



## **THE GHOST EATER**

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# ***THE GHOST EATER***

by

Elaine Corvidae

## **CHAPTER ONE**

*If I still lived, the ghost eater thought wryly, they would turn my name into a chant. Though for misery or courage, I can't guess.*

Half-frozen rain slashed down from the darkening sky, forming icy puddles in the dirt and stinging exposed flesh. The ghost eater hunched his shoulders beneath his stolen coat, skin shrinking at the alien touch of the fabric. The cold was bone deep, and he guessed that the rain would change to snow once it reached the far-off mountains of his home.

Mud, greasy with horse manure and trash, squelched under his bare feet. He winced at the sound and glanced about uneasily, wondering if anyone would come to investigate. The foul weather had emptied the streets, and clouds hid the last rays of the sun. A passerby might only notice the charcoal coat and ragged black trousers, might miss the brown cast of his skin and the waist-length fall of his crow-dark hair. But here in the heart of this alien Enemy town, discovery seemed all too likely.

"Scared, ghost eater?" Rabbit asked. "Better hope your ancestors are too busy dancing in the Darkening Land to see you now. All dressed up like an Enemy yourself, skulking through the streets like a thief."

The ghost eater bit back an angry word. Rabbit deserved respect like any elder, even when he wore the face of mockery. "I am the ghost eater. I have no ancestors."

"The old one trained you well. You sound like a parrot."

The ghost eater had never heard of a parrot and suspected Rabbit was trying to pull some trick. You couldn't believe what Rabbit said, not all the way at least. He was always looking to get something for himself, even when it hurt other people. The ghost eater glanced at Rabbit out of the corner of his eye, wondering. Rain beaded on Rabbit's sleek pelt and splashed out of puddles as he hopped along. A handsome mica gorget swung from a leather cord around his neck. His animal face revealed nothing of his intentions.

The ghost eater sighed and turned his attention back to his surroundings. The buildings were odd, reinforcing the sense of alienation he felt. Every one of the structures was square, as if they were all summer houses. They were made from stout wooden planks, and their walls were regularly pierced with windows, most of which were covered against the cold. Some of them were tall, like two or three houses piled one on the other. *And they smell*, he thought with a fastidious sniff.

The town itself was strangely laid out, with the buildings butted up right against each other. The paths in between were bare mud in most places, though one or two were lined with stones. Several wagons lay to one side of the street, most of them empty.

"Is she truly here?" he asked wearily, not expecting a clear answer. *Please, let her be here. I want to go home. I want to see Siska-init—*

But what would be the point of that? Siska-init had married his body's brother and borne a child. He was the ghost eater and had no love.

A door swung open down the street, distracting him from his gloomy thoughts. A plump woman, her skin the ugly corpse-white of the Enemies, peered out into the rain as if looking for something. Panicked, the ghost eater glanced at Rabbit, only to find that he had transformed himself into an elderly Enemy man. Rain dripped off his wide-brimmed hat, and a heavy stick swung from one hand. He abandoned the shape once they passed beyond the woman's line-of-sight. "How uncomfortable," Rabbit remarked mildly, shaking himself and flinging rain off his fur.

The ghost eater peered around at the too-tall buildings. They all looked the same to his eyes. "How can I find her if you don't help me?"

"Why should I help you? This is all Little Deer's fault. He's always held it against me that I tried to, ah, *ease my way* when we were racing for the antlers. He's too serious. Besides, he won the Kani-cursed things in the end."

"Because the other animals thought it was cheating to gnaw down all the trees and underbrush in *your way* and make *him* run through a thicket."

"It was," Rabbit admitted cheerfully. "But still, you wouldn't think he'd hold such a grudge. Certainly not enough to make me come here, when someone else could have watched you just as well."

*Then he must have quite a grudge against me as well,* the ghost eater thought. He didn't say the words aloud—to antagonize Rabbit would be stupid, not to mention disrespectful. Even so, Rabbit *hadn't* been much help, leaving him to flounder through Enemy territory alone, trying to survive in a land where he knew neither the language nor the customs. Where he had seen not a single other person with normal skin tones and proper black hair.

Rabbit hopped ahead, long bounds that splashed mud onto the ghost eater's frayed trousers. The ghost eater followed, hoping Rabbit had some purpose behind the direction he was going. They moved down the street, drawing closer to the enormous wooden structure that dominated the town.

"What's that?"

Rabbit didn't look at the building. "It's called a fort. Don't go near it. That's where the Enemy warriors are, mostly." He stopped and raised up on his haunches, his nose twitching. "Here we are."

They stood near one of the smaller buildings. A tin-roofed shed leaned up against it, and the stink of metal and heat filled the air. The ghost eater's stomach quailed a little, remembering his one painful encounter with Enemy metal. It had taken the bullet half a day to work its way out of his brain.

Uncertain, the ghost eater crept closer to the structure. The wall had a window in it, and he cautiously stopped and listened for any sound from within. The scrape of metal on wood drifted to him, accompanied by a soft intake of breath. Moving silently, he eased closer to the window and chanced a peek inside.

It was her.

She sat in the center of the room, her profile turned slightly away from him. Honey-colored hair, tangled and wild as a thicket, billowed down around her shoulders and back. She was older than he had realized, perhaps near her fortieth winter, if he could judge an Enemy face. She dressed like a man in trousers. "A Changed One?" he asked, surprised.

But rabbit shook his head. "Enemies don't do things the way Ahkan't do."

The woman's eerie green eyes stared intently at a wooden statuette before her. She reached out with a sharp tool and added another shaving to the pile collecting

about her feet. All of her attention focused on the carving, tension radiating from her body to it, as though her very life depended on completing it correctly. Although it was difficult to see from a distance, the sculpture appeared to be that of a human figure. Its arms were raised above its head in either entreaty or escape, and its mouth stretched wide in a silent scream.

The sound of hard Enemy shoes came from inside, and the ghost eater quickly flattened himself against the wall, well away from the window. “Gwendith?” called a masculine voice. *Her name?*

He found his courage and looked inside again, albeit cautiously. Gwendith had stopped her work on the carving and sat poised like a doe startled by a cougar. For an instant, the ghost eater thought he saw real desperation in her eyes.

An enormous Enemy man with a tangle of dark brown hair and beard came into the room. He spoke, but the ghost eater didn’t understand what was said. The only Enemy words he knew were the ones Rabbit had given him, things like “trousers,” and “cart,” and “window,” none of which seemed to have any place in this conversation.

The man’s voice was gentle but with an odd undertone of pity, like a healthy person speaking to an invalid. Gwendith looked away, as if his words made her feel ashamed. The man pulled out a small pouch, reached into it, and offered her what appeared to be a fragment of dried root. She accepted it from him, put it in her mouth, and chewed. After a few minutes, all the bright vitality drained out of her eyes, and her mouth went slack. Moving gracelessly, she stood and shuffled out of the room. The man touched her shoulder briefly before she left, as if to reassure her of his presence.

When she was gone, he turned to the carving. The ghost eater ducked out of the way so that the Enemy would not see him. There came a long moment of silence—then the carving suddenly hurtled out the window, landing with a splat in the mud.

Footsteps receded. After several minutes of stillness, the ghost eater cautiously picked up the statuette. Although rough and unfinished, it was clearly meant to represent a man, his body stretched and twisted as though in agony. Across the unfinished features, she had scratched shallow lines in the shape of a skull.

He touched his face unconsciously, where the black lines of tattoos followed the curves of his skull, drawing a death’s head over flesh.

“What did he give her?” he asked quietly. “Was it a sedative of some kind?”

Rabbit stood on his hind legs to peer in through the window. His nose twitched again. “Crippleweed.”

“What?”

“Crippleweed. Can’t you smell it?”

The ghost eater frowned. “But crippleweed—it was used to suppress a captive’s Way, when we fought other peoples in the time before the Enemies came.”

“That’s true.”

“But Enemies don’t have Ways. They don’t walk in the world like we do.”

Rabbit only looked at him out of one dark, round eye and made no answer.

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Several hours later, the ghost eater sat under a tree and contemplated the high palisade before him.

He had found himself with no clear purpose after locating the Enemy woman Gwendith. When he had first left Ahkan’i lands, eager to fulfill the task Little Deer and the other animals had set him, he had been filled with blind optimism. He had been so excited just to have a *purpose* again that he hadn’t thought much about the realities of fulfilling it. But it wasn’t easy to find one woman in a vast land. Five moons of wandering through Enemy territory had turned hope into fatigue and optimism into the desire to have it done with. He wanted only to escape this nightmarish place of razed forests, endless fields, and strange towns.

*And the worst thing is...there are so many of them. As if they breed and spread like insects. As if they want to swarm over the face of the world until it is covered in a blanket of their flesh.*

He shivered, from his thoughts rather than from the cold. Although he still felt the chill, it no longer troubled him as it would a living man.

So, he had found the woman. Rabbit hinted that she might have a Way. He saw that she made wooden carvings, took crippleweed, and lived with a brother or husband. And that summed up his entire knowledge of her.



*Except*, he thought wryly, looking down at the sculpture he had retrieved from the mud, *that she seems to know a little something about me as well.*

*So what next?*

He had to approach her somehow, that much was obvious. The vision Little Deer had shown him was clear in one respect—he had to find the woman and bring her back to the Ahkan'i homeland. To the mountains, where no Enemy had ever before set foot. But how? He couldn't so much as speak the same language to explain himself to her. *If* he even got the chance to open his mouth. The few Enemies who had seen him so far had displayed one of two reactions: either scream and run, or pick up a gun and shoot.

*Maybe they know I'm a ghost eater*, he reasoned. The black lines on his face, which followed the curve and sweep of the skull beneath, marked him clearly enough. But some of the Enemies who had attacked him had been too far away to see the tattoos clearly.

He craned his head back, staring up at the tall palisade thoughtfully. It was made from entire trees shaped into poles, their apexes sharpened into points. Metal spikes also decorated the top of the wall, rusting in the rain. Clearly, someone either wanted to keep something out—or keep it in.

The wall itself seemed to go on forever, enclosing an area larger than the Enemy town outside. And the structure Rabbit had named the fort, which housed the Enemy warriors, stood almost right against the palisade. All the other buildings hung back from it like frightened children hiding behind their uncle.

*What could be inside?* he wondered. Probably nothing that had anything to do with him or his quest. *Then again, there's nothing on this side of the wall that's helped me think what to do. Maybe I'll find something useful in there.*

He wished that he could ask Rabbit. But Rabbit had disappeared shortly after showing him Gwendith, apparently considering his task done.

The ghost eater tucked the carving back into his pouch and stood up, walking along the edge of the young forest that paralleled the palisade. There was little cover—most of the true forest in this area had been cleared for Enemy houses and fields, leaving behind only pitiful, bramble-choked remnants. The scent of pine needles filled his nose, pleasant in the cold rain.

Enemies dressed in blue coats and trousers marched along the top of the wall, undoubtedly walking on a ledge set on the inside. The fact that each man's clothing was identical to that of every other both appalled and intrigued the ghost eater. Even their hair looked the same, hacked off shoulder-length and tied back in a tail. *Cowards*, he thought automatically. A man's hair showed his strength and courage, and only those who had behaved with cowardice or dishonor had theirs cut.

He was lucky that the old ghost eater hadn't cut his, when he ran from death.

*That was Tamaugua. I am the ghost eater. Any memories before the time in the cave are not my own.*

*Perhaps if I tell myself that often enough, I'll come to believe it.*

The further he got from the town, the fewer Enemies kept watch on the wall. Eventually, he came to a deserted-looking stretch where the brambles and half-grown pines reached almost to the palisade itself. He stood still for a long time, listening for the approach of feet, but no one appeared. The palisade was too big to be effectively watched all along its length. For the rest, the Enemies depended on the wall's height and the sharp metal stakes to keep anyone from climbing over.

He drew close, gauging the distance from ground to wall-top. It would be a prodigious jump, even for a ghost eater. In the end, he climbed the closest tree, gathered all his strength, and leaped.

One hand came down directly on a metal spike. It tore through flesh, scraping against bone, until his palm slapped wood. For a moment, his entire weight hung on his impaled hand, and he felt the thin muscles start to tear.

Biting his lip against a scream, he wrapped his other hand around another spike and used it to drag himself up and over. The pain redoubled as he worked at freeing his impaled hand, but he did not dishonor himself by screaming. A moment later, he dropped blindly over the other side, leaving blood-smeared metal to be washed clean by the rain.

It was a long fall. One ankle caught under him, and he felt the bone snap. Stunned, he collapsed into a tangle of brambles, agony blotting out his sight. The pain eased as the bones straightened and knitted back together. It took the hand longer, flakes of rust impeding the *bhargha*. Hunger slithered through him like a live thing as the

*bhargha* spent itself. The desire to feed did not center only on his belly but spread throughout his body. Even his hair felt it.

*Not now.* A patch of inexplicably dead briars might not be noticed, but there seemed no point in taking chances. If there was anything he had learned during his time in Enemy lands, it was caution.

When the *bhargha* had done its work, he stood up shakily, wiping the rust off on his trousers. Blackberry thorns caught on his too-long coat, as if seeking to drag it off his shoulders. Yanking free, he stumbled to the edge of the briars and looked out.

It was a wasteland. At some point, trees had been cleared and fields put in. But without any stream or river in sight, any crops that might have been planted there had shriveled and died years ago. Without the rain to soak the barren ground into mud, the slightest breeze would raise a whirlwind of red dust. Brambles and grasses had taken over in some areas, struggling to heal the raped ground, but in others the rain ran off in an orange stream of eroding soil.

*How could this have happened?* he wondered, shocked. One more horror to add to the long list of those he had seen since leaving home.

Voices floated to him above the rain. Coarse and male, they spoke the unintelligible Enemy tongue. Stiffening, the ghost eater looked around warily. There, in the distance—two men, surrounding a third who crouched on the ground, arms held over his head. They stood near a small stream bordered by healthy trees. A patch of raw earth and an abandoned spade suggested that someone had been digging there.

Two of the men had the typical light skin and hair of Enemies, and were dressed in blue clothing identical to that of those on the wall. But the man on the ground was no Enemy. Black hair shone in the rain, and the skin that showed on his hands and face was the same muted brown of the ghost eater's own.

*Someone from another people!* Excitement seized the ghost eater. The Ahkan'it weren't alone in the world—others had survived the wars with the Enemies as well.

But his eagerness turned to ash a moment later. One of the Enemies raised what looked like a long strip of braided leather. He was talking to the crouching man, laughing. The leather cut through the air with a loud crack, and the man fell forward onto his hands, his shirt rent and blood running down his back. Both Enemies laughed, and

the leather rope fell again, and again, each time leaving a shallow furrow of opened flesh.

Rage went through the ghost eater like an ice storm through trees. After moons of hiding from Enemies, of watching their foreign ways, of evading their cruelty, something broke inside him. With a furious battle cry, he leapt out of the blackberries and raced towards them.

The men turned, startled. One of them yelled and swung the leather at him. The ghost eater evaded the blow and launched himself at his attacker. The hunger arose again, but this time he gave it free rein. The *bhargha* unfolded inside of him, like an opening flower. Hair-fine tentacles of glowing light shot out, sinking into the Enemy's flesh. Stung, the Enemy stiffened for a moment.

Then his life flooded into the ghost eater.

*Playing by the river as a child, throwing a ball to his cousin—*

*—Kissing a girl in the woods—*

*—Drinking with his companions, celebrating—*

*—Kicking a black-haired man, hitting him over and over with a metal bar, until his face was gone—*

*—Bouncing a baby on his lap, smiling lovingly at its mother—*

*—A brown woman under him, tears streaming down her face, his hand over her mouth to muffle her screams as he heaved himself up and down on her—*

The ghost eater reeled away from the limp body. He fell to his knees, gagging, as though he could vomit the man's memories back up. His own mind tried to flinch away: sickened, shocked, and violated.

*Kani curse it, no, I don't want to know these things!*

*Monsters, all of them. It's as the old one said—they aren't really human. Just monsters that should be destroyed.*

Somehow, he got back to his feet. The Enemy lay on the ground, his dead eyes staring at the sky. The sight revolted the ghost eater beyond coherent thought, and he had to turn away.

The other Enemy stood nearby, his mouth hanging open as though the *bhargha* had stung him into submission as well. When the ghost eater moved towards him, he took a step back, panic spreading across his face and a wet stain across his trousers.

The man they had been beating lunged at the Enemy from behind, pinning his arms. Frightened black eyes stared at the ghost eater, demanding that he do something. Nauseated at the thought of touching another ghost so unclean, he bent down and picked up a rock.

They dropped the bodies into a pile and stared at one another over them. Like most people, the man was a good deal taller than the ghost eater. He wore an Enemy-style shirt and trousers, but no shoes. His hair, slightly longer than shoulder-length, hung loose about his face. No copper ring pierced his nose to proclaim him a man, nor did he have ear pins. He tilted his head to one side, puzzled, then drew a finger across his face, following the lines of the skull beneath. Asking about the tattoos, the ghost eater thought.

"Yes, I'm a ghost eater," he said, as if there could have been any doubt after the Enemy he had killed. "Who are you? Who are your people? How many others have survived?"

The man made no reply, only looked anxiously at the bodies.

"You can't understand me," the ghost eater concluded.

The man looked back at him, nodded, and made a side-to-side gesture with his hand.

"You do understand? A little?"

A nod.

"Can you speak?"

A shake of the head. Then the man frowned slightly, as if considering. Suddenly, the ghost eater found himself convinced that the man's name was No Tongue. The thought seemed to come from nowhere, or from somewhere outside of himself, as if someone had murmured it in his ear.

"Are you a thought-whisperer?"

No Tongue smiled slightly, confirming his Way. Then he made an impatient gesture towards the bodies. His hands moved back and forth, as if covering them over with blankets.

“Hide the bodies?” The ghost eater looked around for some means of concealment but saw none. Obviously Enemies came to this place, deserted as it seemed. “Why were they beating you?”

No Tongue shrugged, not as if he didn’t know, but either couldn’t or didn’t want to respond. He gestured first to the bodies, then to the abandoned fields, then made digging motions with his hands. Certain that he misinterpreted, the ghost eater asked, “You want to put them in the ground?”

A nod.

Horror washed over him, and he took a step back. Only bodies meant to become ghost eaters went under the ground, and even then they were put into caves. He knew that there was no coal here to make ghost eaters, but putting the bodies into the ground remained an abomination even without that danger. He had devoured the spirit of one man, but that of the other remained. If buried, it would be trapped in the corpse, unable to be freed by the carrion birds so that it could travel to the Darkening Land.

He recalled the unpleasant memories of the Enemy he had killed. Perhaps it was only what they deserved.

They buried the Enemies quickly, using No Tongue’s metal spade. The ghost eater did most of the digging, as he felt no physical fatigue.

When they had finished, No Tongue stood up and motioned for the ghost eater to follow. As they walked away, the ghost eater looked back. Already the rain had begun to wash away the signs of their digging.

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The ghost eater stared at the small cluster of houses to which his silent companion had led him and knew the purpose behind the Enemy palisade. Not to protect anything inside, but to pen and contain those they had dispossessed, the same way they penned animals.

*These Enemies understand nothing of freedom.*

The houses were built square, Enemy-style. Gaps showed in the wooden walls, some stuffed with rags or mud. A few scrawny-looking animals wandered around the dwellings, the unfamiliar birds scratching in the dirt and the mammals cropping what little vegetation they could find. A pitifully-thin girl sat outside one of the houses, clutching a knot of cloth that might have been a toy. The sound of a hoarse cough, thick with phlegm, came through the uncovered door behind her.

The ghost eater made a reflexive move towards the child, then checked himself. He was the ghost eater and felt no compassion. Or, at least, wasn't permitted to show it.

His companion tugged at the sleeve of his coat and gestured towards one of the houses. The bleakness of the place extended inside. No painted skins hung on the wooden walls, nor was there a cheerful clay hearth. A few pieces of furniture similar to those he had seen in Gwendith's house filled the space, but they looked battered and shabby. There weren't even any beds built against the walls. Instead, two piles of folded blankets lay on the floor to either side of the single room.

Voices passed close by outside, speaking in the Enemy language. No Tongue seemed to listen to them for a moment, then turned and looked thoughtfully at his guest. He moved closer, then slowly, carefully put his hands to either side of the ghost eater's head.

The ghost eater started and almost drew back, but the steady look in his wordless companion's eyes stopped him. No Tongue smiled a moment, then leaned over, pressing his forehead to the ghost eater's.

And then he knew the words.

They flooded into his mind, more intense than the memories he saw while eating the ghosts of those he killed. He gasped and jerked back automatically. No Tongue let his hands fall to his sides and made no move to renew the contact.

There was no need for him to do so. Amazed, the ghost eater looked around the little house, Enemy words for the objects he saw coming easily to his lips and thoughts. "You—you have a very strong Way," he stammered in the harsh, alien tongue.

No Tongue nodded and grinned.

Feeling as though his head had been stuffed with goose down, the ghost eater sank to the floor and stared at the compacted dirt. No Tongue went to one of the piles of

blankets and pulled the top layer back to reveal a bottle. Smiling hopefully, he held it out to the ghost eater.

The ghost eater sighed. “I don’t drink,” he explained, still testing the new-learned Enemy language. “No more than I eat, as you understand it. The Enemy’s ghost fed me well enough for now.” It was a slight lie—the truth was that he was almost always conscious of hunger gnawing at his limbs. He controlled it strictly. The very first lesson the old one had taught him had been how to hold the *bhargha* inside, to keep it from devouring whatever it came across. Had he not learned that lesson well, there would have been no more, for defective ghost eaters were destroyed without qualm or mercy.

After all, it wasn’t as if they were alive to begin with.

No Tongue mimicked drinking and held the bottle out again. The ghost eater hesitated. The old one wasn’t here and would never know if he committed this small crime in the name of courtesy. Surely taking one sip of a drink didn’t qualify as partaking of life...did it?

He tried to smile politely as he took the bottle. The substance it was made from—*glass*, another Enemy word like *bottle*—felt oddly cool and smooth against his palm. He lifted it to his lips and took a tiny sip of the liquid inside.

It burned his tongue, like drinking hot ashes. Startled, he coughed, spitting the foul-tasting stuff onto the floor. Then, horrified at what might well seem an inexcusable act of rudeness, he looked quickly up at his host. “Forgive me, I—”

But No Tongue only laughed. He took the bottle back and drank what seemed like a generous amount from it. When he lowered the bottle again, his breath smelled unpleasantly of the noxious drink.

