too much to ask.

Happy thoughts, Bless. I tried to peer into the car's dark opening. My bones felt as stiff as the ones closed up inside, where iron nails groaned beneath a crowbar. Hinges creaked. Then the crate was tapped shut again and the exercise repeated for the next one.

I tried to imagine the number of bones in the crates, the number of crates in the shipment, the number of shipments. I couldn't. How many Yata bodies had been traded for these relics during the famine? Even after the massacre, the number of starving survivors in Crossroads must have been massive. Most weren't anywhere near as weaned from Yata meat as the Masari are now.

All that hunger. All that food from Destiny Farm. Without those bones to trade, Crossroads would have died.

I couldn't fathom that, either, no matter how hard I tried. I almost forgot I was freezing.

My toes had lost all feeling by the time a cloaked Yata appeared in the doorway, slipping a manifest beneath layers of wool. More layers hid his face. He motioned me forward.

I stumbled up wooden steps, toward the cargo. "Are you Jotha?"

"Yes." He turned to address a dark woolen mass seated on a far bench. "You're cleared. Go quickly."

"Thanks, friend." BrushBurn's gravel voice never sounded so weary, but his steps were light. I held up my lamp, but the fog must have distorted everything because he seemed horribly misshapen. Either that, or conditions in Promontory were much worse for Masari than I thought.

His black glove appeared out of his sleeve and squeezed Jotha's shoulder. "Give my regards to Abri. I'll contact him when I can."

In a moment I was rushing down the stairs, hanging onto a still-warm coat. I would have given anything to crawl inside it and snuggle against BrushBurn's chest to keep my teeth from chattering. Instead, I directed him toward the lower ledge where I'd left my wagon and gasped, "Over there."

His own hood hid his expression, but he sounded surprised. "How long were you waiting?"

"Not long."

"You're soaked through."

"That's because I ran the transport, myself."

He cursed under his breath. When we reached the wagon he opened its flaps and pushed me inside before I could reach for my harness. He pried the lantern from my frozen fingers and pulled me out of my cloak. "Take the rest of that off."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me."

He secured the flaps and shrugged out of his woolens, then pulled leather straps off his shoulders. He wasn't misshapen, he'd been carrying ledgers. One canvas bag dropped on the wagon bed, then a second. Then a third.

The fourth bag was still attached when he whirled on me, coat in hand. He draped it over my shoulders. "I'm serious, Bless. Take your clothes off and wrap yourself in this before that chill gets into your lungs." He turned away to give me privacy. The fourth bag thudded to the floor.

His coat was far too big for me. "I can't wear this."

"Yes, you can."

"I'll trip on it. I'm running the transport, remember?"

"No, you're not." He snatched the lamp from the floor.

His linens and underclothes would be sopping before we reached the first switchback. "BrushBurn, don't be ridiculous. It's too dangerous here. We're under Zai's jurisdiction and you'll be completely exposed."

"It's dark and it's raining, Bless. We're past the cargo inspection and we're traveling to an open border."

"My harness won't fit you!"

"I can adjust it quickly. Now do as I say and *take off the damned clothes!*"

He ducked out of the wagon, leaving me feeling childishly peeved. Did he yell at everybody he went to for protection?

If I didn't laugh, I'd make myself sick with worry. I was still fumbling my shirt ties when the chains began lengthening outside. My wet things were off by the time we were halfway to the meadow. I wrapped BrushBurn's cloak around me several times and silently thanked the wool for holding his body heat for me.

I peered out the front after I stopped shivering. The rain had reduced BrushBurn to a bedraggled scrap of fur and curls catching the light. A younger man would have run faster, but my friend's pace remained steady. He was slow, but not winded.

I called forward, "Do you know the way?"

The wind carried his answer back. "Yes. I've been to TripStone's—" He stopped, started again. "I've been to that house before."

The last time BrushBurn was in Crossroads, he was buying the bones the Iron Messenger had just brought back. I sat in the shelter of oiled canvas and leather, drew his woolens tighter around me, and watched Crossroads' latest refugee exhaust himself to get us home.



We sat before a blazing hearth, both of us wrapped in blankets, and didn't speak for a long time. Our empty bowls remained on the dining table, scraped clean of stew. The house still held some residual warmth by the time we arrived, and I'd re-lit the fire while BrushBurn carried his ledgers inside, wrapped against the rain.

Those ledgers were his real cargo, his contraband smuggled out of Promontory. Strings of numbers continued for page after page. Meticulous records reduced to untested projections.

Now his books sat on my father's desk in FeatherFly's old room. I'd gathered fresh bedding to fill the old pallet frame where TripStone's younger brother once slept. Bone inlays still shone from the wood.

I couldn't assign BrushBurn a vacant cottage in Crossroads because those were all taken up by Yata now. He would have to stay here. I expected him to look lost, but I had never seen him like this before. I was afraid to ask him what he was thinking as he rose from his chair and shuffled in his blanket toward the common room.

Without a word, he studied my father's collection of Yata narrative-imprinted kerchiefs on the walls. Relief crossed his face as he lifted a corner and looked upon an old discoloration left from the time when a stippled Covenant relic had hung there instead.

He squatted by the glass case with its single-shot rifles, the plain training rifle that had been FeatherFly's and the ornate sacramental rifle that had been NightShout's. "Now that I'm here, I'll have to learn how to hunt."

At first I didn't realize he had spoken, his voice was so soft. "What?"

"I know the rules, Bless. I eat Yata, so I'll have to either hunt or make some sort of barter arrangement, and I have little to trade that anyone would want." His blue eyes shone. "I've been arguing for increased predation. It's time I practiced it."

I blurted before I could stop myself, "You're too old, BrushBurn."

He barked a laugh. "I know, Bless. I didn't expect to be. Don't worry, I don't expect to break until the spring."

But he still had to train, and then he had to take part in a successful hunt to reserve his ration of Yata at the Deliverance Inn. If he didn't, he'd have to take his chances consuming Sustainer Masari.

Parity had to be better than this. My valley wasn't the arid lands. We could manage that balance when it finally came.

But Parity wasn't here yet, and I harbored a man who would rather risk death to prove a point. He'd also sacrificed everything to bring that point to Crossroads. I couldn't argue with him, not on his first night of exile.

I forced myself away from the hearth. "My father hunted, but he had trained for it a long time ago."

"Reluctantly, as I recall." BrushBurn's fingertips touched the glass. "My wife and my ward were the most accomplished hunters I ever knew. You have no idea how much that frightened me."

He stood. His face and arms, his legs below the blanket edge, looked strange. After a moment I realized they lacked the scarring I was accustomed to seeing on most people.

"I played cards instead, Bless. I learned to win, and then I learned to shoot the loser. I could track my opponent's emotions. I could smell intent. But that was inside a gaming parlor, not out in the wilderness." His great head shook. "When I was in Crossroads years ago, I thought your citizens were crazy for risking their lives the way they did."

"And now you want to do that, too."

BrushBurn's face pinched. "I have to. If I don't, then the evidence I brought with me means nothing."

A thick winter pelt already covered his shoulders. The curls on his head had dried and lightened. Not all of them had turned gray. Some were still rust-colored.

I said, "And if you die?"

He shrugged. "Then I die." He pointed toward FeatherFly's old room. "Just make sure the books live."



BrushBurn preferred fennel tea when not on the road. By sunup I had a pot of it steeping. Its sharp sweetness brought me awake as I gazed out the common room window at flurries and the soft, shallow snow pack covering the ground. Our clothes from the night before lay dry by the hearth. I gathered mine over my arm and left BrushBurn's by his door.

He owned no hunting leathers and my father had been a smaller man. Unlike most of the other people seeking sanctuary in Crossroads, BrushBurn had not spent his fortune in the Cliff's meat market, but had used his worth to secure safe passage. Except for that and for what he could carry, he had left everything behind in Promontory.

He hadn't brought a rifle. Did he even wear a revolver?

Crossroads provided its refugees with a minimal allowance, but BrushBurn was my friend. I sat at my desk, pulled a sheet of parchment, and listed items to outfit him with. After a few minutes I heard his door open and the quiet, efficient sounds of dressing.

He had prepared a light breakfast for both of us by the time I returned to the common room. One look at him and I was thankful the Chamber wasn't in session that day. "You haven't slept."

"No. It's not the bed. The bed is quite comfortable." He lifted his mug. "Thank you for the tea."

"They're expecting us over at the Grange." I hadn't slept, either. Was that what made my voice hard as bricks? I was afraid to touch the man, afraid I would crumble. I didn't know why. He looked so powerless and so accepting of it. I coughed into my fist. "I'll miss your presence at the summits."

"You'll have my presence here."

"That's not what I meant."

"Sedes is a good man. He'll make a fine representative for Lower Skedge."

I set my tea down before it spilled. "For *what*?"

"I'm kidding." He waved it off, not at all convincingly. "The Yata in Promontory don't call it that. Not yet. It's a Masari tavern joke."

I scowled at the twinkle in his eyes. "BrushBurn, Gria's militia was once treated as a tavern joke. What's happening over there?"

He leaned back in his chair and sipped, nostrils flared. "Demographics, Bless." He closed his eyes and held the aroma in his lungs, then let it go with a long exhale.



BrushBurn had been viewed as a parasite the last time he visited the Grange. This time TelZodo met us at the door to the farm house and I watched the two men cling to each other with loud groans of relief.

Tel hugged tighter. "You're still alive."

BrushBurn cradled plum curls and murmured, "Thank you for helping me get here."

I glanced at Ghost, whose expression had turned stoic. Then HeadWind was on us, seeking a body to press against. She exulted when I enfolded her. Yata jerky pressed against my shirt.

I stood on tiptoe and called over her shoulder, "Is ClayPack here?"

"He spends more time with his other family now." Ghost made no effort to hide his disgust as he ferried plates to the kitchen. Remnants of dinner remained on the table. When had his back become stooped? "ClayPack helps to make Destiny when he's not off shooting. Don't ask me what he does in his spare time."

"BrushBurn needs a hunting instructor."

TelZodo disengaged and gave BrushBurn a searching look. "You're serious about this."

"You know my views. Besides, I don't have much choice."

Ghost called from the kitchen, "Evit will know where ClayPack is. You can take a tour of his facility, BrushBurn, and you'll find out why your views don't stand a chance here. Neither do mine, any more." He emerged wiping his hands on his pants and glowering. "That's another thing you and I have in common now, besides TripStone, Piri, and my son."

He stepped up to BrushBurn and clasped him, hard. "I wish Piri were here. She would have wanted to see you. Sit."

BrushBurn sniffed the air as he settled himself by the table. "I can understand why she stays in Basc."

"You can *smell* that poison from here?"

"I grew up smelling that poison. Yes."

Ghost winced and turned away. Tel took a seat across from us and lifted a chunk of bread, looking pensive. Then he reached beneath the table, brought a revolver up from his belt, and slid it across.

HeadWind reached wide-eyed for the shiny gun. I eased her hands away and made a face. "Your doll is much prettier than that thing."

She mouthed the jerky, pondering whether to believe me.

Tel washed his bread down with a mouthful of ale. "That's yours if you want it back."

Ghost led Windy away from the table. In a moment her glee reverberated off the wood walls and she called FlyAway's name as if spotting the child for the very first time.

BrushBurn lifted the six-shooter and smiled a little as he examined it. "The Yata models are more streamlined now. And a lot less decorated." His thumb traced embossing on the barrel. "You've taken good care of this."

"I haven't had to use it here."

"Do you know I've never killed anyone with this gun?" He checked its empty chambers and clicked it shut. "I carried it across the region for almost half my life. Lots of warning shots."

Ghost stepped back to the table. "That makes it clean."

Tel said, "It's not."

I thought I saw BrushBurn give a little nod and wondered what secrets our scribe had carried around since his return from Promontory. Father and son regarded each other, unblinking.

Ghost said, "We'll talk later."

Tel nodded as BrushBurn reached down. A smaller revolver dropped beside the first, but its grips were still Masari. He must have packed it with the ledgers.

"I've gotten accustomed to this one. It's not clean, either." BrushBurn slid the old gun back to Tel. Lines of tidy notches covered the newer, plainer barrel.

I whispered, "You've survived a lot of Death bouts."

"The Death bouts don't come until the third notch. The first was Jirado. The second was her unborn child." The gun slipped beneath the table again. "TelZodo, I believe you can teach me about ambush situations."

"I've never been in the far woods," Tel said, "and it's been six years since Alvav. ClayPack can show you how not to panic."

Ghost's face became a mask. I couldn't tell if the other men were putting on a show for our benefit, reaffirming an old bond, or both.

BrushBurn changed the subject. "I heard SpiderLark perform at my second summit in Rudder. Common Year Eight, I think it was. How's his voice now?"

I grunted, "Overwrought," as Tel chimed, "Magnificent."

We all looked at Ghost, who regained his composure enough to add, "His harvest songs made the corn cry. Our Lacuna will never be the same." His lips quirked. "We should send him to the Destiny fields. Maybe he can kill off the fire cups."

CHAPTER 32

Evit

If I wasn't careful I would end up making Smoke one of my wives, and then Tel would have another reason to hate me—once the idiot made up his mind to go after her, himself. In the meantime I let Smoke regale me with tales of his irritability around her. It made me want to march over to Tel's dormitory, take him in hand, and tell him the facts of life—if he ever wanted anything to do with me again.

Their attraction was mutual, but Smoke didn't admit to it, either. Including TelZodo in our bedroom conversations was almost as good as his being there.

"Evit, he's a hypocrite. For a man who hates Destiny, he gets most of his stories lying down. He uses his penis as much as his pens."

I could have said something about her paint brushes, but why spoil the moment? Tel wasn't the one snuggling against her torso. "He hasn't used it with you."

"That's because he thinks I don't approve of him."

"Do you?"

"No." Her long thigh teased me, not that I needed encouraging. "He doesn't approve of me, either."

Smoke still lived in her cart, which sat behind her shop in the marketplace, but visiting her was like vanishing from Crossroads. We could have been lying in a tent in the middle of the Alvav woods. Canvas swooped down from a false apex, carrying false birds. White plumage drifted through a painted canopy suspended in an eternal summer.

I couldn't find Smoke's bed my first time here, her frame blended so well with a floor of painted meadow grass. Half the time I forgot I lay on linen instead of on soft, fallen leaves half my size. I breathed in aromatics overlaying the sharp scent of pigments and oils.

If I squinted past candlelight, I could find the canvas edge and her cart's flat roof above it, breaking the illusion. I could make out the small hearth at the other end of our compartment and the glowing coals keeping us warm. An occasional flurry flew in through a crack in the doorway and melted on iridescent moss, but that only added to the mystique of the place.

I had never been in Alvav. Smoke's depiction of her homeland was probably like the evergreen mountain murals in the Rotunda's Chamber. Those landscapes might have existed once, but now they were just dreams.

That false lushness took me away from the lab for a little while. Our Destiny harvest was over and our factories began their extended production. Four Yata wetnurses now suckled Masari babies, and WingLeaf would give birth before the winter's end. Every Masari couple I met had hope shining in their eyes. I took their blood. I collected their wastes. I could answer all their questions about Destiny-laced nursing except for two:

Will it work for our child?

For how long?

Ghost was right, of course. FlyAway was still a sample size of one until those babies weaned. Proper study would take years and generations, while our casualties in the far woods mounted, at least until we reached Parity.

But this wasn't the arid lands. We didn't have to wait for Parity, and I was sure we were headed for liberation better than that. As Smoke and I tangled in her painted leaves and as her forest creaked around us on its wheels, I gave thanks for dreams.

Smoke herself was a sample size of one. Even without Destiny, a good squeeze made her weep colostrum. Milk dribbled down her sides under the influence, and Smoke had never been pregnant. She was just as barren as TelZodo, but without any of the trauma that his sterility had caused him.

She was also much more selective in choosing her bed partners. At least, I liked to think so.

I buried myself in her, closing my eyes against slippery smooth skin that looked bleached. My wives and co-husbands liked Smoke well enough. She was teaching my grandchildren how to draw, keeping them occupied away from the fields and the factories. She wouldn't be the first hybrid to join my family. It could work...

No, that was Destiny addling me. Smoke had chosen me alone, and not for my looks. She hadn't even chosen me for the drug I gave her. That had been Roia's job, and now Roia was off growing our Destiny underground in Basc.

Smoke was here because of what Destiny could do to Alvav. As soon as she learned about Clot, she devised a way to deliver it.



As a trader Smoke had protected herself against predator hybrids, but as a youngster she'd played with them. Away from the Marsh, she had survived by ferrying messages between those condemned children and the parents who had banished them outside the city walls.

As soon as Clot saw Smoke, he pressed against his bars and growled, "I missed you."

"Yes," she said drily. "That's why I now do business in Crossroads."

I looked from him to her. "You two know each other?"

Smoke said, "I killed his sister," and gestured toward me with a cupped hand. I fumbled a tied-off Destiny bladder out of my pocket.

"Clot never knew her. I didn't know she was his sister, either, until I started asking questions. She'd managed to break into the Marsh to look for their kin and a hearty meal."

I tried to picture a black-furred predator hunting down its relatives inside a walled city. Smoke plucked the Destiny from me before I dropped it. I grabbed her wrist before she slipped her hand between the bars.

She shook me off. "He won't hurt me. You look well-fed, Clot. Sustainer Masari agrees with you." The bladder wavered in her palm as she pushed it inside. "Take a whiff of this and tell me what you think."

Clot flashed an incredulous grin. "Just like that."

"Yeah. Just like that."

He took it from her without nibbling a finger, then backed away, lounged on his pallet, and untied the membrane. His coppery cheeks twitched as he inhaled.

Even outside the cell, several strides away, I could feel my toes flush as the air changed. Smoke's face turned pink, her lips reddening.

We watched in disbelief as Clot wrinkled his nose at the brown powder. He dipped in a finger and sucked on the residue, his face sour. "What's this supposed to be?"

"No reaction. He's like a Masari with it," Smoke curled her fingers around the bars, her voice sultry. "Ohh, too bad."

Clot glanced up, saw the condition we were in, and leered.

"If we had that in the Marsh—" Smoke licked her lips and leaned in further. "Clot, if we had that in the Marsh when you were born and we gave it to the woman who nursed you, you could have grown up in the city. You wouldn't have been dumped outside, Clot. Do you know what I'm saying?"

He rolled to his feet, the swollen bladder dangling from his fingers.

The hallway shifted. It seemed narrower, the walls closer. I watched them through a pinhole of cloying intimacy that in spite of everything had nothing to do with sex, even though my nose told me differently. I blurted, "Did you two ever—"

"Not yet," Clot said, still focused on her. They were evenly matched in height. He met Smoke at the bars, wagging the half-opened membrane between them. Renewed scent almost knocked me over. His free hand passed between the steel, slid down Smoke's side, and grasped her rump. "But we will, won't we?"

I didn't know what made me more woozy, what I breathed or what I saw. I mused, "You know, Smoke, change his pelt color and lengthen his hair a little and he'd look like Tel."

"Nice try." She clung to the bars, but not from lust alone. "Don't be jealous, Evit. Clot, if I'm going to fuck you, then you have to do something for me."

"You, too?" The prisoner barked a laugh. "Everybody here wants something from me. Who knew that garbage could be so important?"

I balked. "Who else wants something from you?"

He held the Destiny by Smoke's open mouth and pulled her harder against the bars. "What will you give me for telling you, Evit?"

"Your freedom, for one."

"It's already been offered." He chortled. "And by the way, I don't eat Sustainer Masari."

He couldn't be getting Yata meat legally. It was too precious a commodity in Crossroads and regulated through the Deliverance Inn. "Who feeds you? Where does the Yata come from?"

"Why should I tell you?"

I snapped, "Because I saved your life, and I can take it away if I have to."

"You never killed anything, you little piss." His dark eyes met Smoke's and he murmured, "Vermin eat vermin."

She pressed harder. "We can end that."

"Vermin." My people used to be gods. What happened to us? "You mean criminals."

"So I've been told."

That meant Basc Yata taken in Destiny raids. My brother must be feeding him. Abri already brought butchered Yata to HeadWind, but I could understand that. HeadWind was an innocent and her father had been a good man. I didn't know what Clot was, much less what Abri wanted from him.

For some twisted reason, Yata-dependence was important to my brother. My nausea warred with my arousal.

"Clot." Smoke moaned his name and loosened her grip on the bars. "Help us and you can have me."

"What makes you think I want you?"

"After all the time you've been cooped up in here, I'm better than your hand."

"Such desperate people in Crossroads. Don't let go of those bars." He dribbled Destiny on her tongue and smiled as her knees buckled. "Evit, if you want my cooperation, you won't tranquilize me again."

I tried not to splutter. "I won't have to. You look well enough."

The odors of sweat and musk and milk encased us in a cloud. All we needed was for Tel to return from the Grange and find us in violation of more rules than I could imagine. I was throbbing too hard to think clearly, least of all about Smoke. Behind her reaction to the Destiny lay an equally strong sense of purpose, one obsession fueling the other.

Clot seemed to enjoy weighing his options more than satisfying his urges. His finger spread stains on Smoke's shirt from beads of lactation. He tapped more powder as she panted and watched it dissolve in her mouth, his free hand wandering to her neckline.

With a loud rip he yanked her shirt down the front, shifted her against the bars, and latched onto her breast. Smoke cried out as Clot sucked, her grip white-knuckled around the metal.

When I found my voice I wheezed, "Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes." Her chest heaved. "I wish it could help him, but he's too old. Clot—"

He mumbled against her.

"I still have my cart." She struggled to speak. "I can smuggle you back into Alvay, but you have to get me safely to the gangs. To the pregnant girls. I'll save their children. Do you understand?"

Her face glistened with rapture. I wasn't competing with Clot, I was competing with the drug. "Smoke, you're only half Yata. Your milk might not have the same effect."

"They know me." Her neck arched as he switched nipples. "I can get Destiny to the Yata in the Marsh, but any full-blood Yata outside the city is at risk."

Clot's free hand moved lower as he raised his head, chops glistening. "So are you."

"Not as much."

"That was true when there were more traders for us to take. Most of the carts are gone now, because of the damned train. You can't eat trains." He grinned at me, working her breech ties. "Evit looks tasty. He can come with us."

He pulled his hand back into the cell and loosened his own pants while manipulating the bladder. More Destiny coated Smoke's tongue.

Clot pursed his lips at her writhing and mused, "Or I could take the other option offered me."

I forced myself closer to the cell. "What option is that?"

"Living the life of an upstanding Crossroads citizen and joining a Masari hunting party, for one." He reached between his legs and began to stroke. His voice deepened further. "Or living in the far woods to chase down Yata. Might clean out Basc a little, too, when nobody's looking. No walls there."

My stomach lurched. "That's completely unsanctioned."

"Isn't it?" Another rip. His mange was gone, replaced by thick jet pelt patterns. "But so is bringing me Yata to eat in this prison. Now I have the choice of staying wild or becoming tamed."

"You wouldn't get tamed, Clot. Your children would. Come with me." Smoke eased her stiffened fingers from the bars and rubbed her wrists.

Clot jumped forward and cinched her waist. "Did I tell you to let go?"

"No, but my hands hurt."

I waited while they glared at each other.

"He was also threatened with being turned over to the Alvav guards at the border." A rich baritone sailed down as SpiderLark descended a curved stairway. "Where they would execute him."

Clot redirected his stare, eyebrows raised. "It was good enough for my friends."

"Yes. More food for the others, that way. Smoke, if you had come to me instead, I could have put you in touch with my former stage dresser. The bastard's a level fourteen. He can go anywhere he wants and he's acquainted with some of Clot's associates."

"Your dresser doesn't befriend the hybrids, SpiderLark. He exploits them." Smoke grinned at the revived erection inside the cell. "Clot's not interested in collecting local color for the latest *River Crossing*. He can help me make sure we don't *have* predator hybrids any more." She shrugged off the remains of her shirt, eyes blazing. "What do you say, Clot? Do you help me take my art back into Alvav, or do more rejected kids die?"

SpiderLark fuzzed. "Smoke, you're not in that environment any more. You're better than this."

"The only reason I'm not in a gang is because I was born lucky. Clot, you don't get me until you say yes."

He eased the Destiny back out. She grabbed it.

He said, "I'll need food."

Somehow I found my voice. If Smoke and I didn't use the prisoner, my brother would. "Set aside what Abri brings you, as much as you can, and agree to live by Crossroads' rules once you're released." I watched Smoke consume more of the bladder's contents as she finished untying her breeches. Her pale skin flushed to her hairline. "I'll make more Destiny for Alvav and we'll get you when we're ready."

SpiderLark folded his arms. "*Bravo*, Smoke. How noble an act. It makes TelZodo's whoring lackluster."

I wanted to strangle that resonant throat. "Tel's paying you to talk. I'll pay you to keep quiet."

SpiderLark frowned, then nodded. He'd get to keep his gold hem a little longer. He turned away as Smoke kicked her pants back and grasped the bars again.

Not long afterward, I made restitution for the property damage Clot had caused on arrival. Bless issued citizenship papers that he would never use. Clot took up residence in Smoke's cart, partly to plan methods of concealment when they left Crossroads, but mostly to cement their partnership.

My wives and co-husbands welcomed me back in their usual, unceremonious way. They enjoyed their own diversions at the small Meethouse we'd erected on the Grange. My people had left Basc but not its culture.

And our Meethouse used Destiny openly. One might say the Yata here in Crossroads followed tradition better than our neighbors in Basc did, where the old practices were confined to safe houses that kept changing location.

Abri and his fellow enforcers stepped up their raids, making my followers into martyrs. My brother and I should have been at each other's throats, but instead we colluded to feed a Yata-eater, however different our motives. Abri supported Clot's Yata-dependence, still hoping to recruit him as a foot soldier in some perverse quest for balance, while I wanted that hybrid healthy enough to lead Smoke to our next round of customers.

The remains of my friends and colleagues were delivered to me in wrapped packages. I prayed over the people I lost and left them beside Smoke's shuttered doorway, between jerking carriage springs. They fed Clot while the Destiny I brought got stashed away for the trip. Whatever Smoke did with him, she wasn't doing it drugged.

Her market stall emptied of faces real and recreated. Her landscapes and horizons disappeared. No one fussed. Traders traveled, though most now booked their wares on the Iron Messenger. Smoke would run her cart up switchbacks to Rudder Pass, swing past the Pavilion, and arrive in Alvav, using the same east gate bridge her mother had crossed to fight in the Games and to leave her mixed-blood daughter behind.

That trip would bring Clot, invisible inside layers of invented woods, as close as a real predator hybrid could get to standing on the Pavilion's equally painted stage.