The loose curtain that served as a door was violently shoved aside. Startled, the ghost eater pivoted about on his heel. A young woman stood in the doorway, her face set in a scowl. Black hair shorter than No Tongue’s swirled around features that might have been pretty had anger not left its permanent mark on them. Her clothes were like those of the Enemy women he had seen but of far poorer quality—a patchwork skirt and shirt, obviously sewn together from the remnants of even older clothes. Her hands were heavily callused, as if from the farming that was a woman’s task, but her arms were thin from privation.



It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the darker interior, but even before they did she must have spotted the gleam of light off glass. “Drinking again?” she demanded, controlled anger coiled in her voice. She snatched the bottle out of No Tongue’s hand. “You know that whiskey is only Outlander poison! And who is this—some dog who licks Outlander boots and brings alcohol into the—”

She fell silent. For a moment, her eyes took in the tattoos on his face, the fall of his long hair.

“Hello,” he said carefully, testing the new greeting.

“What kind of an idiot are you?”

He gaped at her blankly.

She strode over to him and glared down, using the fact that she was standing to intimidate. “I asked what kind of idiot you are, wearing your hair like this!” She made a dismissive motion at his long locks. “You aren’t from this Sanctuary—I don’t recognize you, and no one here would be so stupid. There’s a rumor the Outlanders are looking for an escapee—if you thought you’d hide here, forget it. I’ll turn you in to them myself before I let anyone here die for you.”

He stared at her, trying to sort his thoughts in the face of her tirade. “I’m very sorry,” he managed at last, remembering to show respect for the owner of the roof above his head. “I don’t mean any harm. Only let me explain. I’m a ghost eater from—”

“Yes, I see those silly tattoos.” She flung up her hands in exasperation. “How old are you, eighteen? Old enough to know better than to brand yourself permanently with something that will be a death sentence when the Outlanders finally catch up with you.”

The ghost eater didn’t think she could be much older than he was, but held his tongue. “I saw Enemies—I suppose you call them ‘Outlanders’—beating your husband and tried to help him.”

She turned to No Tongue, stifling a sympathetic gasp when she saw the wounds on his back. She ripped a square of cloth from her skirt, poured whiskey over it, and told him to take off his shirt. When he did, she pressed the cloth to his back. No Tongue hissed in pain and bowed his head.

“It isn’t too bad—he’ll be fine, so long as the wounds don’t become infected,” she said once she had finished. “No Tongue is my cousin, not my husband. My name

is...the Outlanders christened me Saire in their Church of the Wizards, as if my mother didn't have the wit to give me a name herself. But my real name is Stands-in-Smoke. Thank you for helping No Tongue. Now, get out."

"I'll leave if you wish it. But I'm a stranger here. Little Deer sent me—"

Stands-in-Smoke let out a harsh bark of laughter. "No one believes in animal spirits anymore, little boy. Just as no one will believe your ghost eater nonsense. Go talk to children—they're the only ones who'll listen to such fairy-stories."

Her words made no sense. No one *believed in* animal spirits? As if beings like Rabbit and Little Deer required human belief to exist. As if a person could simply ignore their presence, pretend that they weren't there, and expect to survive and prosper.

"How—how do you grow corn? How do you hunt? Don't you sing the proper chants to the deer and the turkeys, that you may eat their flesh and use their skins and bones? Don't you sing to Little Deer to ward off rheumatism?"

She looked at him with irritation. "You're either insane or naïve. I'll give you some advice, foolish boy. If you want to go about pretending to be a ghost eater, it would be a good idea to take yourself somewhere other than the Proud Ones Sanctuary."

"Proud Ones?"

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "Didn't your mother teach you anything? The Outlanders call us Hut Sitters, because that was the name the Skull People used for us. The Skull People and their ghost eaters hated us for settling down in towns like civilized people, and we hated them for destroying our towns and carrying off our children. You'll find no sympathy by pretending to be our greatest enemy from the time before the Outlanders came."

"You're Hut Sitters? It's said that you were of one fire with the Ahkan'it, when we lived beyond the mountains."

"So?"

He chose his words carefully, sensing a way to gain her help through her overly-blatant display of disbelief. "So what if I am truly a ghost eater? What then?"

"I'm not stupid. The survival of the Skull People is just a myth that the grandmothers tell on winter nights." She settled back, folded her hands around her

knees, and gave him a challenging look. “If you were a ghost eater, you would have had to survive for two-hundred years, hiding from the Outlanders all that time.”

His mouth flexed wryly. “This body only saw eighteen winters before it died and became mine, and I have seen only one.”

“Then if you were truly a ghost eater, I would say that this is the greatest news my people have heard in two-hundred years.”

“Despite the fact that we were your enemies?”

“It doesn’t matter. If even one people managed to defeat the Outlanders, no matter who they were, I would rejoice. Because it would mean that the Outlanders aren’t invincible. Because it would mean that there’s hope even for us.”

Although she spoke steadily, with that same edge of challenge and mockery, he sensed something behind her words. She truly did want that hope. She wanted to defeat the Enemies and get out from behind this imprisoning palisade they called a Sanctuary.

“Do you have a knife? Or a gun? Anything like that?”

Stands-in-Smoke looked annoyed again. “No natives can have firearms, you know that. I have a knife I use for chopping vegetables, but I don’t see—”

“Stab me with it.”

“What?” She stared at him as if he had lost his wits.

He swallowed, trying to be courageous. “It’s the quickest way to show you that I am what I claim to be.”

“No! I’m not going to have a dead young idiot on my floor.”

The ghost eater glanced at No Tongue. No Tongue nodded, perhaps seeing what was in the ghost eater’s thoughts, and drew a knife sheathed at his own belt.

Stands-in-Smoke’s eyes went wide, and she grabbed for No Tongue. “Stop it! That’s sharp! No Tongue, don’t!”

He evaded her grasp and lunged knife-first at the ghost eater.

*Kani, this is going to hurt*, he thought in sudden fear.

The knife slammed into his torso just under the rib cage, angling up so that it caught the edge of his beatless heart. He fell back onto the floor from the impact, agony washing over him as he felt the cold, cold metal lodge in his chest. Something was

wrong, he realized dimly—although he should have been able to sit up and laugh at Stands-in-Smoke's surprise, he found himself unable to move. The metal bit into his heart like a snake's fang, its icy venom paralyzing his body.

"What have you done!" cried Stands-in-Smoke, shoving No Tongue to one side. She reached for the knife, then jerked her hand back fearfully. "You killed him! I know what I said about turning him over to the Outlanders, but I didn't mean it!"

No Tongue bent down by the ghost eater's prone body. Grasping the knife firmly, he yanked it free.

It hurt. The ghost eater bit back a cry as he found himself free to move again. Jerking up, he skittered back, putting as much distance between himself and the knife as possible. Even as he moved, the *bhargha* surged through him once again, tugging the wound closed and binding the muscles, ligaments, and veins back together.

Stands-in-Smoke stared at him, all the color draining out of her face. Her look of surprise probably would have been more satisfying if not for the nasty shock he had just had himself.

"Well?" he managed to say, hoping that his voice remained steady. "Is there any other proof you need?"

She sat down slowly, one hand pressed to the side of her head, as if to hold in her jumbled thoughts. "I...no. No."

For a long time, she stared at nothing. Then, slowly, she looked back at him. She held up both hands, and flames appeared, clinging to her wrists and fingers like droplets of water.

He held himself still, refusing to let fear show on his face. As she had said, Ahkan'i and Hut Sitter had once battled each other as deadly enemies. And the only defense against Ahkan'i ghost eaters were the fire-callers. Only flame could destroy a body so thoroughly that the *bhargha* could no longer inhabit it.

*Just my luck—I travel for two seasons across Enemy lands, I finally find the Enemy woman I'm searching for, and I end up sitting at the hearth of one of the only people in the world who can kill me with nothing more than her hands.*

He wondered if Rabbit was laughing at him somewhere.

"I could kill you," Stands-in-Smoke murmured, staring now at her fingers. "The grandmothers say that was the duty of fire-callers—to fight the ghost eaters, when they came with the raiding parties. They say each band of the Skull People had only one ghost eater, so to kill one meant a terrible blow against our enemy."

There seemed no sense lying to her. "Not really. The Ahkan'it are great warriors. Although the only purpose of the ghost eaters is to fight, it is the spirit and ability of the living warriors which counts."

"Perhaps. But, as you said, the ghost eaters exist only to kill. So what are you doing here, if not to destroy as many of us as you can? Shouldn't I slay you now, before you have the chance?"

He had to tread carefully, he could see that in her face. "You could try. But only if you're faster than the *bhargha*. If you haven't reduced me to ash within a few seconds, your ghost will go to feed my healing. And you've never fought anyone before, let alone something like me." Neither had he, unless one counted the Enemy he had taken by surprise earlier, but she couldn't know that. "But I'm not here to kill you or anyone else. Little Deer sent me to find a woman."

The flames disappeared from Stands-in-Smoke's hands. A calculating look appeared in her angry eyes. "You came to find me, then. You came to help us." Her hands clenched into fists, and she stared at the ceiling, as if seeing some beautiful vision. "All my life, I've dreamed of destroying the Outlanders, of throwing down their fort and burning their town. With you, we have a chance."

Her eyes gleamed with hate and rage. From what she had said earlier, he doubted that she believed that Little Deer had sent him. But she was willing to go along with anything he said, so long as it helped her fulfill her dreams of vengeance.

"No. I'm sorry, but Little Deer didn't mention your people at all."

She looked down at him, startled. "He didn't? But then what—"

"The animals sent me to find an Enemy woman. I finally managed to locate her here, in the town outside the Sanctuary. I think her name is Gwendith."

"What! Why would a ghost eater care about some stupid Outlander?"

The ghost eater shrugged. "I don't know why Little Deer sent me to her, exactly. I was shown a vision—I'm supposed to find her and bring her back to the mountains with me, back to where the Ahkan'it live. If I don't, something terrible will happen."

"What?"

"I'm not certain," he admitted. "All I saw was death—the death of the Ahkan'it, of the animals, of the forests. Even of the Enemy-held lands. I didn't see what caused the destruction. But if I don't find this woman, not only will the Ahkan'it suffer, but your own people as well. So, in a way, I am here to help you."

The last sounded weak even to him. Anger glinted in Stands-in-Smoke's eyes. "You are the most powerful weapon we could ask for," she said hoarsely. "And you refuse to help us?" She stopped, making an obvious effort at getting her fury under control. "Perhaps you don't understand what things are like for us here. Did you see the fields outside?"

He nodded, remembering the wastelands of red mud. "Yes. They looked over-planted."

"Of course they did—the Outlanders won't allow us to plant crops anywhere else, though there are far better places even in the Sanctuary. So the soil went bad years ago, before I was even born, and we can hardly grow anything. We have to depend on the Outlanders to *give* us enough food to live, when we could easily have a surplus. But anyone caught trying to farm in any 'unauthorized' place is imprisoned." Her mouth twisted. "Or rather, the person they come across first is put in prison—the Outlanders don't much care whether they've found the guilty party or not."

"But it's worse than that. The soldiers from the fort do whatever they want to us. When they get off duty, some of them come down here looking for women. There are some women who choose that way to feed their children, but no soldier is going to face trial for rape if he fancies someone less-than-willing. We aren't allowed to speak our own language, we have to wear Outlander clothes, and we're forced to go every week to worship in their accursed Church of the Wizards."

The ghost eater winced. The Enemies were as evil as all the stories claimed. The very idea of dealing with one of them, even a woman, was beginning to sound repulsive. Was it really wise to bring such poison among the Ahkan'it? The animals seemed to

think it necessary—but were they concerned with the price the Ahkan’it might have to pay?

Probably not.

“I’m sorry,” he said slowly. “I would like to help you. But what could I do? I’m only one ghost eater.”

“You could show my people that there’s hope!” She smiled suddenly. “The Skull People were always great warriors—you could bring them to us, and together we could drive the Outlanders into Sanctuaries of their own!”

He didn’t like her look of glee at the thought, even though he understood it. “No. We Ahkan’it are going to have problems of our own, and soon. And besides, we barely kept the Enemies out of the mountains two hundred winters ago, when we knew how to fight them. We haven’t fought anyone since then.”

Stands-in-Smoke smiled cruelly. “Neither have the Outlanders. And their Wizards have left them. They have neither their terrible magic, nor any Ways of their own. With help from a free people, we can win.”

He stood, not wanting to argue any further. “That isn’t why I came here.”

No Tongue leaned forwards suddenly, holding out the root that he had been digging up when the Enemies attacked him. Stands-in-Smoke took it, looking surprised for a moment. “Is this why they whipped you?”

He nodded.

“My cousin reminds of one last argument, then. Did you hear the coughing when you came into the village? There is sickness in the Sanctuary. We’ve already used our allotted amount of medicine from the Outlander supply depot. No Tongue apparently thought a traditional cure might work, but using our own medicine is as illegal as speaking our own language. That was why they attacked him. At least he managed to get away with some. It will help, but there are many sick, including children. For them, I ask you to help us break the Outlander hold.”

He sighed, even though there was no need for him to draw breath when not speaking. “I want to help you, but it won’t work. I’ve traveled all over Enemy lands—there are too many of them for us to even dream of fighting directly. Please, let me do what I came here to do. I understand if you don’t want to help me, but don’t hinder me.”

She looked away, disappointment and bitterness clear in every line of her face. “I’ll help you,” she said, but there was an edge in her tone that he did not like at all.

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Stands-in-Smoke stood in the doorway of her friend Rheda’s shack and looked inside. Rheda didn’t have a real name, just the one the Outlander priest had given her at birth. Her mother had been a Wizards-fearing woman and wouldn’t put up with talk of animal spirits, or with dancing to ensure the ripening of the corn, or with anything the Proud Ones still remembered from before the coming of the Outlanders. She wouldn’t even let her children use their own Ways—declared it sacrilege against the Wizards.

If only the old woman hadn’t died years ago and could see what was even now sitting on the floor of Stands-in-Smoke’s house, watching No Tongue drink more than was good for him.

Not that Stands-in-Smoke had believed in those things either, but at least she had scorned it for wishful thinking, not because it ran contrary to the teachings of the thrice-accursed Wizards.

She let her eyes rove over the desperate scene inside the shack. Rheda lay on a pallet against the far wall, her complexion disturbingly sallow. A baby curled against her breast, its breathing thick and labored. It wouldn’t be the first infant Rheda had mourned—supposing she didn’t find herself in the grave alongside it.

Others lay on the blankets, occasionally coughing or gasping weakly for water. Some of the old women who hadn’t come down with the sickness ministered them, pressing wet rags against fevered foreheads and holding water gourds to cracked lips. The rattle of labored breathing filled the shack, like a chorus of monstrous bees.

Rheda’s eyes half-opened, and she caught sight of Stands-in-Smoke. She motioned with her hand, and Stands-in-Smoke came to her side, crouching down by the sweat-soaked pallet. “Did they give you any more medicine at the depot?” Rheda gasped.

Stands-in-Smoke shook her head, rage moving through her like a beast swimming beneath still water. “No. I could see five jars sitting on the shelf behind the counter, but the sergeant wouldn’t give any to me. He said we had already used up our



allotment for the month. He said we'll get some more next month, but no sooner. He said we shouldn't be so wasteful."

Rheda collapsed back with a sob. Stands-in-Smoke touched her hand quickly and held up the dirty root that No Tongue had given her. "No Tongue brought this—the old women will know how to make tea out of it, to soothe the coughing."

Rheda closed her eyes against tears. "It's not enough."

"I know." Stands-in-Smoke drew a deep breath. "We're going to lead an attack against the supply depot tonight."

"What? Are you insane?"

The entire shack had fallen into a hush at Stands-in-Smoke's words, all but the most ill staring incredulously. "Don't be a fool," one of the old women said sharply. "If you do that, you might get medicine, but the soldiers will come in here and kill more than the plague would carry off."

"Ordinarily. But I have a new weapon. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, and I don't have time to explain. But I will bring medicine for all of you by the next dawn. I swear it."

She left them to wonder and speculate. As she passed outside, a young man by the name of Sleet lurched up from where he had lain in the shade by the shack. He reeked of whiskey, and his clothes were filthy, as if he no longer bothered to change them. "Did I hear you right? You're going to attack?"

She eyed him uncertainly. Sleet was a slave to Outlander alcohol—if he wasn't in a drunken stupor, he was trying to scrounge something to trade for more whiskey.

That was the one thing the Outlanders would give them in limitless supply.

"That's right. Are you coming with me?"

He looked confused, suddenly, and stared at his feet. "Would you bring me back a bottle?" he asked quietly, sloshing the one clutched in his hand for emphasis.

Stands-in-Smoke sighed and brushed by him. There was no time to waste on drunkards like Sleet. Now was the time for men of action, men who chafed under Outlander rule, who would rise up if only they had a leader like her to give them impetus.

And she knew plenty of them.

## CHAPTER TWO

Gwendith stood off to one side of the ballroom, trying to look normal. Some fogginess still clung to her thoughts, and lethargy affected her movements at odd moments, but even so a thin tendril of hunger for the crippleweed spiraled through her. She took a sip of her wine instead, barely even tasting its expensive flavor.

She wished Beoch had not insisted they come tonight. She risked a glance around the crowded room and wondered again why they had been invited. The house—mansion, really—belonged to General Paywin, the genteel commander of Fort Ironwood. Guests, made up from the families of high-ranking officers and wealthy landowners, swirled and flowed through the enormous candlelit room. She touched her dress self-consciously, fearing that she looked like a laborer despite the rose-colored satin and yellowing lace. The style was many years out of date, and the dress's bagginess betrayed a recent loss of weight.

*Caitlin would have fit in here*, she thought regretfully. Her daughter had always been interested in frills and ribbons and fine dresses. *How Gairin would have laughed, to think that the two of us could have produced such a child.*

For Caitlin, she had once tried to fit into the upper echelons of society herself. It wasn't something she had been born to—Gwendith's father had been a military man, whose skill with the saber had earned him a fine reputation as a teacher once he retired to civilian life. He had passed on his knowledge and skill to his eldest child, but it wasn't until after Gwendith had been wed and widowed by a lowly carpenter that she had turned to teaching herself. She remembered the long string of her students, most of them silly young men ready to bloody each other over the slightest insult. And a few quiet, intense young women, more interested in defense than in dueling. She could never be a part of their society, but she had hoped that Caitlin might someday become one of them.

For a moment, she dreamed of those days, gliding across the floor of the salon with the familiar weight of her saber in her hand. Her fingers curled unconsciously,

wanting to hold the blade with a need that momentarily outweighed the ache for crippleweed. But the saber, like her dueling pistols, had ceased to play a role in her life. *“A threat to herself and others,”* wasn’t that how Beoch had put it when he thought she couldn’t hear?

A servant passed by, bearing a tray of sweetmeats. Like most of the silent staff tonight, the young man was a muddy from the Sanctuary. His shocking black hair was held back in a civilized queue, and he dressed in proper Rhylachan clothing. She tried not to stare at his brown skin, so out-of-place amidst the fairness of guests and master. She had never seen a muddy this close before, at least not in real life. But they had haunted her dreams and her madness for over a year now.

She wished that Beoch had not thrown out the carving. She really, really wished that. Oh, he meant well, of that she had no doubt. But she had hoped that, by employing the small skill she had once used to soothe her mind after a long day of difficult students, she might somehow get the vision out of her head and into the real world where it could be dealt with.

A quick gulp of wine warmed her throat. She didn’t want to think about him, the persistent hallucination who haunted her. Didn’t want to think about his young, eager face with its dark complexion and waist-length hair. Nor about his outlandish, savage clothing, like something out of the Book of the Migration at church.

Most particularly, she didn’t want to think about the sudden, searing vision of his death, the one that had finally sent her screaming to the asylum.

Someone nearby cleared his throat, and she started out of her reverie. A rather dashing gentleman dressed in a colonel’s uniform stood before her, his smile lighting up the air like a chandelier. He looked perhaps a decade younger than her thirty-seven years, with brilliant blue eyes and loose curls of hair that could truly be described as golden rather than blond.

“Forgive me for intruding, ma’am, but I saw that you were without refreshment.” He handed her an elegant glass of red wine. Startled, she looked at her own glass and found it empty. In the absence of any crippleweed to distract and dull her thoughts, she had consumed more than she had intended.

*Good, Gwendith. So instead of being in a stupor, you'll be staggering around drunk.*

"Thank you," she said with a pallid attempt at a smile.

He nodded but made no attempt to rejoin the rest of the party. "My name is Talys."

"Gwendith Smithswife."

He tipped his hat politely. "The general has put on a lovely ball, don't you think? I'm glad I was able to arrive here in time for it."

"You aren't from Fort Ironwood?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm usually stationed at Fort Reed."

"The one by the big gold mine?"

"Exactly. I just arrived here today, with only a few hours to get the road dust off me." He smiled conspiratorially. "The truth is, I would rather have spent the evening soaking in a hot bath, with bed at the end of it."

She nodded, finding herself smiling back at him. He seemed a likable sort, very different from the stiff young privates she normally found herself dealing with. There was something about his presence that immediately put her at ease—and that was a feeling she hadn't had in a very long time.

"I don't really care to be here, either," she found herself confessing. Beoch would have been scandalized at the admission. "In fact, I don't know why I'm here at all, to tell the truth. My husband, Beoch, isn't even in the army anymore—he's the local smith now. He does work for the fort, of course, but only as a civilian."

Talys nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps the general wanted to recognize his good work. What is it that you do, Gwendith?"

She bit her lip. "I used to be a fencing master," she said carefully, like a woman trying to walk across broken glass. "But I haven't taught for some time."

"Do you hope to work with some of the soldiers at the fort, then?"

She looked away. "No. I...I've retired. Permanently."

Talys nodded thoughtfully but didn't press the issue. Instead, he asked, "So which one is your husband?"

She pointed out Beoch's tall, hulking frame, and he nodded. "And who is the spirited fellow scowling at him so darkly?"

"Johann. He was my first husband's brother." She watched as Johann threw up his arms and stomped away, fair hair flying. "He and Beoch have never gotten along. Beoch considers himself a Wizards-fearing man, you see, and Johann...well, he mostly travels around gambling and getting into trouble. Not the kind of lifestyle Beoch approves of."

"But you like Johann."

"He's funny. And he's kind. He was always bringing presents for Caitlin, whenever he would stop to visit."

Instantly, she regretted bringing up Caitlin's name. And indeed, Talys asked, "Caitlin?" But his voice was oddly gentle, as if he already knew the answer.

"My daughter. She died three years ago. I...that's one of the reasons we moved here from Aneirach, where I grew up. The doctors thought it would be best if I didn't have constant reminders." She looked down in shame. A part of her wondered why she was telling this to a total stranger. "I have a nervous condition, you see." *In other words, I'm insane.*

"I see."

"No, you don't." She laughed without mirth. "I see things. Have visions. I don't teach anymore because I went into a frenzy last year and attacked one of my students. They tell me that I was yelling at him to stay dead. So I suggest that you go find someone else to talk to, unless you want to be linked to the smith's crazy wife. I doubt it would help your career."

He smiled, warm and gentle. "What do I care? There are plenty of people here I would most definitely not want to be seen spending an evening with. You, however, aren't one of them."

She swallowed against a sudden tightness in her throat. Not even Beoch would say something like that to her. She couldn't blame him—she had been a normal woman, with a beautiful daughter, when they first married. Not a shuddering wreck, raving of visions and having to be dosed with crippleweed to be kept sane. Not a woman who flinched back from his touch and made his bed a cold one.

"If you don't mind my asking...what kind of visions do you have? I'm not trying to mock you," he added quickly. "And if you don't want to speak of it to a stranger, I understand. But I was wondering...have any of your visions ever come true?"

She blinked at him, not certain what she was hearing. "Of course not," she replied automatically. "That would be blasphemy."

"Of course," he agreed soothingly. "'The Wizards' magic is the only true magic.' I am as familiar with scripture as anyone. But would this really be *magic*, in any case? Think of the miracles that the Wizards performed—raining fire and death down on their enemies, opening a portal from old Rhyllach to this world. Surely one or two visions couldn't compare to powers on that order."

"I suppose," she said uncertainly. It seemed that there must be a flaw to his logic somewhere, but when she looked back up at him, it evaporated from her mind. "But they aren't that kind of visions anyway. I just have hallucinations about muddies. Not like the ones here tonight, though. I used to see one man in particular. I think he might have been about eighteen years old." She described his savage clothing and decorations briefly. "Then...then I saw him die."

She closed her eyes, trying not to think about that traumatic vision. "It was pretty horrible. But only a few hours later, I had another hallucination—he woke up in a cave. Only he was still dead. That...that was when they put me in the asylum. Now I take crippleweed, so the visions aren't so bad. I only have them once in a while, usually when I'm asleep. I still see him, though. He looks the same, but now he has tattoos on his face, like a skull. So you see, I'm just crazy, not prophetic."

An odd look of intense interest sharpened Talys' features for a moment, then vanished. "Does Beoch know about this?"

"No. He only knows that I see things that aren't there. He has an old rifle from his days in the army. There's a hank of black hair from an escaped muddy tied around it. It was the only kill he ever made, but he's very proud of it. If he knew I was hallucinating about them, he would be beside himself. Being insane is one thing, but dreaming about muddies would be downright improper."

"Gwendith." Talys put a hand to her arm, his look kindly. "I would be interested in speaking with you some more. I think it would do you good to have someone with whom

to talk. And I find your visions very interesting. Will you indulge me by coming up to the fort tomorrow? We can have lunch in the office General Paywin has set aside for me.”

The idea of getting out of the house and having real human contact seemed like a promise of heaven after so long, even if her insanity was the topic of conversation. Normally, her madness was dismissed with sneers, sniggers, or uncomfortable changes of subject. As Talys had said, it might be good to get the visions out into the air with someone who would truly listen. Was it so different than what she had tried with the carving earlier?

“I would like that very much,” she replied.

Talys bowed, then moved away. A moment later, Johann took his place.

Johann reminded her of Gairin and even more painfully of Caitlin. He shared their white-blond hair, their wide gray eyes, and their straight noses. In temperament, however, he was nothing like either of them.

“I can’t believe it!” He glowered at no one in particular. “Beoch said he told you not to even let me know you were moving here!”

Gwendith sighed. “You look very nice tonight, Johann.” And indeed, his fine red coat, ruffled white shirt, and dapper gray trousers with cream-colored stockings made him the match of anyone there. But then, Johann could afford to be well dressed, as his luck at the gambling tables seemed nothing less than phenomenal.

“And now—where does he think he’s going?” he asked, pointing. Gwendith glanced across the room, and her heart unexpectedly sank. Beoch’s towering form stood at the row of glass-paned doors leading out into the garden. There was a woman outside, talking to him. Gwendith knew she was Aerwyn Bakerswidow without having to see her face. After a moment, both slipped outside, probably headed either to a secluded place in the garden or to Aerwyn’s house in town.

Johann took two steps towards the doors, outrage clear on his face. But Gwendith quickly restrained him. “No, don’t. Listen, Johann. You know that my marriage to Beoch was one of practicality, not love. He needed a woman to take care of his household, and Caitlin needed a father to give her some security. But he’s been truly good to me, especially since....” She let the sentence trail off, unable to say the words *Caitlin died* to someone who had known her. Who knew just *how* she had died.

“But he’s going off with another woman, right in front of everyone!” Johann hissed, keeping his voice low.

“I know. You don’t understand—how could you, you’re never here?” He winced at her words, but she shook her head. “I don’t blame you. You have your own life. You can’t waste it looking after your brother’s widow. The truth is, I haven’t been much of a wife to Beoch over the last few years. He didn’t bargain for a madwoman in his house. If he’s willing to put up with me, with all the trouble I’ve given him, then who am I to blame him if he finds a little happiness of his own?”

Johann stared at her as if she had just sprouted horns or wings. “What’s happened to you?” he managed at last. “What have they done to you, Gwenny? When I first met you, you were full of fire and life. If Gairin had dallied with some other woman, you would have thrashed him up one side and down the other. Now...you not only look wan as a spirit, you act like one too. Is it the crippleweed? Is Beoch beating you?”

She turned away, suddenly annoyed with him. As she had said before, he hardly even came around anymore, especially since Caitlin’s death. Why should he interfere now, when he would be gone again soon enough? “Leave it alone, Johann. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He grabbed her arm. “Come with me when I leave. I have a...that is, I have friends up in Whitefoam. That’s where I’ve been spending my time lately. They’ll be happy to have you stay with us. As long as you like.”

She pulled away from him. She was angry, although she wasn’t quite certain why, and the craving for more crippleweed had become an ache in her blood. The air in the ballroom was stuffy, and she longed to be elsewhere. “I’ll think about it,” she lied.

“I brought something for you—something of yours that I think you’ve been missing. If you’ll meet me somewhere private tomorrow—”

“I said I would think about it,” she snapped. “Now, please, excuse me.”

Gwendith stumbled as she turned away, pulled herself back up, and tried to walk normally to the closest doors leading out into the garden. Several people looked at her, either wondering if she was drunk, or else gawking at the madwoman. The outside air was colder than she had expected, and she cursed mentally, wishing that she had a coat. At least it had stopped raining.



Since it didn't seem likely that Beoch and Aerwyn would linger outside in such a chill, she felt safe in penetrating deeper into the gardens. Many plants had been taken inside for the winter, and most of those remaining were bare-branched. Still, some did have buds swelling on their tips, promising that spring wasn't really as far away as it seemed.

Gwendith wandered without purpose, following a white gravel path through a hedge of boxwoods. The sound of other feet crunching on the stones came to her, and she turned, thinking that Johann had followed her. Instead, she found herself facing a muddy. Unlike the muddies inside, she was not dressed as a servant but wore a ragged, patchwork blouse and skirt over her thin frame. Her dark eyes flashed with pleasure.

"I don't believe you decided to make this so easy," she said cryptically.

Gwendith caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye. Hands grabbed for her, and she tried to bring her arms up to block. But the crippleweed slowed her reactions, and her attacker caught her wrists, jerking her forwards. Someone forced a wet cloth down over her nose and mouth. Startled, Gwendith took a breath, sucked in water and the overpowering smell of herbs. Her last sight before darkness claimed her was that of another muddy, the look on his face one of regret and apology. Then the herbs took effect, and she knew no more.

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Awareness slunk back like a beaten dog. Gwendith moaned softly. Her mouth tasted terrible, and nausea roiled her belly. *What happened?* She forced her eyes open and found herself lying on a dirt floor. The only light came from a small fire, which flung huge shadows on the shabby wooden walls. Her hands were before her, tied securely with knotted rope.

*The garden—there were muddies....* She heaved herself up on her elbows, intending to come up in the best fighting stance she could manage. Instead, the movement sent her stomach over the edge, and she vomited helplessly onto the floor.

Hands touched her, and she jerked away. The man who had seized her in the garden sank down on his knees by her, holding out a crude cup made from a gourd. He still looked regretful, as if he hadn't really wanted any of this to happen.

"Who are you? What do you want with me?" she asked, trying to keep her voice calm.

He made no reply, only offered the cup to her a second time. When she gave it a distrustful look, he lifted it to his own lips and drank down half the liquid inside. She took it warily, chancing only a tiny sip on her unsettled stomach. It was only water, and it took away some of the cottony feeling in her mouth.

Someone pushed aside a curtain that hung in the doorway. Moonlight shone in, and Gwendith realized that the shack she was in consisted of only the one room. The woman who had been in the garden entered and gave Gwendith a disgusted look. "Clean it up, No Tongue," she ordered absently. "And her. We don't want her to look mistreated, do we?"

"Why have you kidnapped me?" Gwendith demanded.

The woman looked at her sharply. "I don't want to hear anything from you, Outlander. Keep silent, or I'll gag you. Not that there's anyone here who'd come to help you, even if you did call out."

Gwendith subsided. From what her eyes and ears told her, they must have taken her to the Sanctuary. They had probably slipped out and back in under the cover of the servitors going to the party. But to what purpose? *They must have mistaken me for someone else. Maybe for General Paywin's wife?* But the general's wife was small and round, not embarrassingly tall and rawboned like Gwendith.

The curtain over the door opened again, sending an unpleasantly cold draft of air over her skin and making the fire dance and spin. She looked up quickly, ready to assess any new danger—and felt as though her heart stopped.

It was the man from her visions.

They stared at one another in mutual shock. He had changed into Rhylachan clothes, she noticed distractedly. The sleeves of the shabby, charcoal-colored coat hung too long on him and might hamper his movements in a fight. His black trousers had been torn off at calf-length, with no shoes beneath. But he had the same long hair,

the same egret tattoo on his bare chest beneath the open coat, the same bone ear pins and copper nose ring. The same skull tattoo over his features.

She scuttled back, heart pounding. “You—you aren’t real,” she declared weakly, certain that her mind had finally snapped altogether. Always before, she’d had no trouble distinguishing the hallucinations from real life. But if they had invaded her perceptions this thoroughly, she couldn’t fight off the madness anymore. There was nothing left for her but the asylum.

He knelt down by her. “I am real,” he said reassuringly. He touched the back of her hand with heavily-callused fingers which, although somewhat cool, certainly felt solid enough.

“No—you’re just a vision, just a symptom of insanity.” She closed her eyes, struggling to dismiss him. When she looked again, he was still there, as disturbingly real as before.

“You aren’t insane.” He caught her lightly beneath her chin, tilting her head so that she had to look at him. His expression was troubled, as if he held some concern for her. “Do you understand?”

“Enough of this.” The woman grabbed him by the shoulder. “I brought her here for you, ghost eater. And you can have her—if you do something for me first.”

He glared at her. “Help you fight the Enemies.”

“We’re going to get medicine from the supply depot tonight. If you want this Outlander woman, you’ll be with us.”

He rose slowly to his feet. Gwendith was struck by his shortness—he couldn’t have stood more than five feet tall. Nevertheless, he seemed to radiate power and strength, and even though he was the one who had to look up at the woman, she was the first to turn away.

“Or what, Stands-in-Smoke?” he asked softly. “Think carefully before you answer. Threaten Gwendith, and I’ll kill you. Staving off the destruction that Little Deer showed me is more important than the life of one foolish Hut Sitter.”

For a moment, Stands-in-Smoke’s show of confidence wavered, and she looked frightened. Then her jaw clenched. “Will you help us?”

He sighed, shoulders slumping. “Yes.” The response was less than enthusiastic.

Stands-in-Smoke gave him the smile of a huntress. Beckoning to No Tongue, she started outside. "I'll be back by midnight to collect you," she called over her shoulder.

Then they were alone. The man sighed again, then sank down beside Gwendith. He clucked his tongue at the sight of her bound hands. Moving slowly so as not to startle her, he laid his fingers over the bonds. For an instant, Gwendith thought she glimpsed what looked like a thin, glowing tendril of light emerge from his palm and snake in and out of the rope. Then he took his hand back. The cords now had an oddly desiccated appearance and crumbled apart within seconds.

Gwendith stared at the fragments of rope. *Some sleight of hand*, she thought. The priest at Fort Ironwood's church had said only last worship day that muddies were capable of every sort of blasphemy and trickery. She knew that she shouldn't believe that he had done anything more.

Unfortunately, she had never been the devout woman Beoch thought she ought to be.

"What's your name?" she asked tentatively.

He moved to sit by her, leaning his back against the wall. He looked tired, she thought, not so much physically as spiritually. "I am the ghost eater and have no name," he said. It sounded like something learned by rote.

...*All right*. "Stands-in-Smoke made it sound like you want me for something." Insane as it seemed—surely no man would go to the trouble of stealing someone as tall and plain as herself.

"I did come here looking for you," he admitted slowly. "It's a long story. I didn't want to meet you like this. I had hoped to find some way of approaching you that wouldn't frighten you. But Stands-in-Smoke...she's young, and angry, and isn't thinking very clearly right now. I apologize for her actions." He paused. "Don't be afraid, Gwendith. I won't let any harm come to you, I promise."

*Why should I believe you?* she wanted to ask. But he at least sounded sincere. And she was already in his power—she had no illusions about her ability to fight off a group of people who intended her harm. She had no weapons, and alcohol,

crippleweed, and long lack of practice would slow her reactions anyway. Why would he try to reassure her, when threats might serve better to keep her tractable?

The curtain opened again, and Stands-in-Smoke came in. She scowled when she saw the remnants of the bindings. "It's time," she said curtly. "No Tongue will keep an eye on the Outlander while you come with us."

The ghost eater nodded. "I trust No Tongue," he said to Gwendith. "I don't think he would hurt you. But he can't talk, so don't start worrying when he doesn't answer your questions." He made an attempt at a smile, which distorted the tattooed lines on his face into a ghastly death's head grin.

No Tongue came back in, moving stiffly, as if he had taken some wound. He had put on a long duster similar to those worn by miners or laborers, and wore a wide-brimmed hat of similar type. It looked, Gwendith thought, as if he expected to be going somewhere.

Stands-in-Smoke obviously came to the same conclusion. "You're staying here, to guard the Outlander," she reminded him. He merely nodded and sat down, hat still firmly settled on his head. Stands-in-smoke shook her head in exasperation and left. The ghost eater paused to give Gwendith what was probably meant to be a reassuring look, although she couldn't imagine how he thought she could be reassured in such circumstances. Then he, too, was gone.

No Tongue smiled at her wryly. Once the sound of footsteps had disappeared, he turned to what looked like a pile of bedding and dug out a pack. He checked its contents: dried corn flour, an extra change of clothes, and a canteen. Then he set it on the floor by his boots and settled back to wait. He looked far too alert for her to even think of trying to escape. *As if I could run anywhere in these silly skirts and shoes.*

Gwendith looked thoughtfully at the pack, then at the door. Sudden insight came to her. "You know something, don't you? Or at least strongly suspect it?"

He held up two fingers, as if to indicate that her second supposition was correct. Then he pointed at her and mimicked sleeping.

"You must be joking."

He spread his hands apart in a wry gesture. They sat on either side of the fire, stared at each other, and waited.

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Stands-in-Smoke had managed to gather roughly twenty young men eager to join her in the assault on the supply depot. The ghost eater watched them as they crept through the darkness armed with knives, old wooden boards, and one or two rusty rifles that had lain hidden away for who-knew how long. The hiss of their breathing sounded loud to his ears, and their footsteps squelched in the rain-soaked ground. They clung to the shadow of a group of old buildings constructed close to the part of the palisade nearest the fort. The ghost eater wondered briefly what the structures were for and if anyone yet used them. Certainly they looked deserted tonight.

Stands-in-Smoke paced nearest him, anticipation on her face. Anger sliced through him at her manipulation, but he strove to control it. He was the ghost eater and felt nothing.

*And that was always the lesson I had the most trouble with,* he thought regretfully. It bothered him that Stands-in-Smoke had used Gwendith to force him into joining her raid. For all he knew, the Hut Sitter's impetuosity could turn Gwendith against him from the start, not even allowing him the fair hearing for which he had hoped. And if that was so...he wasn't certain what he would do. He could hardly force her to come with him against her will, kicking and fighting all the way back to the mountains.

"There," Stands-in-Smoke whispered, pointing. She started to touch his wrist, then at the last moment remembered what he was.

He peered through the dimness. His eyes were no better than a living man's, so he had difficulty making out any details in the moonlight. The supply depot was a small, one-story structure built dangerously close to the palisade and the Enemy soldiers manning it. Unlike the other buildings he had seen on the Sanctuary, this one looked sturdy and well-made.

They crept up to a small porch. Several of the young men, their faces flushed with excitement and cold, took up position around the building. Stands-in-Smoke tried the only door, but a heavy padlock secured it. She motioned to a man carrying an ax, but the ghost eater stopped him. Laying his hand on the door close to the metal, he let the *bhargha* extend an exploratory tendril. He sensed the long strands that made up the

wood, the flaws and cracks that age and drying had introduced. The metal handle was like a black void to him, cold and unknowable.

The *bhargha* quested among the wood-strands, unbinding them one from another, sapping what little strength remained. A short time later, he tugged experimentally on the latch. It pulled easily away from the wood, the lock dangling uselessly from it.

Stands-in-Smoke gave him a feral grin and pushed the door open triumphantly. "There's the medicine," she said, pointing to a row of jars on a high shelf behind a counter.

Her men rushed in behind her. "Whiskey!" exclaimed one, and "Flour!" cried another. Hands began to snatch at whatever lurked on shelves and in barrels, dumping and dropping things to the floor. Within moments, the careful raid had degenerated into a free-for-all.

"No! We have to get the medicine and any weapons we can find and get out of here!" Stands-in-Smoke hissed angrily. She grabbed the sleeve of one of the young men attempting to make off with a whiskey keg. "Drop that!"

The sound of a shot broke the night outside.

Instantly, there were people running for the door. The ghost eater ducked out of the way, then cast a glance at Stands-in-Smoke. The confidence had vanished from her face, replaced by a look of horror. "No!" She ran to the door and peered out cautiously. "Soldiers! We've been betrayed. But...Sleet? No, surely he wouldn't have given us away."

She didn't sound like she believed it. The ghost eater didn't see that it mattered at the moment. "We've got to run," he ordered, beckoning her sharply. "Unless you want the Enemies to corner you in here!"

They emerged into chaos. More shots rang out, fired by a cordon of blue-coated soldiers who had surrounded the depot. A few Hut Sitters had managed to break free; the ghost eater saw one felled in the street, caught in the head by a shot from one of the buildings they had all thought empty.

It was a massacre. The Hut Sitters were poorly armed at best, and the soldiers had the advantage of numbers, position, and weaponry. One or two Hut Sitters tried to

hide in the depot, and the ghost eater wondered how long they would manage to hold out. For himself, he would not sit in a trap.

He grabbed the stunned Stands-in-Smoke, hauling her along behind him as he dashed across the open space directly towards one of the soldiers. He saw fire flash from the rifles, felt the painful tear of muscles in his free arm, the cold burn of metal through his neck. Then he was on the soldier.

The *bhargha* bloomed like a deadly flower, stunning and draining the man in seconds. Another approached, and another, and he took them down so quickly that he barely felt their memories skim over his consciousness. The *bhargha* flared like a beacon fire with their ghosts. He tugged it back inside, felt it knot and settle in his blood and bones. The concealment came a moment too late. Two other soldiers had spotted the flare and now ran to investigate.

Stands-in-Smoke spun as one of them set on her, fire leaping from her fingers and igniting his hair and face. He screamed, staggering back and clutching at his melting eyes. The other soldier stumbled to a halt, an expression of horror on his face. Then he turned and ran away.

The ghost eater and Stands-in-Smoke dashed through the momentary gap they had created in the line. No firelight showed in the night, and he hoped they blended into the darkness to the eyes of the soldiers. Even so, it would be only a temporary respite.

"We have to flee, now, tonight," he said.

Stands-in-Smoke gasped from the exertion of the run. "No, I can't—they'll come to the village. We have to go with the rest, hide—"

"We can't. That last soldier saw you, Stands-in-Smoke. I don't think it's a sight he's likely to forget, either. When the Enemies come to the village, they'll be looking for you."

"No." She shook her head, panting. "I can't abandon my people—"

"You're the one who brought this on them in the first place!" he yelled, temper snapping. "If they can tell the soldiers you fled, at least maybe the Enemies will come after you instead of persecuting everyone here!"

She had no answer to that.



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Gwendith huddled deeper into the blanket that No Tongue had given her to supplement the thin fabric of her dress. She wondered whether or not anyone had missed her yet. Although Beoch had been less discreet than usual by meeting Aerwyn in a public place, surely he would have returned to the general's house to collect his mad wife by now. Or, if not him, then Johann would definitely know she had vanished. Johann was a kindly soul and would have become worried about her shortly after she left for the garden. Even if he thought she had gone home, he'd had plenty of time to go back to the house and check. Not finding her there, he would immediately have returned to the party and marshaled the men to look for her.

And then what? Would anyone even think to search the Sanctuary?

She shifted her weight into a more comfortable position and eyed her strange guard thoughtfully. Even though Stands-in-Smoke didn't seem to think much of her, no one had offered her any real harm. *Yet*, she reminded herself firmly, but the thought lacked conviction. No Tongue managed to convey a genial nature despite his silence, and the man who called himself the ghost eater had been upset that they had taken her at all.

*"You aren't insane."*

And, earlier, Talys' voice: *"But I was wondering...have any of your visions ever come true?"*

*But they can't be true*, she thought. *I saw the ghost eater die. He's obviously alive, so it must be madness.*

There seemed no logical explanation. She sighed, trying to keep her thoughts from circling back to the same point over and over again. No Tongue, seeming to sense her distress, offered her a hip flask. She took it gratefully and swallowed a generous portion of the whiskey. It burned a line of fire into her belly, but she didn't care.

*Not the way I would have imagined being treated if someone had told me I was going to be kidnapped by muddies*, she thought wryly. As a child, she and her playmates had scared each other with tales of seeing wild muddies in the woods. The stories were silly—no muddies had lived anywhere but the Sanctuaries for at least two centuries. Even so, she had pictured them similar to her visions of the ghost eater,

dressed in deerskins and barbaric ornaments, stalking people through the trees behind her house. There hadn't been a Sanctuary near Aneirach; like most Rhylachans, she had thought of the muddies as a people of the past, who had once flourished but now were effectively gone from New Rhylach.

*Other than that, I never thought about muddies at all, not until the visions. Then when Beoch wanted to move here...did I agree because it didn't matter to me, or because I hoped to find answers?*

If that was the case, then she had possibly stumbled on more answers than she ever wanted to have.