After they left, I gathered together portraits Smoke had done of my three oldest children, the ones TelZodo had helped raise. I walked them past the stone walls separating my operations from the rest of the Grange, crunching on hard-packed snow with fallow fields to either side. I barely noticed when the farm dropped behind, or when I crossed a locked-down marketplace and took the long, curving road to the Rotunda.

Tel was home, but he was busy meeting with Abri. My brother's muffled voice reached me from inside the dormitory, impassioned but indistinct, leaving me nothing to do but set my peace offering at the scribe's doorstep and go home.

CHAPTER 33

Midwinter

Abri

The Second Covenant took form over the winter. I spoke with Ata's voice and TelZodo captured it like a sparrow in a snare, reading back to me words that I didn't remember uttering. How could I? I had been someone else.

Leaving the Rotunda was like stepping into a blast furnace compared to the Cold Time. I wanted to throw off my robes and walk bare-chested through Crossroads. Let someone else sweep down the streets in my black wool and dancing embroideries, these trappings of sacred office.

The Dirt People hadn't worn pictograms. Ata taught me to stitch together strips of Masari pelt, paying careful attention to the nap of protective undercoat, before I added heavy ruffs of neck fur and fine torso hairs. That was the clothing he had worn. In the secrecy of my sanctuary I worked furs as multicolored as my robes, not for ornamentation's sake but to weather the chase I tried to reawaken.

With Clot gone I placed my hopes in BrushBurn, who kept refusing my offers of meat. More than nourishment was at issue here. More Masari had to shoulder the burden of predation. BrushBurn wasn't learning how to hunt just for himself, he wanted to pass those skills on. More than that, he wanted to pass on the *need* to hunt, at a time when so many hungered for its end.

If only he were younger.

I lingered near the windbreak, watching him train. So did Bless, wincing as a blade caught him unawares and he dove, streaking blood across the snow. He leaped up again, his knife in his other hand.

For someone his size and age, the man was surprisingly agile. "I didn't know he was ambidextrous."

"He wasn't."

"He's a fast learner."

Bless leaned into my robes and whispered, "He's proved his point."

I didn't have the heart to tell her he hadn't. That was a debate best left to the two of them. "BrushBurn's better at marksmanship than at sparring. He should concentrate more on his strengths."

She clutched me tighter. "What makes you think he has a choice?"

"HigherBrook had a choice. He took lookout duty at the end."

"My father was different, Abri. He had years of hunting experience and he was a hero. BrushBurn's remembered here as a meat trader from Promontory if he's remembered at all."

I tried to hear shouted instructions. Rifles discharged in the distance. Traps sprang. I had watched exercises like these on both sides of the meadow for almost all my life. I had practiced them almost from the time I could walk. BrushBurn moved better on ice and rock than anyone I knew, but our hunts rarely extended above the treeline. Our battleground was the forest.

Bless tensed when BrushBurn fell again, but then he reappeared, slashing. He fainted well.

She let loose a breathless laugh. "Do you know what's funny, Abri? He's committed some of the most disgusting acts in our valley's history, and they're what's keeping him alive. All that smuggling and all that flesh peddling taught him the terrain, otherwise he'd know only the desert. All that travel made him hardy. I'm thankful for those disgusting acts. I must be crazy."

I had to smile as I squeezed her shoulder. "You're haven't come close."



The sounds of training camps on both sides of the meadow mingled farther down the windbreak on my way home. I hunched over a sitting rock and listened until Yata and Masari voices and artillery became a buzz half-lulling me to sleep. Snow dropped from needles and dusted my shoulders and head. Tranquil echoes of battle drills.

In two days, six young men and four young women would stand before me, stiff-backed and proud as I inducted them as Preservers. Those newly tattooed elite, their deep blue ink still fresh, would swear to protect Basc while

dealing the Masari a merciful death. Just as I had, longer ago than I want to remember.

How could I convince them that we had to protect Basc from itself?

I tramped among my people as Ata and The Honorable One fought for my soul and made me a walking war zone. Where did that leave Abri?

Alone, I should think.

My mother's printing press disgorged its usual propaganda as I neared her home. We had the ceremony to review and the amphitheater to prepare. Even with its old interior walls knocked down, the visitor's hut became more crowded with every induction. Calling it an amphitheater did not increase its girth.

I expected Zai to meet me with her usual brusque embrace. I did not expect to find Piri at the door. She tapped on my arm, *Your mother's resting.*

With our pending show of strength? Zai thrived on these events. "Is she ill?"

No.

Her lips made a thin line as she turned and led me to my mother's office. Zai remained in uniform despite the late hour and didn't seem at all tired. On the contrary, her desk was littered with busywork. Piri was the one looking worn as she retired to a seat in the corner.

I sat opposite my mother. "What happened?"

"Your wives miss you, that's all. I've spoken with them. Don't worry about me."

Zai had never been the type to lecture me on domestic responsibility. But she was right. I'd been distant from my family ever since Gria's death and my move into the sanctuary. Who wanted a man who used a sheath, when Basc celebrated the births of children it wouldn't have to sacrifice? Only Preservers and the condemned faced Masari in the far woods now.

That didn't explain my mother's sudden interest in my home life, or the way she avoided my gaze. She focused instead on Iron Messenger revenue projections and Liberty Farm tallies, including food exports to Skedge to feed its canyon expeditions.

I turned away from broadsides tacked to the walls. "Piri, I'm happy to see you, but why are you here?"

She spelled in the air, *I'm here as a friend.*

She had trouble looking at me, too.

"Four expeditions." Zai lifted parchment and frowned. "No sign of the canyon Yata, or of their remains."

Piri snapped her fingers for attention. When Zai looked up, she gestured, *Too many years gone and too many false trails.*

"Tylie's numbers look good, though. He's making the best of our aid packages."

I could have been invisible to them. "I can come back later."

The parchment dropped onto its blotter. Zai leaned back and rubbed red eyes that told me she hadn't slept.

I bent over her scattered accountings and eased her toward me. "Mother, this is about more than talking to my wives. Something's wrong."

She shrugged. Coming from Zai, it was a gesture of hopelessness.

"I'll go home," I promised. "I'll see them. I miss them, too." More than she could imagine. "But I haven't seen you like this since—" Realization dawned. "Since Father died."

She held my hands and traced them, palms to fingers, still not looking up. "You have no idea how proud I am of you, Abri." Her voice flattened. "How much I love you."

"You've sacrificed—"

She shook her head. "But Gria—Gria walked in the afterlife. She brought it to us and let us walk with her. That's why we loved her so much. She let us in, Abri."

I thought I understood. "I've been too distant from our people."

"Gria *chose* you." She squeezed so hard my hands hurt. "You are The Honorable One. I can't change however the gods speak to you. I can't tell you

what to do. But, Abri, we need the afterlife. You carry so much death in you. Tell me we have more than that."

"Mother." I worked a hand free and cupped her cheek. Her eyes wavered. She still couldn't look at me. "The gods don't bring me the peace they brought to Gria. They bring me strife. As much death as I already carry, they would have me carry more."

She whispered, "Gods forgive us for unleashing it."

"I've never seen you so troubled."

She looked past my shoulder, toward Piri, and for a moment I could gaze into Zai's eyes. She was a woman trapped in the middle, reflecting back all the agony I felt. "Mother, what's wrong?"

She shook her head, wincing. A hoarse sigh burbled up as she folded her hands on her papers. "Abri, do you remember the night TripStone shot your father?"

"Barely." I'd felt as confused then as now. "You didn't want me to see how upset you were."

Her voice climbed as a tear formed. "You asked me if he was gone."

"You said yes."

"No, Abri." Her fingers knotted together until her breathing leveled out. "I couldn't say yes, it was too hard. I told you that without him the Masari would die, and you asked me why they couldn't just die." She laughed a little. "It was such a simple, innocent question. *Why can't they just die?* You had no idea how much we needed them under the Covenant. How utterly helpless we were."

She worked her hands free and spread them across her papers. "*This* is how far we've come. *This* shows how much we don't need them any more."

I twisted in my seat and looked back at Piri. Her husband Ghost was Masari.

She answered my unspoken concern with the forgiving smile of a Destiny Farm Yata who'd seen everything.

I turned back to my mother. "We still need the Masari. That is what the gods are telling me. But our people are not ready for what the gods want them

to hear." I swallowed. "It's also why I avoid my wives and let them turn to Psalm."

"Why?" she asked. "Because his seed is better than yours?"

"Because we are over-seeding, Mother."

"He more than makes up for your absence." She seemed to melt in her chair. "He's filled your wives, Abri. Be with them."

It was more a plea than a command.



First I would shuck my robes in the sanctuary and change into the clothes of an ordinary citizen. No uniform. No guns. I would leave The Honorable One and Ata behind and walk from my sacred hut into a household raucous with children, all of them precious. I would ignore the gods and silence the voices inside me that screamed *No more!*

If my wives were filled, I could go to them bare and they wouldn't push me away. I could enjoy Psalm's tall tales and his jolly fertility, but I would hold my tongue about his sister. Whatever BrushBurn meant to Bless, I wanted no rumors circulating around Basc of any kind of an attachment.

If necessary, I would be the only one who was happy for them.

For now, I would just be happy, and hope that was enough to alleviate Zai's distress.

I avoided the hand prints of Ata and his daughters and circled in toward my room. Dirt People symbols wavered in the heat vented from lanterns. They became pretty pictures all around me as I willfully forgot their meanings.

They could be simple art. I could be a simple man.

Far from focusing religious power, the sanctuary became only an odd little room festooned with stippled bones. Chairs, a small table, a raised pallet. A box whose long-buried Destiny Farm meat had been replaced by paper. Manifestos and Death decks, narratives and scriptures. A little shrine. A little hearth.

The weight of a thousand generations infusing torch-lit adobe.

What could that mean to a little boy standing at the threshold, listening to his baby brother whimper? I still didn't know. Best to just drop my robes on the chair by the bed, dress in plainer wool, and breathe the crisp air outside as I became one with my people. I almost didn't register the footfalls growing nearer. I'd forgotten how well this room ferried all sound to me.

I knew that relaxed gait. I could close my eyes and picture Mala's mild appraisal as she passed the pictograms, hands clasped behind her back. Stout, muscular legs. Lips like dark fruit that could open astonishingly wide. She had known me before my blue Preserver band was needled into my forehead, after only my first couple of kills. I'd made love to her with blood on my hands and she married me anyway. But that had been Masari blood.

I met her at the entrance to the sanctuary and wrapped her in my arms.

She clutched me. "I couldn't wait."

I nuzzled her ear. "Let's go home."

"Not home. Here."

I hadn't been intimate with her in so very long. Why not here? But then, all these bones surrounded us. "It's not the most seductive place."

"You're with me. That's all that matters."

She caught my hand and drew it toward loosened trousers. I caressed a smooth mound, modest and lovely and just shy of quickening. Psalm's sixth child with her. The gods would demand that it be hunted down. How could I possibly do the same?

In a moment I was on my knees, kissing her navel. Her fingers twined through my hair. A tapered fluttering, more nervous than usual. It was like kissing Tezani all over again, through skin and womb, before she was born. I hugged Mala's belly to my face and pictured the bloody girl who had emerged from it, the child that was ours.

"Abri."

She uttered my name like a prayer. I grasped and carried her to the bed. Her stomach lifted higher as she lay down. She untied her shirt, her breasts darker and swollen, then freed me from my breeches. I dove into a sweetness I'd almost forgotten.

She laughed and sighed, "No sheath."

"No sheath."

"No fur."

I murmured, "You said you liked Psalm's fur."

"I do, Abri, but feeling you again is so...soft..."

She surged around me and the world reduced to just the two of us. No bones, no missives, no symbols. But echoes from farther out, circling in.

Anvi. Tiris. Izyrel.

And, farther back, Raist.

I groaned, "We're going to break the bed."

I wanted to laugh. My mother didn't trust me to go to my own house. Otherwise, why would all my wives be coming here?

I request an audience with The Honorable One...

I stifled a guffaw.



I don't know who stoked the hearth, who brought the food. For a day and a night, nothing existed but the six of us. Two babies were already quickening. Three. I could close my eyes and remember whose arms were Anvi's, how Izyrel's voice warmed the base of my spine, how Tiris tasted like lakeflower.

Raist darted in among them like a sprite, teasing. I grabbed for her and the others moved to make room for us. They closed in again, until I couldn't tell whose flesh I held, whose pregnancy I caressed, whose moistness heated me to bursting. I swam in their whispers. Their moans washed over me in waves. One musk folded into another as they kissed my closed eyes, tongued spiced berries into my mouth, rode me.

If I listened hard enough I could pick Raist's voice out from the others. She groaned, squeezing harder and swelling my groin to the size of the room, but that couldn't be. I didn't care. I reached for her and groped Izyrel instead,

while Mala's hand crawled beneath me and I remembered again what her fingers could do.

We cried out together, Raist loudest of all. And we began again.

They fondled me. They massaged me. They plied me with fruits as I rested. They had me so besotted I didn't see the melancholy in their eyes. I wouldn't know until later why they hadn't brought me home. Ten hands stroked me. Five loins pulled me in and then changed places. And every time I came, they made sure that I was blind.

They turned me around and around, until I was certain I had kissed five mounds instead of four. Only near the end did they ease away, leaving me to slide my full length into Raist alone.

Lithe, flat-stomached Raist. She wrapped her legs around me as I softened. Anvi and Mala clasped her hands to either side of us as I realized their deception.

If a child didn't come from me, it would come from Psalm. The numbers wouldn't change. It wouldn't matter. I clung to Raist, sore and spent and deliriously happy, while a high-pitched chorus rang the inside of my skull, chanting *mine, mine, mine*.

I brushed a tear from Mala's cheek and tried to reconcile her sadness with her grin.



They were gone in the morning. I prepared for the induction, soaking off the scents of the previous day and meditating on what it meant to pursue our predators with blood lust and strike them down with tenderness.

I had performed only six Masari kills by the time I took my Preserver's oath. But I had taken the oath young, just as I had entered the hunting grounds young. I wanted to be with my mother. I wanted to face the danger my father had faced and transcended. Ulik had looked upon an armed Masari and given himself up for reverent, painless slaughter.

I wanted to look upon an armed Masari and end misery. A Preserver trained harder because killing mercifully took more skill. Anyone could be sloppy with weapons and still take a life. As a young adult I had inflicted gruesome deaths and screamed in the Soala afterward, as though grieving my

own kin. Only then could I face my victims' survivors, ready to hear their Remembrances.

Zai, who never took the oath, ended her training with me and brought me to the camp that made me an elite warrior. The night before my induction twelve years ago, I sat without flinching as dye-tipped needles bore into my brow to the rhythm of chanted prayers.

On the night I cavorted with my wives, ten new Preservers learned what it was like to have their foreheads on fire. To want to spring up and dance as adrenalin coursed through them, exulting in their new status as agents of mercy.

How I envied them. How I wanted to believe what they still believed.

The uniform I pulled on made me a soldier. The woolen robes covering them made me a priest. Lumpy on a chair in the far corner, the coat of pelts sat in shadow awaiting my return to them and to Ata. My back iced when I doused the hearth.

Raist could be carrying my child even now! The thought alone warmed me and made me feel blissfully naked again.

I floated out the door, toward my somber ceremony.



Did my mother sing the Dirt People battle hymns the loudest of everyone, or was that only her proximity to me? One moment our pendants of braided skins writhed like serpents, the next they curled up into tight little balls. It must have been a vision from the gods. I couldn't tell if the strips of Yata and Masari leather tried to strangle each other or pull apart.

Zai choked on her speech about merciful killing, but she'd always had trouble with diplomacy. Her eyes pleaded when she looked to me to deliver the benediction, and in a moment I was blessing the very activity I wanted to restrain.

How could I convince our finest warriors not to kill Masari, when Masari were still killing us? I couldn't be more proud of that uniformed line as I pinned squares of pelt above their hearts. *May this Masari's spirit guide your aim and your compassion, until such time as the gods decree an end to our mutual sacrifice.*

According to my brother, the gods had finally decreed it. But we were trading one form of sacrifice for another that almost no one wanted to acknowledge.

Chairs, for one. This had been a smaller room when I was a boy, and I'd watched eleven warriors honored at my first Preserver ceremony. Ten stood before me now, in an enlarged hall with standing room only.

Faces beamed throughout an amphitheater crammed with relatives of the new Preservers. The inductees remained at stiff attention as I removed their ceremonial kerchiefs and exposed a string of tattooed lines, but I could smell waves of glee.

I had taken for granted the presence of my own family members, who dutifully attended all of my official functions. This time I didn't notice their absence until Zai's lieutenant wove through the throng. Bodies pressed more tightly together to give him space as he carried his stone plate holding ten mouthfuls of Masari flesh.

Aside from my mother, none of my blood kin attended the ceremony. I was still trying to puzzle out why, forcing myself to pay attention instead of scanning the crowd as she took the plate. Despite the stifling room, the usual chill prickled my skin as she held the meat high and intoned, "The balance of life and death in this valley now resides with you. Remember that as you consume your prey."

Balance? I almost groaned aloud, we'd gone so far off-kilter. Zai watched the ritual consumption of Masari with an air of desperation. Bloodthirsty, even for her, but not with the hate I remembered from after the massacre, when I was little. Something else made her eyes gleam.

Underneath all her posturing, she looked sick.

She kept her back to me as we congratulated Basc's latest crop of protectors. Two would come to me at dusk, to touch the gods through a fellow murderer. One would meditate alone. The other seven would pray as a team, the way they trained and the way they fought. For now, all ten descended into the arms of their kin groups, and for a few minutes their excited chatter turned the amphitheater festive.

I reached across the empty space and eased my mother back around. "Tell me what's wrong."

She said only, "We have prisoners."

That didn't surprise me. The Destiny underground had been growing ever since Evit established his operations in Crossroads. Banishment to the far woods made good theater when it followed a Preserver ceremony. After honoring our citizens who had been trained to hunt Masari, we witnessed the disgrace of criminals sentenced to be hunted by them.

"How many prisoners?"

"Four, caught in safe house raids. You're lucky you were in Crossroads at the time and not here."

I nodded. "You wanted them alive for this spectacle."

For a second I thought she would strike me. Instead, she made a smart pivot and shouted, "Fall in!" Years of battle conditioning carried her voice over the hubbub.

The new Preservers withdrew from their families and assembled along space cleared against the side wall. Guards at the rear opened tall oak doors as jubilation fell to silence. We all watched as relatives of the condemned filed out of the amphitheater, straight-backed and stiff, breaking all kinship ties as they crossed the threshold. They disowned no one, mourned no one. A criminal exiled to the far woods became nonexistent.

At a nod from Zai, one of the new inductees broke ranks and strode toward the doors. He broke his own kinship tie, his face hard set. His nine comrades would deliver the prisoners to the killing fields.

The room became cavernous as the crowd thinned, leaving no doubt that my household hadn't come.

I suddenly felt as haggard as my mother looked. When she glanced at me I mouthed, *Who?*

She turned from me and took her position beside the Preserver line. The doors thudded shut.

"Today we gather here to close a wound." Her ragged words hung over those remaining. "Since the beginnings of the Covenant, Yata have died from a drug once called holy. A drug that gave us children raised for sacrifice. A drug used to enslave our distant kin in the arid lands. A drug the people of Basc once blindly loved.

"It kept our people alive, but helplessness is not life. Our people rutted when they could have planted, rutted when they could have built, rutted when they could have learned and invented and expanded our horizons. We had no independence. Worse, we were as dependent as infants on those who consumed us, unable to break free of that stranglehold."

My mother settled into rote delivery, nothing left of her but her speech.

She paced down the line of Preservers, her breaths short. "We thought we practiced freely the same abominations that the Destiny Farm Yata were forced to endure from childhood. But we were not free. Our bodies were not our own. Our children—" She gulped air. "Our children were not our own. We were gods with no power. We fostered a culture of negation. We sacrificed *everything*."

"There are those among us who would rekindle that nightmare." Her gaze shifted from person to person. "The nightmare that claimed Piri for half her life. The nightmare that almost destroyed our beloved Gria. The nightmare re-cast as a miracle because it *might* end Masari hunger, by enslaving Yata women to do nothing more than give suck for them."

"It is still a demon drug. And, unchecked, it *will* destroy us."

A door opened behind me. Shackles *thunked* on wood and I ached to turn around. I didn't dare. I would grieve soon enough. Neither my mother nor I had the luxury or the excuse of exiting the amphitheater and breaking kinship ties to the condemned, because we were the ones doing the banishing. The condemned would leave us first. Their scents eddied in a tangle of defiance and horror. One strand stood out, sharper than the others. I grew weak at the knees.

The air in the room shifted as recognition dawned on the faces I could see. Zai kept her back to me as she pronounced sentence. "These four prisoners are hereby relinquished to the gods and are no longer under Basc's protection. They are returned to the wild, and they are returned as prey. From this moment forward they are no longer Dorii. Roia. Vahd." Her shoulders twitched. "Or Tezani. As Destiny negated our existence as people, so too do we negate these people's existence as Yata. I sacrifice *nothing*."

Her last words came out brittle as I spun toward the condemned. My daughter stood bound, my blood child, the first baby Mala carried and a

mother herself, whose carpentry outfitted half our neighbors, whose culinary skills rivaled my brother's, whose laughter I thought could cure anything.

She showed me only her profile. My cheekbones. My nose. A blade sliced into my dumbfounded body and carved me throat to crotch.

I couldn't ask her how. I couldn't ask her why. I didn't know if her averted glare was anger at Zai, or me, or herself, or whoever had been careless enough to give the safe house away. I didn't know her at all.

She would know what to pick in the far woods, what to eat, for as long as she could survive the hunt. I at least had that certainty, that tiny speck of familiarity. That piece of her. I clutched it to my heart, delivered empty prayers to impotent gods, and waited for visions that wouldn't come as the Preservers led the prisoners away.

My mother's fingers barely registered on my arm as they tapped, *You will tell Evit what he has done to you.*

Through the blood roar in my head I watched the crowd drain out through opened doors, and for a terrifying moment the walls seemed to tumble in. Only Piri remained, ready for Zai's stern façade to disintegrate. She grasped my mother around her waist and guided her out of the hall.

CHAPTER 34

TelZodo

A wild man beat on my door and broke it open before I'd crossed the room. Abri staggered in, uniform ripped and eyes unfocused. After hurling inarticulate curses at the gods, he fell against my dresser and pounded his head against a drawer.

He had the strength, skill, and resolve to bash his own brains out. I rushed to my dining alcove, grabbed a brandy bottle by the neck, and tried to ignore my pens skittering across the floor. I pulled the cork, wondering what had driven him here instead of to the Soala.

"Take this."

His nose led him to the liquor. Abri took the brandy from me and upended it into his mouth. I noted his blood-spotted feet as I bent and gathered my scattered writings into a pile. By some miracle he'd avoided frostbite, running across the meadow bootless. That meant a hasty exit, self-mortification, or vision-induced forgetfulness. I couldn't tell.

He stumbled to my pallet and dropped onto linen, nursing the drink with his eyes closed. I pulled up a chair as his guzzling slowed. He used both hands to steady the bottle between stained trouser legs.

He sounded as though he'd swallowed glass. "I spent the night with my family."

I waited. Normal visits to Abri's family didn't cause this.

New bruises shifted as he blinked. "Nobody mentioned her name. Ever. They carried on as though nothing had happened at all, but so slowly I couldn't breathe. Her children already knew not to ask about her and they're so *young*, TelZodo. But they knew. And I couldn't. Stop. Thinking about her."

His eyes were terrible to look at. "Who?"

"And I realized—you've seen the hand prints under Ata's in my hut? The smaller ones, his daughters'? You never learn their names. Nothing in any

of the scriptures mentions their names. You know his. We're named after him, the Yata all bear Ata inside. But nobody. Knows. Theirs."

He took another swig.

"Tell me what happened to Tezani."

He swallowed a sob. "She's not Tezani any more."

By the time he finished telling me what happened, the bottle was four-fifths drained. I pried it out of his hands and set it aside.

He whispered, "I created this."

"Nonsense, Abri. You didn't break the law and you didn't pass the sentence."

"I *sanctified* it!" Sweaty fingers wavered before my face. "That's four more bodies for the Masari. Four fewer Yata to take up space and deplete the land. Four fewer Yata to make and distribute Destiny. I've fulfilled the wishes of the gods, and all it took was driving her into oblivion." He lurched up, swaying. "I'm too drunk to aim now, I can go with her—"

I grabbed him before he reached the broken door.

"Let me go, you *wyakkak* half-Woolie, I'll kill you."

"Go ahead."

He caught my leg with his and we crashed to the floor. The sharp blow rattling my skull reminded me how well Basc trained its Preservers, even pickled ones. I scrambled after Abri, thanking the gods for my big Masari bones.

The bottle flew as I tackled him, raining brandy on SpiderLark's youthful exploits. They needed rewriting, anyway. My desk corner bit into my arm as I shielded Abri's head. I winced as an inkwell dropped and shattered, but managed to pull him away from the door again and narrowly missed getting a kick in the groin.

I couldn't pin him for long, no matter what my size. Ripping his shirt was the best I could do, but that was only fair. He'd ripped mine. When his breech ties came away in my hand I realized he'd flee the Rotunda naked if he could. I threw myself against him with a yell and wrapped my long limbs

around him as the desk drawers came loose and more wood splintered around us.

Abri reached behind me and twisted. In a moment the muzzle of BrushBurn's old revolver passed my neck fur. Cold metal bit my jaw.

I gasped, "It's not loaded."

He made sure I was looking at him, then shook his head and cocked the hammer back.

I tightened my hold. If he pulled the trigger, he'd be free to go to his own death. Wherever I fell in his notion of balance, I wasn't producing more bodies of any kind. Not Yata, not Masari, not hybrid. He'd have removed an unimportant player from that scheme.

"Your turn." My lips couldn't manage anything past the stutter.

I don't know how long we lay there, his sweat cold and my mouth dry. Masari hunters would be roaming the far woods by now, informed of the availability of easy prey. But it was a huge forest, with plenty of room for uncertainty.

Abri eased the hammer forward and the passage of time resumed. His muscles relaxed into a moan. "What am I, TelZodo?"

My hold stayed firm. "You're asking the wrong person, Abri. I don't know what I am, either."

"You're not as calm as you sound."

"Noticed that, did you?"

The door creaked. SpiderLark peeked in, wrinkling his nose at the mixture of alcohol and urine. He'd probably waited for the noise to die away. I told him with a glare not to say anything stupid.

Abri took one look at him and growled, "Don't you dare touch my daughter."

"He doesn't hunt. Remember?"

"You heard what I said."

Abri could have been referring to anonymous cubes in brine.