No Tongue abruptly rose to his feet, face expectant. A moment later, Stands-in-Smoke ripped the curtain aside. She was panting with exertion, her breath steaming in the cold air. The ghost eater entered behind her, looking completely unwinded. For some reason, his breath remained invisible in the icy night.

"We were betrayed," Stands-in-Smoke gasped, looking wildly at No Tongue. "I was seen—I've got to leave here. Get someone to take the Outlander woman back to the fort, tell them I was the one who abducted her. Tell them that no one else had anything to do with it. Tell them I've fled."

"No." The ghost eater pushed past Stands-in-Smoke. Oddly enough, his breath did steam slightly when he spoke, as it had not before. "Gwendith, I have to ask a favor of you. I know you don't owe me anything, and you have every right to refuse and go back to your own people tonight. But I ask you, come with us, just long enough for us to reach a place where I can talk to you. Just long enough to hear me out. Then you can come back here if you want and never see any of us again. Please."

She hesitated. Common sense told her that she should refuse to flee into the night with a bunch of hunted muddies whose intentions toward her remained unclear. Seeing her uncertainty, the ghost eater reached into a pouch slung from a sash at his waist. To her surprise, he drew forth the carving that she had made of him.

"I found it outside your house," he explained, handing it back. "You should have it."

She stared at it for a long moment, knowing he had given it to her at this moment to manipulate her, but unable to leave the gesture unacknowledged. She remembered

her months of loneliness, of fear, of soul-devouring despair. She recalled the doctors telling her that she was mad, while she lay strapped to a bed, sobbing from the horrific vision of a young man waking up to find himself dead. That might not have been true, but something of it had a connection to reality, however tenuous. If she found out what, she might finally put to rest the hallucinations that had haunted her.

*“You aren’t insane.”*

She handed the carving back to him. “I don’t have anywhere to put it in this stupid dress. Will you hold it for me?”

Looking relieved, he took the statuette back. No Tongue slung his pouch over his shoulder, giving Stands-in-Smoke a grim look when she started to protest. Pausing only long enough to smother the fire, the four of them slipped out of the little shack and into the night.

They headed purposefully across the Sanctuary, following Stands-in-Smoke’s lead. Voices shouted in the distance, and Gwendith guessed that the soldiers were still looking for anyone who might have been involved in the raid. The moon gave just enough light to see her surroundings, though at first she paid more attention to her footing in the slick-soled dancing shoes she wore. But gradually the bleakness of the landscape pressed itself on her attention, an endless parade of fallow fields, miserable shacks, and blasted wastelands.

“This is your home?” she murmured, glancing at No Tongue in amazement.

“It’s the only one your kind will let us have,” Stands-in-Smoke snapped over her shoulder. “Does it please you, Outlander?”

“No, of course not. I didn’t know it was like this.”

“And didn’t trouble yourself to find out.”

In time, they came to a deserted section of palisade bordered on the other side by tall trees. As they waited nervously, the ghost eater moved close to the wall, where he stood with his head down. Gwendith was uncertain what he did, but it seemed somehow related to the trick he had used on the ropes. A flickering tendril of light seemed to come out from his chest and touch the wood. After a moment, it was joined by a myriad of other insubstantial tentacles, all sinking into the logs like the stinging arms of a sea anemone.

“Hurry up,” Stands-in-Smoke muttered impatiently.

“Even the *bhargha* takes time to work,” he replied calmly. “The wood is weakened already—just a moment—”

*Soldiers!*

Startled by the sudden certainty that someone was coming up on them, Gwendith turned to see No Tongue pointing insistently into the night. The rising wind brought the sound of voices. “Let’s check here—I thought I saw something move.”

Her heart went still with dread, even though she knew intellectually that no Rhylachan soldiers would harm her. On the contrary, they would think her an unwilling hostage and do whatever it took to free her. It might be possible to argue that she wasn’t being kidnapped, but Stands-in-Smoke had apparently been seen at the raid earlier. Nothing Gwendith could say would keep the three muddies out of the fort’s brig.

The ghost eater turned towards the approaching soldiers with a resigned look on his face. “Hide,” he said shortly. “I’ll distract them. If I’m delayed, break through the rest of the wall—it should be weak enough now. Parallel the road leading towards the Darkening Land. The road isn’t the biggest or most traveled that I saw, so it might be safe. A half-day’s walk from here, you’ll come to a lightning-struck oak to the left of the road. Wait for me there.”

Stands-in-Smoke nodded silently. Without another word, the ghost eater slipped through the shadows and made his way towards the approaching voices. Once he was a fair distance from their hiding place, he suddenly stood erect and raced across the open ground.

Excited shouts rang out. Three soldiers appeared, running after him. One caught him in a flying tackle, knocking him to the ground and pinning him to the dirt. The other two closed in with kicks to his side and groin. He lay still, not struggling, only accepting.

“Are there any more?” one of the soldiers demanded, peering into the shadows near the palisade.

Another moved closer, then shook his head without really doing a thorough search. “Nah. There’s no way to get out through here. He must have been by himself.”

The apparent leader motioned for the other to get off the ghost eater. He drew a pistol from his belt. "Stupid muddies. You'd think they'd have the brains to be grateful for what we give 'em."

Horror washed through Gwendith as she realized what was about to happen. These men had no intention of taking anyone back to the brig. She started to move, but No Tongue's arms locked around her, one hand over her mouth to stifle her cry of protest.

The soldier leaned down, put the muzzle of his gun to the back of the ghost eater's head, and fired.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

The ghost eater listened intently for the sound of retreating footsteps, but earth stoppered his ears and sealed his eyes shut beneath its weight. The smell of wet dirt and blood filled his nostrils, and he tried not to shudder.

*Under the ground. They've put me under the ground!*

Certainly he now felt a great deal less guilty about the soldiers he and No Tongue had buried earlier. The Enemies seemed to practice the same cruelty on their foes, even when there was no need for concealment of the corpse. He tried to move and felt the weight of earth press back at him. Had he been an ordinary man, he might not have been able to escape the grave. But the *bhargha* fed strength into his arms, and he shoved the wet dirt aside in a wild heave that brought him headfirst into the night.

He stumbled away, slipped on rain-slicked grass, and fell to his knees. The cold air tried to bite at him but had no real effect. He coughed, bringing dirt up out of his lungs, and blinked clay from his eyes. When he could see again, he glanced around and found himself in the middle of a small clearing which appeared to be outside the Sanctuary's palisade. Perhaps the soldiers who had dragged him here, laughing and joking all the way, hadn't wanted to bury him where the Hut Sitters could retrieve his body for proper treatment. Indeed, there were several other graves here, their fresh-turned earth proclaiming that many held victims of the night's raid.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're an idiot?"

He swiveled around on his heel to find Rabbit staring at him scornfully.

The ghost eater bit back the angry reply that sprang to his lips. "Tell me, Granduncle, what I have done so wrong."

Rabbit shook his head, absently stroking the fine gorget that hung about his throat. He seemed more man-like than he had before, sitting back on his haunches with one paw on his hip in an attitude of impatience. In addition to the gorget, he wore several ear pins—striking in his long ears—and a copper ring in his split nose. "Crawling out of an Enemy grave isn't a sign of doing things right. We told you to find the Enemy

woman, not get caught up in Hut Sitter problems. You shouldn't have listened to that fool girl, Stands-in-Smoke. Anyone with that much anger in her is trouble. You knew she wasn't thinking straight, but you followed her anyway."

"She had taken Gwendith. I thought that going on her raid might satisfy her."

"You should have just taken the Enemy woman yourself—what were the Hut Sitters going to do to you? The girl's a flame-caller, but she doesn't have any experience fighting ghost eaters. She might have hurt you but probably not much more than that."

The ghost eater shrugged. "I wanted to help," he admitted. "I felt guilty that they were suffering so much, and I couldn't do anything."

*And that's the problem, he realized glumly. I am the ghost eater—I have no commerce in the affairs of the living. The ghost eater does not feel compassion, or fear, or guilt, only fulfills his role.*

Rabbit made no mention of the lapse. Instead, he shook his head and sighed. "Well, you did get the woman, one way or another. That's something."

"I still have to convince her to come back to the mountains with me."

"If I were you, I'd put her in a basket and carry her back."

The ghost eater hid a grin. "I don't have your abilities, Granduncle. Unless you're making an offer of them."

Rabbit snorted, dropped down to all fours, and scratched vigorously behind one ear with a hind foot. "Just see that you're persuasive." He hopped nonchalantly off into the woods, white tail flashing behind before it disappeared with the rest of him into the shadows.

The ghost eater stood up and stretched. The first gray light of morning showed beyond the trees, and a redbird called a greeting to the sun. Glancing about warily for Enemies, he started off in search of the road.

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Gwendith stumbled through the woods, lost in a miasma of shock, exhaustion, and crippleweed hunger. Brambles clutched at the ruins of her skirt, and branches reached out to scratch her face. The sun had come up hours ago but was hidden

behind a bank of thick clouds that drizzled rain. The patter of falling water sounded loud on the dead leaves and hid any sound of approaching footsteps.

She needed more crippleweed. Desire for the drug grew more insistent, chewing at the edges of her thoughts. She should turn around, find the road, and head back to Fort Ironwood. There was no point in continuing on now that the ghost eater was dead.

*Dead.* She tried not to think about it, but the scene forced itself back into her mind. The rifle gleaming darkly in the night, the breath of the soldiers hanging like frost in the air, the spray of blood as the bullet tore into the back of his head....

*No.* She shuddered, stumbled, and kept going. Death, there was death everywhere she looked, everywhere she turned. Everyone she had ever really loved had gone to the grave in a wash of violent blood, and now this...this last hope that she might be sane, that there might be some explanation for the visions she had...taken by the same casual brutality.

*That isn't true,* she tried to tell herself. *Beoch, Johann, my friends back in Aneirach: they aren't dead.*

But Beoch had never commanded her passion, Johann wasn't around enough to know very well, and the few friends her work had left her time for had withdrawn even before she was dragged off to the asylum.

They broke out of the entangling forest. Gwendith looked up through a haze to see a towering, lightning-struck oak. Stands-in-Smoke, looking rather the worse for wear, staggered to a halt. "This must be the place," she muttered. Her dark eyes skipped over Gwendith and went to No Tongue. "We'll wait here for him, like he said."

Gwendith gaped. "What are you talking about? He's *dead*—the soldiers shot him through the head! You've got to keep going, find somewhere better to hide until things blow over. And I...I might as well go home."

Stands-in-Smoke shot her an annoyed look. "Don't sound so self-pitying, Outlander. He's a ghost eater—he wasn't alive to start with." She sank down onto the carpet of leaves beneath the tree, weariness breaking through the angry frown that seemed almost her only expression. "We'll wait here."



Gwendith shook her head, wondering if Stands-in-Smoke wasn't mad. *An odd thing to wonder about someone other than myself*, she thought ruefully. "What do you mean, he wasn't alive to start with?"

"She means exactly what she said."

She spun around to see him pushing aside the last tangling honeysuckle vines to emerge into the clearing. His clothing and hair were smeared with mud, and dried blood tracked across one side of his face. Nevertheless, the wry smile that quirked up the corner of his mouth was unmistakable.

Gwendith took an involuntary step back, feeling as though all the blood had drained from her body. "I...you...." Anger began to replace the shock. "It was all a trick."

"No." He moved closer to her. She took another quick step back, and he stopped. "No," he repeated again, more wistfully. "I didn't realize that you wouldn't know what a ghost eater is. I'm not alive, Gwendith, not like you are."

She'd grown up hearing folk tales from old Rhylach, ones that the preachers sometimes spoke against as blasphemy, with no place here in the Wizards' promised land. One of the words in them came involuntarily to her lips. "*Undead*."

The ghost eater cocked his head to one side thoughtfully. "Yes," he agreed finally. "The sense isn't quite right—there isn't any equivalent word for what I am in your language—but it comes close enough."

"Impossible."

Stands-in-Smoke gave her an exasperated look. "You saw the soldiers shoot him, and yet here he stands, unharmed. Touch his chest—you aren't going to find a heartbeat. And surely even an Outlander isn't so blind as to see that he doesn't breathe when he doesn't need it to speak."

Gwendith swallowed, fear dancing up her spine. Most of her life, she'd been able to fight anything she was confronted with using either sharp steel or bullets. Only once, the day Caitlin died, had she felt completely powerless. But this—how could anyone fight one of the undead, who couldn't be killed even by a bullet through his brain?

Hesitantly, she stretched out one hand and laid her fingers against his chest. As Stands-in-Smoke had said, she felt no heartbeat. Not breathing, that might only be a trick of control, but no one could fake this.

The man was dead.

She saw it again in her memory, the slow unreeling of madness. *The young muddy lay naked on the cave floor, even his bone ear pins and shell necklace stripped from him. A sharp stone spear point had been driven deep into his chest so that it pierced the heart.*

*Although it should have been black as night in the cave, a faint bluish glow illuminated the scene. Motes of light dripped from the soft, brown-black rock of the ceiling, swimming through it like water. Feathery impressions lurked in the stone, as though plants and animals had somehow been incorporated into it, leaving behind their shadows.*

*As she watched, unable to move or speak, the motes of light swirled together, faster and faster, until they seemed to be compacted into a single entity that exploded out of the rock, striking down like an arrow into the muddy's body. For a moment, nothing happened—then the light expanded to fill him, shifting his fingers and toes, causing even his long black hair to wave as if alive.*

*Then, the spear point still cleaving his heart, he opened his eyes and found himself dead.*

*And he screamed.*

*And screamed.*

Hands grappled with Gwendith, clamping over her mouth. The screams she listened to became muffled, and she realized belatedly that they were coming from her own throat. She struck out blindly and felt her fist connect hard with flesh. The grip holding her didn't loosen.

"Stop it, Gwendith! It's all right—I won't hurt you!"

She wasn't certain whether the fear she felt came from any perceived threat, or simply from some instinctive horror of the dead who refuse to stay where they belong. Her teeth sank into his palm. She tasted blood, heard him say something sharp in a tongue she didn't know. *So he does feel pain. He can still be hurt.*

The grip of his arms was like iron—not painfully tight, but unyielding. After a few minutes of struggling, she went limp, tired and starting to realize that fighting wouldn't

accomplish anything. Once she had been still for a while, he cautiously took his hand off her mouth.

“Let me go,” she said in what she hoped sounded like a calm, reasonable voice. “I want to go home. I need...I need some crippleweed.”

“You don’t need it. It’s bad for you.” Nevertheless, he let her go. She stepped away, glancing at No Tongue and Stands-in-Smoke, who had watched the exchange with interest. Vague embarrassment touched her, to behave so in front of strangers. Then again, she ought to be used to being stared at because of her odd actions.

She expected the ghost eater to be angry, but instead he only looked frantic. Dark eyes pleaded with her as he searched for words. “Don’t be afraid of me, Gwendith,” he repeated. “I came here to find you because I need your help, not because I wish to bring you harm.”

She took a deep, calming breath. “You said before that I’m not insane.” The words had somehow become a mantra, and she clung to them with illogical strength.

He nodded guardedly, as if worried any motion on his part might set her off. “That’s right. I can explain everything to you, if you’ll just sit down for a moment and listen to me.”

Seeing little choice, she did as he asked. He hunkered down by her, near enough that he didn’t have to yell across the clearing but not so close that she felt intimidated. That gesture made her relax more than any spoken reassurances. “All right. I’ll listen.”

“Thank you.” He craned his head back a moment, staring up into the branches of the oak tree. The skeletal lines drawn over his features made it difficult to read his expression. When he spoke, his voice held a formal cadence to it.

“I am the ghost eater of Bird Creek Town, and this is my tale. I am of the Ahkan’i people, who fought off the Great Enemies to live free in the mountains. I have been the ghost eater for one winter and am still under the tutelage of the old one, who was ghost eater before me.

“In the Spider Moon, I went to Where They Shouted on the night of a great storm. Kani Thunderer sent his son, Lightning, to strike me to the ground. When I looked up from my daze, I beheld Little Deer, who is the leader of all the deer. With him was the Saw-Whet Owl, to whom my clan is cousin. Little Deer showed me a vision, and I

beheld death everywhere around me. The plants, the animals, and the Ahkan'it all died before a great, consuming hunger that devoured everything that crossed its path. When it had stripped bare the mountains, the Devourer went out into the foothills, even into the lands of the Enemy, destroying everything.

"‘This must not come to pass,’ said Little Deer. ‘We will fight it, but humans must help as well, for this death is of their making.’

"Then he showed me one last image—the face of a woman with strange skin and eyes, who could only be one of the Great Enemies. ‘Find her and bring her here,’ he said. Then he was gone.

"I listened to Little Deer’s wisdom. I greeted the dawn and sang the song of journeying to each of the seven directions. Then I left the peak and left the mountains, without so much as a word to the old one, so important did this task seem. And from the Spider Moon until now, I have searched for the Enemy woman.” He broke off and looked piercingly at Gwendith. “She was you.”

Gwendith stared down at her hands. It was too strange and incredible to believe...but then, so was a man who seemed both alive and dead. “You’re saying that you’re from some lost band of muddies, and some kind of...of animal god told you to find me, or some disaster will befall the world?” she asked.

“Not mysterious. The Devourer will consume all that lives,” the ghost eater replied patiently. “And that word you used, ‘god’—that isn’t one of our words. I don’t know a word in your language that would be right for describing the animal spirits. And Little Deer didn’t say that you would be able to stop the Devourer—he only implied that you might be able to help somehow. Maybe we could do it all without you. But I think your help will make things easier.”

She shook her head, baffled. She had the feeling that no amount of skill with sabers or pistols would stop the kind of threat he was talking about. “But what could I do?”

He frowned, opened his pouch, and drew out the small carving she had done of him. “You knew me, even before I came here. Will you tell me how?”

It all seemed suddenly surreal. Only a few hours ago, she had told her story to Colonel Talys, despite having moved to Fort Ironwood to avoid people who knew about

her hallucinations. Now she told it again, to yet another virtual stranger. She made it sound as if her visions had begun suddenly, on an ordinary day—certainly there was no harm in that small deception. The ghost eater listened to her describe the increasing frequency of the visions, the asylum, and the crippleweed used to control her madness, nodding encouragingly when her words stumbled.

When she had finished, he sat back on his heels, his expression grave. “You have a Way,” he said, as if making some life-or-death proclamation.

“Impossible,” Stands-in-Smoke declared.

“What’s a Way?” Gwendith asked.

Stands-in-Smoke grinned wickedly. “This.” She held up her hand and flames appeared about her wrist and fingers, running harmlessly over her flesh as though they were nothing but water.

“Magic,” Gwendith whispered in awe. “Like the Wizards had.”

“Hardly,” Stands-in-Smoke replied contemptuously. “We’ve had Ways for as long as our people have existed. The Wizards had nothing to do with it.”

“But...we’re taught that the Wizards commanded the only true magic. Since they went up into heaven, there has been no magic in the world.”

Stands-in-Smoke let out a humorless laugh. “Spare us—I know the story, Outlander. I had it pounded into my head every holy day—church going is mandatory on the Sanctuary. Whatever your stupid priests might like you to think, people here had Ways long before we’d ever heard of Wizards, and we still have them now that they’re gone.”

“But Enemies don’t,” the ghost eater added. “I was always told that, because you came here from somewhere else, you don’t walk in the world the way we do. But the true visions you’ve had—from what you said, it sounds like you actually saw events as they happened. That’s the Way of a far-watcher. The kind of Way that an Ahkan’i, or a Hut Sitter, might have.”

Gwendith shook her head, not certain she entirely understood what they were saying. “So what does it mean if I do have this...this *Way*?”

“I don’t know.”

It was obviously something he took very seriously. Gwendith closed her eyes, wishing she had time to think. More, wishing she had time to lay down and go to sleep for a few hours. Perhaps to wake up in her bed in Aneirach, to find that she had dreamed the last few years, and Caitlin still slept safely in her room.

It was hard not to believe the ghost eater's words, when she had seen him get shot through the head and survive unscathed. When a woman caused fire to appear and disappear from her hands with no apparent tricks or subterfuge.

Part of her simply didn't *want* to believe. Not because it was too incredible, but because it would mean her first vision, the one that had started everything, would have been as true as the others.

*The man above her, face horribly twisted. The looming sky over his shoulder, the old mill's waterwheel against the gray clouds. And the blood. So much blood.*

Gwendith rocked forwards, pressing her fingers against her eyes as if to shove the memory back where it belonged. She didn't want to accept that, she didn't want it to be true.

But...there was another part that *did* want to believe the ghost eater's story, if only for one reason.

Gwendith dropped her hands and cleared her throat. "I'll do what you want," she said levelly, "but only on one condition."

Hope and excitement lit up the ghost eater's eyes. He smiled broadly, perhaps unaware of how the expression distorted the tattoos on his face into something awful. "What?"

"I had a daughter, Caitlin." Gwendith spoke carefully, as if the words were fragile things that could fall and break. "She died three years ago, from the influenza." *Liar*. "Your people obviously hold the power of life and death—you are proof enough of that. If I help you, I want you to restore Caitlin to me."

But the ghost eater was shaking his head. Her hand balled into a fist, wanting to strike him, wanting to knock away the expression of sympathy and force him to change his answer.

"I am sorry for your loss, Gwendith." His voice was sad, and for a moment he seemed a great deal older than his appearance suggested. "But that isn't how it works."

“Why not? Look at you!”

“For one thing, no ghost eater is ever made more than one day or one night after the death of his body. Your daughter has been dead for three years—all that is left of her is bone. Even if the *bhargha* could somehow reanimate the bones, I don’t know if it could restore brain or flesh if there wasn’t any there to start with. And if it could, it would still be kinder to leave your daughter’s body alone. My people believe that the spirit of the dead person goes on to the Darkening Lands, while all that remains behind is the *bhargha* in a borrowed corpse. As such, a ghost eater is considered to have no kin, no friends, and no family. I’m not alive, Gwendith—I can’t take part in the everyday things that you take for granted. I can’t bounce my niece on my knee, or marry the woman I loved. I wasn’t even allowed to grieve when one of my uncles died.”

She frowned, seeking some way to convince both of them that his words were wrong. “You said that you aren’t the person who was born in that body, but then you speak as if you are.”

He looked away, as if she had shamed him. “It has been my greatest failing as a ghost eater. If the old one caught me saying these things, he would kill me the rest of the way. The man whose body I took was named Tamaugua. I have all of his memories, all of his likes and dislikes. I have no memories of the time before waking in the cave that are not his. It...feels very much as though I am him. But I don’t know.” For a moment his eyes were haunted, desperate. “I truly do not know if I am Tamaugua, or if I am the Child of the Mountain, the *bhargha*, and have only usurped his memories as I usurped his body.”