"SpiderLark won't run out of his supply for a while yet, and he can eat Sustainer Masari. Tezani is safe from him."

I didn't care that she didn't have a name in Basc any more. She still had one with me.

The singer surveyed the ruin of my dormitory and said, "I'll get another bottle."



I had misgivings about leaving Abri alone with SpiderLark, but the Preserver was a man of his word. He would stay put in the Rotunda. I would deliver his unpleasant news to Evit, whose entire household had moved into Crossroads. What was Zai thinking when she told her son to run that gauntlet at a time like this?

My guests were asleep, draped over each other on my narrow bed. Three empty goldberry brandy bottles, two of them broken, added their dregs to other fluids soaking into parchment. I'd clean the mess later. I stripped off my stained, torn clothes and scrubbed myself down with a kerchief dipped in well water before changing into fresh.

BrushBurn's old revolver held a single bullet, and no amount of scouring my memory told me when Abri had slipped it in. For a moment I entertained the thought of leaving it loaded.

The cartridge went into my pocket, the empty gun on my belt. I certainly wasn't going to leave it here. Into my other pocket went my face mask to block ambient Destiny fumes. I reduced Abri's message to a list of four names and tucked that slip of parchment next to the bullet.

There. Ready or not, I was set to visit my former co-husband, my ex-wives, and other people's children. I grabbed my coat, closed my broken door behind me as best I could, and made my way toward the Grange and its happy corner of hell.



By all accounts, the Destiny Farm Museum did brisk business in the canyon, but it didn't have what Evit had. The museum had a burlap bag and a handful of old brown dregs in a glass case; Evit had a storeroom of full-

strength poison. The museum sat in a pretty oasis in a pocket of fresh air, while Evit's facility sat in a smoggy valley. On good days I could see which mountain was being demolished.

The museum charged admission to fund arid lands initiatives, but Evit promised the Masari their wildest dreams and proffered free samples to lure Yata customers in. Six years ago, the thought of stepping into Destiny Farm had terrified me. Now I would rather dive into those canyon ruins than enter their living counterpart sprawled across my own back yard.

I was most afraid of seeing Evit again. How I loved that man. How I wanted to kill him. Thank the gods I carried an unloaded weapon.

The stone barrier separating the Destiny facility from the rest of the Grange made it look like a walled compound. New snow melted on slick rock, as though sexual heat permeated the property itself, but that came from the composters below ground. It explained why the laughter coming from inside sounded like summer.

BrushBurn could smell the drug from as far away as my father's farm house, and my mother's nose was keener. Most times the prevailing winds brought Basc's smog over here, but how often did they turn tail and waft an undercurrent of Destiny the other way?

At first I didn't realize I'd made a fist, bunching the mask in my pocket. I couldn't tell if the prickling on my neck came from fear or from traces in the air, only that I'd snugged and knotted the cloth and filter around my nose and mouth before my legs could take another step.

Then I strode toward the wall, trying not to hyperventilate.

The land opened up inside the barrier, filled with crisscrossed footpaths and neat but disorienting lines of cottages. Tall and short buildings lay as if thrown together, Yata proportions jangling against Masari, until their alleyways ended at fallow fields and a frozen marsh. I could tell the processing houses by the pinkish smoke rising from their chimneys. Even through my mask the air turned vaguely salty, with a dark sweetness at its core. The ground became more of a cushion as my boots tramped through slush. I fought against vertigo and steered away from the manufacturing quarter, toward the residential end.

Toward late winter, with promises of snow in the air, the people around me strolled with their coats open, half-masked Yata side by side with

unmasked Masari. I couldn't help staring at the cloth flapping around the Yata's faces, all of them flushed with mild arousal that could easily be mistaken for a reaction against the cold.

I had once used that same relaxed gait as I'd prowled the streets of Crossroads and Basc, seeking a body to press against. Next to the Meethouse revels, the scene here was tame, almost proper. I shivered inside a coat that remained closed and called stiff greetings muffled by a mask that stayed secure.

"TelZodo! You've come!" Boots slapped and slid on icy film as I neared Evit's home. Eyes crinkled above white cloth as his oldest daughter gripped my waist.

I lifted and hugged Ijil to me before I realized what I was doing. "You look wonderful."

She laughed into my hair. "And you look petrified."

"Can you blame me?"

She pulled back and studied what she could of my face. "Is it better than being angry?"

"No." I kissed her forehead through my mask and lowered her to the ground. "I'm still angry." I added, quickly, "Not at you."

"No, just at my father. You've singled him out." She pulled on my sleeve. "The house is very well caulked. Let's get you inside and we can take these things off."

Now her movements were stiff, too. We didn't speak to each other as she led me to Evit's door. Nobody had ever taught me how to mix small talk with terrible news.

My former co-husband had thought of everything. Ijil and I removed our coats, boots, and masks in an anteroom sealed off from the rest of the house. The intake flues were all filtered. Even the Destiny room, which had been integrated into every Yata household when the Covenant existed, was set apart from the others here. The doorways were all my size. The architecture itself screamed reconciliation.

I said, "I'm here only to deliver a message."

Ijil shot me a sharp look. "You're here to stay for dinner."

Fine. If that's what it took. Then I would go home.

She added, "We are still your family, *dobresso*."

I wanted to tell her that I hadn't been her non-blood father for eleven years, but we were both hurting. I didn't want to make my job any worse than it already was. Smelling Evit's cooking as we neared the dining room only reminded me of his culinary protégé. If Tezani were still alive, she would be finding ways to shelter herself against the night by now.

Ijil left my side to greet the co-husbands who'd joined Evit's household in my wake. Soon, they and my ex-wives surrounded me, and my other non-blood children, and my non-blood grandchildren, as though I were paying them a long-overdue social call.

"It's about time you got here."

I turned toward the smoky alto and stared over the others at WingLeaf, who cradled a tiny bundle in her arms. A bare-breasted Yata wetnurse stood beside her, attentive as a bodyguard. "Where's ClayPack?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Training your friend BrushBurn." Her glance shifted to the baby. "Come meet your kin. This is DogLake."

So, my blood was here after all. Yata children gripped my pants legs as I stepped to my Masari cousin and gazed down at her sleeping son. "He has your mouth." Broad, like mine. The boy was only a few days old. I couldn't tell if his translucent down would darken into my family's plum and lavender shades or into ClayPack's ruddy brown. "You honor my father with his name."

"Ghost works to end dependence, too. Clay and I respect that."

Her storm-colored scrutiny was another thing she and my father had in common. It demanded respect from me, too. For her, for ClayPack, for their choices. For Evit, their savior. I was on the losing end of an argument I didn't know how to navigate.

Everyone surrounded me except for Evit, who still labored in the kitchen. At least my cousin and her mate could make use of the high counters he'd installed. I hadn't seen WingLeaf or ClayPack at the farm house in more than a season. They must have been living here full time.

The throng let me go. I sought out Masari-sized cutlery in the kitchen and began cubing vegetables. To the side and lower down, Evit's hands manipulated spices in a marinade that made my mouth water. His dark hair dipped toward one eye, daring me to brush it back.

"Welcome to Paradise."

At first I didn't realize he'd spoken. "Is that what you call this place?"

"I didn't name it." His profile frowned. "Whatever else you blame me for, you can't blame me for that."

Murmurs and laughter trailed in from the next room, and the sounds of children held back. Hard chunks thudded into a bowl before I returned to my chopping board.

"Here's how this is supposed to work." His lips curled, infusing his high tenor with false jollity. Herbs swirled into liquid. "You're here because you missed me. You missed *us*. We have our disagreements, but we can work them out. I've adopted members of your family, just as your parents once adopted me. We're all working toward the same goal, we're just doing it differently, and you know I couldn't have come this far without them. And no matter what's happened between us, Tel, I still love you. You came here to reassure me that our friendship still means something." He trained a wary, hopeful look on me. "How close am I to the truth?"

Closer than I wanted to admit.

"I'm here on behalf of Abri." I dried off my hands, fished out the parchment, and unfolded it on Evit's counter. "He wasn't on this raid, or I'm sure you'd have seen the bodies by now. He and your mother had the job of banishing them to the hunting grounds."

CHAPTER 35

Evit

I don't remember what happened first. My family rushing in and my driving them back out. My soaked pants and shirt, brown splatters everywhere. The yelling I didn't realize was mine. Part of me marveled that I could hurl a bowl that far. It thundered against the wall, showering clay and liquid beside the hearth.

I'd lost committed people before. Roia and the others knew the risks they were taking, now that they lived and worked on enemy land. They might have been my followers, but they were the brave ones. I shuddered every morning to think I might find one of them on my doorstep, brought by Abri in the night.

But nobody had told me about Tezani joining the cause.

And I was so *vyakkek* tired of being the villain.

"How could my mother do this?" I shook wet parchment before Tel's face. "Don't tell me I'm responsible for this, because I'm not! I didn't make Zai's damned policy, I didn't force anyone to work for me, and I sure as hell didn't try to recruit my niece!"

I slammed the paper back on the counter as TelZodo dripped beside me. He looked over at the shards as though they could give him the answer.

"Abri must hate me." I tried to wrest something from those troubled brown eyes. "What am I now, an abomination? Did he just stand there and let Zai order his daughter taken away? For the gods' sakes, Tezani's her granddaughter!"

Tel coughed into a spice-laced hand. "He sanctified it."

"*Why?*"

If anyone tried to take Ijil or any of my other children away from me, I'd have grabbed that giant knife by Tel's arm and plunged it into their hearts. I'd have done it to protect Tezani, if I could cross into Basc without being killed. And I wouldn't have thought for a second about variables, or sample

sizes, or animalcules. "It makes *no sense*, TelZodo! Destiny is not evil. I don't force it on anyone. I swear to the gods, it's saving this valley!"

He fingered a cube of squash. "I'm not so sure about that."

"Fuck the longitudinal studies. I can't make FlyAway and those Masari babies grow any faster!"

"It's not that."

The worry in his voice made me shiver. "Tel, what happened to you in Promontory?"

He bent to wring liquid from his hair and didn't look at me.

"You're friends with BrushBurn and I know his theories. Abri tried to recruit Clot for his predatory skills. What the hell are you trying to do?"

"I've delivered your brother's news."

I grabbed his pickled shirt as he tried to walk past me. The Masari knife was a sword in my hand.

He looked down at me and choked back a nervous laugh. "Abri almost shot me with my gun earlier. You two really are Zai's sons."

What I most wanted to do at that moment would only have proved his point.

"Then take it!" I shoved the handle into his palm. "You want predation? I'm here for you! I'm pre-marinated for you! Go ahead, cut me up and be done with it, because I can't stand this estrangement from you, from Abri, and from your parents any longer. And if taking my life will bring Tezani back, then slit me open and feed me to HeadWind!"

People shouted outside and somebody banged on the wall as I stood spread-eagled before a man I couldn't look at any more. I yelled back, "I'm fine! He won't kill me, he hates the sight of blood!"

Tel's knife clattered against the counter as he whirled away from me. The cubes of vegetables went flying.

I murmured, "Dinner is served."

I don't know what broke my heart more. Now I had another rift I couldn't patch, and the new divide between my brother and me was especially ghastly.

All that wasted food only made it worse. At least I could clean and save the vegetables. Twenty-three years ago I'd have gladly sucked the marinade off the floor. I'd have eaten it off our clothes. I could still taste bitter acorns in my mouth, which were delicacies compared to the skeletal vermin stumbling into my extended family's traps.

But I ate. Because Abri had given me his food. A groan poured from me as I sank to the floor and let precious calories soak into my pants.

TelZodo lowered himself beside me, catching his breath.

All I could say was, "You've never starved."

He blinked at me past long arms folded across his knees. "That's Abri's point."

"What? Feeding the predators?"

"Avoiding overpopulation."

I would have laughed, but it was so damned tragic. "You'd be surprised at how far a little food can go. This is a big valley." I waved aimlessly toward a nonexistent window. "Those are big mountains."

A wail started up in the quiet. DogLake's upset gathered steam as we sat in our peaceful little mess. I laid my cheek on a wet sleeve. "Go ahead. Blame me for his crying, too."

The howls diminished as WingLeaf carried her baby to the Destiny room. That's all I needed now, for Tel to hear a wetnurse in ecstasy. The rustling outside the kitchen picked up, peppered with impromptu games and inventive riddles that masked drug-induced reactions. I thanked the gods for my family.

Tel said, "BrushBurn can smell this place from the farm house."

What did he want me to do? Where did he want me to go? Both our kin were suffering now, but that didn't erase the simple truth that both our kin had suffered from other causes, long before I'd mixed my first batch of aphrodisiac. Turning grief into a sacrament didn't stop it from being grief.

I combed a vinegary slurry through my hair. "Tel, did it ever occur to you that Abri's visions are the fears of a child? I hate thinking of him that way, but it's true. I can't tell you how many times he saved my life, but it cost him. I didn't know how much until now."

His chops were sticky with finely-chopped leaves. I looked from them to his coppery cheeks, a Yata and a Masari in the same face. "What do *you* believe?"

"I honestly don't know." His brown eyes wavered. "I'm an unbeliever, remember?"

"So is Ghost, but you don't see him siding with BrushBurn."

Tel whispered, "He has his own fears to contend with." He fished a wayward cube from the floor and popped it into his mouth. The gun on his belt was still shiny amidst the muck.

I tried to imagine it in Abri's hand, trained on him. That was easier for me to comprehend than the actual object in front of me. "Did I hear Smoke say you'd shot children?"

He eased his hands behind his head and slouched further down the wall. He answered in a flat voice, "Yes."

"You never told me."

"I didn't tell my father until recently." Spilled brine crept up his shirt. "It's not what happened to me in Promontory, Evit. It's what happened to me in Alvav. Did Yucof ever explain what goes on there?"

"Not enough, obviously." I tried to blink away images of Yucof's corpse on my bed. The gods only knew what other secrets he had taken with him. "Smoke's gone back there, you know."

"She's a trader. Traders travel."

"She kept her cart in Crossroads for six years." The new stiffness in Tel's joints turned him into a tightly-coiled spring. I peered more closely at him. "She's with Clot now."

Tel pushed himself to his feet. He retrieved his bowl and started gathering the scattered vegetables. Busywork and feigned nonchalance. He was

just as transparent now as when he was nine and learning how to be a husband, especially one who shared.

"Tel, she chose him over you, SpiderLark, and me, but it's you she wants. Clot is just a means to an end."

He glanced at me. "What end?"

"Saving the hybrids." Would sopped-up marinade still be useful? I could try. "Making their children non-dependent."

He looked down at the bowl in his hands as though seeing it for the first time.

I asked, "Still blame me for Destiny?"

I couldn't see his face working because he'd turned away, but I could picture it. His wet shirt stuck to his scapulae, making him look bony as he leaned against the counter. I watched his lungs push against his ribs.

I couldn't do anything more. He'd have to figure it out for himself. But if Smoke's mission of mercy assuaged some of his own guilt and made me less of a demon in his eyes, I wasn't about to complain.

He said, "I have to get home."

"You have a home here."

"I know." He grabbed a washcloth. "I'll clean up and then I'll leave."

"Use a fresh one," I said. "I want to see what marinade I can salvage."

He stared at me.

"If all my good works lead us to famine, I want to be prepared."

I don't know how long we locked gazes. If he was searching for sarcasm in my answer, he wasn't going to find any. All I wanted was to save our peoples in the best way I knew how, no matter what nightmares anyone else painted. Who could say that they were right and I was wrong?

I couldn't let him leave me like this. "My tub is yours if you want to scrub that off. And if you stay for dinner, the processing houses will be closed for the night by the time you leave. You'll be safer from the fumes."

He considered it for a moment, then nodded.

At least I could lessen his own fears a bit. It might even be worth a friendship.

CHAPTER 36

Early Spring, Common Year 22

Bless

I had never seen my people so happy. Men strutted. Women waddled, even those who didn't have to. I entered the tavern's heady cloud of ale and listened to repeated toasts proclaiming that Crossroads had attained superiority to Promontory once again. We had found a way to outshine even Parity.

In another tavern, burnt down before I was born, invaders from Promontory had sat here in Crossroads choking on their own hubris. Now all I saw were more Masari being just as raucous, only this time they were my own citizens.

We stockpiled Destiny in the Rotunda. Paradise, now officially named, continued to expand along with every other industry, due to the influx from across the meadow. Every day it seemed another factory was being built on the slopes of another stripped mountain. We might as well have installed piss buckets in the tavern, too, to make our transformation into our former adversary complete.

Worse yet, BrushBurn's numbers were starting to make sense to me.

At first I thought it was only because I worried about him, unable to shake the same mantle of dread I'd always worn whenever my father was off hunting. Maybe I was trying to comfort myself by entertaining the notion that predation was necessary. That way I could point to the caked blood on my friend's fur and say that it was there for a reason.

Did that make my mother's death any nobler? Did it make me miss her any less, because she was one less Yata overrunning the landscape?

Two-thirds of our decisions in the Chamber now centered on the Destiny trade and on issues of procreation. Every day more people marched across the border from Basc, seeking protection from persecution. My desk almost vanished beneath petitions for sanctuary after the spring Lacuna, and our labor force realigned to prepare for the coming population explosion.

Every day I heard another story about another baby suckling "magic milk" and having its diapers collected for analysis, even though I knew exactly how many babies had been born in Crossroads and how many were on the way. No Masari came to term that fast.

But I had trouble believing even solid statistics when I passed a cluster of Yata wetnurses sprawled on the steps of the Rotunda, moaning with pleasure and holding furry babies to their breasts in a show of libidinous solidarity.

FlyAway, going on five years old, still had not taken a single bite of Yata. She sprinted through the streets like the special girl she was, showing off her healthy pelt and her strong bones and daring us to believe that our new reality merited anything less than ecstasy.

Until all the babies weaned, we wouldn't know whether or not they were free of dependence. I had no numbers that proved anything. All I had were tallies of hope in the form of spilled beer and dropped pants. I could count the lanterns shining in windows in the night, sending their invitations into the streets. They made Crossroads into a single, massive Meethouse, as if to prove that Basc claimed no monopoly on sex.

And I had my census numbers from the controlled war in the far woods that had been going on for longer than I'd been alive. I knew how many Yata fell at the hands of our hunters and how many Masari fell at the hands of Preservers. I still kept a calendar of funerals and remembrances, officiating while TelZodo sat motionless and attentive at my side to collect stories about the dead.



"I'm still here."

I almost jumped out from behind my desk when I heard the door open and the greeting I'd been aching for. "I should hope so."

BrushBurn always read the relief behind my attempts at nonchalance, but that didn't stop me from trying. One look at him and I ran for medicines.

"They're superficial wounds." He dropped into a chair. Blood streamed into his eye from a nasty cut. "Don't fuss, Bless. I'll be fine."

"Lean back." I set about cleaning and then dressing his shaggy head. A quick sniff told me that he'd fought harder than usual, this time. "Successful patrol?"

BrushBurn nodded. "Successful enough to let my unit live. I've just earned my next Deliverance meal."

It meant I didn't have to worry about him starving the next time he had to eat Yata. But it was only one meal, and the trauma to his body was the price he had paid for it.

His sadness was clear, but it was the grief of an accomplice. He hadn't done the killing, himself. He faced me and managed a smile. "How was *your* day?"

"Nothing compared to yours."

"We returned through the Grange," he mused. "There's another nursery compound going up."

"I know. The Chamber approved it."

He chortled. "I never expected I'd be moving back to Destiny Farm."

"Shut up and take off your shirt." Beneath stained cloth lay bruised ribs and abrasions. I swallowed my dismay. "Those are rope burns from a spring net."

"Not a spring net. I was disarming a whip drop." He gasped as I checked for breaks, "Got a bit too close."

I tried to imagine his moment of terror when that network of leashed rocks whirled around his torso, but he'd been prepared to cut free before they tightened. The bones under his discolored flesh felt intact. "You were very lucky."

"I know, Bless. I was there."

I wanted to scream, but a blurt would have to do. "I *hate* your books."

"How do you think I feel?" he asked. "I'm the predator. I hate them, too."

"You've got horrible numbers in them."

"They're not horrible if you want the Masari to disappear." He frowned. "Do you still dispute the trends?"

I finished bandaging him. "I'm making tea." We still had some fennel left. I stepped into the kitchen and nudged a crate beneath the shelves.

He limped over as I stepped up. "Bless, your people have made their decision and the rest of the region supports it. Maybe it's better if my kind just went away."

He was talking about half of me. I banged the bottle of seeds on the counter and stepped down.

One cup eased beside it, then another. His furry hand covered my own. "Even if your experiment works and puts an end to hunting, the increase in Masari births won't last. We don't have the resources here to support both kinds of growth, and the Yata are multiplying a lot faster."

"We can expand outward."

"And what if you still need that breast milk?" He reached up and retrieved the teapot. "Wherever the Masari go, we'll need the Yata with us and we'll need the means to make Destiny. Our dependence won't go away, Bless. It will only change form."

"Stop it, BrushBurn. You're speculating."

He spoke to my back as I bent toward the kettle. "Yes, I am. That means that we still have only one proven means of balancing our populations. That is predation."

Such a pretty word for murder. I watched as he tapped in the seeds. A touch of seepage showed through his wrapped head. He was willing to die for his convictions, no matter how much suffering those convictions caused him, both physically and spiritually.

He hobbled to his room and changed into clean clothes as the tea steeped. "It's interesting," he called, "that in their own way, the Covenant fanatics had it right. For all your sheer, stubborn backwardness, you had found a way to keep everything in check."

My pelt fluffed. "Gracious of you."

"I'm not advocating that we return to it. The Covenant worked, but it

worked badly. It fostered superstition and it did away with any kind of scientific inquiry. And believe me, I had never seen such stuffy, pompous sentimentality in all my life as when I met—"

He stopped in the doorway, his face flushing beet red. At first I thought it was the wound.

He turned away and pretended to adjust his shirt. "Never mind."

"What?" I brought our cups to the table, then headed back to the kitchen for the pot. "Crossroads was dying when you were here. Who was so stuffy and pompous?"

When I emerged from the kitchen he looked so nervous I wanted to laugh. "BrushBurn, you almost got killed today. You're more afraid of insulting me than of being shot by a Preserver."

He gentled himself back into his chair as I poured. Then he took a deep drink, holding onto his cup for dear life. "May I speak freely?"

"We're friends. Of course you can speak freely. So, who was the prissy little bombast?"

He choked on his tea. I pounded his back as his face purpled and he wheezed something unintelligible.

I steadied his cup. "The Covenant's gone, BrushBurn. You were here a long time ago. Come on, out with it."

In a minute he had caught his breath. "HigherBrook."

His desolate expression made me chuckle. "It's called officiousness. It's part of the station."

"No, you don't understand. Your father had just taken charge of Crossroads. I don't think he'd ever gotten his head out of a book until the massacre."

"His world was destroyed when you met him. Pomposity was the least of his problems."

"He was tight as a drum." BrushBurn sipped. "Though he must have loosened up some. You're here."

I nodded. "Along with my brother and dozens of half-siblings running all over Basc. He took full advantage of his ability to sire non-dependent hybrids."

I thought BrushBurn was going to choke again. He squinted up at me. "*HigherBrook?*"

"And I was conceived in the Meethouse."

"You're kidding!"

I couldn't tell if BrushBurn was intrigued or dismayed. Obviously he had never thought of my father this way before.

Watching his preconceptions unravel was delicious. I couldn't resist a further tease. "Not only that, but my father didn't even know my mother's *name* until after their first tumble."

"No!" A little-boy grin spread across his face, as though he'd just been told a dirty joke.

I bent to flick stray droplets from his chops. "She knew *his* name, of course. But my father was governor of Crossroads. Everybody knew who he was." I thought for a moment. "That probably helped his popularity."

Blue eyes blinked in amazement. "In the Meethouse."

"In the Meethouse."

"Honestly, Bless, I could have sworn he never took his clothes off."

I had to laugh. "No, BrushBurn. That was me."

"That stuffy little faker."

"Officiousness, remember?"

His lips curled into the most delightful smile. They were moist, luscious pillows when I kissed them, even before I realized what I'd done.

His cup touched down and his chair scraped back to give me room. I leaned in further and the pillows opened. Heat blazed between us as our tongues touched.

So this was what all the fuss was about. I was glad I no longer kept my clothes on all the time and I was ready to divest my guest of his. Musk rose

from beneath his shirt, ancient and wild and calling to the part of me that had hunted him down. His curls were like silk.

He pulled away, his palm on my sternum. "Bless."

My mouth felt suddenly empty. I whispered, "What?"

"Do you have a sheath?"

The meaning took a moment to register. "No. Do you?"

"No."

I was straddling his knee and my feet barely touched the floor. When I reached down, he caught and held my hand. "Think."

I did. Then I wriggled my fingers free and followed the heat to his groin. I leaned forward again, took his tongue back into my mouth, and sighed as he unwound the bindings from my breasts. I drummed on his cheek with my free hand, *You get to keep your own bandages on.*

He freed me from the linen and moved to my trousers. I freed him from his breeches and marveled at the flesh I held. This instrument of controversy.

I cradled his neck fur. He opened me with his fingers.

He whispered, "You've never done this before."

"Much to my constituents' chagrin." I pressed harder against his thumb and jolted from the loveliest shock. In a moment I could breathe again. "I believe they've stopped taking bets."

He kneaded my breasts until they realized they were indeed unencumbered. I wondered why anyone had ever needed Destiny in the first place.

Then he grasped my bottom and lifted me and I couldn't think any more.



I fell asleep to the sound of his heartbeat and awoke to an ancient roar thrumming through my veins. BrushBurn still snored lightly, his lips near my nipple. I smelled the sweat in his hair and itched to rouse him.

His bandages reminded me to let him rest. I eased away and stumbled about the house. My notes for that day's Chamber session read like gibberish. I was still a virgin when I'd penned them. How could I have forgotten my own language so quickly?

I poured myself into my clothes before I realized I'd left my breasts unbound. My linen shirt strained. I pulled it off, grumbling, and wrapped myself up, wondering how I'd ever gotten through life so cramped. Just dragging a comb through my neck fur shivered me down to my toes, and I thought I'd never manage to get dressed.

Somehow I reached the Rotunda, pressing my briefcase to me like a shield. The sound of suckling babies nearly drove me wild and I almost tripped over a wetnurse on the steps. Damned public nuisance.

I don't remember how we got through the voting, only the blasted monotony of our motions. No one argued procedure. No one threw a wrench into our agenda. I prayed for a disruption, anything to get my mind off the naked Masari still in my bed. How could anyone not notice my muscles clenching as I sat? I knew what I was broadcasting, no matter what I did or didn't say.