Then he shook his head, sending his black hair flying in a long arc. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever my memories of life, I’m not truly alive now. Look at me, Gwendith—this body had seen eighteen winters when it died. I may survive another two hundred, but my appearance will never change. What hope would your daughter have, trapped forever in the body of a child? And there are worse things than remaining forever unchanging. I can never father children.”

“That’s the one part that doesn’t work anymore,” Stands-in-Smoke put in mockingly.

The ghost eater glared at her but didn't deny it. "Think about it for a while, Gwendith. This isn't an existence I would force on an innocent child, not even if I could. And I *can't*. It is neither possible nor desirable."

No one said anything after that. Gwendith rose slowly to her feet, but the ghost eater made no move to stand or to follow her, perhaps respecting her need for silence. She walked to the edge of the clearing before closing her eyes against the sting of tears. No, she wouldn't give into grief. There had never been any real hope to begin with.

She thought about her options. She could go back to Fort Ironwood and...what? Have lunch with Colonel Talys? He might not think her mad, but she doubted he would believe her if she started babbling on about Rhyllachans having "Ways" like muddies. In an earlier era, such blasphemous talk would have potentially earned her the stake. Now, in this more enlightened age, it would just earn her another trip to the asylum.

And no matter what she told or didn't tell him, he would be leaving soon enough to go back to his own command. She would remain behind with Beoch, her days lost in a fog of crippleweed, bound to a husband who had to find his pleasure with another woman since his wife was unable to give him any. The days stretched out before her in a dreary procession of sameness, locked in a world where she could have no real life because everyone thought her mad.

Or, she could go with a dead man back to mountains that neither she nor any other Rhyllachan had ever seen. Once there, she would be among strangers who apparently saw her as an "Enemy," adrift without any familiar ties of friendship or family. She didn't know what would happen there, couldn't guess what sort of life she might have for however long she stayed. Didn't even know what it was, exactly, that the ghost eater and his animal spirits might require of her once there.

But no one would think her mad. And at least it wouldn't be the slow death of despair and crippleweed that awaited her back in Fort Ironwood.

Her hand tried to close on a saber hilt that was no longer there. "All right," she said, staring out into the woods as she spoke. "I'll come with you."

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Colonel Talys sat behind the desk in the small office that General Paywin had lent him, his hands folded carefully over the ancient book resting on the desktop. Sunlight streamed through the window behind him, illuminating his crisp yellow hair and gleaming off the brass buttons of his coat. A brazier kept the room warm, but Talys still felt vaguely uncomfortable here. The spartan walls and lack of bookshelves made him long for his own study at Fort Reed. He thought briefly of Donia, wishing again that she could have been here with him.

Well, he would see her and home soon enough, once his visit here was done. He frowned down at the worn leather cover under his fingers. He wasn't yet sure whether or not this trip would be profitable, but certainly it had been interesting.

A sharp rap sounded on the door. At his call, a young private opened it, saluted, and stepped aside. From behind her came a towering man with thickly-muscled arms and a ragged bush of beard. He smelled of smoke and hot metal, even though he had obviously dressed in his holy-day-best.

"Beoch Smith to see you, sir," the private announced unnecessarily.

"Come in, Beoch." The private marched out once the smith had gotten his bulk through the door. Talys gestured to a seat, which Beoch took nervously.

Talys smiled reassuringly. "As you know, Beoch, General Paywin has put the investigation of last night's dreadful events in my hands. Although most of the matter was easily cleared up, I'm very sorry to report that no trace of your wife has yet been found."

Beoch's shoulders slumped, and his hands knotted together. Talys could feel the big man's guilt, his anguish, his terror over the horrors he assumed his wife would be subjected to at the hands of renegade muddies.

"My...my wife is a fragile woman," Beoch said, clearly fighting to keep his words steady.

Talys schooled himself to keep an interested expression for the moment. *Our smith doesn't know his wife very well. I would have recruited her in a moment had this not happened. If things are resolved well, I still will.* After all, reports of a woman who saw strange visions were what had drawn him to Fort Ironwood in the first place. There had always been the chance that she was simply insane rather than gifted with a Way,

of course. But as events progressed, it was beginning to look more and more likely that she was a genuine far-watcher.

“I understand your concern,” Talys said sympathetically. “I assure you that we’ll do everything we can to find her. But I was wondering if perhaps you could be of help. She seems to have disappeared at the party, but so far we have found no one who saw anything suspicious. The muddy servants were questioned, of course, but none of them could so much as give a description of her, so I doubt they were involved. I was hoping that you might have noticed something out of the ordinary that night.”

Shame, so strong it washed over him like the heat from a forge. Beoch’s head bowed even further. Soon, Talys thought, it would be resting on the man’s knees. “I...I was not with her. I should have been, I know, but...I wasn’t.”

And there lay the key. Beoch felt guilt over her disappearance. What he wanted more than anything was to get Gwendith back and absolve himself of that guilt. Or, failing that, he wanted to seek absolution for himself by taking revenge against her attackers.

This would be even easier than usual. Only a few words and phrases would be needed. Hardly an application of Talys’ talent at all.

“Why was that, Beoch?”

The smith responded to the light touch of talent and looked to Talys as if he was some sort of father confessor. “I...I had gone off with another woman.” Remorse twisted his features. “I’m so sorry for it—Gweny deserved better treatment from me, I know she did. Because of my failings, she was alone when those Wizards-damned muddies took her!”

Talys looked sympathetic, knowing his words would be like a twist of the knife. “There was no way you could have known.”

“I should have been there,” Beoch insisted. “I could have stopped them. But I failed her. Please, colonel, I love my wife. Let me make it up to her by helping rescue her! I used to be in the army—I can fire a rifle.”

Talys nodded sagely, pretending to think it over. “Very well, then. I’m sure there’s something you can do.”

“Thank you,” Beoch gasped, as if being granted a great favor.

“I’ve sent some soldiers out looking for her already. A man named Johann went with them—is he your brother?”

“No.” Beoch glowered, and Talys was glad Johann had left beforehand. Normally he didn’t have to work to keep order among his followers, and it would be an inconvenience if he had to start now.

“You’ll stay at my side. I may have need of your smith’s skills soon. Oh, one last question, if you will.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“I originally came here because I was looking into something for the army. As a smith in a town assigned to a fort, I assume you have access to phoenix stones to fuel your forge?”

Beoch seemed puzzled but answered readily enough. “Yes. Not as many as some larger forges elsewhere—certainly not as many as gunsmiths have—but enough to get by with.”

“Have you noticed anything odd about the phoenix stones lately? Does there seem fewer of them than before?”

“Theft?”

Talys sighed mentally. The phoenix stones were the last legacy of the Wizards, burning with a white-hot flame that never consumed the stones themselves. Or at least, that had been the case until now. The idea that the magic in them might someday die was incomprehensible to a man like Beoch, whose faith in the Wizards was likely close to unshakable.

Well, if he fell in with Talys, it would be shaken very well in the days to come.

“Not exactly. Just let me know if you notice anything strange.”

Beoch looked confused but nodded his assent. Giving Talys a rusty salute, he shuffled out the door.

Alone, Talys sighed and relaxed. He ran his fingers over the ragged old journal on the desk, reverently opening its pages. A soldier had kept this diary over two centuries ago; his terrible handwriting had combined with age to render some passages unreadable. Even so, the book was invaluable, for it contained a first-hand account of

the time just before the Wizards abandoned their flock—an account not written to order by the Wizards and their priests.

And it contained a chronicle of the war with the Skull People, which had otherwise been expunged from all records. Neither the priesthood nor the military had wanted posterity to remember their ignominious defeat at the hands of savages armed with bows and stone arrows.

Ironical that he had found it in the old library at Fort Reed, hidden back behind some dusty volumes that no one had opened in at least forty years. He liked to think that it had been waiting for someone who would appreciate the truths it contained, instead of burning it for blasphemy.

The book fell open to the page Talys had turned to most often as of late. Although the handwriting of the anonymous soldier was atrocious, the man had displayed some artistic skill. This particular page showed a picture of something the soldier had witnessed in the battles with the Skull People: a native man, barbarically dressed in a deerskin breechclout, with a skull tattooed over his features. The accompanying entry talked about men called ghost eaters and noted that everyone was terrified of them. They could supposedly kill a man by drawing the life out of him, yet were themselves immune to even the most terrible wounds. Hut Sitter flame-callers had to be brought in to deal with them.

It had seemed an exciting coincidence when Gwendith mentioned having visions of a native bearing the distinctive ghost eater markings. More than a coincidence, really—it had seemed a path leading to an answer to the dangers threatening New Rhylach, dangers no civilian like Gwendith could know about.

And then there had been the attack on the Sanctuary supply depot. Reports of soldiers slain by a woman who wore fire on her hands like a lady would wear gloves—accompanied by a tattooed man who apparently killed by some means other than any known weapon.

This morning, another report had come in concerning two soldiers missing since the day before. Rather than being found in a drunken stupor as expected, they had been discovered in shallow graves in one of the farther Sanctuary fields. One had clearly had his head bashed in with a rock. But as for the other, the fort doctor was

unable to find any cause of death, putting the case feebly down to some kind of paroxysm of the heart.

*There was a ghost eater here last night,* he thought with a thrill of excitement. *And now Gwendith is gone. It can't be a coincidence. If I can find her, then I can find him.*

*And I must find him. For all our sakes.*

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

As the sun walked her long trail over the sky on the way to her mother's house where she would sleep the night, the ghost eater and his small band of fugitives walked their own through the forest. It proved a frustrating day for the ghost eater. During the five moons of his wandering, he had almost forgotten what it was like to be mortal and have to stop for rest, food, and other necessities. He had simply walked until his mind became so fogged with exhaustion that he more or less dropped in his tracks. He had always found it a bit odd that an untiring body should still host a mind that craved sleep and dreams.

*They sound like an entire herd of frightened deer*, he thought, annoyed with his companions. Twigs snapped loudly under their feet, and the ruined skirts of Gwendith's dress caught on every other branch. Earlier, he had instructed them to walk single-file, stepping in his own footsteps, so that any pursuit would be confused as to how many of them there were. Glancing back, however, he saw that he might as well not have spoken. Although Stands-in-Smoke trod practically on his heels, glaring at him in a challenge to find fault with her, No Tongue had straggled off to one side of the path to examine a bush. And as for Gwendith, she trailed far back, her steps erratic. As if sensing his scrutiny, she looked up, and he saw that her face was pale and bathed with sweat.

Alarmed, he stopped abruptly, almost causing Stands-in-Smoke to walk over him. "Gwendith?" Ignoring his own advice, he pushed back past No Tongue. Gwendith stopped when she saw him coming, putting one hand on a tree trunk to steady herself. Although he was no judge of Enemies, he thought she looked terrible. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, then swallowed heavily. "I'm just not used to walking so much. I'll be fine." Her tone was short and clipped, as if to forbid any further conversation.

"It's the crippleweed, isn't it?" Stands-in-Smoke asked, coming back to join them.

Gwendith looked away without answering. The ghost eater frowned in confusion.  
“But she hasn’t had any since yesterday. Have you?”

“And that’s the problem.” Stands-in-Smoke folded her arms over her chest.  
“Crippleweed is addictive. If a person takes it for too long, the plant hurts them when they try to stop.”

“How?”

“Sweats. Pains in the gut. Maybe hallucinations. If she doesn’t get some more soon, she won’t be able to travel.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?”

She shrugged. “I assumed you knew, great Ahkan’i warrior.”

The ghost eater pressed his lips together on an angry reply. Crippleweed was used for captives of war. A warrior might take a prisoner, but it was the women who dealt with them after and decided their fates. The knowledge of the plant’s properties would certainly be part of the women’s lore, passed down through the long generations since there had been any captives to take, to guard against the day when the Ahkan’it might again have to fight.

*Siska-init would have known. And she wouldn’t have waited until Gwendith was half-dead to tell me, either.* For a moment a powerful longing for her presence seized him, like ropes tightening around his stilled heart.

But he was the ghost eater and had no beloved.

Angry with himself, he grabbed Stands-in-Smoke’s arm, dragging her aside. “Will she live?”

“Probably. Sometimes this type of thing kills people, but I never heard crippleweed was all that bad. She’s going to be in a lot of pain soon, though.”

He took a deep, calming, and completely unnecessary breath. Anger would not help him right now. “We’ll have to find somewhere to hide, then, until she’s well enough to travel.”

“If we find some more crippleweed for her, we won’t have to.”

“No. I want her to learn how to use her Way, not keep it from her.”

Stands-in-Smoke sighed and ran one hand back through her short-cropped hair. Her own patched garments were stained and torn from travel through the wood, and

weariness marked her face with harsh lines. “Fine. I came this way once, a long time ago, with my mother. She worked for the family of one of the fort commanders. They wanted her to come with them when they went down to their summer house at Quick Falls, so they got us both passes to leave the Sanctuary. I was young then, but I remember we stopped to rest the horses at the edge of the wood.” Her mouth twisted slightly. “We of course walked behind the baggage cart, but the Outlanders were riding. We stopped in the shadow of a mound by the road. When no one was paying attention to us, my mother took me aside and told me that the Proud Ones had built that mound, back before the Outlanders came. We had our own temple on it, with our own gods, and our own leaders lived there in sacred houses.”

“And?” the ghost eater demanded impatiently. Of course Hut Sitters built monuments and permanent things—that was why the Ahkan’it called them “Hut Sitters” to begin with. It was of no interest to *him*.

Stands-in-Smoke frowned in annoyance but cut short her reminiscing. “We could use the mound to block the view from the road. It’s on the edge of a field, but there are some trees on it, and at least no soldiers happening by on the road will see us. It’s the best cover we’re likely to get anytime soon.”

“All right. We’ll find somewhere to hide Gwendith there—you can stay with her while she’s ill, and No Tongue and I will watch the road.”

Stands-in-Smoke’s lip curled. “You expect me to give comfort to an Outlander woman? *You’re* the one who wanted her with us—you watch her, and I’ll stand guard with No Tongue.”

“I didn’t ask *you* to come with us in the first place,” the ghost eater pointed out tartly. “Besides, this is the kind of thing a woman should do. It isn’t appropriate for a man to tend her while she’s sick.”

“You aren’t a man. You’re a ghost eater.”

He looked away, feeling an odd mixture of anger, shame, and hurt surge through him. No matter how true her words, they weren’t the kind of thing that should be spoken in polite company. Despair and regret flitted over him, like the shadow of an owl’s wing. “Very well, then.”



To his surprise, Stands-in-Smoke drew back from him, a sudden look of consternation on her face. Perhaps she had expected angry words, or some sort of denial, as if he could somehow reject his own nature. He brushed past her and went to Gwendith.

She looked up wanly as he approached. While they had talked, she had slipped into a sitting position, arms wrapped around her knees. No Tongue crouched nearby, looking anxious and helpless.

“You were arguing about me,” she said sadly. A sudden spasm of pain passed over her face, and her body drew up more tightly about her gut. “You should leave me here. I don’t think I can go any farther.”

“You don’t have to.” He put aside his anger over Stands-in-Smoke’s obstinacy and offered Gwendith a reassuring smile. “We’re only going a little way. Then we’ll stop until you’re better.”

Gwendith nodded weakly. She didn’t look as though she’d be able to stand up, let alone walk the rest of the way to the mound. Deciding that need won out over propriety, he bent down and lifted her up in his arms.

She let out a protest but didn’t struggle. The cloth of her dress felt odd to him—smooth and soft in some places, stiffer in others. Her long hair had come mostly undone from its braid and straggled around her face like a tangled thicket. Although she was tallest woman he had ever seen, her weight was nothing to a ghost eater’s more-than-human strength.

“It will be all right,” he said, feeling that he had to say something.

She let out a soft, bitter laugh. “It will never be all right again,” she said into his hair. “But it is a kind lie.”

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Gwendith half-dozed, her head jostling against the ghost eater’s shoulder. She was vaguely aware of the wood around them, of the murmur of voices—Stands-in-Smoke asking where they were to get food—and of the play of light and dark against her eyelids. Cramps twisted her stomach, sometimes so hard they left her biting her lip to keep from crying aloud. The ghost eater’s long hair fell over her face, like strands of

midnight silk. Neither his hair nor his skin seemed to have any scent, although the smell of earth clung to his clothing.

She saw the soldiers shove him down on the ground, heard the crack of a pistol. Blood, black in the night, sprayed over one soldier's face, and he wiped it away casually. She yelled, jerked sharply, felt arms carrying her tirelessly. She opened her eyes on the dark line of the tattoo that traced the hinge of his jaw.

"We're almost there," someone said to her. The ghost eater, she thought. Why was he carrying her? Why was she letting a corpse touch her? She swung her saber desperately, trying to cut him down, to force him to stay decently dead, but at the last moment she found Caitlin's sweet face looking up at her instead. Water plastered her golden curls to her head, dripped from her bloodstained dress, and ran from the hollows where her eyes had been.

There was a high rampart of earth blocking the late sunlight, vaguely like one close to the road from Aneirach to Fort Ironwood. If that was so, then Beoch ought to be around here somewhere, shouldn't he? He wouldn't like her associating with muddies. He would be furious if he caught her—he might even go so far as to add a second hank of black hair to the rifle hanging above the hearth.

"Come with me," Johann begged, holding out his hands. "Forget Beoch and Aerwyn, forget running away with these people. I'll take care of you."

"I can't," she replied reasonably. "I have to take care of Caitlin." She looked around for her daughter but instead saw a man's body swinging from the trees above her head.

A door creaked open in front of her, and she caught a glimpse of a rude wooden shack, the kind of thing a farmer might store tools in for a far field. "Deserted," said a woman's voice. And: "Maybe we can find food here—there could be rabbits in the orchard."

*Food.* Hunger gnawed at her belly, then turned into searing agony. Had she been stabbed? She jerked, curled up around the hurt, then flung her head back. It impacted with something hard, and she heard an exclamation of pain. Then there were hands holding her, pinning her down, and the smell of dirt in her nose.

And then everything fragmented, leaving only pain to anchor the center of the world.

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Gwendith opened her eyes. A beam of late afternoon sunlight cut sharply through a hole in the ceiling, spreading a pool of gold on the floor near her face. A small fire crackled nearby, well away from a damp spot where the damaged roof had let in rain. Despite the smallness of the flames, she felt warm and comfortable. The smell of pine hung heavy in the air, and she realized that a bed of springy boughs cushioned her from the hard floor. A charcoal-colored coat lay over her, supplementing the thin fabric of her dress.

Exhaustion ate at her, as if she had been running for days. Hunger lurked in her belly, insistent even over the soreness of the muscles in that region. Lifting her head on a stiff neck, she glanced around the small shack. The ghost eater sat nearby, his back propped against the wall, his head bowed as though he drowsed. Since his coat covered her, he was naked from the waist up—shocking to her Rhylachan sensibilities. Despite his short height, his shoulders were broad and well muscled. In addition to the egret tattoo over his right nipple, a long serpent uncoiled its way from the inside of his left elbow to the top of his shoulder.

He raised his head at the sound of rustling boughs, and it struck her suddenly that she ought to be afraid of him. A dead man—and a muddy one on top of it—who disintegrated ropes and wood with a touch, then took a bullet through his head and returned as if nothing had happened, was not the sort of person she ought to feel comfortable associating with. The skeletal lines drawn over his face made a sort of mask, distracting the eye from the features beneath. But his brown eyes were quiet and a bit sad, and it was hard to be afraid of anyone with such a gentle smile.

“How are you feeling?”

For some reason, she got the impression that he had asked this question more than once. “Better,” she said, trying to feel out the aches and pains in her body. “A lot better.”

He looked relieved. "You must—that's the first time you've said anything coherent since we got here yesterday."

She vaguely remembered being carried through the woods but nothing further. "And where is here?"

"We're in a shed behind an earthen mound. Stands-in-Smoke says the Hut Sitters built the mound a long time ago, before the Enemies came. She also says that the strange rows of trees outside are an orchard, and that this building might be used for storage in the summer, but that no one is likely to come here this time of year." He shrugged, disavowing any personal knowledge.

Gwendith tried not to stare at the way his long muscles moved under his brown skin. She failed miserably. Sleep tugged at her, and she fought it doggedly. *I've slept too much already. I feel as though I've been asleep for years.* Her thoughts skimmed along, light and unencumbered, as though the crippleweed in her blood had been a weight dragging at her.

"Why do you call us Enemies?" she asked, resting her head on her hands.

He looked surprised at her question, then thoughtful. "It is the purpose of the ghost eater to remember," he told her solemnly. "This is what the old men told me when I was a boy. A long time ago, we were of one fire with the Hut Sitters. But the people argued and split into two groups: the Ahkan'it, who kept to the old ways, and the Hut Sitters, who built permanent houses and plowed fields. In doing so, the Hut Sitters took the lands where my people had hunted game and gathered nuts, and refused to share them with us. Their walls and fields blocked our paths. So we fought them and took from them, as they had taken from us.

"One day, a party of warriors led by Y'laune came to the Hut Sitter village at Where They Cried. They saw only a band of Hut Sitter warriors waiting to fight. The Ahkan'it attacked, but as they fought, they suddenly found strange men all around them. The men had been invisible and were only revealed once all the Ahkan'it had come out into the open. The strangers were horrible to look upon, with skin the color of drowned corpses and hair like dead grass. They fought with terrible weapons that killed a man by making a hole in him. And they were encased by metal, much like the stone-covered monsters of old, and no man's spear could pierce their shells. They killed Y'laune's

warriors on the field of battle, then sent dogs to drag down and rend apart those who survived. The slaughter was great—not the two or three men who normally died in a conflict, but almost all of the warriors who had gone to fight. Y’laune alone managed to escape. As he fled the village, he stopped for a moment and looked back to memorize the faces of the strangers. He did not know who they were, so he swore then that the Ahkan’it would have no name for them save for ‘Enemy.’ And so it is to this day.”

Gwendith nodded, not certain what she thought about the tale. It sounded a little like the story she knew, where the Hut Sitters shared food with the first soldiers to come to New Rhylach, only to be attacked by hordes of sneaking, cowardly muddies. But the tone of the story was certainly very different. “The Wizards brought us here, away from the corruption of Old Rhylach. This is the Promised Land.”

“And who promised it to the Wizards?”

She laughed weakly. “Point made. But I thought I was supposed to be your ally now.”

“True. What do you call yourselves?”

“Rhylachans.”

“Very well. I won’t call you an Enemy, if you don’t call me a muddy.”

“It’s for, you know, the color of your skin.”

He grinned faintly. “Then I shall call you ‘drowned corpse.’”

“It’s what I feel like.”