But the air was filled with sex, so why should my smell be different from anyone's or anything else's? Yellow pollen dusted the cobblestones. Doves cooed and strutted, and humid air carried a chorus of cock crows and bleating. Night-blooming flowers left scent lasting half a day. For the first time in my life everything conspired against my restraint and left me so swollen I could barely walk. My life had turned ludicrous over the course of a few short hours.

Then it all made sense again as I bumbled home, ripped off my clothes, and fell into BrushBurn's embrace. I forgot about politics. I forgot about numbers. I clutched his back fur and yelled into his chest as my feet left the floor. My teeth tingled from the bite marks I cut on his shoulder. I thanked the gods when he cried out with his massive shudder, whether I lay against linen or wood or straw, whether my feet were up in the air or curling beneath his thighs.

I thanked the gods for days and days.

He thinned over the next weeks, and his ribs stood out more as I clutched him. I knew what it meant. "How soon until you break?"

"Soon."

He eased my arms above my head and nuzzled, sniffed, straightened. I let myself melt into our bed as his lips curled back and his nose and mouth moved from my armpits to my breasts. I lifted my hips as he slid down and eased my legs apart.

It all smacked of sensuous danger, somewhere between inspection and seduction. BrushBurn had to be hungry this close to the end of his fast. "Are you smelling the Yata part of me?"

His fuzzy head took a moment to lift and his bright blue eyes searched mine out. "I'm smelling the nursery part of you. You're pregnant."

I balked. "I am?"

He nodded.

"How do *you* know?"

He said, "I grew up knowing."

It seemed the funniest thing in the world. I was sorry people had stopped taking bets on me, so long ago. Who would be collecting what?

I reached down toward his curls. "Come here." I ran my hands over his ribs. He hesitated for a moment, then gathered me up in his arms. My fingers combed through wet chops.

I brushed his tears away. "Shouldn't my glands be making me emotional?"

His lips covered mine. We clung to each other through the night.

In the morning he reported to the Deliverance Inn and gorged on the anonymous flesh of people we once knew.



I didn't tell Psalm, or Abri. I didn't need that kind of news getting back to Zai. It could wait until our next summit, when I couldn't hide anything from anyone. My in-laws had become increasingly remote since Tezani's banishment, nursing in private whatever wounds they had inflicted on themselves.

TelZodo became a walking twitch. Most of his bed partners wanted fertility now, but he still prowled the streets, breezing by doorways. It must have been difficult living where people flaunted their potency. I wasn't surprised to see him in my small office behind the Chamber's meeting hall, dropping his satchel to the floor and holding out his papers of non-dependence. He was already outfitted for a trip to the central valley, laced up in his traveling clothes, his long hair bound up in a plum-colored club.

I reviewed his request for recertification. "Alvav is not my idea of a vacation." I'd expected he would spend time frequenting Rudder's Pavilion, he liked SpiderLark's singing so much.

"It's not a vacation."

One look at the fingers drumming on his belt and I realized he was armed. I motioned him into a chair, just so the desk blocked my view of the gun, but his tallness still offered a flash of metal. "Crossroads will be without the services of its official scribe. Why?"

"Research."

I raised my eyebrows at half-fuzzed impatience. "What kind?"

"I've wanted to interview Alvav's hybrids for years. You know that." He'd wanted to speak to Rudder's Masari, too, but that wasn't on his itinerary. The drumming moved to my blotter. "You'll find SpiderLark's completed narrative on the public shelves."

"And Abri's?"

"I haven't seen Abri."

Tel's arms drew back, folding across his leather-clad chest. He looked ready to spit himself like a melon seed out of his skin. I didn't know why that made him so appealing; his surliness didn't do anything for me. Maybe it was the traveling clothes and whatever he'd soaked them in.

I scraped away the old dates on his documentation, penned in the necessary updates, and re-initialed. "I hope you find her."

He glared at me. "It's not just Smoke."

His tantalizing aroma begged otherwise. "If it's just research, then why the aromatics?"

Perplexed blink. "I'm not wearing any."

"That's odd."

Maybe it was the closeness of the walls around us. Maybe the life growing inside me was mucking around with my senses. I almost told him my news, but our shared childlessness had been an unspoken bond. I didn't want to break it with Tel on the verge of his entering dangerous ground. If the gods delighted in superstition, then holding my tongue might guarantee his return. "I'll miss you."

I handed him back his papers and on impulse pressed my nose against his wrist. His long torso hung over half my desk as I pushed back the sleeve of his linen shirt and curled my lips back to get a better scent. He smelled distressingly chaste for all his roving. It didn't explain my sudden attraction to him at all.

Tel laid his long fingers against my chops, a touch of uncertainty in his leer. "I'd be happy to oblige you before I go."

I tried to sound disgusted. "You would."

It had been fun banter when I was virginal, both of us prodding each other's tender sensibilities. His skin was exquisite. I didn't want to look into his eyes, and I didn't want to let him go, but our friendship wasn't what tightened my grip. He just smelled good.

My larder was full at home but I was famished, which made no sense. BrushBurn and I had split the last of the winter's root crops and fallen to plump early peas and sweetmeats for breakfast, before he shouldered his Reckoning and trudged out the door, following his conscience. I didn't want to let him go, either, but that's because he'd become a part of me.

This was different. My desire for Tel reeked of uncomplicated urgency, and anybody who smelled the way he did would suffice. My stomach growled.

Vyak.

I forced his hand away from my mouth.

"Bless?"

Part of me was deliriously happy, for some ridiculous reason. Maybe I could hide my confusion if I scowled hard enough. "Just make sure you come back here, Tel. I don't want to hear you've been auditioning for *River Crossing*."

"I could," he mused. Folded parchment ducked inside his belt pouch as he stood. "I know the libretto by heart, I've heard it so often out of SpiderLark. Too bad I can't sing." His brow creased into a squint. "Don't worry about me."

The image of Clot rose unbidden. His gaunt frame had filled out before he disappeared from Crossroads at the same time as Smoke, which meant he was getting Yata from somewhere. My head buzzed with scenarios, each one more unpleasant than the last. "I worry about all my citizens. Don't get a swelled head over it."

"I wasn't thinking about my head."

He hauled his pack over his shoulder and jaunted out of the office as I waved him away, as eager to leave as I was to see him go. We'd become so adept at façades. Now all I had to do was wait until he left the Rotunda on his new quest, before I made my way to the Grange and consulted with his father.

And when BrushBurn returned from his patrol, I would tell him we were expecting a Yata-dependent child. His faith in controlled predation would have to include hunting for all of us.

CHAPTER 37

Abri

The construction site for Gria's shrine was an abomination. But my life had been reduced to an abomination, and I never felt so much at peace as when I collapsed onto inscribed alabaster slabs stacked in a pocket of exploded hillside. Nothing around me but waste. I hated to admit how good the cool stone felt against my back.

Artisans had carved Dirt People pictograms into the marble, side by side with modern Yata. They reduced Gria's oratory to jingoism, whole passages taken out of context. Gria didn't exist here, only a one-dimensional saint. My mother's miscast worship.

My boot tracks in the chalk looked like any other worker's, falling in scruffy rays about rails laid down for materials transport. Here and there I passed the bodies of broken animals, displaced from the trees converted into rough-hewn timbers buttressing storage rooms. I knew when these caves would fill up, stinking of sweat; and when the rails would echo with work songs imported from the Cliff.

I knew when it would all fall silent again, interrupted only by the distant thunder of demolition. That's when I came to these vacated scars, wrapped in Ata's coat of pelts, a particolored shag of blood-red and golden brown that ranged down into rarer, purplish tints. Its lining of thick Masari under-fur cushioned my bare skin beneath. Warmth blanketed my shoulders and cascaded to my ankles as I beheld this travesty of a shrine through my ancestor's dead eyes.

I dropped the coat onto shining stone and stretched out beside my lantern's raised wick, feeling chiseled lies imprinting the skin of my back in reverse. If any of the markings remained when I disrobed before my wives at home, they didn't say, least of all Raist. Our child was pushing toward term now, and the full-throated yells of four more infants echoed across my swollen household. Psalm's progeny.

In the beginning I had come to the construction site to mourn. Raist's baby would be hailed as my firstborn. No one in my family sorrowed for the

loss of an older, nonexistent sister. I was expected to believe that my seed before now had been as empty as TelZodo's, yielding nothing but dreams.

I rolled onto my stomach and spread my limbs atop the marble, breathing dust as beveled edges embossed me.

I had no wives. My wife died of starvation in the Cold Time. I could prove it. Beside the lantern sat my ink pot and my bone needles. My stomach still burned from its tattoo, with a swath of red spreading from my groin to just above my navel. It was enough for the first day's work, enough to remind me of where my purpose lay. Each new stippling of my skin drove tears from my eyes. They evaporated, cooling me further into a block of ice.

The mountain roared. I listened to the echo of its dismemberment fade away, my heart barely clenching at the sound. Idly I wondered what was taking up residence in the void my grief once filled. My demons were just as industrious as the Yata blasting these hills, but so much quieter. They let me sleep at night, sinking into me with a perfume like gunpowder.



We named my new daughter Uliz. She was born with a full head of jet hair and eyes as dark as my mother's. Her fist bunched the tunic hiding my red-inked chest as I held her. Raist was hidden inside a wall of well-wishers. Psalm played the exuberant host, whiffs of ale eddying in his wake.

My grandchildren clustered around Raist, completing her transformation into their new mother, now that Tezani was gone. I passed Uliz to Bless, who was flushed without having touched a drop of drink. She looked as ill at ease as I felt, but I couldn't blame her after the way I'd been avoiding Crossroads. Her nostrils flared time and again, reading the room.

She cradled the baby and whispered, "Congratulations."

"You look well."

The governor's nod suggested all the things we couldn't talk about. My brother. My eldest daughter, who might still be alive. The old meat trader to whom Bless had given asylum in the winter, who still lived with her in the spring. Love looked hearty on her.

"I can't stay long." Bless planted her lips on my daughter's forehead and returned Uliz to me. "She's beautiful, Abri."

In a world where ugliness persisted, it was a heartbreaking truth. We listened to the hubbub echoing off rounded adobe walls until Uliz stirred in my arms and cried out, hungry. My grandchildren parted for us.

I cleaved to my narrow state of existence as a new father, doing those things expected of every Yata since the beginning of time. As the crowd thinned I eased beside Raist, mesmerized by the rhythm of nursing, and let everything else fade.

I would never undress for my wives again. My false pelt guaranteed that, as it spread upward into a tattoo of pectoral and shoulder fur. Soon the stippling would band my thighs and my upper arms. My ceremonial robes would mask the ink on my neck. Eventually only my extremities would remain to become Ata, and then I would take the needles to my cheeks and chin. And Abri would finally be gone.

Somewhere, between the blue forehead band that marked me as a killer of Masari and the pricking in red that marked me as a killer of Yata, I would sacrifice myself to the gods. They had blessed and cursed me with the knowledge of what it meant to be a man, but my flesh had never belonged to me. It belonged first to Zai, who had pushed me out into the world. It belonged to my family, and then it belonged to Basc. It belonged to any Masari who could best me in the far woods. The only master it didn't belong to was the Covenant, which Gria and my mother had sacrificed to the demons before it could claim me.

I watched Zai cluck over Uliz, born into a world where she could call her flesh her own. Raist, who'd lost six parents to the Covenant, laid claim to her own body with a fierce sense of self-possession even as she bent it to our daughter's will.

Uliz embodied that confidence even now, at so young an age. But what of her inheritance from me? I watched for signs of negation coursing just as freely through her delicate veins.

I became The Honorable One and scattered blessings throughout the house. A piece of me rode out on each prayer, until all that remained were the holes I'd punched into my skin. I crawled inside each and every one of them, maintaining the illusion of solidity.

CHAPTER 38

Mid-spring

TelZodo

"Purpose of visit?"

I almost laughed at armed border guards who barely measured up to my chest, but I was just as afraid of shooting someone as of being shot, myself. "Visiting old friends."

"This really you?"

"I'm not hungry, if that's what you're asking." I jabbed my finger at Bless's seal, beside the guard's thumb. "I came through here with Yucof seven years ago, and I wasn't hungry then, either. If you've started banning non-dependents, you'd better tell me."

"Non-dependents are welcome." He craned his neck and gave me a long look. "Liars aren't. What have you got against the train?"

"I'm looking for a trader who still uses a cart."

He snorted and passed my papers to his colleague before the wind grabbed them off Alvav Ridge. A localized storm hung over the Cliff, far ahead and to my right. I bet with myself that it would dissipate before I got clearance to proceed. Those odds improved when the Yata motioned me to pass my satchel forward for a thorough inspection.

The other guard compared my description against a roster nailed to the outpost. The checkpoints at Rudder Pass and at the Basc Depot saw the heaviest and more cosmopolitan traffic, but this backwater station lay idle most of the time, like others on the forested border.

It explained the rumpled uniforms and the half-hearted paranoia of people finally faced with something to do. Mostly they stopped refugees from Rudder trying to sneak back into the central valley, but those attempts were as rare as they were desperate. Yata dependents eventually adjusted to Crossroads' hunting ethic or found ways to get around it. SpiderLark, for one.

Innocent visitors almost never came this way, unless they were using the old trade routes. The roster of trespassers fluttered in a hefty breeze as the sentinel flipped through it, frowning. Obviously no one at this checkpoint had heard of me or my parents. That uncomfortable fame had finally vanished. Why did I miss it at all?

"No contraband." My little interrogator wrinkled his nose at the salves and tinctures that would keep me healthy in the boggy meadows below. He examined my dried food stores and sniffed my water bladders. "You travel light. What do you do for recreation?"

"Watch you."

His colleague re-secured the roster and passed my certificate back. "He's clear."

It was still raining over the Cliff.

"Guess we can't hold you." The guard stood beside me, watching the storm. "Welcome to Alvav."

He looked crestfallen behind his gruffness. I had to smile. "Not going to ask me who I'm looking for?"

He shrugged. "Up to you."

"Heard of a woman named Smoke?"

The sentinels traded amused looks.

"Visiting old friends." My interrogator walked past me toward the guard house, shaking his head. "So that's what you call it now. Trust me, Smoke is very selective when it comes to her friends."

Securing my pack helped me hide a fluffed pelt. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you have to care about the vermin as much as she does."

He passed behind the guard house and out of sight, to make his own rain upon the ridge. His colleague outlined the route I would take to reach her, his gnarled fingers weaving through the air.



Woods blanketed the foothills, hiding a trade network in ruins. Only the service roads by the cross-valley rail and passages ending at the bridges into Rudder were maintained now. Yata owned the former and Masari the latter, leaving the rest to warp.

The Iron Messenger's popularity had made disasters of Alvav's highways. Lush flora cracked through the old routes, leaving everything rutted and skewed.

A few independent traders still pulled their goods across the meadows instead of paying for freight, and now they doubled as caretakers. I looked for signs of pulled weeds and gravel patches, passing wood boards laid down over springtime mud where the infrastructure had collapsed. One road, better cared for than the others, wove a circuitous path around waystations and predator hybrid camps, and that's where the guard had directed me.

I hadn't expected to feel so alone. I hadn't expected to *be* so alone, listening to my own footfalls and spotting no one for miles. Without a cart I was only a wayfarer, but that should still have made me a target for thieves. A starving hybrid might have taken a chance attacking me, for whatever nourishment my Yata biology could provide. From a distance, my height and my pelt must have been more noticeable than my skin color.

The Cliff gleamed to the right, almost silver beneath a clearing sky. I looked back toward Basc as a Messenger popped out of a tunnel and steamed whistling toward the trading post. Even from here I could spot the haze above my valley, thickening as the day advanced.

Up ahead, spring runoff coursed down the mountains, illuminated in shafts of light. Alvav was beautiful if one didn't look too deeply. The smog to the north seemed more honest.

I hopped onto a wood board as the road tilted beneath a colony of veil buttons. Several had already broken apart, shooting spores across the meadow. It explained why I hadn't had to re-apply ointment against the biting flies. I could still hear Yucof detailing the purpose behind each curative and its role in this valley's war against parasites. The veil buttons were our allies.

Every trader had known that pharmacopeia, until the Iron Messenger breezed above it all. Along with his secrets, much of Yucof's practical knowledge had died with him. I tried to picture him hauling his hodgepodge

of wares down these torn avenues, looking up as the trains screamed his obsolescence.

It took my mind off the predator hybrids I expected to see, even as I armed myself against them. The memory of Alu walked beside me, with her thin, gesturing arms and her entreaties to talk, even if they were only a pretext for ambush. One minute she was a friendly, bug-eaten decoy; the next she was the younger, dimpled girl in Smoke's drawing, with a shy smile that hadn't changed. I couldn't stop thinking of her as innocent, and then I couldn't stop thinking of her as dead.

Maybe that's why I wanted Smoke so badly. She was still alive. It wasn't a good enough reason, but it was the only one I had.

The road twisted, jogging away from the river. The forest closed in around a wide trail. Broken branches would help camouflage my tent. Finally I could make use of all those stories about my father's cabin and how he had concealed it, during those years when he'd worked alone.

They'd been adventure stories, filled with forbidden experiments and daring acts. When I was a kid I'd accepted them at face value. But he never told me what it meant to step away from his back-room lab, after he had recorded all his observations at the end of each day. Before he had taken in BrokenThread and then my mother, his only contact with civilization had been occasional visits by a handful of supporters.

For six years he'd had almost nothing but body parts for companions. No wonder he still talked to them. The Grange was never empty, but now my father was alone again, separated from my mother by Destiny's effects.

Birds called to each other as I lashed down canvas and erected my green blind. I ducked inside at nightfall and listened to skittering and scrabbling, breathing salve fumes as I prepared for bed.

It wasn't a cabin, but despite the risk of sleeping in the open it was a refuge. Before I dozed off, I wondered if my father might have liked this place better than home.



I disassembled my tent in morning drizzle after an undisturbed night. The gangs had left me alone, or they had gathered elsewhere, moving their camps to escape detection. Alvav's unaccustomed peace left me unsettled, as

though I actually preferred danger, but that made no sense. Hadn't I prayed to the gods to spare me the use of my gun?

The Cliff's racket continued high overhead as the forest opened into another meadow. Noise from the trading post became a steady buzz, with trains pulling in and out and travelers boarding the cross-valley line to and from Rudder. I wasn't alone after all. I was only a distant speck advancing down a ripped road, greeting fellow specks with a futile wave. The Games field emerged up ahead as a fuzzy green plain, enjoying a new growth of clover in the long stretch between battles.

The sudden appearance of a bustling outpost rose like a mirage out of the flatland.

It was not the waystation I remembered, where I'd huddled with Alvav's traders, preparing to brave hybrid attacks on our way to the Marsh. I never wanted to see this place again, but the border guards had directed me here. Now, instead of carts, tents like mine and lean-tos clustered around cook fires, marking the area as a hybrid camp.

Smoke lives here. She knows you.

My reassurances to myself didn't guarantee my safety. Worse, they didn't guarantee that I wouldn't have to shoot someone. My old nightmare washed over me until my knees buckled. If I listened long enough to amphibious burps in the mud and kept my eyes closed, I wouldn't have to think about people. The hybrids could kill me instead, while I teased out the songs of frogs, suddenly and conveniently on my knees.

No one tried anything. I struggled to my feet and moved on.

The wind shifted and the scent of roasting flesh drifted past. It was probably Yata, but it could have been anything. The faces coming into view were just as gaunt as they had been seven years ago, but the children weren't crying this time. They were playing, furry and bare-skinned, all shapes and sizes and colors of them. I'd stumbled into a picnic instead of an ambush. The *whump* of a falling tree raised surprised yells and delighted laughter as the ground quivered.

Several young mothers-to-be lounged around a fire pit, gesturing amidst a patois of Yata and Masari; they were as mixed as the language. Others took turns holding and walking hybrid babies. They rounded a corner

and disappeared behind rags washed in the river and hung up to dry. These people were poor but not destitute.

"You eat?"

No matter where I traveled in the central valley, I always heard that question. I shook my head before I looked down. That high-pitched voice didn't come from Yata stature, just from a child. The ragged boy looked like the portrait in SpiderLark's room, if SpiderLark's son had stayed alive and never grown. "No. You?"

"Yeah." A breeze ruffled his neck fur as he grinned over his shoulder. "You got a kid here?"

I wanted to say *All of you*, but then how could I have killed any of them? "Wish I did."

He laughed as though I were joking.

"Where'd the meat come from?"

He shrugged. "Places."

A shadow doubled mine before I could react. From behind me a familiar voice ordered, "Disarm."

I was one against a crowd and stupidly so, wondering why I wasn't afraid. "Or what, Clot?"

"Or you'll be made to leave."

Was that all? Escorted off the property, no hard feelings? "You want my gun."

"We'll return it."

I studied his coppery hand to my right, the impatient twitch of his black-tufted knuckles. "You weren't this civil the last time I saw you."

"I wasn't home the last time you saw me."

The child peered past my shoulder. "Who is he, *dobresso*?"

The endearment put a lump in my throat. Clot had come to the Rotunda's prison a mangy animal, a foul-mouthed, thieving vandal. I hadn't expected him to be a devoted father, and a non-blood one at that.

"I'm TelZodo." The lump made it hard to talk. "How long has Clot been your *dobressa*?"

The boy screwed his face up at me. "Since I was born?"

I unholstered my gun. Clot emptied its chambers and shoved the bullets into my pocket. "Go tell the Mother of Alvav that TelZodo is here. She said he'd come."



Clot led the way with the easy gait of a man who possessed no one but himself. What kind of a rival was that?

I asked him, "What's Smoke to you?"

He grinned at the sky, then over at me. "Did Evit tell you she killed my sister?"

"Yes. He also said you never knew your sister."

The grin widened. "That gives us something in common now, doesn't it?"

I didn't want to like him. Maybe I could work up some healthy animosity if I prayed hard enough to gods I didn't believe in. "I've got questions."

"I'll bet you do."

We passed a pile of mending and ducked beneath a line of wash. Clot pointed to wooden boxes stacked around an abandoned wagon. "Medicines from the Marsh. It's nice not to be eaten alive. By bloodsuckers," he added quickly.

I ventured, "The former owner of that cart might disagree."

"That Yata died of natural causes. They do, you know. We're not always beasts." The finger traveled. "The meat gets preserved there."

I couldn't tell at first how far the waystation's boundary had been extended. Several trails led into the woods, toward the tree that had been felled. New construction barely showed through the crowd, but its echoes carried. "You're creating a permanent settlement."

He drawled, "Oh come now. How can disorganized vermin do that?"

By all appearances this was a peaceful community, far removed from the desperate gangs I'd encountered and impossible to accept at face value. "With all this, why the attempted raid on Crossroads?"

"Because this didn't exist then. That's what the Mother of Alvav means to me."

I couldn't help smirking. "So Smoke's a mystical figure now?"

His explosive laughter made my pelt stand on end.

The cluster of babes in arms came into view again, milling around Smoke's cart. Painted awnings extended out from the entrance. "What does she do, bless the babies?"

"No. She feeds them."

The deductions took a moment to sink in. I whispered, "How long has she been taking Destiny?"

Clot shrugged. "Ask her."

"Her milk might not work for them." How many times did I have to explain the precepts of experimentation through gritted teeth? "We're still waiting for Masari babies in Crossroads to wean, and their wetnurses are full-blood Yata."

"So are wetnurses in the Marsh. They're taking Destiny, too." His arm came around my shoulder in a gesture more dominant than friendly.

Shrugging it off would mean admitting defeat. "Trying to restrain me from going in there?"

"I'm eager to see you when you come out."

Despite his show of strength, he still had dark circles under his eyes and hollows in his cheeks. His adopted son, weaving in and out among playmates, looked better fed.

The awnings became clearer as we approached them. Smoke had never shied away from graphic depictions, but the tableau overhead bordered on the obscene. She must have used mirrors to complete her self-portrait, which answered my unspoken question of how far her pale skin extended beneath

her clothing.

Beyond the cooking smells I could tell she did more than nurse babies in there. The knowledge had its desired effect on me, but I needed no help to get aroused. She might actually want me this time. Of all the people I'd fucked in my life, no one had turned me into such a helpless idiot.

Clot bent toward my grumbling.

I said, "I should have asked, what is Smoke to *me*?"

"The Mother of Alvay, same as to all of us. You're just an outsider."

His hand left my shoulder. He smacked my rump and pushed me toward the cart.

I was ready to fight my way past anyone, which gave me the troubling feeling that Clot was more civilized than I. A baby began to fuss as I stumbled past, and a wave of guardians parted. The mother climbed ahead of me as hunger took precedence over lust.

Smoke's response stopped me on the steps. I heard her repositioning, a male grunt, shifting cloth. I moved aside as a Yata-sized hybrid left the cart without having to duck, his breeches still open.

Smoke's thick voice coated me like a slurry. "Is that you, TelZodo?"

She couldn't see my nod. "Yes, it's me."

"You can come in."

She assumed I could move.

The cart lost all its boundaries as I edged past the threshold. She had painted every surface—walls, billowing cloth, floor, draping and tucking canvas in folds that moved with each vibration. Above me the sky opened. The painted Smoke's toe dipped into a cloud that wrapped around her thigh. The rest of her undulated, flushed and engorged against a false twilight. Milk done in oils streamed from her like runoff.

More of the same pulled me deeper inside. Woodland scenes. Swelling knotholes. I crawled on false water, blinking at depth that couldn't exist and the invitations of open-mouthed carp. I followed the sounds of soft conversation punctuated by tremolos and half-caught breaths that made my spine tingle. Rhythms and smells of syncopated suckling. Two babies nursing.

I blurted before I could stop myself, "This is what your life means now?" Her art reduced to sex. To swilling Destiny. To being milked. How could I have ever hungered for her approval?

Her sultry reply came from closer than I realized. "It's better than painting dead kids."

The curtain parted to show a room awash in natural light. Part of it must have been reflected because it couldn't have come from the stylized sun or through the artificial canopy.

Smoke herself hardly seemed real. She reclined on a whimsical lounge, her white tapered fingers petting downy backs. The woman who had entered the cart ahead of me knelt by Smoke's side, stroking the baby she'd brought in. The man opposite her massaged tiny shoulders beside Smoke's other breast.

I waited until the infants were sated and taken away. "I'm here."

She lifted her hips. "So you are."

Was she offering me communion or just making me an accessory? It didn't matter. Her buttocks filled my palms. Her moisture filled my mouth. I breathed her in, my breeches down, more than ready to climb the rest of her.

Her lip-smacking made my ache exquisite. The sound should have been a warning to me, but I was past warning. Other hybrids tousled my hair. I laughed, using my teeth to draw loud moans of pleasure from her.

Then her nails were at my scalp and I raised my head. Her nod sent me sliding up her slick skin, her muscles tightening as she clamped me, her hands moving down my back. Milk dribbled down my pectoral fur as I grasped her, the most extraordinary creature I had ever held.

She opened her mouth to mine, caressed my tongue with her powdered one, and exploded me from the inside out.

CHAPTER 39

Evit

Importing Destiny into Alvav became ridiculously easy.

I wouldn't have thought so at first. Crossroads' Yata could pass freely into Alvav's woods, but that made them vulnerable to the hybrids. Predators could come here as Clot had done, but they risked getting shot on their return.

That left the border itself, staffed by Yata who had never imbibed the drug, though that changed fast. Their outposts became our points of exchange. Most of the guards came from a long line of wardens from the days when the Marsh was still a prison, and they understood bribes in several languages.

Converting my enterprise into a legitimate trade became the hardest task of all as the Chamber deliberated endlessly on ways to manage its most profitable commodity. Even Bless, who thrived on procedure, looked increasingly peaked during the debates. All that bickering over detail would make me nauseous, too.

I was too happy to care. My latest analysis of all the newborn Masari finally gave me enough data with which to confront Ghost. They weren't close to weaning, but I had other ways of measuring change, in blood and in digestive byproducts. I headed across the Grange and toward my mentor's lab with cross-leaved findings over my arm.

He would try hard not to be proud of me. I would try hard not to gloat. I knew that both of us would fail, especially since Ghost's grand-nephew was part of my success. At least the old man didn't reject DogLake outright as my brother's family had rejected Tezani, one more reason I wished I'd been born a Masari. And if I were born one today, I could be free of dependence!

It wasn't idle speculation any more. It was a shade away from being provable.

I tracked him to the infirmary, where he was in the midst of treating someone. The door muffled voices, but not many people sounded like BrushBurn. The stilted alto belonged to Bless.

Ghost answered my knock, looking wary.

I nodded in BrushBurn's direction. "More hunt injuries?"

"No." He called over his shoulder, "How do you feel, Bless?"

"I'm fine now."

She sat on a raised pallet, feet dangling over the edge as BrushBurn held her around a loosened shirt. Her tan face looked rosier and less dun as he helped her down.

"I didn't know you were sick."

She gazed through me in a most disturbing way, then shook her head as if waking up. I realized after an uneasy moment that she'd made her point, foregoing her usual oration.

"Actually, I'm glad you're all here. There's nothing like a good cross-check." The examination table would do. I arranged my piles of numbers from Masari and Yata, dependent and non-dependent hybrids, FlyAway, and finally the babies. The animalcules and accompanying chemical profiles would explain themselves. I retreated to a bench and tried not to look expectant.

Before I jumped out of my skin from impatience, BrushBurn said, "It looks encouraging."

"Thank you." I tried not to glare at the man who would still have my people killed to serve his statistics. "That's a big admission, coming from you."

"I'm the layman, not the scientist." He paged through the data, sighing. "And I'd call it misguided encouragement, but I congratulate you."

Ghost pointed to one graph, then another. "All this says—"

"Is that the Masari babies are retaining digestion products from Destiny milk that will help them process nutrients the way that Yata do, prior to sexual maturity and at this particular point in time. Any conclusions extrapolating past that moment would be technically premature." I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of criticizing my work first. "Let me point out that

those same products were present in hybrids like Bless, too, and like TelZodo, when they were young. You don't see them reverting back to dependence."

Bless's murmur was almost too soft for me to hear. "Not under static circumstances, it would seem."

I spat, "Just how many different conditions would you like me to specify?"

"Legislatively, that would be up to the Chamber. I doubt they'd be as exacting as Ghost." She cast a curious look at the numbers. "Is this as rigorous as it appears?"

Ghost grumbled, "Given its limited scope, yes."

It was the validation I needed. Not for the Chamber. Not for Basc, where nothing short of a coup would lift the ban on Destiny. Not for the people who had believed in me all along, whose faith would merely be confirmed.

It was frightening, how much I craved being told I had done a good job, by the man who taught me my trade and who hated my findings. I watched Ghost until he glanced up from my documentation and wished I hadn't. He looked adrift.

Bless stared out a window, looking uncharacteristically rumped. Thoughtful.

I shouldn't have expected anyone here to feel happy for me, when all I'd done was solve the single, overriding, horrendous puzzle that had plagued both our peoples from prehistory. I had dreamed of this moment as a child, only the dream had included vast celebrations in the streets and The Honorable One blessing me in front of a massive, diverse crowd. Who knew The Honorable One would cleave to BrushBurn's belief in predation? Who knew I'd be executed for stepping into my own homeland?

How much more perverse could the gods possibly get?

I didn't know if I was angry or amused. I didn't know anything any more, except that I was struggling for breath. I wished I could give milk, because my next stop would be the Grange-side Meethouse and a bellyful of powdered ale. And I would repeat the thrust of my argument until I passed out.

CHAPTER 40

Bless

I listened to parchment being shuffled behind me and wished I could turn around. It would have been the diplomatic thing to do. "Evit."

The shuffling stopped.

"Thank you."

He barked a bitter laugh in reply. Stiff echoes followed his footsteps to the door.

When I could find my voice again, I promised to do everything in my power to maintain Ghost's subsidy of Yata. All his decades of research had earned him that much, but the final decision would come down to a Chamber vote.

He gentled his voice, "I won't break until the summer."

BrushBurn grabbed my fists before I shattered something, like my fingers.

"I don't care what I have to sell, Ghost. You're getting fed."

"Worry about yourself, Bless." He circled the table and rubbed my back. "You need Yata more than I do. I'm sorry you're in this condition."

I snapped, "I'm not sorry."

"I don't mean your pregnancy."

"Neither do I."

There, it was out. The unspoken taboo, the one that would get me thrown out of the Chamber if it ever left this room. I eased my clenched hands out of BrushBurn's and tried not to yell. "Ghost, I'm *supposed* to be like this. My child is supposed to be like this. Dependence is not a deficiency and it's not a weakness. It's a strength."

The air turned rancid with tension. Without thinking, I had just maligned everything that scientist had ever worked for, right after he'd been bested by his protégé.

"Those are the baby's urges." His answer was all hard edges. "And brainwashing."

"This has nothing to do with BrushBurn's theories."

He spat, "Euphoria takes all forms."

I swung around, as frizzed as he was. BrushBurn's arms cinched me and I almost shook them off. I wanted to pummel both men.

How could I explain what I felt to either of them if I couldn't understand it, myself? My hunger *sang*. It was a triumphant aria, not some doomed angst from *River Crossing* but the most natural joy in the world. I wished my father had taught me how to hunt instead of how to govern. I envied Tel his sojourn among the predator hybrids. I even envied HeadWind, who greeted every slab of Yata jerky like the long-lost friend it might once have been.

I shouldn't feel this way. Every fiber of my intellect and every drop of my mother's blood argued against it. But they were no match for the Masari instincts my baby pumped through me. I *should* feel this way, I *did* feel this way, and I didn't want to ever let it go.

I leaned back against the most magnificent chest. "BrushBurn."

"I'm here."

"I still don't know if your numbers are right."

"I know."

"It's not brainwashing."

Ghost stormed away from us. "Then it's love-induced delusion, Bless. Eat Yata if you have to while your child comes to term, but don't glorify in it!"

Was that his scientific opinion? Or his personal request?

You know we're right. I drummed on a waist just beginning to thicken, reassuring a being who knew nothing of the Covenant's sacred guilt, or of controlled fasting, or of *yatanii* levels. It told me when it was hungry and when

it was sated, when I should rest and when it was restless. Its developing heart beat as much with BrushBurn's blood as with mine.

What I wanted to and dared not say was that a longstanding competition between the men had ended. BrushBurn and Ghost had grown up on vastly different farms. They had loved Yata and still did. They had loved TripStone and still did. Even TelZodo had found alternative fathers for himself, first in BrushBurn and then in HigherBrook.

But that deadlock ended with me. BrushBurn was my mate. And even he did not know our child as I did.

In Crossroads' new atmosphere of liberation, I did not want to speculate about the danger our non-conformity entailed.



My first taste of Yata watered my body as though I were a garden. Never had food coursed through me that way. The meat became a tiny sun, flushing my skin before it settled its warmth inside my womb. My child swaddled me back in turn.

Three small lab dishes held my meal, and it was up to me to choose the order of consumption. Rather, I let myself be directed from within. The smell of raw flesh drew my hand first, which didn't surprise any of us. My baby wanted the most potent, most primordial nourishment possible. Tough and undiluted, pure. One sample from the inside of a forearm, another from a liver. Flesh the color of my own. "Do you know who this was?"

BrushBurn's pacing sent him back in my direction. "Roia."

"She took Destiny, then." I called toward Ghost, who hunched over my blood beneath his lenses. "Does that make a difference?"

"There's hardly a Yata I get who hasn't taken Destiny. Even natural and accidental deaths in Basc aren't a guarantee. Most of those bodies still bear traces of it." He scribbled on parchment, gritting his teeth. "If Zai knew how widespread the underground was, she'd have banished half of Basc to the hunting grounds, and BrushBurn's predation fantasies could be realized in style."

BrushBurn mused, "It's a thought."

"I'm sure she knows." I fingered a strip of jerky from the next plate, Yata prepared in the Covenant tradition, the kind of food my father had grown up on. He would have laughed at the skepticism simmering in the men to either side of me. "Oh come now. Leaders make compromises. My mother-in-law is just as much a hypocrite as I am."

The jerky possessed none of the raw meat's rush, but it satisfied me. How could I eat this food and not be a hypocrite? How could I possibly govern if I let those details bother me? "Zai would lose Basc's support if she followed her policy to the letter. Even worse, she'd feed into BrushBurn's theories by providing all those predation opportunities. Only the most brazen Yata become visible enough to be caught. It's a shame Tezani was one of them."

The marinated cubes on the third plate left my child impatient for more. Neither of us was interested in its weaning aids. Quite the opposite. "But Tezani's condemnation has gotten Zai a lot of sympathy, and sympathy for Abri as well. It's good for them politically."

The words were well-suited to this sterile room, with its beakers and burners and not one prayer of any sort tacked up on the wall. It showcased the men's dismay. Some day, when the situation around us was not so tense, I would ask what had shocked them. Yata had been livestock to one man and body parts to the other. They weren't squeamish people.

I suppose we each had our threshold for tolerating barbarism, though we might have disagreed on which type constituted natural law.

I told Ghost my body's reactions to the different preparations, content to be his experimental subject and paying for my meal with pieces of me snipped or drained away for study. BrushBurn hovered by my side one moment and read Ghost's notes the next, looking preoccupied.

He would go on patrol in the morning, armed with his Reckoning and revolver and knives, his combat kit strapped to his back. TripStone and her hunting party had done the same thing years ago, leaving BrushBurn and Promontory's other citizens behind. I would feel just as worried as he once had. Even though our hunts were much shorter in duration, they still had to be lethal to someone.



I inspected the training grounds when I could tear myself away from the Rotunda. It was the closest I could get to BrushBurn. According to Ghost, our child would develop at a pace more Masari than Yata, and my cravings would last for at least as long as I was carrying.

Experimental subject or not, my meals had to be earned. As governor I was entitled to a special meat allowance, but to use it I had to make my dependence known. And the way I felt about my dependence would gain me little if any sympathy from my people.

Joining my mate was an option, but I simply couldn't cultivate the necessary hunting skills in time. I could justify my target practice and other rudimentary lessons as ways of keeping connected to my citizens. Most had gone on at least one mission into the far woods. The least I could do was learn all I could, in case I could put it into practice some day.

SkyBee, one of the younger hunters, led a group of children through tracking exercises. I hadn't realized she'd gotten so tall, or so confident in her movements. Her hazel eyes held an intensity that told me she was proud to be a guide, even in murder. Her well-muscled arms reminded me of how unsuited I was to actual predation. But my father had once been a soft-bodied bureaucrat, and he'd changed.

HigherBrook hadn't battled morning sickness.

"So, this is what it looks like from the other side."

I'd been so distracted I hadn't heard my brother's approach. Some predator I was turning out to be. After a moment of confusion, I realized Psalm was tidier than usual, as though he'd dressed for an official function. His fine linen tunic and trousers made him look thinner. He'd given his chops a close trim, de-emphasizing his Masari features. "This is an unexpected visit."

Ahead of us, the trainees sniffed scraps of clothing taken from fallen Yata, learning to read scent. Older hunters practiced maneuvers farther back.

Psalm winced at the far-off crack of gunshot. "How long before this war ends, do you think?"

"I don't know."

He fiddled with what remained of his goatee, a habit he picked up from our father, and laughed a little. "Zai's offering me an opportunity that

Dad never did. But I remember how he prepared you to lead, and I like his methods better than hers. I thought that maybe you could teach me."

The effects of Zai's training were easy to see. My brother's annoying nonchalance was gone, replaced by a straight spine and squared shoulders. His gaze wavered above a hopeful smile, hands nervous at his sides. The rest of him was rigid as a plank, a far cry from the carefree and sloppy patriarch lounging at the head of his dinner table.

The implications were distressing. "I thought she was grooming Abri to run Basc."

"He hasn't been home."

"That's not unusual. Is he missing?"

"His body isn't." Psalm turned away from battle drills and a chorus of shouted commands. We made our way past the granary, leaving the commotion behind. "He dispenses blessings when he has to. He goes on his patrols. The rest of the time he dresses in a coat of Masari pelts and lives in the mountains."

We turned down a side path and headed past the stone walls of Paradise. "Doesn't he spend time with Uliz?"

"My guess is, he's afraid to. Or he's just lost his mind." Psalm shot me a sharp look. "What was he telling TelZodo?"

"I don't know. That narrative is still in development, and Tel's gone abroad."

"In the middle of a job?"

"Abri stopped meeting with him." Trellises of beans dropped behind us, followed by storage sheds. A breeze from near the foothills carried a faint whiff of Destiny, which smelled like burnt nut shells to me. Not at all exciting. "He almost killed Tel, from what SpiderLark told me. After he lost Tezani."

Psalm took my arm in his, his face gone blank. "Buy you a drink."

He'd either talk about Tezani or he wouldn't. He'd been her *dobresso*, but by Basc standards she never existed. Psalm had been a Basc citizen for most of his life, but he'd been raised under Crossroads standards. I didn't envy him.

We took our seats at the tavern's counter, lowered to accommodate Yata clientele. I was so used to climbing steps that the stool felt wrong. I sipped my tea and watched my brother commune with his ale.

Then a maelstrom of Basc's expatriates mobbed him, asking for news of home and pressing messages into his hands, as though he were a courier. He pocketed them all in his fine linen tunic and took his time with the emigres, calling each by name.

His expansive gestures and business dealings told me he'd learned at least some lessons in governance. He had clearly been here before, though not to see me. I joined my brother in pressing the flesh, relieved that my appetite for that flesh had been satisfied for the moment.

Eventually the waves of Yata parted, the occasional Masari stretching above the others like a column in motion. They returned to their tables, dulled in yellow haze.

"I believe you've mastered the art of lobbying." What I had just witnessed explained some of the Chamber's trade votes.

He shrugged.

"I know you were jealous of me when we were growing up," I ventured. "Would you have wanted Father to groom you for the job?"

"And make me compete with you?" His lips curled into a thin smile. "I wanted the attention, not the responsibility, Bless. You know that."

He'd been getting both, it seemed to me. "Still."

"You were always asking him questions about things I didn't want to know." His head tilted back as he drained the mug. "I'm just now learning the questions that need asking."

Our father hadn't expected to govern, either. HigherBrook hadn't told Psalm how much he'd hated the job at first. Those rants and their successive lessons had been reserved for me.

"You married into Abri's household," I said. "From one house of leadership to another. You weren't completely averse to holding power."

"And I got the attention I wanted, didn't I?" He leaned back, patting his diminished stomach. "My children were my first constituents."

I didn't need alcohol to loosen my tongue. Just the warm infusion of herbs. "I hated you for that."

"I know. You didn't want that kind of attention." He half-tilted off his stool, his beery breath against my cheek. "But you changed your mind, didn't you? I never thought *you'd* get pregnant."

I drummed on his wrist, *Is it that obvious already?*

Consider who you're talking to. His answer caressed my shoulder. *I bet I could tell as soon as BrushBurn could.*

I shouldn't have been surprised that he knew who the father was. Anyone observing me would have reached the same conclusion.

Nothing left to do but sip my tea.

CHAPTER 41

Abri

"Barbi!"

HeadWind could have squeezed the life from me if I let her. I would have, gladly, but then I'd be broken and she would be sad. I couldn't do that to her.

I squeezed back. "How about Ata instead of Abri? It's easier to pronounce."

"Silly!" She dragged me up the stairs and into Ghost's farm house. "Barbi's here!"

No one answered. The farm hands were out working and Ghost would be in the lab. I climbed into a chair and HeadWind climbed into my lap, laying her chops on my coat. She mumbled into the stitched-together pelts, already half-asleep.

"Hm?"

She snuggled further and said, "Nice."

I had lived inside a blizzard for days. It raged around us, blowing through the dark outlines of spades and shears, shadows of tools taken down from the wall for the day's chores. I didn't question anything any more. Eventually the ice under our feet would grow and I'd lose all feeling in my extremities. The cold would take me, just as it had taken my daughters.

But I had fed the Masari and pleased the gods. I could die fulfilled.

No. That was Ata, who had been dead for a very long time. Abri still had work to do.

First, I had to bring meat into the kitchen from the storage shed, where I'd been leaving the bodies.

Gria had always said the gods were perverse, but they possess an inscrutable sense of humor. There, high up in the mountains, is the skeleton

of her shrine, a wound blown away in the place she so loved. The deepest insult imaginable, to glorify her by shredding her heart.

All that naked rock with its surrounding trees mown down affords me perfect sight lines, patterns of tiny lanterns moving along tiny roads below and everything else black. Covert operations in plain sight.

Basc's safe houses fester like organic things, like hundred-headed parasites. I can't strangle them outright. The slower my dissection, the less the criminals' tendency to panic, and I want a long and prosperous harvest. One body picked off at a time, maybe two, and brought here.

Uliz deserves more than to grow up in smog and silt and the filth of too many people. So, too, my other—she without a name, she who never was. A spirit in the far woods. A theory unrealized. Daughter of my imagination. Betrayer. She deserves a better world, too, and so do her children, who are no longer her children.

Psalm, who serves my wives and my household and now my child, has taken the seat beside my mother at civil functions. Who better to unite this valley than a hybrid with dual citizenship, the son of a governor? Before long, Yata will outnumber Masari even in Crossroads, just as they do in Promontory. Zai merely prepares for an inevitable future. She would rather meet it using a figure of life than one of death.

I yield. I bless both of them. My services lie elsewhere.

"Did you make this?"

FlyAway tiptoed over and whispered beside my arm. Her fingers parted fur, seeking the seams.

I nodded.

Green eyes widened. "How come you're not sweating?"

"Because it's cold."

She screwed up her face at me and shook her head. Her fingers moved to my cheek tattoos.

"Those are fresh," I warned her. "They still hurt."

"Sorry."

HeadWind blinked awake, grinned at FlyAway, and clutched me tighter. Her possessiveness made me smile. Was I an odd creature to her, or a morsel of Yata tucked inside a blanket of Masari? Did she make any distinction at all, or just cleave to something that felt good?

FlyAway chirped, "Race you to the pump!"

The hybrid squirmed off me and bolted after the sprinting girl. Maybe I was just a comfortable moment in time.

Indoors or outdoors didn't matter; the same howling gale tried to push me back. Bright-petaled wildflowers glistened through hoarfrost in a ridiculous persistence of opposites. Ice stung my face and caked my brows beneath a cloudless sky. FlyAway and HeadWind pursued each other in turn, with dirty clothes flapping and arms bare, unmindful of the storm.

Ghost stood by the storage shed, his sleeves rolled up and the bag of my dissections at his feet. I could make out his squint between gusts, when I wasn't snow-blind.

"For HeadWind," I offered. "And for you."

The squint deepened as he looked me up and down. "I didn't realize it had gone this far."

"Neither did I." I reached for the leather. "I can carry that inside."

He laid his hand on my fur-dressed arm until I straightened.

"I hate Destiny, too, Abri. But not this much."

"You hate Destiny for what it is." How civilized we were. How concerned about each other. In the Cold Time I would have simply left the carcass and gone. "I hate it for how it's being used. And because it seems to be working."

His voice flattened. "You want predation."

"Yes."

"You're a *Yata*, Abri." He hauled the satchel over his shoulder. "You have no idea how much I hate taking this from you. Or how disgustingly grateful I am for it. You can tattoo a full-body pelt on your skin and wear ours on top of that, but that will not make you a Masari."

"You don't understand," I pressed. "I'm not trying to be a Masari. I know I'm a Yata. This is to save my people as well as yours."

Ghost trudged ahead of me, shaking his head. I followed him back to the farm house.

He served me spring tea in the depth of my personal winter and frowned when he felt my cold fingertips. Ata, who could speak to TelZodo, remained submerged in the presence of TelZodo's father. My ancestor gave me only his weather. The least he could do was let me feel a little warmth and make the blizzard go away.

"I'd like to examine you." Ghost lit the hearth and brought me before it. Soon he peeled off his shirt as sweat beaded on his forehead and around swatches of pectoral fur. He dabbed his face with a cloth.

When he pulled my coat from my shoulders I shook with cold. I tried to explain Ata's mission through chattering teeth while my brother's teacher collected blood. Maybe my visions resided in my animalcules. Maybe the gods rode the tiny creatures inside me, like Gria when viewed from the wrong end of a clarifier. I didn't know.

"I can't look at you and Evit without seeing little boys." He capped and sealed the vial, then draped my coat over my shoulders. "I have a pretty good idea what happened to him. No matter what our disagreements are, I can explain Evit. I don't understand you."

I huddled closer to the flames. The gods didn't speak to Ghost and he had no instruments by which to measure them or their effect on me. Understanding was not an option for either of us.

"I was living in the Marsh when I heard about the massacre here." He squatted beside me, mopping sweat from the places where his fur yielded to bare skin. "I almost singed my chops off because I couldn't get close enough to the fire, and I felt just as cold as you look right now. It's a stress response, Abri. I thought I'd lost everyone. Do you know what Piri told me then?" His moist arm came around me. "She told me to use the pain."

How could I tell him that this was bigger than pain?

He grunted a laugh. "I've become an expert at it, Abri. Your brother's experiments have separated me from my wife. They've set Evit and me against each other. My kin have left home to join his cause and to bear children whose

future is uncertain at best. And considering where TelZodo has gone off to, I don't know if he's dead or alive." His hairy face turned from me to the flames. "I could be freezing just as much as you are right now."

I tried to smile. "At least now you don't have to worry about food."

"No," he admitted. "Just about people."



Ghost found no gods or demons in my animalcules. Nothing I could give him produced any answers that helped either of us. He continued to use his pain, I continued to use mine, and when I could I delivered members of the Destiny underground to him. They became anonymous packages of meat filling a nondescript storage shed.

I carried their hacked bodies across the windbreak, around fields of corn that had grown tall and around squash with leaves the size of dinner plates. Early broods began to fledge, soaring through frozen wastes that touched only me. Hawks plucked them out of the sky.

Everywhere, rosy-cheeked Masari babies yelled their delight in the bright sunshine or howled their demands for Destiny milk. Their parents and wetnurses stepped aside when they saw me. In the competition with my brother to be their saviors, Evit had gained their allegiance while I drew their fear and their pity. In me the Masari recognized their own murderous nature, the most frightening revelation of all. Their terrifying holiness.

BrushBurn kept hunting even when I brought him secret deliveries of flesh. They kept him alive, but he chose to be an example to his people despite their fervent desire for non-dependent children. I loved him for that. I worshiped him for that. I prayed for his safety even as I consecrated the Yata trained to kill him.

I didn't see him or Bless until the first hints of summer, as I lingered in the marketplace before returning to the mountains.

We stood in a pocket of dumbfounded silence, I with my shaggy coat and stippled face and Bless with her light tunic rounded before her, her pregnancy unmistakable now.

When she collected herself, she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

I glanced at her hand clasped tightly in BrushBurn's, beside the child she carried. A chill wind blew through me and I feared for all of them.

CHAPTER 42

Early Summer

Bless

A loud thud bolted me awake. BrushBurn lit the lantern before I'd gotten out of bed, which became increasingly harder to do. Our child all but glued me to our pallet, content to have me do nothing but eat and sleep, just as it was doing.

I called into the half-light, "Tell me I'm dreaming."

"I wish you were. That sounded like a body."

The last body hurled against my door had been Clot's, eager to get his hands on antiquated single-shot rifles regardless of whether they were loaded. I stumbled into the common room, where BrushBurn squatted in his robe, listening at the crossbar.

No, not listening. Sniffing. Whatever lay outside wasn't moving enough to make any noise. In a moment he lifted the bar and opened the house to a muggy night.

From below came a deep and disturbing chuckle that made my pelt stiffen. I rushed forward anyway.

BrushBurn held me back. "Don't touch him."

I hissed, "And leave him like *this*?"

"Thank the gods for brambles." Tel turned a badly-scratched face toward me. Cuts on his lips reopened and began to bleed. It's a wonder he'd kept his eyes. "Thorns make such excellent distractions."

BrushBurn asked, "Can you move?"

"I can crawl."

"Good enough."

I couldn't tell which gory ribbons were Tel's clothes and which were his flayed skin. His boots were gone, his hair and pelt matted with burrs and blood. More pricked him as he struggled, rolling from back to side, from side to front. I wanted to scream at BrushBurn, who did nothing as fresh trickles hit the ground. "I'm going for medicines."

"No, Bless. Nothing touches him."

"Why not?"

Tel began to giggle. "Because then you'll undo all of my fine work."

He raised himself on shaky elbows and reached down. Bullets skittered across the floor, followed by his gun. I hadn't noticed his holster for the mess soaked around it.

BrushBurn murmured, "Congratulations."

"How proud would my mother be if I'd shot myself?" His cheek hit wood as his head crossed the threshold. "That, and only that, stayed my hand. I had to be as strong as she was." He lifted his chin and glared at us. "Do you have *any idea* how strong she was? Believe me, BrushBurn, I had it easy."

His palms slipped on smears that followed him as he finished pulling himself inside. Watching him was torture. I wanted to tell him to stop, to rest, to wait until I'd cleaned his skin, untangled his fur, and shaved his head of its massive knots.

He growled, "Even the damn pain feels too good. You'd better fill in the knotholes or I'll end up fucking the floor."

My lover quipped, "Splinters."

"Doesn't matter."

He continued to advance on elbows rubbed raw.

"Pallet's in my office," BrushBurn said. "The far bedroom."