“I was concerned,” he admitted, frowning at the fire as though it had done something to puzzle him. “But Stands-in-Smoke said crippleweed seldom kills. Easy for her to say, but hard for me to believe. Especially when you were thrashing around and shouting that someone named Johann was coming to find you.”

Her brows drew together slightly. “I don’t remember that. Johann is—was—my brother-by-marriage. From my first marriage.”

“And *is* he coming to find you?”

She rolled over to stare up at the ceiling. “No.” Bitterness closed a hand around her throat. “I doubt anyone will be looking for me. Beoch—my husband—will be just as glad I’m gone. Our marriage...hasn’t been very good for him for a while now. He already has another woman.”

“What?” The ghost eater sat up straight, looking utterly scandalized. “He’s an adulterer, and you let him stay in your house? Why didn’t you throw his possessions into the street? Let him move in with this woman, or go back to his sister’s home?”

“For one thing, it was his house,” she said dryly.

“I don’t understand. How can a man own a house?”

“Men generally do.”

The ghost eater only shook his head. “Houses, fields—these are women’s things. Among my people, any woman whose husband was an adulterer would have simply taken his belongings and tossed them outside. After that, he would have to either go home and live in the house of his sister or mother, or else hope the other woman’s mother and aunts approved her taking him for a husband.”

“The marriage would be ended? Just like that?”

“Of course.”

Gwendith tried to hold the concept in her mind. “The Wizards say that marriage is sacred, forever. Only death can end it.”

The ghost eater sighed. “It sounds to me like your Wizards didn’t much care if their followers were miserable or not. I don’t understand you Ene—Rhyllachans. I’ll be glad to get home.”

For some reason, he didn’t sound as enthusiastic about returning as the words would suggest. She remembered him saying that he didn’t have a name anymore, that he wasn’t considered to be the person he had been before his death. Having your very existence effectively erased probably didn’t leave you much to go home to.

He rose to his feet suddenly. It was an oddly abbreviated move; where an ordinary man might have stretched, or at least shifted his weight to relieve the kinks from sitting, he remained still. “Rest here. No Tongue and Stands-in-Smoke went out to find food. I’ll bring you something if they were successful.”

The door opened and closed in a breath of cold air. Gwendith leaned back and fell instantly asleep.

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The ghost eater stepped outside, shut the door behind him, and leaned against it for a moment. It had been foolish to get into a discussion about marriage and the breaking thereof—too painful, even now, and it led to dangerous confusions between himself and Tamaugua.

*On the other hand, perhaps I needed a reminder that I'm not the only person in the world who's had such troubles,* he thought wistfully. *Though that isn't the kind of thing I'd wish us to have in common.*

Well, they didn't, not really—Tamaugua had never been married, and the ghost eater certainly was not allowed such a thing. It might be worse to actually get around to building a life with someone, only to have her betray you. Certainly it would be far worse to be trapped in the same house.

*Instead of merely the same town?*

Ghost eaters weren't allowed to move to other towns, either. *"You have great power, but you are not free as other men are free,"* the old one was fond of saying. *"You're nothing more than a war club, or a pot, or a digging stick. A tool to be used by others. Or to be cast aside when broken."*

Truth was, the very act of leaving Bird Creek Town might have condemned him to death, if the old one chose it. If he thought it evidence that his replacement was "broken."

*A bit too late for second thoughts now.* Shrugging it off, he looked around for any sign of No Tongue or Stands-in-Smoke. He suspected that he would have been more successful at foraging than they, had Stands-in-Smoke only set her stubbornness aside and consented to watch Gwendith. They were nowhere to be seen about the shed, so he ambled off in search of them.

He found them flat on their bellies at the crest of the long, snake-shaped mound. The tall grass formed a screen between them and the road they watched intently. Worried, he dropped down into a crouch and moved to join them. No Tongue glanced over his shoulder, beckoned the ghost eater closer, and pointed silently towards the road.

A band of perhaps ten soldiers rode at a slow pace down the hoof-churned track. Although most of them looked much the same, in their blue coats and hats, one man

was markedly different. He wore a dark green coat and a white shirt beneath it. Yellow, curly hair shone in the sun, tied back at the nape of his neck with a black ribbon.

“Why is that man dressed differently?” the ghost eater whispered.

“I don’t know. He must be a civilian, but other than that I can’t guess,” Stands-in-Smoke replied.

They watched the troop for several minutes. The soldiers slowed their pace even further, then stopped, dismounting and leading their horses to the stream that ran close by the base of the mound. One or two stayed with the animals, while the rest started to climb the slope.

“Damn,” hissed Stands-in-Smoke.

“They haven’t seen us yet,” the ghost eater reminded her. “They could just be coming up here for a vantage point to survey the land.”

As if to make a lie of his words, one of the soldiers stopped suddenly and pointed at a clump of dead blackberry brambles. The man in the green coat hurried over and retrieved a tiny scrap of red cloth that had been snagged on a thorn.

*Gwendith’s dress.* “I thought I told you to cover our trail,” he hissed at his two companions. No Tongue shrugged helplessly.

One of the soldiers gestured, and the group broke apart, each man fanning off at a slightly different angle, searching for a carelessly-placed footstep or a patch of broken grass. The ghost eater backed cautiously away from the ridge, keeping low to the ground. There was nowhere to hide now that the soldiers knew they were here, so the only choices were to fight or run.

*We’ve got to get Gwendith away from the shed. That’s the first place they’ll look.*

Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue followed him silently, their faces reflecting fear. The ghost eater led them down into a hollow filled with cottonwoods, then stopped. “I’m going back to the shed. You two hang back and keep watch. If the soldiers get too close, flee without us. Gwendith and I don’t have as much to worry about if we’re caught.”

He left the thicket and ran lightly down the sloping side of the mound, through hoary rows of apple trees. A chickadee began to chatter a warning from the direction of



the shed, and he paused, listening and watching. Nothing came to his senses—but chickadees never lied. Danger lurked nearby.

The shed stood amidst the apple trees, its weathered boards covered with moss and lichen. He slipped inside, and Gwendith sat up groggily, blinking sleep from her eyes. “Soldiers,” he mouthed, before she could say anything, and her face went pale. Holding out his hand, he helped her to her feet. She swayed a little but managed to stand. Pulling her after him, he emerged into the late afternoon light.

A large dog lunged at him from beneath the shadows of the trees.

He leapt back with a startled yelp. The dog didn’t attack but hung back threatening. It had a short, blunt head with jaws made to bite and hold on. It glared at him, eyes meeting his in challenge, and its hackles stood on end. A hideous growl worked out of its throat.

He shoved Gwendith away, out of danger, and put himself between her and the dog. The tension in his body loosened, and the tendrils of the *bhargha* lashed out, reaching for skin and blood and ghost—

And found nothing.

*Nothing? Even a spirit should have—*

*It’s not real.*

He spun to look behind him, in time to see the man in the green coat materialize out of the bushes and make a grab for Gwendith.

“Gwendith, look out!” he shouted, hurling himself at the man. A mixture of anger and desperation went through him—he had allowed himself to be ambushed by this Enemy trickster, as though he was a naïve child. The *bhargha* whipped out, hungry, and this time found real skin, real blood, a real ghost—

“No!” screamed Gwendith and punched him.

He staggered back from the force of the blow, losing his grip on the man. Hunger rose in him, ran through his blood, a thing with teeth that was seldom satisfied. It felt her ghost, and for a moment he was caught between twin knives: compelled to feed, compelled to protect her.

Like a man dragging a great stone, he pulled the *bhargha* back inside. Hunger burned through him like scalding water, refusing to back away. Forcing himself to ignore it, he staggered to his feet.

Gwendith crouched by the green-coated man. Her hands were locked around his fingers, but her eyes stared fearfully at the ghost eater, as if he had suddenly transformed into some kind of abomination. It was a look he knew all too well.

“What are you?” she whispered.

“The ghost eater. Why did you stop me?”

“What happened to the dog? Did it run away?”

The man moaned softly, and Gwendith immediately turned her attention to him. His limbs twitched randomly, and the ghost eater wondered if he would recover from the *bhargha*’s sting. He half-lifted his head, then caught in a frightened breath at the sight of the ghost eater standing nearby.

“It’s all right, Johann,” Gwendith murmured, reaching out to smooth his hair. “Just relax. He won’t hurt you. Right?” She glanced at the ghost eater worriedly, as if suddenly unsure.

“This is the man you said was coming for you, when you were delirious earlier? Your first husband’s brother?”

“I—yes.” She looked surprised. “I must have seen him.” She turned back to Johann, who was struggling to sit up. “Are you all right?”

“I don’t know.” He looked sickly-pale, and sweat slicked his forehead. “What happened?”

“Later. What are you doing here, with those soldiers?”

He blinked at her in confusion. “I came looking for you. We knew you had been kidnapped by these muddies, and...,” he trailed off. “You don’t look very kidnapped.”

“I came of my own free will.”

“But—they said that these muddies killed some soldiers.”

“I’ll explain it all to you when I can, I promise. For right now, just believe me when I tell you that it was all in self-defense.” Her hands tightened on his arm. “We can’t be caught by the soldiers, Johann. Can you call them off?”

"I...I don't know." He glanced warily at the ghost eater, as if questioning whether diverting the soldiers was such a good idea. "But I'll try, if that's what you want. If you aren't being coerced."

She grinned faintly. "When have you ever known me to be coerced into doing anything? It hasn't been that long since the salon."

He staggered to his feet, leaning heavily on Gwendith's shoulder. At that moment, there came the sudden sound of running footsteps on the moss-covered earth, and Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue appeared. "The soldiers are—" she started, then stopped, staring at Johann.

"He's a friend," Gwendith said quickly.

Johann appeared to hesitate, then gestured sharply to the shed. "You all hide in there. I'll tell the soldiers I already searched it. I'll try to lead them away."

"So we can be caught in a trap and surrounded?" Stands-in-Smoke demanded.

"He won't betray us." Gwendith had already started for the shed. "Hurry!"

No Tongue followed her immediately. The ghost eater paused and drew closer to Johann, who looked worried and backed away.

"Don't think that you know better than Gwendith," he warned.

Johann swallowed nervously. "Get in the shed. But I want to talk to Gwendith, when I can. Tell her I'll be at the old hay barn where this road intersects with Sugar and Wine Road. After midnight tomorrow."

The ghost eater went inside, motioning for Stands-in-Smoke to follow. She entered after giving Johann one last glare. They crouched in the gloom, silent and listening. A few moments later, voices sounded.

"There you are! Where have you been?"

"I was checking this old shed," Johann replied easily. "Doesn't look like anyone's been there in months."

One of the soldiers grunted. They walked around the area for a few minutes, boots crunching on last autumn's fallen leaves. Then their voices and footsteps receded into the distance. After what seemed like hours, the ghost eater stirred. "I think they're gone. I'll go see."

Gwendith rose quickly to her feet. "No, let me." She gave him a lop-sided smile. "If they aren't gone, they'll be glad to see me. I'll tell them I escaped, then send them off in the wrong direction."

"But they won't just let you go."

She shrugged. "I'll slip away somehow and meet back up with you."

He sighed, knowing she was right, but not liking it. It was difficult to send a woman out to face danger alone, whether she was a warrior among her people or not.

*They aren't her enemies*, he reminded himself. *Just ours.*

She returned shortly. "They're gone," she confirmed.

The ghost eater rose to his feet. "Good." He paused, then asked carefully, "Can Johann be trusted?"

Her face grew still, unreadable. "I hope so."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Gwendith stood on a low hillside overlooking the abandoned barn near Sugar and Wine Road. The sun sank slowly in front of her, spreading layers of gold, crimson, violet, and sapphire over the sky. Although the breeze that bent the brown broom sedge chilled her flesh and made her pull the ghost eater's coat more closely about her shoulders, the day itself had been one of the soft, mild ones that herald the first approach of spring. Looking at the trees around her, she saw that the buds on their tips were beginning to swell with awakening life.

"What—what month is it?" she asked softly, ashamed that she couldn't remember.

The ghost eater glanced up. He crouched a few feet from her, peering vigilantly out over the landscape. "The Moon When the Sap Rises," he replied unhelpfully.

"Spring must be coming soon."

"It is. Faster down here than on the heights where I was born."

"What's it like there?"

He shrugged. "Quiet. Peaceful. We farm and we gather and we hunt. Children are born, grow, and have children of their own."

She remembered how he had attacked Johann, the bizarre tentacles of light that had fastened on her brother-by-marriage like an anemone closing about its prey. "But not you."

He dropped his eyes. "No. Not me."

Perhaps she shouldn't have spoken—it had been cruel, had hurt him. *Too bad Father never taught me the polite points of conversing with a dead man who drinks souls to sustain his own quasi-existence.* She shouldn't worry about hurting his feelings. She should run screaming in the opposite direction.

Gwendith took a deep breath, the cold air clearing her lungs and her thoughts. "It's strange," she said aloud, watching the vanishing sun. A redbird chirped from a nearby tree, then cut a crimson streak across the sky. "I feel...." The word she had been

about to say, *alive*, died on her lips. It seemed terribly unfair to exult in being alive, when Caitlin was dead. "Like I'm waking from a long sleep," she amended.

"In a sense, you are." He stood up and came over to her. "The crippleweed kept your thoughts bound. Now they stand up and stretch. Would you like to try using your Way?"

Her heart contracted suddenly, fearfully. She hated the way the visions made her feel. Helpless. Passive. "I can't control it."

"You can." His voice was calm and admitted no other possibility.

"I couldn't before—the visions would just come out of nowhere."

"They still might. If it's something truly important. Your visions were random because you weren't using your Way but suppressing it, so that it had no other outlet. Learn to use it, to respect instead of fear it, and you won't have such problems anymore."

*If he had told me that earlier, I might have gone back to Fort Ironwood and taken up a normal life again.* But even with control over the visions and no more need for crippleweed, her life would never have been ordinary. She might not be insane, but she was still a long way from normal.

Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue came out of the deepening shadows, carrying firewood and a full canteen. Their thinness reminded Gwendith of the hunger that sat in her own belly. The ghost eater had said something about hunting, once there was time.

"Did you bring the cedar?" the ghost eater asked. No Tongue nodded.

They built up a small fire, not so large as to attract attention, and Stands-in-Smoke lit it with a careless touch. The ghost eater motioned for Gwendith to sit down, and she did so, feeling trepidation flutter in her heart.

The ghost eater settled himself opposite her. The flames burnished his bronze skin, danced in the darkling depths of his eyes. His hair hung down over his bare shoulders like a cloak of raven feathers. "I wish I had some white drink to give you," he said, sounding troubled. "Or some tobacco to burn. But this is the best I can do." Taking up a handful of cedar shavings, he tossed them onto the flames.

"Why cedar?"

He looked surprised, as if what she asked was common knowledge. "Cedar is the most sacred of trees. It endures, when other wood does not. The old men say that, a long time ago, some foes of the Ahkan'it were led by a powerful warrior. Eventually he was defeated, and the Ahkan'it cut off his head. But the head didn't die, only laughed at them. The warriors impaled the head on this tree and that, but still it lived. Finally they stuck it on a cedar tree, and it killed him. That's why the wood is red and white. From his blood."

"Children's stories," said Stands-in-Smoke in dismissal.

The ghost eater pursed his lips in annoyance but didn't pursue an argument. "Breathe deep of the smoke," he instructed Gwendith. She did so and was overcome with a coughing fit. "Not that deep. Now just relax. Let your thoughts drift. Feel yourself, the center of your being, then open yourself to the world around you."

She took another breath, felt herself relax a little. *Discipline, Gwendith*, she told herself firmly. *Just like when you were learning how to fence. Discipline and focus.*

A redbird let out a last sleepy call, the sound melding with the soft rustle of the wind in the grass. A dog barked somewhere far away. Close at hand, the fire snapped and popped, like an old woman talking to herself.

The ghost eater's voice slid into the sounds, became part of them. "Now think about Johann. Want to see him."

She held the image of her brother-by-marriage in her mind, concentrating on how he had looked when she had last seen him: yellow curls in disarray, green coat smeared with mud, a look of worry marring what had once been a carefree face.

She saw him then, sitting at a campfire with the soldiers. He lifted a battered tin cup to his lips, then winced slightly at the taste of whatever was inside it. "Let me take the first watch tonight," he suggested. "It's dark, and we have a long way to go tomorrow."

Gwendith blinked rapidly and found herself looking at her own fire. "I saw him," she said, unsure whether she felt elation or unease. "He was sitting at a camp somewhere, saying something about standing guard."

"Then if he's at a camp, they aren't coming to set a trap for us here," Stands-in-Smoke mused. She sounded as if the concept shocked her.

Gwendith nodded, and then shook her head. "I don't know—it was so easy, maybe I just imagined it."

"It's your Way," the ghost eater pointed out, as if that explained everything. To him, perhaps it did. Maybe a Way wasn't something hard, something you had to work at for years like learning the saber. Maybe it just was.

"Should we go down to the barn?" Gwendith asked cautiously. "It will be warmer there."

"Let the ghost eater stand watch outside," Stands-in-Smoke said, rising to her feet as if her legs ached. "It's not as if he can feel the cold."

The ghost eater glanced away. "I can feel it," he said softly, more to himself than to her.

Since they seemed to be breaking camp, Gwendith reached for the canteen and started to upend it over the fire. The ghost eater grabbed her arm with a startled yelp, directing the water onto the ground instead of the flames.

"What are you doing? Don't we have enough troubles as it is?" he demanded, aghast.

"I was putting out the fire."

He looked at her in incomprehension. Stands-in-Smoke snorted. "She's an Outlander—what does she know about anything?"

"I at least know how to put out a fire," Gwendith snapped, stung.

A look of understanding passed over the ghost eater's face, followed by an expression of sudden worry. "Your people came from somewhere else...you never moved in the world like we did. Until now, anyway. You really don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

He took the canteen from her hand and passed it back to No Tongue. "Fire and water are opposites. By pouring water on the fire, you offend it. Fire will punish you with disease and bad luck."

Gwendith arched an eyebrow. It was one thing to personify a deer into an animal spirit—at least it was animate. This superstition seemed a little silly. "Fire isn't a person. It doesn't feel, or get mad. It's just a thing. I know your beliefs seem very real to you, but—"



“Don’t be a fool, Enemy woman,” the ghost eater said, all his friendly warmth gone to ice in an instant. “Stands-in-Smoke was right—you and your kind know nothing. But you had better learn, for your own sakes. I am the ghost eater, the *bhargha*, the Child of the Mountain. My heart doesn’t beat, and wounds don’t kill me. I’d think that even you would accept that I know things and would listen when I try to keep you from bringing disaster down on your own head!”

He drew himself up, glaring at her darkly. The skull tattoo turned his face into a mask, frightening and strange. Suddenly, he barely even seemed human.

“A-All right. I’m sorry.”

“Now.” He snatched the water skin from No Tongue, waving it in her face. “No water! Not unless you’re putting out the fire during a funeral. Use earth.”

He scooped handfuls of dirt onto the flames, smothering them. She caught a snatch of words in his own tongue. Talking to the fire as he extinguished it?

No Tongue started away, towards the old barn, and Gwendith followed him hurriedly, grateful to get away from the ghost eater’s dark eyes. She felt as if she had inadvertently drawn too close to something that would have been better left alone.

“Don’t let him bluff you,” Stands-in-Smoke said suddenly, appearing from the dark to march along beside Gwendith. “He acts like he knows so much, but he’s just an ignorant savage. We Proud Ones—we are among the civilized people. Long before your kind came, we built towns and temples, raised crops. Those Skull People were nothing but a bunch of barbarians, wandering around everywhere, following the game. Listen to me—he says he knows things because he’s a ghost eater, but that isn’t so. He doesn’t have any memories he didn’t get from the body he wears. He’s powerful, but he doesn’t have any special knowledge.” She paused, frowning slightly. “I don’t know if I believe in all this talk of spirits,” she admitted slowly. “But even so, listen to him about the fire. There are things in this world that can hurt you, and hurt you badly, if you anger them. Humans aren’t the only ones who have Ways.”

“He frightens me, sometimes,” Gwendith said, glancing back over her shoulder to where the ghost eater walked. “But sometimes he doesn’t. I mean, sometimes he seems so normal. And nice.”

Stands-in-Smoke laughed dryly. “Nice? Normal? He eats souls, destroys them so that they never go on to the Darkening Land. He’s about as *nice* as a cougar on the hunt. Don’t forget that, and you’ll live a lot longer.”

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The ghost eater was standing watch outside when Stands-in-Smoke emerged from the barn and came towards him. The wind snatched at her patchwork skirt, and the moon shadowed her work-hardened features. The unpleasant odor of the Rhyllachans’ captive animals clung to her, and he had to fight not to impolitely wrinkle his nose.

“The others are snatching some sleep before this Johann gets here,” she said.

“You should join them.” Exhaustion was starting to eat at the edges of his mind, bearing him down with a weariness beyond the physical. The few moments of sleep he had caught the day before hadn’t been enough to renew him. “I would, if I could.”

“You looked worried when Gwendith made the mistake about the fire. And not just because you thought we might be in danger from it.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out—a habit he seemed unable to break. Perhaps, when he had been dead longer, he would stop trying to breathe, to sigh, and time would pare away all the little human movements and gestures, until he seemed more like something born out of the rocks. “You may get your revenge against the Rhyllachans, Stands-in-Smoke. Sooner than you think.”

“How do you mean?”

“Gwendith has a Way. And she isn’t the only one, of that I feel certain. The Rhyllachans came from another world, and for more winters than I can count—”

“Three-hundred.”

He shot her an angry glare and was rewarded by a smug smile. “As I was saying, they’ve been here for a long time. But they never moved in the world the way we do. Maybe the world didn’t know what to make of them. For whatever reason, our Ways could touch them, but those of animals and plants, or of things like fire, couldn’t.

“But the Rhyllachans are starting to change now, at last. And if they are becoming of this world, then they’re subject to this world’s rules. Things other than mere human Ways will be able to touch them now. Putting out fire the right way, knowing the right

chants to pacify deer ghosts, understanding how to live and move with the other things of this world—they will have to deal with all that. Animals and spirits will be able to punish them for offenses, the way they couldn't before.

"But they don't know any of this. They're sitting there, thinking everything will continue as it always has, that they'll never have to pay a price for all that they've done. But they're wrong. In three hundred winters, they've accumulated a lot of offenses against...who knows, everything in the world, probably. And they don't know how to deal with any of it. They have no way of asking pardon of the animals they kill, or of knowing that they have to bargain with the wild plants they take.

"Not only that, but if they're starting to move in the world, the animals they brought with them will be as well. And once they have Ways, I doubt they'll be very accommodating to people who have kept them in pens and slaughtered them while they were helpless."

Stands-in-Smoke's eyes widened slowly. "The Rhyllachans could be wiped out."