"We'll put something here," I insisted. "He's exhausted."

"Exhaustion is better for cleaning out his system." My mate pointed at ripped, oozing skin. "TelZodo didn't fall into those brambles. He sought them out, and then he forced himself through them. Son, how long since you last took Destiny?"

"Forever." Tel's grin opened more sores. "Yesterday. I don't know." He paused to catch his breath. "I turned back. Ten, twelve times? Turned forward again. Back again. I lost count. I hate meadows." His chin dropped down. "Love the mud."

The smear completed a slow arc and Tel began his straight shot to BrushBurn's office. At least I could cover the windows against morning light. I waddled as fast as I could to prepare the room.

BrushBurn steered me away as Tel squirmed onto straw. "We'll clean later." Behind his firm hold on my arm and his tightly-controlled calm I couldn't read a thing. I took a last look back at my panting, blood-drenched friend before a kick from inside drove my breath away.



An army of Yata wetnurses marched through Crossroads. I awoke from the dream to the tickle of warm breath on my neck fur. BrushBurn's arm rounded my hip, his fingers dangling beside my stomach. Sounds of scrubbing came from outside the room.

Our child was awake, churning my bladder. Other water splattered in the common room as I navigated the bed.

"Don't start!" It was out of my mouth before I could stop it. One more liquidy sound and I wouldn't reach the chamber pot in time. The scrubbing outside paused just long enough for me to haul my bulk to where it needed to go.

I couldn't possibly try to sleep afterward. Tel called as I pushed on the bedroom door, "I'm not decent."

"You never were."

His nakedness didn't bother me. His condition did, but he looked a little better than before. Trays spread across the dining table held piles of brambles, burrs, thorns, nettles, and needles. The gods only knew how long it had taken Tel to remove them. He must have been up all night.

I was still pondering how all of that could have come off one person when he bent toward another bloodstain on the floor and I got a look at his prickled back. "How do you feel?"

His head swiveled, his smile crooked. He eyed the belt of my robe.
"Like cuckolding BrushBurn."

"You just wanted a new way to proposition me."

He laughed, wincing.

"I'm supposed to stand here and watch you do all this work with thorns sticking out of your bottom, is that it?"

"That's it." His scrub brush teased more red from gouged wood.

I stalked into my mate's office and rummaged in his hunting pack. All his poisons were meant to kill, not to knock unconscious.

By the time I returned to the common room, BrushBurn was awake and fully dressed. He lifted the crossbar again. "I'm letting Ghost know you're alive."

Tel's voice hardened. "My father shouldn't come here. I'll go to him and then into Basc when I'm ready." He touched cloth to the seepage on his brow.

I barked, "Ask Ghost for a sedative."

"Even a strong one wouldn't do much good."

"BrushBurn, I don't care!" Our guest ought to be able to sit. Destiny or no Destiny, I was going to have to touch him.



Later, BrushBurn and I compared Tel's suggestive hand prints, before we peeled off our salve-stained pants and tunics and changed into fresh. I would never again underestimate the sexual attraction of tweezers, or the strength of a sedated and sleepless man. Or Destiny. For a moment I was tempted to let my bandaged and near-bald friend seduce me, but that would have been out of pity. He looked so awful.

The baby got the most attention of all, which I took as a compliment. Whatever our child turned out to be, Tel was already in love with it.

BrushBurn had brought clean clothes from the Grange. Tel eased into them as I busied myself clearing bloody leavings from the table. I told myself

the hair and fur would grow back, and the skin. My childhood friend watched me with a pensive leer as the kettle heated.

When I turned away, he said, "I don't know what kept me there more, the drug or the people."

His soft voice touched my spine, making me turn back. It was the last thing I'd expected to hear. "The ones who attacked you."

"That's not how all this happened." Wrapped fingers fumbled his shirt ties closed. Tel swayed on his feet, his eyes rapturous. "Bless, the thought of Destiny had terrified me ever since I was a child. I had nightmares every time my mother drummed one of her stories against my arm because I knew, deep down inside, how easily I could become a slave to it."

"Because Piri had."

"Because I'm not just half Yata. I'm half *Farm* Yata." He hobbled toward the hearth. "BrushBurn! You bred that sensitivity into her, didn't you?"

His answer chilled me. "That's what farmers do."

"No non-Farm Yata knows what that's like, not even a pure blood." Tel stumbled into the kitchen. Mugs clattered against each other as he brought them to the table. "One drug-laced kiss from Smoke and I was gone. I was theirs. The predators took me into their community."

Odd word. "I'd hardly call the Alvav gangs a community."

"Oh, Bless." Wonder rippled across his damaged face. I could tell he wanted to hug me and didn't dare. "They're not gangs any more, they're something marvelous. All those rejected hybrids are finally getting support from their kin in the Marsh because Destiny, that demon, that destroyer of minds and souls, is helping to build a civilization." He eased onto a cushioned chair, chortling. "Imagine that."

BrushBurn returned to the common room, his face working. "How, TelZodo? No one has weaned yet."

"It's uniting Alvav." He counted off shaking fingers. "The predator hybrids had always banded together, but they were scattered. They turned on each other when they weren't looking out for each other. They killed what they could get their hands on or they starved."

The bandages clasped together. "Their Yata parents in the Marsh had two choices at the first sign of dependence, murder their children outright or lock them outside the gates. Does it surprise you to learn that more kids were adopted than died of exposure? The predators had *nothing*, but those babies still lived."

"Where does the meat come from, then?"

Shake of the head. "*Places*, BrushBurn. That's what Clot's son told me." Tel shrugged. "The predators couldn't enter the Marsh, but I could. Smoke could. The Mother of Alvav."

I stood on my chair step, halting in mid-sit. "The what?"

Tel's stare fixed on mine. "The Mother of Alvav, who would paint anything, trade anything, sell, barter, prostitute, whatever it took to get flesh to the kids she grew up with. Yata who died of natural causes. Yata who amputated pieces of themselves. Yata who sacrificed themselves. Some of the Games warriors were already half gone and ready to retire. They gave themselves up to her." His wrapped finger wagged. "Destiny helped there, too. They died happy. Because when Smoke told them what her drugged milk could do, those people and their predator children could finally come together to try to end dependence. Smoke was the bridge between them. Marsh Yata are wetnurses now."

BrushBurn returned to the hearth. In a moment tea was steeping.

I rested my hand on my navel, trying to wrest answers from it. Was I looking at the converted or the inebriated? My own opinions had changed, but not because of statistics. They'd been dictated to me from within. "Is that what you want now? An end to dependence?"

"I *vyakkak* wish I knew." He laid his bruised face on his arms, leaving bandaged bald spots for me to look at. "I could go back there. Smoke wants me to be with her. *I* want to be with her." His sigh trailed across the table. "It would kill me."

Steam rose beside his head as BrushBurn poured. Tel straightened and lifted the mug to his lips, fighting to keep his drink from slopping over the side. He leaned back in his chair, eyes toward the ceiling. "My reaction to Destiny surprised everyone. I might have even scared Clot a little. I'd have been delighted if he weren't such a gentleman."

"Now I know you're delusional."

"I'm serious, Bless." He leaned into the table and took another shaky sip. At least his brown eyes were clear. "I was very careful with how much I took after that, especially since most of it was meant for Smoke. I was careful where I kissed her. I lived in her arms when I wasn't carrying babies back and forth. I think I adopted them all. I listened to their parents in the camp and to their grandparents in the Marsh, and I learned everything I could about them. I helped the predator hybrids build permanent shelters. And every few days I tapped more grains of Destiny onto my palm and thought of my mother, and of my brothers and sisters, and I communed with everyone and everything. I could feel its cumulative effect. I knew it went far beyond the physical. Eventually I realized how happy I would be simply to die there, and that's when I knew I had to leave."

BrushBurn stepped into the kitchen, followed by sounds of chopping. My mouth watered, but not from the vegetables. "Tel—I've become a predator hybrid."

The dressings twitched on his cheeks. "Is that what you want to be?"

"Yes."

He thought that over for a moment. "Okay."

"That means you don't try to seduce me, and I don't try to eat you."

"You're no fun at all."

"And you're still a mess."

Cuts reopened as he grinned, and for a moment we were kids again. Then my baby made its demands and I almost dove for the bloody skin we'd peeled off. I called to BrushBurn to fetch Abri's charity from the cupboard.

CHAPTER 43

TelZodo

I had to imprison myself until I felt free to go. Bless's house couldn't be farther from the Grange and still be on Crossroads land, but I smelled fumes even when the wind died. They came from Evit's facility or from home Destiny labs, or I imagined them. I had no way to tell.

Bittersweet cravings continued to follow me after my injuries healed. They weren't the violent cravings that my mother or Gria had experienced. I ached for the sacrament of the drug, but not as the Covenant portrayed it. Destiny required no less of me than total relinquishment and I had given it gladly. Withholding my soul twisted a knife in my chest.

Now that I had successfully fought to get my self back, I didn't know what to do with it. Bless kept me well-supplied with parchment and ink as I threw myself into narratives. BrushBurn moved me into his office, where the lives I recorded of predator hybrids shared space with his population matrices. I listened to our nibs scratch at cross-purposes from opposite sides of the room.

My own opinions were a storm that stopped just short of stabilizing one way or the other. I didn't know what I thought. Predation was the center of the argument, but it was also beside the point. No matter what happened, I still loved the people I had left behind.

The room I slept and worked in bore traces of FeatherFly, who had died before I was born. His bed frame was still here, inlaid with inked Yata bone. Either the afterlife exists and his sister TripStone guarded me or I imagined that, too. She wasn't the wrinkled, dying woman who had saved me but the one in Smoke's portrait, young and with all her infirmities stripped away. Before I fell asleep her spectral arm encircled my shoulders, and for a long time that touch remained the only one that I could feel without Destiny's effects grabbing hold.

She came to me when I most wanted to hug Bless, who mustered up her strength whenever BrushBurn went into the far woods. Even if I didn't see him dressing in his leathers or shouldering his pack and rifle, I could time

his departures by the slowing of Bless's walk and by her sudden soft-spokenness, quiet and raw.

So I was startled when she blurted during one of his absences, in the midst of a peaceful evening, "We're naming the child StoneSun."

The name was as jarring as the pronouncement. "That acknowledges neither of your families."

Bless nodded, stretching her legs and shifting raised feet. "Less stigma that way."

"I understand how that applies to BrushBurn's kin names—"

"And in the eyes of many citizens, I've disgraced mine." She wore her stoic look again. It underscored her fragility no matter how well she'd toughened herself up. "Tel, my Yata consumption renders me unfit to enter Rudder for the summit. My request for a waiver has been denied. No Masari on Crossroads' Chamber meets the weaning requirements, so I'm sending a Yata official in my place." The baby cut her deep breath short. "My father didn't meet Rudder's standards either, but he'd gotten a waiver. So had BrushBurn, even last year. That means Rudder's representatives alone will defend Masari interests."

A hug was still too dangerous, but I could try massaging her swollen feet. I knelt by the cushioned chair. "Tell me if I'm too close."

She whispered, "I've already eaten."

I wanted to rub my grown-in chops against her toe tufts and slide my palms beyond her brick-furred ankles. I didn't dare. Touching her skin and pelt sent shock waves through my fingers as everything came alive. If I focused only on my hands and what they were supposed to do, I could ignore the rest. The sacred demon inside me could be negotiated with.

Across from my head, her belly *looked* like a stone sun, pushing the day forward and up. By this stage of pregnancy most Masari had found a wetnurse for Destiny milk. Bless wasn't looking for one. Her child was one-quarter Yata and had recently hastened its development, which only increased dependence. If Bless succeeded in her plans, her child's stigma was already assured. I took hold of her other foot.

Her voice cracked above me, "You're a good friend."

"You, too."

It was as close as we'd gotten to confiding our terrors.



A bright sky almost blinded me when I finally emerged from the house. My fuzzy pelt itched in its newness, my hair barely over my ears. My nose twitched at every change in the breeze as I walked through windblown grass across the old training fields. I became prey, alert to dangers I wasn't sure existed, hauling the people of Alvav on my back. I carried them in sheaves of parchment, dozens of voices, with many more waiting to be freed.

My father talked to body parts. I talked to Destiny. It strolled beside me, relaxed and jaunty, a swirl of contradictions as it shifted shapes. It was a straw Yata dummy brought to life. It was the bones I'd piled at the Farm ruins and the timbers of new settlements. It was brown powder sweetening the air and pages of numbers from livestock ledgers.

It shadowed me as we crossed to the cobblestone streets, dissolving as people walked through it and re-forming in their wake. By the time I reached the Rotunda it had ridden back into me on my breath, left its aftertaste in my mouth, and answered none of my questions.

SpiderLark's aria sounded like the beautiful ravings of a fool as I descended to my dormitory. After I laid the satchel of narratives on my bed I turned to my dresser. For a long time I stared at the dolls that Ijil had made for me, many-times patched and battered with age. Three girls and four boys, reduced to lumps.

Their eyes were long gone, but they recognized me now. I took them down one at a time, held them against my heart, and recognized them back.

Dead from the canyon hunts. Dead from poisoned Destiny. Killed during the Farm escape. Missing.

Preserved as rags in burlap. My siblings.

I whispered, "What do we do now?"

Crossroads' new Destiny storehouse lay two levels below me, around the bend from the prison cells. I could sprint down the hall, drop down the

curved staircase, and bust open a door. I could slip a blade into sturdier burlap, pop open a palm-sized bladder, and never be heard from again.



I don't remember how I got back outside.

I barely remember how I got to the Grange, disoriented and giddy, with Destiny laughing in my ear as though we had just shared some obscene joke. I was shadowed by a demon-god I hated and loved, who could save me and destroy me in a single moment of weakness. The certainty that I would never be alone again made me cackle in the streets.

Ripe fruit fermented the air over the Grange fields, but not enough to conceal the traces blowing over from Paradise. I had been initiated into my Farm roots now. My nose was as sensitive as BrushBurn's, maybe even as sensitive as my mother's. The drug merely registered with him and it throttled her, but with me it was more insidious, whispering promises it fully intended to keep.

Tying my mask around my nose and mouth muted the invitation. Better to have my father surprised at that, than to have him find me standing mesmerized among the beans.

He was in the lab, examining samples and muttering to them as usual. He barely acknowledged the cloth on my face when he finally turned around. Instead, he grabbed a sheaf of notes and made to shove them into my hands, when he stopped, squinting.

The sheets fell to the floor. He wrapped his arms around me, sparking my new and outrageous sensitivities. I held him through the tingling.

He led me out the door and toward the windbreak. It wasn't like him to leave papers scattered, but the handwriting on them was Evit's. My father walked half hunched, as though fighting his way through the light breeze.

It took me a moment to realize he hadn't washed up, breaking one of his own cardinal rules. "What happened while I was gone?"

He seemed not to have understood the question. Then he shrugged. "Plenty." He looked up at me—when had I become taller? "You stayed with the Governor a long time. I was beginning to wonder if BrushBurn had lied to me, telling me you were still alive."

I'd needed BrushBurn's help more than Ghost's, but saying so would have upset my father under ordinary circumstances. "He told you the truth."

"Obviously."

For one wild moment I wanted to pluck off my mask and let him see what I'd become, but that wouldn't have done either of us any good. Unhinging him further wouldn't make him tell me what was wrong. We were never good at that with each other.

I wouldn't learn until later about the meat he received from Abri. Or that most visitors now bypassed his lab, continuing on to Paradise. In the eyes of Crossroads, my father's long career was ultimately defined by a succession of failures.

The Chamber had been gracious about his change in status, bestowing official recognition at a special session. If I had been present to record that meeting, I would have filled one page with accolades and then scribed less-florid dictation on the next one, granting Evit the majority of resources to continue his work.

I loosened my mask once the windbreak closed behind us and heavy summer air settled on our shirts. Destiny's temptation dropped behind, leaving only the wood's aromatics to compete with my father's stink of preservatives. We listened to bird twitters and buzzing insects, alone on the trail and away from the trade roads crisscrossing the meadow. Our already insubstantial conversation reduced to mulch crunching underfoot.

The mask stayed off in Basc because the only fumes came from smog. They permeated Evit's old lab, where my mother bent over parchment, adding to her book of questions. Now that she lived away from my father, her hypotheses took the form of prayers to the Destiny Farm dead. The far side of her desk was more shrine than work space. It held the Farm ledger, still bearing its placeholders and garnished with Covenant bones returned from Skedge.

Her back straightened as Ghost and I ducked through the entrance and walked past counters the height of my hips. I sat on a Yata-sized chair, sinking toward the floor with my knees up toward my shoulders as my father paced the room.

One look at me and my mother laid her fingers across her forearm and then pointed, asking with her eyebrows if I could tolerate being touched.

Even before I could tell her what had happened to me, she knew. We could have been pantomiming to each other all our lives, our understanding was that complete.

"Hugs, yes," I told her. "But brief."

Waves of relief and rage played across her face. I added, "It's different, with me."

I could probably thank my perplexed father's blood for that. His attention shifted from my mother's notes to the mask hanging by its ties like a talisman around my neck. He had never shown fear when I was growing up. He could almost hide it from me now.

My mother settled for squeezing my arm and drumming, *Not different enough.*

"No."

The door to the attached hut opened from the outside and we heard a grunt. Heavy footfalls, a weight dropping. My mother turned her head toward the sounds of sliding and then of cloth being cut away. My father scowled as Abri's hymn drifted in from the consecration room.

My mother's fingers danced on my arm, making it tingle. *It's Masari.*

I listened to Abri's tempered grief as he petitioned the gods to welcome a fellow protector. He never sang like this at official functions. SpiderLark must be teaching him.

But SpiderLark used artifice. Abri wasn't manipulating emotions. That richness was genuine.

My father stepped up to my mother's desk and towered over us, stiff as a pylon. His voice dropped. "He recovered that body from Crossroads."

The interruption startled me. "How do you know?"

"He invented different rituals depending on the cause of death—whether it occurred outside the hunt, during the hunt at the hands of another Preserver, or at his hands. That last one is the worst."

"How does he get Masari bodies outside the hunt?" What was Abri doing collecting corpses from Crossroads?

"The families send for him. He worships Masari now, so he consecrates them." My father's eyes flashed. "I've left explicit instructions that he is not to touch me if anyone finds me dead. I'd rather be remembered as a demon than as a god, TelZodo. Is that clear?"

The hymn became a paean. Abri thanked the deceased for eating Yata in a divine quest to balance and save the valley. Flesh tore beneath a blade.

"What disgusts me is how he differentiates among Masari. Non-dependents are unfit for consecration. His sick logic declares FlyAway impure, and *you*—" Ghost shook off a nervous tic as the song climbed. "It's the principle of the thing."

"I'm not offended." Becoming a god was never one of my ambitions. I was still wrestling with the image of Abri summoned by mourners, to sanctify a Masari dead of old age or disease, or from an accident. But my picture of Abri showed me a Yata whose only tattoo marked him as a killer of Masari. I hadn't seen what he had done to himself in my absence.

Finally I offered, "He's found a way to give comfort."

"He is exploiting vulnerable people!" My father's fists tightened as he forced his voice back down. "TelZodo, your grandparents lived long and meaningful lives, and their work on the Grange kept Crossroads fed just as much as any sanctified meat. That doesn't mean they were gods. It doesn't mean your aunts and uncles were gods, even VineSong, who was one of the best hunters our family ever produced. Masari aren't gods, any more than the Yata ever were. Our biology causes our suffering. The last thing we need is a superstition to validate it."

He whirled from us, his back to the wall we shared with Abri. I didn't have to point out that the ledger on my mother's desk held cross-references to my other grandparents. I thanked imaginary gods that most of my father's dead kin remained as faceless to me as my mother's.

I tapped on her arm, *Abri isn't exploiting anyone. The Masari really are his gods.*

She offered a shallow smile, as though I'd belabored the obvious. She lived and worked here. She knew that better than anyone.

I fought against nausea amidst the splatter of drained fluids and the rips and cracks of dismemberment. Not seeing what Abri was doing

heightened my sense of hearing. His hymns became as disembodied as the rest. Given another setting it could have been TripStone's singing, the worshipful prayers of a devout Masari standing over a consecration table and a Yata corpse.

Seven years ago it *had been* TripStone lying in the next room, being taken apart by the same man who was praying now. I watched my father take comfort in his atheism.

So what if some Masari believed in their own divinity? They'd been wretched creatures under the Covenant. They'd been inferior and weak, owing their existence to the mercy of Yata sacrifice. Evit offered their descendants freedom from that weakness, but he didn't pray to them.

Did they know what Abri invoked as he bent over their loved ones? Were any of them starting to believe, as he did, that predation was holy?

CHAPTER 44

Late Summer

Evit

I was following my big brother around again, just as I had when we were kids. But I had worshiped him then. Now I didn't know what he was.

Abri knew I tracked him. I didn't try to hide and he didn't try to confront me. I suppose I was nonexistent to him. Our mother had shunned me ever since my legitimization here a year ago, so why shouldn't Abri do the same? Tezani's banishment gave him every reason to hate me.

I wished he did. It was better than nothing.

He wasn't a scary novelty in Crossroads any more. Citizens thought nothing of seeing him bundled up in furs or huddled in his black ceremonial robes in the sweltering heat. Otherwise he behaved as any other man, haggling in the marketplace or downing ale in the tavern. He served no official function on this side of the meadow. He wasn't accountable to anybody until he crossed back into Basc.

The Yata making Destiny in Crossroads were protected. Abri could kill Masari in the far woods, but he spoke to them in town as though he belonged to their hunting parties instead. They discussed the finer points of stealth or compared close calls, laughing together, just as Games opponents must do over in Alvav and Rudder.

He looked as though he was having a good time. I knew better.

Rudder held its regional summit without him. Instead, our mother traveled abroad with Psalm and with a Yata from Crossroads' Chamber, leaving Bless behind to do domestic paperwork. Bless avoided me as much as Abri did, except to receive my reports on Paradise.

At first I thought I'd fallen out of the Governor's favor. Then, as I heard whispers in the street and watched the wide berth given her in the marketplace, I could sense her power draining away. It could have been a liquid stream, it was that obvious.

"Buy you tea?"

I almost cried with relief at the sound of Tel's voice. He was alive. Better yet, he was talking to me.

I managed to choke, "Tea sounds very good right now."



We sat at a Masari-sized table with a ladder built into my chair. I didn't care what we drank. Public or private place didn't matter. The heart of the marketplace could have been a private room for all its bustling, and we relaxed outside the tea house like any other tired shoppers. Tel's battered satchel rested between his big feet, smelling of ink.

I offered, "You cut your hair."

He laughed. The lines around his eyes looked pained.

He turned his head toward the sound of a distant rumble. Across the meadow, more of the mountain fell away in a billow of white smoke. "That's the shrine to Gria, isn't it?"

How would I know? I hadn't been back to Basc in over a year. "I think so."

It could be another factory. It could be an expansion of the Iron Messenger. I really didn't care. I peered over the heads of seated Masari as the plume spread.

Tel returned his attention to his mug. The tiny scars spidering around his chops and brows were new and almost invisible, they'd healed so well. It explained the uneven skin around the pelt pattern on his arms.

I watched his quiet sipping until I could find my voice. "I did some terrible things to you and your family. I'm sorry."

He eyed me over the lip before lowering it. "You're fighting for what you believe in. That's more than I can say." His face turned back toward demolition. "I don't know what I believe in."

Love. Memory. The care of children. I could tell him plenty of things that he believed in. Forgiveness, otherwise he wouldn't be speaking to me. "I'm prepared to listen if you want to talk."

His lips curled into an abashed little smile. "I was thinking I might spend the night."

I dared to hope. "You're kin, Tel. You can spend more than just the night."

I should have felt vindicated when he described the changes in Alvav, but his scars told a different story. Whenever he looked at me I wanted to turn around, to see what specter stood behind me vying for his attention. I wanted to tell him, *It's only powder*. But that was a lie, even for me, and I never succumbed to Destiny the way he had.

He glided beside me as we left dregs and wilted leaves behind, but his saunter was gone. Even with his satchel weighing him down, he seemed impossibly light. Impossibly resigned, though I didn't know to what.

His nostrils flared as we neared the Grange; he pulled a mask from his pocket and left it dangling around his neck. We waved to Yata and Masari marking fields for the harvest and listened to Crossroads' hunters training for their next battle for food. His sandals whispered.

He crossed the barrier into Paradise as though falling into a caress. Lips curled back, eyes half-closed, his head tilted at pink smoke rising from the Destiny houses.

I secured my own mask around my face. He left his untied and mumbled something unintelligible. The corners of his eyes grew moist.

I was afraid to take his arm. "Stay with me, Tel. What's happening to you?"

He shrugged. My followers passed us to either side, protected against the fumes or enjoying them. Luscious moans rose from the nursery.

"What a beautiful hell this is."

"Tie your mask, Tel. I can't reach that far."

He gazed sadly down at his arms instead, shrugging his bag more firmly into place before he petted his own fur. A tear rolled into his chops. "Poor, dead gods."

I grabbed his hand and rushed him home. His stagger clipped my heels. My family lived in a clean house, a ventilated house, with enough fresh

air to clear his head. That's what I told myself as he sighed after me. He tripped across the threshold and through the anteroom, mumbling to his demons as I waved my kin, our kin, away from us.

"That's what's charming about dying out."

I followed the direction of his gaze. Nothing but work clothes hanging over an unpainted stool.

He added, "It's so peaceful." More pelt ran through his fingers. "So easy."

I grumbled, "The Masari are *not* dying out."

He looked down at me, confused. "They're not?"

"No." I had no evidence, but it didn't matter. "When did you last eat?"

"I don't eat."

I snapped, "I'm not talking about Yata!"

His face worked. "I drank tea with you."

I called out for food. I was an idiot, to think that growing up in a farming family meant he had sense when it came to meals. But that was before. I loosened my shirt ties as my chest flushed. "Tel, my brother is crazy enough without you following in his footsteps!"

He sat on the stool, his knees in the air. I grabbed a heel of bread from my newest co-husband and passed it to my oldest ex co-husband, then unstrapped my water bladder. "Eat and drink this, will you? I'll shove it down your throat if I have to."

I didn't have to. Instead I watched the slow movements of his hands and waited for his eyes to focus. I let my family come closer—one, two people at a time. When he finished the bread, we gave him DogLake to hold after wiping the baby's mouth, in case any traces of Destiny remained in his spittle. I motioned WingLeaf forward.

"Tel." She knelt beside him. "It's all right."

He absently patted the boy's ruddy hair. I heard the hearth stirred back to life and smelled rabbit.

We watched him return to his senses over the meal, a conspiracy of good food, good air, and good people. WingLeaf and Tel looked like bookends on opposite sides of the table, towering over the rest of us. She chattered, "There are more of us here than at the farm house now, don't you think?"

He scanned us all, then made a noncommittal nod.

"How's Uncle Ghost?"

He washed a bite down with water. "Misses you."

My adopted kin opened her mouth to reply, but then she thought better of it. Tel wasn't trying to provoke her. Nothing in his voice held any blame. Of course her uncle could visit here, he knew the way. Destiny did nothing to Ghost, except through its effects on Piri and now on his son.

My ex co-husband fell back to the food. Did he feel like a traitor to his bloodline by even coming here?

At long last he started to relax as he caught up with us. Even the walls he'd thrown up years ago began to dissolve as he asked about our lives—not the way a scribe would, but the way a relative would. I let my kin talk, watching my best friend's responses and keeping the old hurts to myself. I'd lost a wife to childbirth and the biological father to divorce. Two of my adult children had chosen to remain in Basc and belonged to other households now. I waited for the heaviness over our table to lift and fade and for snatches of laughter to take hold. Tel hadn't known the newer members of my household at all, not like this.

Ijil passed behind me and drummed on my arm, *Will he come back?*

She was my offspring, but Tel was her favorite father. She'd asked me the same question after he left us twelve years ago, and I had no more confidence now than I had then.

He'd never really left. That's what I had told her then, when she was little enough to believe me. Repeating it now wouldn't do us any good.

My fleet-footed daughter rounded the table. "More silkcake, *dobresso?*"

Tel furrowed his brow at her. "You're fussing over me." His chops twitched with a smile as he took another pastry. When our replenished pitcher

made another round, he passed it on without taking a drop of ale. From beginning to end, he kept to water.

He glanced only briefly to the side when WingLeaf handed DogLake to his wetnurse. "Where's ClayPack? Training?"

"Hunting." WingLeaf looked back from her retreating baby.

"Didn't he finish his rotation?"

"It's the same rotation. Let's not talk about it now."

I could have told Tel that the hunts were getting harder for the Masari. My condemned followers were easy targets, but the far woods were big. Crossroads' troops would have to get through the Preservers first, and that meant drawn-out battles.

I could have told Tel what ClayPack looked like when he came home, doubled over with fatigue. And Clay's being alive meant that at least one more Yata was dead. On those days I marveled that we could get along at all. On those days I gave thanks to the gods for FlyAway and DogLeaf, and for Destiny, and for natural-born non-dependents like Tel.

The tension passed. My ex bent down, half-hidden in a cloud of kids. I grinned over at his shoulder blades and felt as needy as Ijil, basking in all the magic moments I could get.



He returned to our marriage bed, if not to our marriage.

For a while I just listened to sighs and caught breaths, to the sounds of slow lovemaking. Throaty laughter and tenderness. The melancholy that had once dogged Tel was gone, as though his barrenness didn't matter to him any more. His obsessive need to pleasure us was gone, too. Instead he joined us, truly joined us, the way he had in the beginning. But he was older now and more seasoned, more connected to his body. He wedded all of us for one night. He became once again the furry giant in the bed, at long last unashamed that we loved him back.

I didn't beg him to stay, but I wanted to. When I awakened in the crook of his arm and saw him staring at the ceiling I knew that he'd be trapped here,

either cocooned against the drug or ensnared in it. I whispered into his ear, "Thank you."

He planted a kiss on my forehead, as though I were the younger one. After breakfast, he gathered up his satchel, tied two masks around his face, and all but ran back to his narratives.

CHAPTER 45

Mid-Autumn

Abri

Heavy snows muffled the sound of everything, including the printing presses. All that clacking sounded far away and impotent, as though the broadsides and not the blizzard were imaginary. I wished they were. The more the Yata united, the vaster the wealth we amassed. The brighter we shone in the eyes of the gods. Our industry came from the gods because they favored us and wanted us strong. Pity our starving Masari brethren, but stay out of their crosshairs. Parity is coming soon!

If only I could bury all that propaganda beneath the drifts, instead of standing by while its sheaves flew across the region. The machine across the courtyard was Zai's god, and she fed it delicacies beyond our wildest dreams.

In spite of everything I was still her son, and in spite of everything I still hunted down those poor, starving Masari in the far woods. I had taken an oath to protect my people. I prayed to Gria to guide me, but more than that I prayed to TripStone, who had taken my father away.

She had fed her people. What was I feeding? What was I blessing?

I greeted my fellow citizens as I walked to our government complex. Their polite waves answered mine, but the air reeked of nervousness because I killed Yata, too. My tattoos frightened them, especially the newer ones, even when I left my furry coat behind and wore the clothing of an ordinary man.

Psalm didn't fear me at all. His likable nature calmed me. That was true even when I found him reviewing matters of state that had once been my responsibility. I can't say I missed the paperwork.

The pile on his desk was higher, this time. Strange, to see a man who had never touched a gun surrounded by battle maps tacked to the walls, but my mother and I managed those. "Need help?"

His head jerked up. Almost immediately his frizzed neck fur settled back down. "Tell me you were practicing your stealth moves."

"I'm afraid not. You were engrossed." I moved closer as he caught his breath. "Those are Chamber minutes, Psalm. Are we conquering Crossroads now?"

"I've been auditing their sessions." His smooth tone sounded forced. "Bless has been teaching me some of the lessons she learned from our father. I spend almost half my time in Crossroads."

At least that gave him less time to hasten our family's population explosion. "How do you like the job?"

"Better than HigherBrook did at first, I think."

"Better than I do, certainly." I lifted a sheet and almost dropped it, then blew on my numb fingertips to warm them. More often than not, my affliction made me laugh.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "What's so funny?"

"Ata." My ancestor and I were buddies now. Sometimes I wished he would crawl out of my skin so that I could buy him an ale. "I'm chilled to the bone, Psalm. You can burn me, you can scald me, it doesn't make any difference. Only one thing stops my winter."

He bent back to his papers. "Taking up arms."

He'd been my co-husband for almost half my life. Sometimes he knew my darkest secrets better than I did. "Why is that? Why must I kill to stay warm?"

His chops drooped as he frowned. My question remained rhetorical.

I shrugged my uniform tighter and wished I'd worn my pelts instead. Every day became an argument over which side of madness I walked on. It became a matter of mood, of personal preference, when I could control it at all. When I wanted to.

Today I wanted to. I had a patrol report to fill out. "Have you seen Zai?"

He nodded, making notes on the minutes. His thumb jerked toward the wall behind him.

My mother drilled to keep her skills sharp, but we sent only Preservers to engage the Masari now. She hadn't entered the far woods in years. "You're not serious."

But her old pin stabbed the map, snugged beside those of the new inductees. Their trail took them toward outcroppings of mushrooms and wild berries and around clusters of edible weeds. "They're headed toward the Pantry."

He drawled, "That's where everybody goes when the supply lines thin."

I knew that. But someone else could have brought reinforcements; it didn't have to be her. Why was my mother placing herself at risk? "Did she say why she was going?"

In reply, Psalm pushed parchment across the desk. I squinted at Bless's tight signature approving the names on gridded sheets. Whom to relieve, whom to assign and where. Dates of deployment.

I whispered, "Did you tell Bless my mother's out there?"

He pulled the papers back. "No. Why? "

"She's your sister." My teeth began to chatter. "Are you ready to see her husband killed?"

"No, Abri. Of course not." He hunched over the records, massaging his temples with tufted thumbs. His frown deepened. "But those are the rules of the hunt. Zai has every right to pursue BrushBurn."

To pursue a man who was old and unrelieved after weeks in the wilderness, just when Bless was coming to term. My mother had bided her time, waiting for her enemy's moment of greatest weakness.

"She's not a Preserver, Psalm."

He looked up. "She's flanked by them."

"She's their commander. She'll make sure they're out of the way." Psalm didn't know history as I did. The six years between us put us in different worlds. "The last thing Zai wants is for BrushBurn to have a painless death. She'll torture him first."

"You sound sure of that."

"Read TelZodo's narratives," I spat. "Go to the Rotunda and read his eyewitness accounts of people who survived her raids."

Frostbite swept me up, so quickly I almost screamed. Shoving my hands into my armpits did nothing. I needed weapons.

This was about more than my sister-in-law's mate. I've killed Masari I loved. I've shaken next to their corpses and prayed to them to save this valley. Sending them into the afterlife ripped me apart, but I did it because I was consecrated to do it.

I've known for a long time how much my mother hated BrushBurn. I knew what Basc owed him for its freedom. That's not why I worshiped him.

The gods had brought us together to save our peoples. Now they were bringing us together again, and everything inside me screamed *No!*

But who was I to refuse the dead? To refuse my father? To refuse Gria, and CatBird, and TripStone? To refuse HigherBrook, who died so easily and so readily in my arms? They all trusted me.

As I turned to go, Psalm asked, "Are you forsaking your oath?"

How dearly I wanted to. "No." I had trouble forming the words. "But I *took* an oath."

Gods forgive me, I took an oath to kill. If I had to fight Zai, it would not be over whether BrushBurn would live, but over how he would die.



The Pantry had kept Gria alive during her exile, and it nourished her militia before the Covenant fell. One needed only to reach out and pull from the tree, pluck off the vine, twist from the stem. Our controlled war had stretched the Pantry to capacity, but it still retained its power to feed. Yata and Masari soldiers fought over that bounty as fiercely as over the bodies.

Maybe I fretted over nothing. BrushBurn could drop behind; his comrades could close ranks ahead of him. I didn't know the Masari battle plan. I knew the Yata battle plan, but fighting had gone on for too long. It was outdated now.

And I knew the rules of engagement, set down by Erta before her abdication decades ago: *The Masari may take what they need to survive and no more.*

The number of allowable deaths was limited on both sides. But our stalemates kept getting longer, leaving Crossroads' providers and Basc's protectors increasingly fatigued.

My mother had entered the fray refreshed, bent on accomplishing her personal objective.

I passed the signs marking Basc's perimeter and flew down transport roads, then left those roads behind as I took to the trails. My soul buckled and boiled. My Ata-self fled from me. The Honorable One rose up in my chest with a righteous yell, half in me and half in the afterlife.

I had become a Preserver before I became either of them. As my boots punched through the forest I thought only of the job I had to do and of my sacred task. I skirted traps and decoys, my blood hot again, my fingertips pulsing, the far woods a second skin. I could spot its deadly blemishes from afar.

I masked myself against gas bombs at the sight of distant haze, leaves just a little dulled, the suggestion of shouts in the air. *Engage. Fall back. Re-engage.* The scars of past battles fell behind as everything closed in on the Pantry. I zigzagged around outcroppings, slashing at ropes and hearing boulders connect, splintering wood instead of my skull.

I could worm my way toward the Masari, make my kills, and decrease the number of allowable Yata deaths by decreasing the number of predators. I could spare BrushBurn by forcing this engagement toward its end, but that wouldn't stop Zai. Her battle lines were set.

She had to make her move, and then I had to make mine.



I knew where he was.

The shifting wind didn't matter. That was all acrid smoke and sharp aromatic spikes. It was ripe fruits splattered underfoot. Voices dropped to nothing in the quiet lulls. Communication shrank to tapped commands and brief gestures. Scrabbling beetles drowned the messages out.

I knew where BrushBurn was because of the thrill in my veins. I was in the presence of divinity. Light emanated from his location, a blinding spear cutting the fumes away.

Don't let him be desecrated. Sacrifice him now.

A furtive whistle stopped me. I didn't expect to hear mimicked bird trills, one call and one reply. They echoed from the wrong locations. Extra eyes in the forest. With a jolt I realized that the exiles—the criminals, the untrained, the easy prey—had come to the Pantry, too.

The rules of engagement applied only to hunters on both sides of the meadow. It didn't account for the Yata who, in Basc culture, never existed.

CHAPTER 46

Bless

I can't leave Crossroads.

Even if I wanted to leave, I can't. Rudder won't let me in. Alvav won't let me in. Not with my hunger.

By a vote of seven to one, the Chamber decrees that Destiny wetnurses be assigned to all Yata-dependent pregnant women.

I could move to Basc, but how would I nurse StoneSun? Eating Yata in Crossroads is natural. Eating Yata in Basc is an affront to our allies.

Eating Yata in Basc would place me and then my child under Zai's jurisdiction. If that isn't conquest, I don't know what is.

"Dad said there are two inescapable truths to governance. The first is that after I have heard all the arguments, my decisions are mine alone to make. The second is that I must make them first and last for Crossroads, whatever Crossroads happens to be."

Psalm was a most attentive pupil. When I asked what Zai was teaching him, he shook his head and said, "Nothing like this." He fetched me pillows and made me comfortable when my ankles swelled. He brought me tea. He listened to StoneSun shifting, pressing his ear to my belly and remarking on my baby's vigor.

"You were like that, too," I told him. "When you were still inside Mom."

He blinked at me. "You remember that?"

"You squirmed so much you tickled my face."

His cheeks dimpled above his chops. "*That's* who giggled through the water."

"You *remember* that?"

"Of course not." He gave me a look. "Was Dad this gullible, too?"

I should have taken his joke as a warning.

From the time I started teaching him, he'd attended all the Chamber sessions but this one. The one whose vote put Destiny in my house and a chaperone at my side.

He was my *brother*.

I asked him if he'd engineered the vote. He asked me if I thought the vote was best for Crossroads, for what Crossroads had become. How would our father have handled it?

I know what my people see when they look at me. They don't see HigherBrook any more. They don't see our mother Kova. They don't see a Yata and they don't see a Masari. They see the befuddled, knocked-up consort of a flesh peddler. They see hormones run amok in a ravenous dupe.

But they are still my people. Crossroads is still under my jurisdiction, at least until I go into delivery. Until I am physically unable to preside.

And that's when Psalm, secure in his dual citizenship, will act.

CHAPTER 47

Abri

I know what desecration looks like.

When TripStone's brother FeatherFly and his friend MossDancer were flayed alive, that was a desecration. I could see them through TripStone's words, conveying the horror she had seen through her father's eyes as she related every detail on the night before she died.

Desecration was the price TripStone paid for a slab of Destiny Farm meat, when BrushBurn exacted her body from her. Before she could give it to him willingly. Before Jirado, in turn, desecrated him.

Desecration was SandTail stuffing Gria with Destiny and fucking her with his gun. Desecration was six Preservers and their wives raping and mutilating CatBird. Desecration was what Promontory did to Piri, what it did to TelZodo's brothers and sisters, what it did to every soul in every ledger like the one on Piri's desk.

Desecration was the brown waste coursing off the mountains, and the dead fish floating in the lake, and the metallic burning in the air.

And it was my mother's triumphant scream as her first blade found its target. It was the drugginess in BrushBurn's dulled eyes. It was his paralysis as she broke his fingers, one by one by one. It was her laying down fire in the morning fog as she claimed her prey.

The rules of engagement said to leave them alone for as long as he was alive, but they were meant to bond Preserver and prey. Zai was not a Preserver. She could do as she wished.

I raced toward streaming light as a bullet sped past me from behind, revealing me as a Masari's target. From ahead came the sound of a pelt ripping away. A helpless gurgle rose from motionless lips. Masari sinew tightened—around his neck, between his legs. My mother crooned to him, promising that she would go slow, describing how slowly. Intestines and their connective tissue *glooshed* between her fingers.

The light brought everything into sharp relief. The Honorable One, half in my heart and half in the afterlife, guarded the portal as he guided me through the mist. My own spectral eyes stared back at me, nodding. Ready.

I couldn't push Zai off BrushBurn, there was no time. She was reaching for excrement, drenched in blood when I burst into full brightness. My hand shot between their bodies, up BrushBurn's chest and toward his heart and I slammed my poison home.

None of us spoke. BrushBurn couldn't. Above me, my mother shook with rage.

I sang consecration hymns as my god died. I floated him toward the portal and eased him through, and on the other side I took his mended hands. I had relieved his suffering, but I could not relieve his confusion. Or was that my own?

I was barely conscious of the firestorm. Zai, on her feet again and once again a target, shielded me. The bright light that had guided me was gone, but the fog had begun to lift. One Masari was dead. The battle for food continued.

Then my soul shifted again and I was Ata, mourning my fallen savior. Another Yata-eater was gone and more of my valley's balance had been chipped away. We would all starve, slipping on the Pantry's rotted fruit. My stomach shook with emptiness before I circled back to being the Preserver hurling gas grenades, to being The Honorable One thundering prayers through the forest until BrushBurn's divinity was assured. To being Abri, whirling at the shriek of an arrow and whirling again as Zai dropped with a yell, clutching her punctured thigh.

"I sacrifice *nothing*." My nonexistent daughter echoed her grandmother's condemnation. I stared at Tezani, turned wiry and weatherbeaten in her rags. My joy and terror warred as she notched another arrow.

The shot that killed her came from above, through a knothole in a hollowed-out snag.

She never was. She never was. Oh help me, she never was.

Desecration is a tool of the gods.

CHAPTER 48

TelZodo

My mother bent over the corpse in the consecration room, looking thoughtful. After all the letters back and forth and all the confidences she had shared with BrushBurn, I had not expected her to be so calm. Not when my pulse was jumping in my throat.

Cloth slid. From across the table, Abri said, "I've covered the worst of it."

I steeled myself not to throw up. Abri had closed the eyes, but BrushBurn's skin sagged like putty and his fur had turned brittle. Preservatives and aromatics hung in the air, so thick they made me itch.

Tezani had simply been taken away from the Pantry, hauled over ClayPack's shoulder for butchering.

I drummed on my mother's arm, *Talk to me.*

Her fingers answered against my back, where Abri couldn't see, *I loved him, TelZodo, but he farmed us. I forgave him. I am thankful he is out of pain.*

I averted my head before Abri uncovered the body again, and pulled a stool beneath me at the rubbery squeak of gloves. My mother hummed through her inspections, not a dirge or a prayer but just to comfort me, as though I were a child again. I listened to her wordless soothing with my head between my knees.

Unbidden images swept me up. Bloody gloves gesturing. Dark fluids splattering out of drainage tubes. BrushBurn's arm around me as I fought my demons in Promontory. His careful touch, reading a decayed Farm ledger until he'd found every child my mother had lost.

My own collection of letters. He had been nothing but kind to me.

My mother dropped her gloves into a basin. Laces sang as she slipped her apron off. I steadied myself as she squeezed my shoulder, before she stepped from the room and back into her lab.

Yawning returned the blood to my head and kept my nausea in check. I would stay with BrushBurn through his dismemberment. I owed him that much. And I didn't want Abri to be alone.

Thank the gods my father remained at the Grange. Ghost wouldn't see me trembling as Abri drew himself up and all the parts of his twisted soul fused together in one, terrifying instant.

His voice boomed, but not with the cryptic scripture that had once tripped him. Abri's oration shattered the air, penetrating the afterlife as BrushBurn's bones cracked like lightning. For a moment I could see into his head, the consecration room awash in flames and the portal spinning itself into a vortex. It swallowed Abri's world, my world, *the* world, turning life and death inside-out. Like fingers pulling out of a glove.

And then it jerked out of existence. My stomach roiled again as color returned to the room. Nothing on the dissection table resembled a person. Abri had reduced BrushBurn to the contents of a crate. Alcohol sharpened the air as he wiped the last of the mess away, his stippled face calm and sad.



Few people came to the funeral shed in Crossroads. Most were busy preparing for the harvest in the days before our Lacuna officially began. Bless leaned against me as she gave her Remembrance, her dry eyes closed. Exhaustion poured off her but she insisted on standing.

Ghost's tears surprised me most of all. He tried to hide them, dabbing at his face with a kerchief. His Remembrance recalled a man who'd been pummeled from boyhood. One who'd survived two wives, a born and an unborn child, and an adopted ward. Bless's hand moved to her belly when my father mentioned Sunrise.

Some of BrushBurn would be in StoneSun's name after all. Not a bloodline name, but the one he'd given to a Farm Yata. To his first, slaughtered mate.

I whispered to Bless, "You knew this?"

She nodded. "I knew everything."

Then she slipped her fingers beneath my shirt and tapped, *Tel—you know what the Chamber has decreed for my child.*

"Yes." The Yata woman assigned to live with Bless was an enforcer, not a visitor.

BrushBurn's numbers need your protection.

I said nothing, waiting for the Remembrances to end. By the time the singing began, I'd knotted the stories together in my head so that I'd know what to write. Only then did I ease my hand inside Bless's tunic. For the rest of the funeral we drummed, outlining and refining our plans.

I knew how to disguise the books and how to encode information. The narratives told multiple tales if one knew where and how to look. I could create volumes worth of redundancies.

And if that failed, I could bury them in the Rotunda itself. HigherBrook had taught me where all that building's hiding places were.

CHAPTER 49

Evit

I was preparing my next report when ClayPack ducked through my door, still unwashed from the hunt. His leathers stuck to him, sifting grime onto the floor, but at least his rifle was gone. He must have left it at home.

It wasn't like him, being dirty like this. If we were in my lab instead of in my office, I'd have shoved him outside.

"WingLeaf told me where you were." He licked his lips, his voice nervous. "I've never done this before. I don't really know how."

I shook my head as he unlaced his vest. "Done what?"

The vest dropped off him, raising a puff of stale aromatics. Odors of mulch and insect parts and a metallic drift of dried blood. His arms were bruised with crusted-over cuts and powder burns.

I glanced at the stains on his pants as he loosened his breech ties. "You need medical attention."

I don't think he heard me at all. He dropped to the floor, his pants down at his knees. I rushed to open shutters as he tugged off his boots. A stink rose as his leg wraps unwound.

When I turned back, he was naked. On his knees, his back bent, forehead to the floor. His arms rested along the sides of his body, palms up.

No one had ever done that for me before, but I knew what it was. I was too young when TripStone gave her Atonement to my mother. I was still a little kid when Basc performed its collective Atonement for the massacre. "You killed somebody."

Blood kin. My heart sank as I dropped into my chair. "Clay, sit up and tell me what happened. That's what the Covenant hunters did."

He sat back on his heels, reeking of dread as he spoke. Tezani's death depressed but did not surprise me. She had been condemned, and her falling

to the hunt had been only a matter of time. But the rest of what happened made my hair stand on end.

I never cared for BrushBurn—how could I?—but my mother's actions shocked me. Banishing my niece had been bad enough, but I could blame that on policy. The rest was unthinkable.

I loved Zai, but thank the gods we had a meadow between us. Her injured leg should keep her away from the Lacuna, because if I saw her here I don't know what I'd do. I didn't want to think. I just listened to Clay's labored breathing, stepping to my window to get some fresh air.

For once, the air cooperated. A clean wind blew over the valley, driving pollution away. Even the mountains stayed quiet in a rare respite from demolition.

Clay was still on his knees when I turned back.

"Clean yourself up. You did what you had to do." I went after a broom as he struggled to his feet. "I'm glad you're on our side, ClayPack. I'm glad you're making Destiny with us, because your work is going to help end this nightmare. You're still family, you know."

I pressed his hunting clothes into his arms and handed up his boots. He didn't dress. He could walk home naked if he wanted to; people in Paradise did it all the time. His fur would protect him against the autumn chill.

Maybe he wouldn't catch a fever, especially if he stopped at the infirmary first. Maybe I could make my own numbness go away. "When you eat Yata over at the Deliverance Inn, just say a little prayer to Tezani, will you?"



The harvest gave us all a chance to forget. I spent days and nights pulling food out of the ground, sticking with root vegetables until they became a fetish. It was like delivering babies all the time. Long ones, brown ones, hairy ones, round ones, white ones, smooth ones. I felt a rush every time the dirt yielded. *Open up. That's it, open up. Come to Papa...*

I bent over the ground until my back burned. Cider chased the soreness in my hips away as I lay with the others in our big field tent, raising

toasts to the farmers and to the gods and to the cider itself. Raising toasts for the sake of raising toasts, to life turned sticky-sweet and smacking of sap.

When I got sick of all the pulling I lived in the canning room. *Hey, look at me! I'm a Preserver!* The real Preserver was somewhere else, but the Grange was a big place. I didn't see Abri at all. He had already blessed the Liberty Farm Lacuna, sounding more lackluster than ever from what people told me. Mumbling from one disjointed train of thought to the next. I would, too, if I were him.

I didn't see Bless, either, but I didn't expect to. Someone might mistake her for a pumpkin. The rest of the Chamber officiated, which meant they were raising mugs when they weren't hauling crops. I kept spotting Psalm as he threaded his way from one field to the next, slapping backs, filling baskets, and belting out work songs.

Basc could make all the policy it wanted to, but Destiny united this valley. Bets were already being placed on how fast we'd consolidate. Before Parity or after Parity. Before weaning or after weaning. One village, one constituency. It was already happening, with more and more Yata pouring over the border to stay. I could picture Bless on her back, with her swollen feet raised on petitions for citizenship piled as high as her cushions.

My head filled with the echoes of syncopated bubbling. I swam through the canning room, hot and sugary, waiting for everything to reduce to jam.

CHAPTER 50

Bless

My people are happy. Our trade is healthy. And this whole valley is thriving now, including Crossroads.

How often had I repeated that litany to myself? I'd lost count. My thoughts were simple and short and my bottom hurt like hell. My heart ached.

From behind me Tel asked, "How's this?"

"Go deeper."

He couldn't, of course, he was massaging me as deeply as he could. I coiled my arms tighter around my pillow and pressed my chops harder against it, trying to push it into the wall.

"You know I've always dreamed of this moment."

"Bastard. Don't make me laugh." Breathing was hard enough.

At least he and not the wetnurse kneaded my ass in the middle of the night. StoneSun hung between me and the wall, forcing my knees to bend. At long last, Tel was getting to see me naked.

He told me I had beautiful stretch marks. He called the purple veins around my thigh pelt tantalizing and said I had the prettiest flat feet in Crossroads. All the while I was half bent over, showing him how un-frigid I was.

Maybe I could push the baby out if I laughed hard enough. Crying certainly hadn't worked.

I concentrated on his broad palms, trying to relax and rock as he pushed. His fingers didn't stray at all. On that matter I trusted Tel more than the Yata sitting at my table. She had begun dosing herself with Destiny, to prepare for my delivery. Her face flushed in the lamp light as she watched us, her hand moving rhythmically beneath the table top. Moist sounds.

Even Tel refused her advances, but that was because of the drug.

A new back spasm jarred my teeth. "Higher."

His thumbs moved up, making circles. "Better?"

"Yes. Now make the rest of it go away."

The Lacuna had finished on the other end of town, and the hunt had closed down for the duration of the harvest. I'd hear gunshot again in a few days, when battle drilling resumed. Now everybody was sleeping off their labors. And we had a glut of new immigrants, which meant new houses had to be built. We'd have to cut into the slopes.