"I don't think it will come to that. But they will be hurt, and badly. Disease and disaster will be their lot, maybe for a long time to come." He fell silent, wondering how he felt about it. In a way, he was glad—no one should be exempt from taking part in the world, the way the Rhyllachans had been. But what if there were more people like Gwendith, who didn't seem to be cruel or unreasonable? It was possible she was an anomaly, but what if she wasn't? Surely people like that should be warned and taught how to live in the world.

*Not that they would listen to a "muddy."*

Stands-in-Smoke pointed across the field. "Someone's coming."

He glanced at her, looking for a reaction to his speculation. But she kept her thoughts to herself. "Get Gwendith," he said, turning away and peering out across the moonlit fields, where the silver light outlined a lone man on horseback. "Tell her Johann is here."

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"I'm not sure what to think," Johann said, staring at the hay-strewn floor. "Can you really see things far away?"

Gwendith took a sip from the canteen to ease a throat gone dry with talking. She and Johann sat in the middle of the big barn, in a puddle of moonlight that poured in through a hole in the roof. The shadows around them smelled of cows, horses, and rotting hay.

The strain of the last few days had left Johann looking pale and drawn. His hair flopped into his eyes, and his green coat had a large rip in one sleeve. There was a vulnerable look about his face that she had never seen before, and she wondered what it meant.

“Yes,” she answered, before he asked again. “I know it sounds incredible, but I can see things. I saw you, before you left the soldiers’ camp. You told them that you would stand the first watch.”

He nodded absently, gray eyes flicking to where No Tongue and Stands-in-Smoke sat wrapped in an old horse blanket they had found in the back of one of the stalls. Then he looked at the ghost eater, perched like an owl amidst the roof beams, and a shiver went across him. “What did you do to me yesterday?” he asked. There was a quaver in his voice, as if he feared the answer.

The *bhargha* flared, like a flower of light opening out of the ghost eater’s heart. Then it was gone again. “You already know the answer to that.”

Johann shuddered. “You believe what he’s told you?” he asked Gwendith. “That there’s some kind of threat, to them and to us?”

“Yes.”

“Then why not go back to Fort Ironwood and tell the authorities? Tell Colonel Talys—he would help you, I know it. He was very upset when you disappeared, and personally took over the search for you.”

Gwendith smiled faintly, remembering Talys’ kindness to her, his quick smile, his charm. “Who would believe me? The town madwoman comes stumbling back with a tale of talking animal spirits, Ways, and unknown threats? Talys would find himself personally escorting me back to the asylum.”

Johann sighed, shoulders slumping. “I suppose you’re right. If you truly believe this—if you truly want to continue on—then I’ll come with you. Someone has to look out for you.”

She started to reply that she could look out for herself just fine. But the offer touched her unexpectedly, and she caught the words back. Johann had been kind to her, the few times he had seen her since Caitlin's death, but she had never thought he cared enough to inconvenience himself like this. "Are you certain you want to do this?"

He flung his arms into the air in a frustrated gesture. "A madwoman, a mute, an outlaw, and a dead man—this group needs *someone* to be the voice of reason."

Startled and grateful, Gwendith clasped his hands in thanks. *He certainly is taking all of this remarkably well*, she thought. She had truthfully expected to spend the rest of the night trying to convince him that her Way was real and not a devil-inspired blasphemy against the Wizards. "Thank you, Johann. This means a great deal to me."

He shrugged. "I would rather you forget this and just come home."

"More people means more of a chance someone will spot us," Stands-in-Smoke said from the depths of the blanket.

"You're welcome to leave any time," the ghost eater shot back at her. He shoved himself off the rafter to fall a frightening distance before landing on his feet on the dirt floor. His long hair swirled around him like something alive. Dark eyes lighted on Johann, who shifted uneasily.

"Gwendith tells me that you are something of a gambler," the ghost eater said. The studied casualness of his tone caught Gwendith's attention. "You aren't certain about the journey we've undertaken. You say you would rather Gwendith leave with you."

"Yes," Johann agreed slowly, suspiciously. "This entire thing sounds dangerous. And I'm not sure I believe any of it. After all, Gwendith's made this decision without the first shred of proof that this threat to the world even exists."

The ghost eater dropped into a crouch before him. "We Ahkan't like to gamble as well. I have a wager for you. You and I will play a game." He pulled one of the bone pins out of his ear. "Gwendith, may I have your shoes?"

Surprised and wary, she pulled off her slippers, tucking her feet up under her skirt in a futile effort to keep out the cold. The ghost eater took the shoes, handed them with the ear pin to a puzzled Johann.

“Take the ear pin and hide it under one of the shoes while I’m not looking. I’ll try to guess which one it’s under. If I guess right, then you will come with us, and we’ll go on as planned. If I’m wrong, you and Gwendith can go back to your lives, and you’ll hear no more of me.”

“What?” exclaimed Gwendith indignantly. “Have you lost your senses? I’m not an object to be gambled. By *either* of you.”

“I thought it usually took longer for ghost eaters to go mad,” Stands-in-Smoke observed.

Johann stared tensely at the ghost eater, obviously trying to fathom the motive behind such an outrageous wager. Then he nodded hesitantly. “All right.”

The ghost eater turned his back, face a mask that betrayed none of his emotions. Johann hurriedly hid the ear pin under one shoe, his body blocking the motion even from Gwendith. “All right. Give it your best guess.”

The ghost eater turned back and studied the upside-down shoes. Then he reached out and for the briefest of moments laid a hand on each sole, before lifting the one on the right. There was nothing under it.

“Yes!” exclaimed Johann. “Come on, Gwendith—“

The ghost eater suddenly lifted the other shoe. There was nothing under it, either. His right hand slapped down on what had been the empty space under the first shoe, came back up holding a white sliver of bone between his brown fingers.

“Not so quick, deceiver,” he said with a tight grin.

Johann went white and scrambled backwards. The ghost eater followed him, holding out the ear pin triumphantly. “When I touched the two shoes, I sent the *bhargha* down through them and felt the pin under the one on the right. But when I lifted the shoe, amazingly it wasn’t there!”

“You cheated,” Johann said feebly.

“So did you—and you used your Way to do it!” The ghost eater flung one shoe at Johann, who hastily ducked out of the way.

“Johann?” Gwendith gaped at them both.

Johann looked at her, and his face crumpled into a study in wretchedness. “How did you know?”

"I'm not a fool." The ghost eater glanced at Gwendith. "Do you remember the dog yesterday? The one that conveniently attacked me, just in time for Johann to run up and try to snatch you away? The one that disappeared just as conveniently? I tried to drink its ghost, but the *bhargha* couldn't touch it. It was never there at all."

"So you tricked me into revealing myself tonight," Johann snapped bitterly. "Fooled me into thinking that you would let us go if I could beat you."

The ghost eater turned away in disgust. "As Gwendith said, she comes and goes as she pleases. What do you think I am, that I'd make such a bargain?"

Gwendith swallowed against disbelief. "Johann? Is it true?"

"You have to ask, after all that you've seen and heard?" He laughed without humor. "Why is this so hard to accept? Yes, it's true—I cast illusions. Make people think that the six on the die is really a two, or that they've drawn the Page of Wands instead of the Queen of Cups."

"You use it to gamble? How could you do that?"

"Your Way is sacred," the ghost eater added, his tone severe and dripping disapproval. "A tool to make a useful life, not to cheat people with."

"It's all I had!" Johann snapped, glaring at them. "Do you think it's been easy, wondering what's wrong with me that I can do this? Wondering if I'm damned or blessed? If the Wizards gave this to me, or if I'm some sort of devil spawn?"

Gwendith's mouth quirked. "At least it never got you locked away in a sanitarium."

"No." He looked away then, subdued. "It was different for me. I've been able to do it since I was a child. Father...never saw eye-to-eye with me, you could say. I think he felt I wasn't manly enough, or some such. You never met him, Gwenny, but he was a big, strapping, hulk of a brute who won purses wrestling at fairs. He thought he could beat me into a copy of himself, if only he hit me enough times."

The ghost eater took a quick step back, as if Johann had spoken some unthinkable obscenity. "He *hit* you? When you were a *child*?"

Johann shrugged uncomfortably. "Yes, well, maybe it would have been different if I'd done something to deserve it."

"Deserve it? What could a child possibly do to deserve such a thing?"

“What, your people’s children never misbehave?”

“Of course they do. But no Ahkan’i parent would consider striking one as punishment.” The ghost eater shuddered in disgust.

Johann ran his hand back through his hair in a tired gesture. “Yes, well, mine did, and worse than most. I used to be so scared, waiting for him to catch me. I wished more than anything that I could be invisible, that he would just stop seeing me. And he did. After that, I learned how to do more, then started gambling down at the tavern. As soon as I had enough coin to keep me fed for a while, I ran away. I spent the next fifteen years running.”

Sadness touched Gwendith at the wistful tone of his voice. “And you never told anyone?”

“No.” He hesitated. “That is, not until I met Rowe. That’s my friend in Whitefoam that I mentioned before. I never met anyone I trusted enough before Rowe.”

*Rowe...Rowenna? Gwendith wondered. A lover, it sounds like. Is Johann too much of a rogue to even marry her? Or are they like Beoch and Aerwyn, kept separate by an inconvenient spouse?*

“Would you have told me?” she inquired in place of the questions she really wanted to ask.

He nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes. As soon as we were away.” His face fell. “Although it looks like we won’t be going back to Fort Ironwood, will we?”

“You can,” she replied gently. “But there’s nothing for me there.”

“I’ll stay with you, as I promised. But what about Beoch? Won’t you even send him word?”

She folded both her hands carefully on her knees, to keep them from tightening into fists. “Beoch’s better off without me.”

“He was truly worried about you.” Johann hesitated, then sighed. “I think he felt guilty for, uh, *leaving* only to have you kidnapped while he was gone.”

Hardness closed around Gwendith’s heart. In her memory, she again saw her husband slipping out the door with the baker’s widow, unable to wait long enough to spare her the humiliation of being left alone at a party. “I don’t care,” she said, cold as the night outside. “I don’t care if I ever see him again.”



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Colonel Talys stepped into his own quarters at Fort Reed and felt as though a tremendous weight had lifted from his shoulders. He took a deep breath, enjoying the familiar scents of home: smoke, wool, and cedar. The ride from Fort Ironwood had been a long one, and he had left Beoch down in the barracks, suffering from a very sore backside. The rest of the men, all of whom had been recruited by Talys some months before, had exchanged sympathetic glances over the suffering smith. But Beoch himself hadn't complained, only grimly gone where he was told. No doubt he felt the pain was only a just punishment for letting Gwendith vanish.

"I got your letters," Donia said from behind him.

He turned to his wife with a smile, eager and grateful for her welcoming embrace. He kissed her lips, then rested his head against her glossy black hair, while her brown hands stroked his back. For most in the military, marrying a native would have been tantamount to career suicide. But it was Donia who had first made him aware of the power within himself and had shown him how to use it. After that, he no longer needed to worry about expressing his love for her.

"I missed you," he said.

"I missed you as well." She leaned back to study him. A flower stuck out from behind one ear, and earth from her potted plants stained her sturdy hands. That was her Way, to make plants grow strong and healthy. Fort Reed always had a bountiful harvest, sometimes even lending corn out to surrounding farms whose own crops had failed. "You haven't found the ghost eater yet, have you?"

He shook his head. "No. And worse, one of my searchers has disappeared himself. The brother-by-marriage of the woman the ghost eater took. He was standing guard one night with a troop of soldiers. When they woke up the next morning, he was gone, as if the earth itself had swallowed him. Of course, the earth conveniently swallowed a horse and supplies as well, so I doubt the desertion was anything but voluntary."

"I see." She left him to go stare out the window. She looked strong and slender in the light, like something from a dream. He followed her, slipping his arms around her waist from behind. "One of your special recruits is ill," she said.

“Who?”

“That young private—Geoff, I think his name is?” She shook her head angrily. “He’s in the infirmary now, tied to a bed and screaming for someone to get the snakes off of him. The apothecary has stuffed him full of herbs, but nothing calms him or stops the hallucinations. I made a few inquiries—I was told that he killed a rattlesnake. If no one says the proper chants to ask for forgiveness, or to drive the snake ghosts away, he may not survive the experience.”

Talys frowned. This wasn’t right. It wasn’t proper for human beings to be vulnerable to the whims of animals and the elements. Such things should supplicate humans, not the other way around. Although Talys knew the truth behind the Wizards, he agreed with them when they said that the Promised Land existed to be used for the benefit of humankind. That was where Donia’s people had failed—they couldn’t break free of chants and curses, and take their proper place in the world.

Of course, they didn’t know about the Wizards’ magic, didn’t have volumes detailing how it worked. But Talys did, and he intended to use his knowledge to the fullest advantage.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

The next afternoon, Gwendith and Stands-in-Smoke made their way down to a nearby creek to bathe. Johann had left that morning for the nearest town, returning by noon with food for everyone and new clothing for Gwendith. Although in Gwendith's opinion it was far too cold to do anything more than wash her hands, the ghost eater had rather pointedly suggested that she take the opportunity to bathe before putting on fresh clothes. Apparently, his people doused themselves in the river every single morning without fail.

"It makes you healthy and ensures longevity," he had claimed.

"But on a cold day like this—"

"Cold water's the best!"

Gwendith had given in. To her surprise, Stands-in-Smoke volunteered to accompany her. Maybe the Hut Sitters believed in regular baths in freezing water as well. Privately, Gwendith thought they were both likely to catch a chill and fall ill.

They took turns at the small creek that wended through hills slowly gaining back forest from pasture. Scrubby pines and cedars secluded the stream and filled the air with their spicy scent. Twisted willows leaned over the banks, and last year's cattails rattled like dry bones in every breeze. Gwendith made her bath a quick one, then stood chattering on the bank while Stands-in-Smoke finished. The native woman had a tough, wiry body marked with the nicks and scars of a lifetime of labor. Her wet hair stuck out like feathers from her head. There had been little conversation between them, but Gwendith remembered how the other woman had spoken to her the night before after her altercation with the ghost eater.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said hesitantly.

"You just did."

"I was wondering about No Tongue. He does have a tongue. So why can't he speak?"

Stands-in-Smoke finished wringing water from her hair and climbed out of the creek. Gwendith handed her the old horse blanket, which served them as a towel even though it left them both smelling of its former owner. "I don't know," Stands-in-Smoke said finally. Her dark eyes were troubled. "Maybe he doesn't, either. To be perfectly honest, I'm not even sure that he's really my cousin."

"How can that be?"

Stands-in-Smoke pulled her shirt on, buttoning it slowly. "Did you know that the Outlanders come for our children? Take them away from their parents on the Sanctuary and either give them to Outlander families to be 'civilized,' or else lock them away in boarding schools until they barely remember who they are or where they came from?"

"No. I didn't."

"I was one of the lucky ones—when the priests came looking for children to take, I always managed to hide, or to run off to another part of the Sanctuary where they wouldn't bother coming. But my cousin wasn't so fortunate. His Outlander name was Rith, and his child's name was Twig. He never got a real name, because they came for him just before his fifth birthday.

"I don't remember him very well. I was only six at the time myself. What I remember most is how my aunt and uncle acted once he was gone—as if he had died. I think they somehow knew that they'd never see him again. Years passed, and to be honest I almost forgot he had even existed. No one ever spoke his name, as if they were afraid of calling down the same fate on their own children.

"About six years ago, some soldiers rode up to the gate and left a young man there. Just shoved him off the back of a cart, with no explanation about who he was or where he had been. He wandered through the streets of the Sanctuary, staring at everything, like a man in a dream. Or a nightmare. Everyone gathered to look at him, but he didn't say anything, just kept walking, as though he had been there before and still half-remembered the way. Eventually, he came to where my aunt and uncle had lived. They'd died from plague a long time ago, and no one else took their house for fear of sickness. It was just standing there, a ruin. And when he saw it, the young man collapsed and started crying.

“We tried to talk to him, but he never spoke to anyone. But because he had gone to my aunt’s house, and because he looked the right age, we thought that he might be Twig, returned to us at last.” She shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s a thought-whisperer—he knows what other people are thinking, and sometimes I get things from him. But he’s never shared anything about his life before the day the soldiers left him with us. So I just had to decide to accept him as my cousin. That made me his last relative, so I had to take him into my house. We gave him the name of No Tongue because of his silence.” She paused, then sighed. “I often wonder what happened to him that made him like he is. But I would never ask him.”

“Because it would hurt him to remember.”

“Yes. And because I’m afraid he’d answer.”

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“We can’t go on like this,” Johann was saying when Gwendith and Stands-in-Smoke returned.

He and No Tongue had also bathed; Johann’s wet curls hung close to his head, sad and bedraggled. No Tongue looked up from cleaning mud from his boots and flashed Gwendith and Stands-in-Smoke a quick grin. Gwendith felt vaguely guilty for speaking about him behind his back, and then wondered if he had caught the thought.

“Go on like what?” she asked.

Johann turned to her, then nodded approval. “That looks a lot better than that silly dress.”

“Feels better, too.” The clothes Johann had brought her must have originally been made for a big man, because they hung loose on her tall, bony frame. The rough trousers and shirt might have been worn into the field, judging by the red clay stains around the cuffs. The boots had proved slightly too large for her feet, but some strips of cloth from her ruined dress had helped as padding. A tan duster kept her warm, and a round, brimmed hat shielded her eyes from the sun.

She handed the ghost eater’s coat back to him, wondering where he had gotten it and his Rhyllachan-style trousers. Both looked ragged from travel and bore stains of

blood and earth. He pulled the coat on absently, his attention focused on Johann.

“Explain,” he requested, steering the topic back to its original course.

“You’ve been lucky so far,” Johann said, leaning back against the weathered boards of the barn. “But crashing about in the woods and hoping to hell we don’t get caught isn’t a very good way to travel. The food I brought won’t last long—we’re going to have to stay near towns and homesteads to replenish it.”

“I can hunt,” the ghost eater broke in.

“With what? How close do you have to be to something before you can kill it with that *bhargha* thing?”

The ghost eater hesitated, then shrugged. “Arm’s length, more or less,” he admitted. “I *have* hunted that way before, but I’ll admit it isn’t easy to get so near without an animal sensing you. A lot of animals have Ways for knowing when something wants to eat them. I can say some chants that might help me get closer, but they never really worked very well for me.”

“You could lend us your rifle,” Stands-in-Smoke pointed out.

Johann gave her an exasperated look. “I could, but even if I did, have you or No Tongue ever hunted in the woods? No? Well, Gwendith and I definitely haven’t, and I doubt the ghost eater has the first idea about how to fire a rifle. But that isn’t our biggest problem. Even if we could hunt, there won’t be woods for us to hide in for much longer. Most of the land in this area has been cleared for farming. We’re going to be a lot more conspicuous trudging through some farmer’s field than walking on a road.”

The ghost eater nodded thoughtfully. “True. What do you suggest?”

“The soldiers are looking for fugitive muddies and a kidnapped woman. Not a gentleman traveling with his three servants. And a hired gun for protection against highwaymen, of course.”

Gwendith considered a moment. “It could work,” she admitted slowly. “Ghost eater? What do you think?”

He linked his hands together, inspected the lines of knuckle and sinew. “We can try,” he agreed finally. “But I still want to avoid people whenever we can.”

“We’ll stay on the back roads,” Johann promised. “And I’ll have to use my illusions to make myself more presentable and to cover the tattoos on your face. I have some scissors with me—Gwendith can cut your hair so I’ll have less work to do.”

“No! I won’t be branded a coward!”

Johann and Gwendith exchanged puzzled glances. “What do you mean?” Gwendith asked.

The ghost eater gave Johann a condescending look. “Only cowards have their hair cut short,” he said, looking pointedly at Johann’s shoulder-length queue. “A warrior’s strength is in his hair.” He shook his head proudly, sending rippling waves through the raven-dark locks that brushed his waist.

“Barbarians,” Stands-in-Smoke muttered.

“I understand your concern,” Gwendith said slowly. “But—”

“No!” He folded his arms across his chest defiantly. “I’d sooner cut off my manhood.”

“It’s doing you less good,” Stands-in-Smoke jeered.

Johann gave them both an odd look but forewent any comment. “Fine. I assume you’d have the same objections to my making your hair just look shorter? Well, then, what about this?”

Gwendith glanced back at the ghost eater. A small, slender woman stood where he had been only a moment before. Her diminutive height and long, black hair were the same as the ghost eater’s, and there was a resemblance in the face, but she wore a proper shirt and skirt, and the body beneath was definitely feminine.

Johann smirked. “Better?”

The ghost eater, however, seemed oblivious to what Johann had probably intended as a jab. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully. “A good idea. Any soldiers we encounter might not think me a threat. It will give us an advantage. How long can you continue such a seeming, mist-shaper?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never tried to sustain something so large and complex for long.”

"You'll only have to make your illusions when we can't avoid others," the ghost eater said. Johann had returned him to his normal appearance. "Gwendith can use her Way to search the road ahead of us and make certain everything is clear. Agreed?"

"Do we have any choice?" Stands-in-Smoke groused.

"Not really."

"I think it might work," Gwendith said. She glanced at the rifle Johann had been given by Colonel Talys when he set out to look for her. "If I'm to be protecting you, I suppose I should carry that. Unless you want to put another illusion on me, so that it looks like I'm armed as well."

Johann grinned suddenly and went to where his packs lay by his saddle. "No need! Do you remember that night at the party? When I said I'd brought you a present to remind you of the way things used to be? Maybe one of the ghost eater's animal spirits put the idea in my head." He pulled out a bulky package wrapped in oilcloth and handed it to her.

Curious, Gwendith took the heavy bundle and carefully unwrapped it. The early sunlight gleamed off a metal hilt, sights, and a muzzle.

She gasped, feeling as though her heart had stopped. Hardly daring to believe her fortune, she lay the bundle down, reverently drew a sheathed saber from the folded oilcloth. *Her* saber. The hilt slipped into her hand like something alive, like an extra appendage that she hadn't realized had been amputated.

"I know the saber needs polishing, and I'm sure the pistols will have to be thoroughly cleaned," Johann was saying in some far-off world where other people existed. "They've been in the attic for the last year, I'm afraid. I hope you don't mind that I took them. The doctors told Beoch to get rid of them, but I thought maybe you would be wanting them again some day...."

With a cry like a hawk breaking into flight, Gwendith snatched away the sheath and brought the saber through a gleaming arc. The air whistled around the slender blade, echoing her shout, and a wild, fierce joy surged through her. A year with no practice had left her reactions slowed, her movements not quite so precise as they once had been, but still the swing and motion of the blade felt as natural as walking.



Imagining opponents, she thrust, parried, riposted. Everyone else backed nervously away from the flashing steel. Everyone except for the ghost eater.