Crossroads wouldn't get this quiet again for a long time. If I weren't in so much pain I'd let the Yata's masturbation noises lull me to sleep.

I was almost there when I heard a soft *ploof*, like a brief rumble of thunder from over the mountain range. I murmured into the pillow, "Storm coming?"

Tel's palms halted at my hips. "I don't know."

"You sound worried."

"That sounded like an explosion. I *am* worried. It's too close."

It happened again, sending tiny vibrations through the floorboards and into my flat feet.

"*Vyak*, Tel, I am *not* in the mood for this."

I pushed away from the wall, reached for my pants, and the room went white. A *whoosh* inside sent streams coursing down my legs. I wasn't going anywhere.

My sultry Yata helper perked up, unlacing her shirt ties with glistening hands. She was already primed to suckle, as heavy with milk as I felt. She grabbed the lantern as we took to the bedroom.

A third rumble made me shake. "Tel, what's happening outside?"

"I'll find out."

"No, you're staying with me. She'll go."

My wetnurse lit another lamp, all business now. She turned for the door, her shirt still open. "I won't be long."

She ducked half-topless into the dark.

CHAPTER 51

Evit

The first detonation jolted me out of a dream and the fuzziness in my mouth said I'd been drugged. I wasn't in bed any more. I was on my lab table, cushioned in silks. Something heavy lay on my chest. Steady breaths bathed my face. I told myself I was still dreaming.

The second blast made me twitch. That's when I felt the ropes tying me down.

"Ssh." A gentle reassurance warmed my ear, low and calm. "Easy."

My throat tightened up. "Abri?"

"I'm here."

He brushed my hair back. I couldn't see a thing until I dark-adapted, and then there were only shadows.

"Abri, what's happening? What did you do?"

He didn't answer. My lab shook with the third explosion as the smell of charred Destiny filled the air. Fire. He held me as I strained against the ropes.

"Abri, untie me. Let me out of here *now*. This is *wrong*."

The flames outside began to grow, lighting the room a little. There should have been shouting, a bucket brigade. Why wasn't there?

Blood roared in my ears. My brother smiled down at me, the way he did when we were boys. Nothing but love in his eyes.

I had to reach him before he lost his senses completely. "Destroying the factory won't stop Destiny. You know that. It's all over this valley now. People are making batches of it in their homes. What you're doing now is only a setback."

He kissed my forehead. "I know."

"Then for the gods' sakes, stop this!"

"For the gods' sakes." He gave a little chuckle. A new blast shattered beakers against the floor. "You're funny."

If only I could cut myself free. I'd give anything for a knife. Abri always carried our father's with him, but nothing hard pressed against me. When I craned my neck to see, the firelight showed a man dressed in simple clothes, weaponless.

I corrected myself. His weapons weren't on him. He'd spread them throughout Paradise. "You got the dynamite from Gria's shrine."

He nodded, delighted.

"Abri, I'm sorry." Squirming against him didn't help, but I couldn't do anything else. "I'm sorry for everything. I didn't mean to hurt you. I never did. If nothing else gets through to you, then please believe that."

"I do, Evit. I believe you and I love you. I'm sorry, too."

"Then you've got to stop this."

He shook his head and trailed silk across my brow, wiping sweat away. Another flash erupted, lighting his face with its blue forehead band and its red pelt tattoo. He snuggled against me with a happy sigh as the air thickened.

"We'll suffocate," I pressed. "We'll die."

He shrugged.

I bit down panic. "Who's controlling you now? Is it Ata?"

"No, Evit. Nothing like that."

The eruptions died down a little and for a while I thought they would end. Then they flared up again, taking a different tack. I struggled to listen over my pounding heart, tracing the progression of blasts.

My body froze. "No..."

I sank my teeth into him. I pushed. I tried to kick my way out of the ropes. Finally my shaking worked nails free and drove wooden legs loose from the floorboards. We started to travel, scraping across the room.

Abri wrapped his limbs around the table. I shook it harder and tried to bust it up, to crash it down. Anything to get out. "Abri!"

"Shh."

"Those aren't the production rooms you're blowing up, Abri. Those are the houses!"

He hugged me tighter. "I know."

"Your kin live here, too, Abri!"

"It's all right."

There should have been screaming, but I heard no screams. No voices of any kind.

Oh, gods! I shoved against the ropes. I rocked us, hauling wider and farther, finally tipping. The table fell on its side and I heard a bone crack, but I was still tied down. I screamed as a renewed blast made the walls split, showering us with plaster.

Abri dragged himself around me, wincing as he cinched me again. "Getting closer now."

I started to cry. I smelled piss, but I didn't know whose it was. The room heated up, much brighter than before. It looked like noon. My body moaned through a weak, pitiful struggle, but I was not going to die lying still.

The echoes reached me through billowing smoke, each detonation worse than the last. Those were the houses of my wives and my co-husbands. My in-laws. My children and grandchildren. My adopted Masari kin and miracle babies like DogLake. My comrades. My friends. The people who believed in me, in Destiny, in what we were doing, in what we were saving.

Please, gods, get them out. Keep them safe.

If I knew that they were safe, then I could die. I could give myself up, to Abri or to Ata or to whatever demons did this. That's all I asked. "Please tell me you didn't drug them asleep, the way you did to me."

He didn't tell me. He didn't say anything.

My eyes stung through coughing as I struggled for air. The next explosion left me almost deaf. I thrashed as hard as I could, fighting the ringing in my ears.

"Almost here."

His voice held only tenderness. A sob broke from me.

"Shh."

"Oh gods, Abri..."

"Shh."

He stretched around me a last time and cradled my head against his chest, as if to shield me from the flames.

CHAPTER 52

TelZodo

Lanterns knocked against the walls with each new blast, but they stayed on their hooks. Bless yelled in my arms with a new contraction. Her wetnurse returned, sweaty and breathless and with helpers in tow, a Yata midwife and two muscular Masari hunters.

They told me with one hard look that this would be a Destiny baby.

In-between the glares their faces turned haggard. They knew what those explosions meant. I could hear all of Crossroads waking up, filling the night with distant shouts whenever Bless's pains eased.

She dug her nails into my chest. "Tell me what's going on."

I growled upwards, "You heard her."

"You're safe here."

"That's not good enough!"

"Calm down, TelZodo." The midwife rubbed more oil between her palms and reached between Bless's legs. "Governor, the more you tighten up, the harder this is going to be."

The Governor hissed, "Don't push me."

She stiffened as a new wave hit. Her moans ripped through the room. They built and crested, finally diminishing as the floor vibrated again.

"I want to know who's dying out there!" The shout rushed from Bless as she caught her breath. "I want to know who started this war."

"It isn't a war." The hunter who answered stood off to the side with his arms folded, regarding her heaving belly with thinly-veiled disgust. "It's contained."

The lamps shook again and Bless yelled, "The hell it is!"

"We're *here* to *have* the *baby*." The midwife massaged, taking deep breaths. Her smooth cheeks twitched. "Bless, you're going to have to listen to me or I can't help you."

My pelt stiffened as my nose took on a life of its own. I could feel my lungs being throttled. "That's Destiny burning."

It wasn't a house fire, it was a conflagration. That meant the Grange could be burning, too.

More shadows flickered as glass knocked against wood. I managed to whisper, "How contained?"

The wetnurse said, "Just Paradise."

Tears streamed from her eyes even as she cradled swollen breasts in her hands. Drugged and sad.

"And the people inside?"

"I don't know."

The others had all fallen silent except for Bless. Her panting filled the room between rumbles. They didn't sound like thunder any more. The blasts were too evenly spaced, too premeditated.

It didn't matter who was for or against Paradise. Every single one of us had loved ones in there.



"Breathe it out," the midwife urged. Her voice scratched. "Just breathe."

A bit of blood puddled on the floor. I spread more analgesics on Bless's back as she dropped to her hands and knees. Her gasps became another howl as a new contraction hit.

But it was just the contractions now. The explosions had stopped. Between Bless's yells I could still hear shouting outside, trailing off in the direction of the Grange.

"You're doing fine." I knelt beside her. "Everything else has to disappear, Bless. This birth is the only thing you can control right now."

The fury in her eyes told me that even that was subject to question. The hunters waiting in the corners made the bedroom feel like an armed camp. I looked away from the wetnurse sprawled and ready in a chair.

Everyone's face held the same intensity. We focused on Bless because none of us wanted to think beyond this room. We would find out what had happened to the rest of the world later, but right now we were busy bringing a new life into being. I watched the spreading of sterilized sheets. As dawn rose, the wetnurse stood and padded about, extinguishing the lamps she could reach.

"TelZodo, get in a chair. Bless, let him hold you." The midwife moved to the side as I tore off my sticky clothes.

Bless hung onto my wrists as I locked my arms around her sternum. Her words spilled out. "Gods, I'm exhausted."

"Don't rest yet," the midwife said. "It's time to start pushing."



StoneSun's first cry sailed into the clouds as the midwife pulled her free. For a moment Bless's sobbed laughter hovered in the air. Then it turned into gut-wrenching shrieks as the wetnurse moved in and the hunters pinned me down.

It was my mother in the nursery all over again, screaming for the babies the farmers were taking away. I couldn't breathe. They pushed me down again as the midwife cleared a snipped umbilical and passed Bless's daughter up.

My mouth filled with fur but they had me by the legs. A hand forced mine away from the blade on the sheet. I twisted back toward Bless, who was yelling for her child, her fists in the midwife's hair.

I landed one punch before the rest of my wind was knocked from me. The hunters left me wheezing on my back, my ears filled with screams as the wetnurse backed away, pressing a bundle to her breast.

"It's over, TelZodo."

It's not over. I'd tell that Masari brute if I could talk.

I had to get to Bless. She was spread-eagled on her pallet, arms dropped against the mattress, fingers limp. I dragged myself toward spent wails.

"Bless..." I fought to speak, clutching her hand. I brushed soaked hair back from a tan face turned pale. "Bless, they'll bring her back. They won't hurt her. You'll hold her, I promise. It's only the nursing—"

My throat closed up.

I drummed on her palm, trying to keep my fingers steady, *We'll protect her.*

She turned puffy eyes to me. Tears ran from them as we listened to sounds of suckling coming from the opposite end of the room. The midwife kept her distance, tending to cuts on her face. The hunters pulled up a couple of chairs and kept watch over us all.

They weren't threatening any more. They weren't thugs. They were just following orders from the Chamber, doing their jobs.

I thought Bless had fallen asleep when she nudged my arm and pointed. I struggled to my feet and leaned against a wall until my balance returned. Outside the window the sky was bright, but hazy. The smell of char still hung in the air.

Nobody stopped me as I made my way to the wetnurse, who had done her job for the moment. She turned her flushed face to me as I stepped up. Her neck arched, her eyes searched mine out, and for a moment the Destiny fused us.

When I could get my tongue to work I said, "It's not your fault."

Arousal still deepened her voice. "It's no one's fault."

I bent to take the bundle from her. The downy baby yawned in my arms, her hair already brightening with her father's rust coloration. Her fur would darken later. I laid my finger against silky, translucent pelt crescents that would mature into chops.

She stared up at me with her mother's brown eyes. I smiled down at perfect dimples on cream-colored cheeks and whispered, "Hello, Stone."

I hurried her to Bless.



Over the course of half a day, we settled into uneasy but nonviolent domesticity. Faced with no other choice, Bless lived with the wetnurse at her side, handing StoneSun over whenever the baby called for food. I hated to leave them, but I couldn't stop thinking about my family, and Bless wanted a report on what had happened to Paradise.

The air thickened as I neared the Grange. Stunned runners pulled transports up and down the cobbled streets, shaking their heads when I asked what was inside. Finally, one said only, "Remains." Up ahead and toward the windbreak, columns of black ash corkscrewed into the sky.

I found my father rounding a corner of the funeral tent. He barred my way when I tried to pass inside, before I noticed the blood covering his clothes. The other smudges told me his job had been one of recovery, not rescue.

I whispered, "WingLeaf? DogLake?"

"Gone."

I took one look at his face and almost crumpled. "Evit?"

He turned away. I hurried past him and into the tent, with its makeshift tables and its grisly puzzle of body parts. Smudge pots were lit against the flies. Destiny walked beside me, nothing but a black shadow holding me up while I followed Ghost's instructions on identifying and categorizing the dead.

Other than command and response, we didn't talk. I stepped outside the tent for air and spotted Psalm sitting on a wagon bed. The dust on his clothes told me he'd been to Paradise, helping to clear away the rubble. He looked awful.

I took a seat beside him. "Bless had a healthy girl this morning."

He turned red-rimmed eyes to me and croaked, "That's good news."

We sat in silence, catching our breath.

I asked him, "Does Zai know what happened here?"

"Zai was here. She's back home now." His head turned toward the windbreak. "She said all she had ever wanted to do was protect her boys. That's all she's been able to say ever since she identified their remains."

He hopped off the wagon. I watched him shuffle back toward the ruins.

CHAPTER 53

Common Year 32, Early Fall

Bless

The old hunting grounds opened to the public two days before my daughter's tenth birthday. I stood off to the side as Psalm gave thanks to the gods in a ceremony we'd awaited for decades.

Basç and Crossroads together had designed a simple memorial marking the old entrance to Gria's militia camp. Cheers erupted all around us as my brother pulled inscribed silk off polished granite, and then the real party began. I became just another tourist, choosing one of the graded trails that would take me even deeper into the far woods.

"You'll be exhausted by the time we get home."

I smirked up at Tel. "You wish."

He was right, of course, but I wasn't going to tell him that. He was the one who needed exhausting. Ghost's Remembrance had only agitated him, crowds of people relating the same stories he'd heard dozens of times. Now Tel had to write them all, including his own, which began with his father lying down on a lab bench to rest and not getting up again. In spite of everything and even after Parity, Ghost had persisted on finding a drug-free solution to Yata dependence. He died doing what he believed in.

The opening of the far woods gave me a chance to pull my friend out of his stuffy little room. It had taken us two years to turn that vast forest into a park after Parity was declared. A brand new war almost resulted from our attempts to reach consensus on both sides of the meadow, but Psalm eventually quieted everybody down. It wasn't the first time he'd pressed taverns into political service. Members of the valley's bilateral Chamber signed their agreements and concessions with a pen in one hand and a throbbing head in the other, and my hangover had been just as bad as everybody else's.

My brother was a fair and generous boss, but if he had his way all the time our production of ale would outpace that of the Destiny. Part of me still

wanted to see that disgusting powder done away with. A bigger part of me didn't want to lose our customer base.

"Stone!" Tel's shout sailed over my head. "Get back on the trail!"

"That only encourages her, you know." I wished I were tall, and not for the first time. "She always makes sure she's in view. She *is* still in view, isn't she?"

He grunted, which meant yes.

"I'm okay, *dobresso!*" StoneSun's rusty curls bounced back where I could see them. She was already my height, but that still made her short for her age by Masari standards. Her hiking clothes flashed once across the path and ducked behind foliage on the other side.

I giggled at Tel's splutter. "She got back on the trail." And right off it again.

He pointed to the mulch below our feet. "This is here for a reason."

"Same reason as all the other rules," I said. "To invite bending."

I shifted to the side as FlyAway sprinted past us, followed closely by her latest boyfriend. She must have flirted with every teenage Masari male in Crossroads by now, but flirting was as far as she went. I couldn't stop the wagers already being placed on whether she would bear a non-dependent baby naturally, but I would keep an eye on her. I knew what it felt like to be under that kind of scrutiny.

Tel's chin jerked up, long enough for me to find my daughter's pale hand grabbing hold of a branch. She dropped back down before he could yell. A moment later her boots crunched ahead of us and she turned around, holding a bit of hacked-off rope high in the air.

I was glad she had BrushBurn's mouth. I could never grin that wide.

"Five points!" Her triumph was contagious.

I asked, "What does that make, so far? Fourteen?"

"Fifteen!"

I was sure the dried aromatics didn't count. After all this time they would have been native to the forest, not something a hunter had carried in years ago. But what did I know?

She handed her prize to Tel because she knew how much it bothered him. Her hair frizzed as she shook herself free of leaves.

Tel whispered, "Must she?"

"We consulted every single Preserver and every single hunter alive." I should get points for the number of times I'd explained the safety issues. "All the traps were disarmed and all the caches were emptied before we laid the first path down."

His thumb traced the rope's clean-cut edge. "And whose idea was this?"

Tel would be horrified if he knew how thorough the children were in their games. They'd started their point list the day we reached Parity, knowing that the far woods would open. Instead of trying to stop their hunt for war relics, the Chamber had worked out acceptable risks. "It was a joint enterprise."

"Jointly irresponsible."

"And you were never wild."

He scowled. One more peep of *Things were different then* and I would hit him.

StoneSun clipped her mane back into place. She plucked the rope from her *dobresso's* hands, draped it about her neck, and fished a map out of her vest pocket. Half a day into Peace Park and it was already tattered.

Her tufted finger landed on a narrow patch. "Is this where Dad died?"

"The Pantry. Yes."

"Uliz is going there to look for her imaginary dead sister. I said I'd meet her."

That raised more questions than I wanted to count. "When did Uliz find out about Tezani?"

Tel said, "Uliz visits the Rotunda. She was curious about her father, so I showed her his scriptures."

"The Second Covenant." I was going to have to sit him down and tell him what *irresponsible* meant. I didn't care that Uliz was an adult Yata now. She was a *young* adult Yata.

"We can get there this way." StoneSun traced a network of looping trails. "Tezani's not mentioned in the Second Covenant, just Ata's daughters and they had no names. Uliz learned about Tezani from Psalm because he thought she should know, when she came of age." She squinted at me. "I'm one-quarter Yata, Mom. When do I come of age?"

Tel's fingers jerked against my hand. *When I say she does.*

"*Dobresso*, I know what you're tapping. I don't have to see it."

"The Chamber is still puzzling that one out," I said. "And how do *you* know Tezani's not mentioned in the Second Covenant?"

"Was I not supposed to read that?"

I would have felt better if she looked the least bit contrite. Tel seemed suddenly fascinated with his map. "I should lock you both up in the Rotunda. With no books, and no visitors except for SpiderLark."

"But I *like* his singing, Mom."

"We'll see how much you like his singing after you've heard the same damn aria a thousand times."

"I wonder how many points Uliz has." My competitive daughter stuffed her rope in her shirt and popped back off the trail. Maybe she and Abri's daughter would confine their discussion to their treasure hunt and leave the madman's ravings alone.

Right. And Psalm would turn teetotaler, the far woods would remain undeveloped, and the air out here would stay clean. What was I thinking?

Tel was still mulling over his map. When I craned my neck, he lowered it to where I could see. I followed his gaze to the unmarked finger of cleared land jutting out from Basc.

He lowered his voice. "It's bad enough my mother couldn't come to the Remembrance. How much more are you going to marginalize her?"

There was no way out of this argument. "Would you rather we forced Piri to stay where she doesn't want to be?"

"How many more times will she have to *move*?"

"As many times as it takes." That finger would grow as long as it had to. For as long as Piri was alive, we would keep her as far from Destiny fumes as we could. I had nothing more to offer him. "This won't be a ghetto. Basc still has a vocal minority of citizens against Destiny, and they have every right to their opinion. I share it, remember?"

"I couldn't tell."

You're not a politician. I looked up as he pocketed the map. No matter what I said or did, he would always be sour with me when it came to this. I couldn't blame him. "I'm sorry."

"She deserves better."

"Yes, she does."

The Chamber's vote on Piri's pension had been unanimous. They would have voted the same way even without her caretaking of Zai, who had turned as simple-minded as HeadWind. We made sure that neither of them would want for anything.

Anything, except a permanent home and thorough insulation from the drug.

I filled my lungs with the smell of unsullied pine. We would reach the Pantry by midday, sink onto benches, and celebrate Peace Park's opening with native-grown featherberry pie drizzled with goldberry syrup imported from Alvav. It might not lighten Tel's mood, but at least it would keep him from feeling worse.

So would watching StoneSun. "Where's our girl now?"

He pointed. "Want a lift?"

"You haven't lifted me in ages. I'll break your back."

He scooped me up and set me on his shoulders. His plodding turned bouncy. "I should carry you into Chamber meetings like this."

"Trust me, Tel, you can't humiliate me any worse than I've humiliated myself. I retain full control over my own disgrace."

"And that's the secret to your long-lasting power."

I laughed and planted a kiss on his plum-colored hair. All the gods and all the demons in this life and afterlife couldn't make me tell him how close he'd come to the truth.

I held onto his hands as we watched my child hunt down her history.

EPILOGUE

Common Year 59, the Forty-First of Bellows, Native Calendar

Attachment to Expedition Dispatch

Dear Mother and Father,

I am writing to you from the other end of the world. I have found the answers to our questions in a place called the Crossroads Preserve.

I now know what a Masari looks like. For all that you have taught me about them, they are surprisingly docile.

I have met our people, but they are nothing like us. They call themselves Yata (they have not been "Little Masari" for generations). Their language possesses the same syntax as ours but is choppy beyond belief. I did not know my tongue could accomplish so much and am using muscles I didn't know I had.

Sometimes it hurts to speak! Imagine that.

The Yata are filthy and crude and they dominate the region, all the way from the ruins of your birthplace (now a Destiny Farm Museum!), up through Lower and Upper Skedge, through East and West Alvay, and finally into Basc. A railway crosses the mountains.

I have so much to tell you and the rest of the Oava'e, but first I want to confirm the rumor that our touch speech came from someone who was Destiny Farm-bred and not someone from Upper Skedge. The touch-speech originated all the way here, in the Crossroads Preserve (once just called "Crossroads"), and spread southward.

Father, your mother was the first Oava to use it. Her name was Piri. She was married to a Masari, whose dictation tells that she invented the touch speech with the help of a Masari girl named BrokenThread.

I should have told you both to sit down. I'm sorry. Get comfortable before you read any further. If I were you I would go to your favorite sitting rock by the ocean, far from the fleet so you won't be distracted by all the construction noise.

The mountains haven't stopped since I climbed out of the canyon with the rest of the team. I find no seas, only rivers and lakes. They are unbearably polluted and have been the cause of much sickness and disease here.

Let me tell you how I got this far from home.

Wo'i, our principal genealogist, tracked down many of the branding numbers you and the other founders wear. She discovered almost all of the original ledgers in the Destiny Farm Museum, but those are kept locked away because they are so fragile. The books had been copied and Wo'i consulted those, but one had different bindings from all the rest. We were told that the copy had come from abroad and that the original was missing.

That was the book with Piri's branding number in it. Even more astounding, Piri herself had copied the ledger and sent the duplicate back to Lower Skedge! Lower Skedge was called Promontory then. Piri had sent the records to a Masari named BrushBurn, about whom the museum curator knew little, only that he must have once worked at the Farm.

The rumors about Upper Skedge sending search parties to find you remain unconfirmed. Our research is still inconclusive, but I believe they diverted their resources toward liberating Lower Skedge instead of seeking out Oava Nation. We received a mixed reception by the Yata, but overall I believe our arrival had caused them embarrassment.

We were intensely curious about Piri, even before Wo'i traced my lineage to her. We wondered how an Oava had escaped Destiny Farm and traveled all the way to Crossroads. Did BrushBurn help her? No one could answer our questions adequately, and both Upper and Lower Skedge possessed almost no information about the Masari at all.

So, we traveled north. Wo'i was searching for the missing Farm ledger. As principal linguist I was searching for the origins of touch-speech, not knowing that Piri had helped create that as well.

The Yata of Alvav, on both sides of the river, were stranger still. Many hadn't heard of Destiny Farm or knew where touch-speech came from. A few older ones remembered vague stories from their great-great-grandparents, but most of their history is bound up in records of slavery and a prison called the Marsh, which is now their capital. They were holding a re-enactment of the Games when my team arrived in the central valley. The real thing must have been brutal.

One of the attending dignitaries was a retired official named Bless. Until we met her, we had seen only hints of Masari traits among the Yata, not enough to give us a true picture of what those people looked like. But Bless had a full Masari pelt.

Bless had been married to BrushBurn. When she learned who we were and where we had come from, all of her fur stood on end.

She asked us how much our people knew about Crossroads.

We had never heard of Crossroads.

When Wo'i mentioned the missing Farm ledger, Bless told us the original ledger was in a library called the Rotunda, located in the northeast quadrant of the Crossroads Preserve. Bless said she knew the Rotunda's curator personally and added that he would be very interested in meeting us.

Father, the curator is your half-brother.

Piri had given birth to a child after she escaped from Destiny Farm. His name is TelZodo, he is half-Masari, and he is six years younger than you are. Piri had another three boys and three girls, but you and TelZodo are the only survivors.

I have an uncle.

I am writing this letter in the dormitory where TelZodo lives. He told me that these rooms once belonged to Bless's father. He said her mother Kova had been a slave in Alvav, which is why Bless goes to the Games reenactments, even though she hates them.

Nobody here knows what an ocean is. TelZodo wants to know everything about the Oava'e. Sometimes I can tell when he is standing outside, or I hear him pacing back and forth before he returns to Wo'i, but she is learning all she needs to know from Bless and from Masari narratives stored down the hall.

I know that my uncle wants to talk to me, and this is his room, and part of me wants to tell him to just come in. But if he did I would never finish this letter to you.

The rest of the team is out gathering information about Reckoning, which is Basc's capital, and about the Crossroads Preserve. The preserve is built as a great temple to the Masari, with ornate shrines where Yata come to

pray to the spirits of people like TripStone, or HigherBrook, or CatBird, or BrokenThread, or Ghost, who was my grand-uncle. Bless's daughter StoneSun guards the preserve because there are so few Divine Ones left. Not just the purebloods, but the Masari who stay alive by eating Yata. She personally maintains the shrine to BrushBurn, whose books of numbers had foretold the fate of the region.

The Divine Ones are sheltered from the outside world in the hopes that their population will increase. Yata from all over the valley bring the Masari offerings, including their own flesh, because it is believed the Divine Ones can help hold sickness and blight at bay. A priestess named Uliz sanctifies the offerings before they can enter the Preserve.

We have so much to do here. Our cultural liaison is still in a state of shock over learning that the Masari are worshiped as gods by their former prey.

I must finish. Our courier leaves on the train tomorrow, so I am sending this letter with her. The boxes of artifacts she's bringing will amaze you. Inscribed Masari bones with prayers from something called the Second Covenant. Ancient Yata narratives woven into cloth.

My uncle is outside again. I can hear him trying to be quiet. It's hard to be quiet when you have such big feet.

When the team is finished here, TelZodo is returning with us. He wants to see home before he dies. I really must tell him to come in.

Give everyone my love. Gods willing, I will see you again soon.

Your devoted son,

Ia'o.