Head cocked curiously to one side, he walked right up to her, as though trust for her control with the weapon came to him automatically. Elated, she sketched the outline of his body with the saber, flicked the point so close that its passing stirred his hair. His eyes tried to track the blade, pupils wide and brows arched, as though he watched something new and strange and beautiful.

Emboldened, she sent the point past his face. But lack of practice betrayed her, and the edge caught on his skin, drawing a line of blood from the corner of his mouth up to his cheekbone.

She jumped back, dropping her saber with a cry of dismay. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to touch you!"

A normal man would have put his hand to the injury in an attempt to stem the blood. He remained preternaturally still, his attitude oddly focused, as though listening to something no one else could hear. Light gleamed through the blood leaking out of the wound; the thin tentacles of the *bhargha* rose up from somewhere inside him, crisscrossing the cut like stitches and drawing it closed again. In less time than it took to take two breaths, the wound was gone, leaving behind only drying blood and smooth, unblemished skin.

"Incredible," she whispered.

He shrugged, but there was a bleak look in his eyes. "It has its advantages," he said, turning away. "And its price."

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The next two days passed quickly and without incident. True to his word, Johann kept them to the back roads, and they met few travelers. Every few miles, they paused briefly while Gwendith used her Way to scout ahead and behind, searching for anyone else on the road. The few times she spotted people, the little party had plenty of time to conceal themselves in the woods. Once or twice, Johann's horse was too large to either fit through the underbrush, or to find cover in a field. These times, he dawdled by himself near the road, pretending to tend the horse or eat his lunch. One traveler who

passed him at such a time was a tin peddler in his clanking cart. The peddler stopped for a few moments to rest and get news of the road ahead, all the while complaining bitterly about the soldiers stopping people on main roads and intersections, snooping into everybody's business.

The ghost eater found himself enjoying those days, even though he knew he shouldn't. He spent most of the time walking beside Gwendith, to one side of the mounted Johann. He excused spending time with her by telling himself that she was the entire reason he had come into Enemy lands in the first place. He ought to stay close and protect her if there happened to be any trouble. Not that she seemed to need any protecting. Her warlike ways puzzled him, though he thought he did well at concealing it from her. Among the Ahkan'it, only Changed Ones could have feminine bodies and be warriors as well. True women weren't risked in combat any more than the children that issued from them would be so risked.

Gwendith obviously would expect to be in the front ranks of a fight, and yet she was not a Changed One. Rabbit had said that Rhyllachans did things differently, but it was still a little confusing. And, perhaps, intriguing as well.

As promised, he tried to teach her all the customs and taboos that she might need to know now that she walked in the world. And he also told her some of the stories of his people to while away the time. He knew that he should restrict his contact with her to this teaching and telling. Taking pleasure in her company went against all that the old one had taught him. He was the ghost eater and felt no joy.

Nevertheless, he found himself talking to her the way a friend might, despite the wrongness of it. To his amazement, she reciprocated.

*She just doesn't know any better.* Back home at Bird Creek Town, everyone understood that he was a dead thing, not to be treated like a living person. Some had responded to him with fear, others with guilt, as though he was Tamaugua's ghost come back to haunt them all. But no one reacted to him as they would to a normal man.

*So what if I speak with Gwendith as though I still lived?* he asked himself resentfully. *The old one isn't here to see and punish.*

It should never have begun in the first place, and it would certainly have to stop once they got back to Ahkan'i lands. But for now, he could pretend that the journey was endless. He could pretend he was alive, and normal, and had all his life ahead of him.

"...And so Rabbit danced closer and closer to the pot where they kept the fire," he said one day. "And then when he got right up to it, he stuck his head in the pot, and his hair caught on fire!"

Gwendith made a sound half between a laugh and a snort. "That doesn't sound very bright."

The ghost eater grinned, partially from the story, and partially from the sight of her. He remembered her as she had been the first time he had seen her. She had been pale then, drained-looking, all of her energy concentrated on the carving she made. Then her husband had brought the crippleweed and made her listless as one half-dead.

It was a stark contrast to her current self. She strode along beside him, lanky legs eating up half again as much ground as his did, so that she was constantly having to slow down to keep from leaving him behind. Her hair straggled out of its braid, blowing around her face like a mane. Her sharp, clear eyes, so startlingly green, sparkled with curiosity. One hand rested lightly on her saber hilt in a confident gesture. She almost might have been a different woman.

*Strange, that I feel comfortable with her,* he thought idly as he watched the sun strike gold out of her hair. The color seemed less exotic with every passing day. *I would have thought to have more of a bond with Stands-in-Smoke or No Tongue, even if they are Hut Sitters. At least they look like me, even if they do smell like Rhylachans.*

"So what happened next?" Gwendith prompted, breaking him out of his thoughts.

"Well, Rabbit of course ran, and all the people ran after him. They were the only ones with fire, and they didn't want it getting out to anyone else. But he ran and ran, with his head ablaze the whole time, lighting others things on fire when he went past. Eventually, he found a hollow tree to hide in, and his pursuers ran by. Then he set the tree on fire and rubbed his head on the ground to put it out. Once he was sure the danger was over, he took the fire from the tree and carried it back to his town. And other people found the places he had set aflame during his flight and got some fire there. And that's how fire came to the people of the world."

"I see. This Rabbit sounds like quite a personality. Not many people would see setting their heads on fire as a solution to a problem."

"Well, I might not have done it that way either," the ghost eater admitted. "But if you ever see Rabbit, you must remember to treat him with the same respect that you would treat your grandmother or granduncle with. No matter how foolish or arbitrary his words seem, you must remember that he is an elder and an animal spirit. That's true for any spirits you might meet."

"I'll remember that," she said dryly, obviously not expecting to have to worry about it.

He made no response. Gwendith still seemed to think one could either believe or not believe in beings like Rabbit. The Rhyllachans must have a strange way of relating with their world, and even stranger ideas about how they fit in it. And, although she hadn't said anything about it since their first meeting, he suspected that Stands-in-Smoke felt something similar, not quite willing to accept as truth what seemed ordinary to him. He sometimes thought that she humored him in hopes of being accepted among the Ahkan'it once they arrived back in the mountains.

"Can I ask you something?" Gwendith said after a few minutes of silence.

"Of course. I'll teach you anything you care to know."

"How do you fit in with all this talk of spirits? What is the *bhargha*?"

All the brilliance seemed to go out of the sun. The memories he had tried to avoid returned in a flood, leaving the taste of ashes on his lips. Perhaps the ashes were all that was left of his heart.

"The *bhargha* is a spirit," he said slowly, staring at the road ahead. Although the weather was still cold, a few early flowers formed on trees and bushes, or poked their heads up from the fallen leaves. For once they were passing through an area that hadn't been cleared for farming, and tall oaks and hickories lifted bare branches against the blue sky. A blush of purple heralded a redbud deeper in the forest. The time of the eagle was almost over. Soon the time of the snake would come, and with it the planting of crops, the flowering of fruit, the days when the sun lingered in her journey across the sky.

“The *bhargha* is sometimes called the Child of the Mountain. It comes from a rock that we call coal.”

She looked at him, puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

How to explain? “When...when a body that is to become a ghost eater is killed, it is taken to a cave. There are several such caves throughout the mountains, some natural, others made by Ahkan’it long ago. The body is stripped of everything that had once been alive—bone ornaments, clothing, anything.”

“Why?”

“The *bhargha* has power over anything that lives or has ever lived. You’ve seen it—it’s how I destroyed your bonds the first night we met. The *bhargha* could touch the rope fibers, break apart the tiny bits and pieces that used to make up the plant it was taken from. It does the same thing when it heals this body, except that it causes the flesh to grow instead of destroying it. There’s a risk that the *bhargha* might move into something other than the body—a shell gorget, for example, or a bone bead.”

“Ah.” She thought about that for a moment, clearly not really understanding. Truth was, he didn’t understand it very well himself. “What happens after the body is left in the cave, then?”

“No one knows exactly. There is a spirit that lives in the coal. Some say many spirits, or maybe even the ghosts of dead things. Plants can be seen inside the rock sometimes, and there are some who say that the coal was once alive somehow, that its power comes from all the life inside it. The spirit in the stone comes into the body and animates it, heals the death-wounds, and thus becomes the ghost eater.”

“And what does a ghost eater do?”

He stared at the ground fixedly. “Mostly, he’s lonely,” he whispered, almost too low for her to hear. “We aren’t considered to be the people we were before death. We have no kin, no lovers, nothing. And yet, every day we have to face our kin, our friends, our loves, and pretend as if we have no ties to them.”

“That’s very cruel.”

He shrugged. “As I said, it’s believed that we truly aren’t the people whose bodies we wear. But I...I don’t believe that. And I don’t think that the old one does either, even though he would never admit it.” He cleared his throat against a sudden

lump. “Maybe a long time ago it wasn’t so bad. The ghost eaters fought for our people, first and foremost. Back then, before the Rhyllachans came, war and battle were everything to us. We wandered where we would and fought those who would stand in our way. War honors were a man’s greatest achievement. Maybe the chance to become a fearsome warrior, the most devastating of killers, seemed worth the sacrifice.”

“But not anymore.”

“No.” He looked up, but not at her. “Stands-in-Smoke calls us barbarians,” he said with a bitter laugh. “But she’s in for a surprise when we get home. We held the mountains against the Enemies, but in the end we paid for it with our very identity. We couldn’t keep our wandering life—there was nowhere to go. No more enemies to fight. So we settled down in towns and started growing corn. We scorned the Hut Sitters, but in the end we became just like them. They had their revenge against us and never even knew it.

“You can imagine that there isn’t much for a ghost eater to do in such a world. We remember some of the stories, and we tell them at dances and ceremonies. And sometimes we hunt successfully and bring meat for the rest of the town to share. But other than that, we just...sit. We aren’t allowed to participate in town life, aren’t even allowed to have friends. There’s only one ghost eater per town, except during the single turn of the seasons when a ghost eater ready to die creates and trains his successor, so we don’t even have any of our own kind to talk with. So we just sit and let the memories of our hearts eat at us, until in the end we go mad with longing.”

She didn’t say anything for a long time. Then, finally: “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. “It’s who I am. So, to answer your original question, we fit somewhere in between. We’re considered creatures of the Upper World—we are unchanging, stable, beings of strict boundaries and limits. That’s opposed to the Under World, the world of madness, disorder, change, fertility, and creativity. But the truth is, we aren’t either truly spirits or truly mortals. We have no place.”

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Gwendith sat in the thin shade of a cedar tree, eyes closed as she concentrated on using her Way. The ghost eater crouched on the other side of the track—more a rut

between farms than a real road—watching her, while the rest of the party took the chance to eat. As he studied her angular features, her brows puckered together, and a look of consternation crossed her face.

“Trouble?” he asked, unconsciously shifting his weight into a ready crouch. Everyone else fell instantly silent at the word.

She sighed and opened her eyes. “I don’t know. Maybe.” She took a sip of water from her canteen. “This road will take us out to a crossing with a larger highway. I saw soldiers there.”

Stands-in-Smoke straightened, a look of fear and hate darkening her eyes. “We’ll have to wait for them to be long past before we chance the road, then.”

Gwendith shook her head. “They aren’t traveling. It looks like they’ve set up a roadblock and are questioning people.”

“Can we go around them? In the woods?”

“There’s nothing but fields for miles. They’d be sure to see us. Unless Johann can hide us somehow?”

But Johann made a negative gesture. “I’m not even certain I can disguise the ghost eater for very long, let alone make all of us invisible, or look like farmers. A few minutes, probably, but not long enough for us to cross a wide field and get out of sight.”

“Then we have no choice but to go ahead as we’d planned,” said the ghost eater, feeling an odd combination of trepidation and relief. After days of dreading just such a confrontation, he was almost glad to have the suspense over with.

They set off down the road, Johann riding his horse out in front, Gwendith walking beside with her coat parted to display her twin pistols, and the rest trailing behind the horse. Stands-in-Smoke reached out and took No Tongue’s hand silently, though whether she comforted him or herself the ghost eater couldn’t guess.

The road came into sight within the hour. It was set up on a high berm above the level of the fields, and well out of reach of any save the most severe floods. The track they followed curved up steeply, meeting the main road beneath the bud-swollen boughs of two enormous oak trees. Even from a distance, the ghost eater could see the sunlight flash off the buttons of the soldiers’ identical coats. As if on cue, Johann’s

travel-stained clothes took on a newer, finer look. The ghost eater glanced down at his hands, saw a woman's slender fingers.

As they approached, the soldiers rose to their feet from where they had been resting under the oaks. The ghost eater immediately turned his eyes to the ground, trying to look the way he imagined a prisoner might. Stands-in-Smoke had made references to the servitude of her people and members of her own family, but he wasn't really sure he understood the concept. A war captive seemed the closest analogy he could make. Although he kept his head bent, he glanced to one side, and saw that Stands-in-Smoke's lips had tightened and her face gone pale.

*Be calm*, he willed her. *You didn't survive the Sanctuary by being completely foolish.*

A small rabbit suddenly emerged from the row of cedar trees that lined the field boundary. It hopped along, pacing them, before suddenly swelling to the size of a dog. A mica gorget dangled and swayed about its short neck. Startled, the ghost eater looked around, but no one else seemed to notice Rabbit's presence.

"Better worry about this one," Rabbit said, hopping just before Stands-in-Smoke's feet. The ghost eater winced, thinking she would tread on him at any moment, but somehow he stayed just ahead of her. "Looks like she might snap any minute now. Bet she could scorch a couple of them pretty good before they shot her, though."

Johann slowed his horse, calling a cheerful hail to the soldiers. One of them moved forwards, while the others touched their guns and stared suspiciously at Stands-in-Smoke, No Tongue, and the ghost eater. "Morning, folks," the first man said. His idle tone belied the sharp look in his eyes. "We've got some renegade muddies on the loose, and we think they might be heading this way. Haven't seen anything strange, have you?"

Rabbit darted forwards, changing his shape to that of an Ahkan'i man as he did so. A warrior's crest of stiffened possum fur adorned his long hair. Grinning, he slipped around behind the oblivious soldiers and started making rude faces at them. The ghost eater, torn between amusement and the fear that they might be given away, barely remembered to keep his face neutral.



"I assure you that all my muddies are well trained," Johann was saying in a lofty tone. "And as you can see, I have already hired a bodyguard to protect my person from brigands. I'm sure her bullets will work just as well against renegades."

Rabbit moved to stand just behind the lead soldier. Leaning forwards, he blew lightly on the man's neck. The soldier jumped and slapped at the spot. Rabbit repeated the action, then pinched him behind the knee.

Johann lifted a brow at the soldier's slaps and scratches. Embarrassed, the man grinned wryly, obviously fighting not to scratch at the spot on the side of his face where Rabbit was tickling him with a feather. "Bugs are out early this year."

"Probably lice," Johann said acerbically. "Really, gentlemen, I appreciate the warnings, but I have pressing business in Whitefoam."

The soldier stepped out of the way and waved them on. "Be on your way, then. But if you see anything suspicious, go to the nearest army post and have word sent to Colonel Talys at Fort Reed."

They moved on past the soldiers, crossing the main road to take a smaller track that continued its way between fields. Rabbit capered past, stopping to pantomime Johann's stiff posture.

"We made it," Gwendith said once they were well out of the soldiers' sight.

"No thanks to our ghost eater," Stands-in-Smoke snapped, giving him a rough shove. "You almost gave us away, you fool! Standing there ogling the soldiers instead of looking at your feet—you're lucky one of them didn't decide to drag you off into the bushes for a quick tumble."

Rabbit hooted with laughter. "Now that would have been something!"

"It isn't funny!" the ghost eater snapped, humiliated.

"No one's laughing," Gwendith said gently.

"I wasn't talking to you." Now they were all looking at him as though he had lost his senses. The ghost eater remembered how the old one used to talk to people who weren't there. It was generally considered the first sign that a ghost eater was losing his grasp on sanity.

“That’s right, he was talking to me,” Rabbit declared. Instantly, everyone else fell back, gaping at the man who hadn’t been there only a moment ago. Both Gwendith’s pistols were in her hands, their bores trained on Rabbit’s chest.

“No!” the ghost eater exclaimed hastily, moving to put himself between the pistols and Rabbit. Offending Rabbit by shooting him would most certainly not help anything. “This is Rabbit. He’s helping us.” *Supposedly.*

Rabbit came around him, sniffed at Gwendith quizzically, an action that looked rather odd since he was still wearing a human form. “Fierce little warrior, are you, woman? I like it. Maybe I should consider getting another wife.”

Gwendith’s eyes widened, and her grip shifted on the pistols. Feeling the situation slipping onto dangerous ground, the ghost eater tried to smile at Rabbit. “But, Granduncle, you have two already. I doubt the sisters would be pleased if you tried to bring home another.”

Rabbit laughed. “Probably not. No matter, then.” His eyes narrowed slightly, still trained on Gwendith. “I don’t want another that badly. It’s not good to want something too strongly. Others can take advantage of it.”

Confused, the ghost eater nevertheless bowed his head respectfully. “Thank you for your advice, Granduncle. I’m sure we’ll all heed it.”

Rabbit’s eyes lit up, bright and mischievous. “We’ll see.” Without warning, his ears began to lengthen, until two rabbit ears poked out from amidst his black human hair. Then the rest of his shape wavered and began to change, until at last he was once again a small, brown rabbit, which hopped nonchalantly away into the tall grass by the road.

The ghost eater sighed in relief and looked around. Three faces frozen in shock stared back at him. Only No Tongue seemed unperturbed by the encounter. The ghost eater frowned at them, feeling rather annoyed—hadn’t he told them that Rabbit was nominally helping him?

“I suppose there will be no more questions or condescending looks next time I talk about the animal spirits, will there?” he asked.

Gwendith shook her head, her earlier confidence clearly shaken. “N-No. Definitely not.”

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Talys glanced up in annoyance at the sudden pounding on his office door. He had been deep into one of his more ancient texts, a book that might have actually been brought from Old Rhylach during the Migration. Indeed, the more he read, the more he began to suspect that the book had been the personal possession of one of the Wizards. Parts of it appeared to be a treatise on the rituals and incantations used to perform magic. The reading was slow going, however. The language had altered somewhat during the intervening years, and deciphering some passages was difficult. Also, as the Wizards had left a mere fifty years after arriving in New Rhylach, the vast majority of terms used to describe magic and its functioning had long ago fallen out of usage.

He took off the spectacles he used for reading and rubbed at his eyes. Glancing at the window, he was surprised to find that it was dark outside. Someone, probably one of his personal aides, had come in and lit lanterns without his even being aware of it. "Come in," he called.

One of his aides, a middle-aged woman, entered and saluted him sharply. "Sir! An urgent message just arrived from one of our roadblocks. I thought you would want to be informed immediately."

Excitement quickened in him— finding Gwendith and the ghost eater was taking far longer than he had anticipated. "What is it, lieutenant?"

"It happened earlier today, at one of the blocks on the main road near Haynesville. According to the rider who came in, one of the men stationed there is a truth-seer. He said that a very suspicious group of people came through today—a wealthy gentleman, a hired gun, and the gentleman's native servants. Although they were asked only very routine questions about their business, he said that the gentleman was lying. It made him suspicious enough that he took a closer look at them all. He thought that the hired gun matched the description of the woman Gwendith. But she clearly was both armed and going with them of her own free will, so he wasn't certain enough to detain them."

"Ah." Talys leaned back, propping his boots on the table. Although most assumed that Gwendith had disappeared against her will, he had been careful not to

make that mistake. If she had joined the renegades of her own accord, traveling free and at ease was the best disguise possible. Had one of the soldiers not been a truth-seer, she would have passed through the blockade without anyone ever giving her a second look.

And the gentleman ostensibly leading the party? Could that that be the solution to the mystery of Johann's abrupt disappearance?

"It might be necessary for us to go to Haynesville on short notice," he said aloud, and the lieutenant nodded her understanding. "Send word to Beoch Smith—tell him I want a report on how far he's managed to get on the special project I gave him. I have the feeling that we might be needing it soon."

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That night, Gwendith dreamed.

*She stood upon the deck of a boat, which rolled and kicked beneath her. The smell of the sea was in her nostrils, and she breathed it deeply, startled by how much she had missed it. It began to rain, a light sprinkle that quickly turned into a downpour. The ship yawed and bucked, and her heart sped up along with the wind. Where was the crew? They should be swarming all over the deck by now, fastening things down for the storm. She could hear objects rolling and crashing below, and a few dark shapes slid across the pitching deck.*

*A titanic crash of lightning lit up the sky like a storm-born sun. Its sudden illumination cast the dark shape nearest her into stark relief. The huddled mass was no water barrel or pile of rope as she had first thought. It was a human body.*

*He lay on his back, sunken eyes staring at nothing. He looked to have been dead for some time, the flesh of his face pecked at by seabirds and rotted by the hot sun. The stink of him hit her in a wave, overwhelming even the salty tang of the omnipresent sea.*

*With a choked cry she staggered back, only to find herself staring at yet another body. Lightning lit the sky again, revealing dozens of dark shapes caught in the rigging, the bones showing through their putrefied flesh. The entire crew was dead.*

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Two days later, Gwendith found herself making her way into Haynesville.

The night before, Stands-in-Smoke had unceremoniously announced that they were nearing the end of their supplies. As Haynesville was a large enough town that two strangers wouldn't stand out, it seemed the most logical place to buy more food. Unfortunately, its size also made it likely that there would be at least a small garrison of soldiers there. After some discussion, it had been decided that Gwendith and Johann would both go into town, while the rest of the party hid in a patch of forest a few hours away. Neither of them were likely to be noticed, and the two combined could get an amount of food that would seem suspicious if purchased by only one person.

Haynesville was an older settlement that had sprung up where two large rivers came together. At one time, it had been contained within a stout wooden palisade and guarded by a fort. Now, the town had spilled far outside the original wall, and the disused fort was considered an historic building. Large boats plied the river, their decks crowded with barrels and boxes. Wagons carrying goods from outlying farms and plantations moved up and down the streets with a sound like low thunder. A young woman with a steaming basket over her arm moved through the crowds, singing a song about corn bread.

"We need money," Johann said quietly as they melded into the bustling crowd. His eyes had taken on a peculiar sharpness, watching buildings and people alike with an assessing look, like a miser separating gold from copper.

Gwendith nodded, unsurprised. Nothing had been said back at camp—apparently the ghost eater had only the most vague idea of how transactions involving money worked. But she knew that none of them except Johann had been carrying any coin to begin with, and most of his had already gone towards food.

"What, no sermons?" he asked, when she made no further comment.

She shrugged, tilted her head back so that she could look up at the sky from beneath the brim of her hat. The sky was flawless and cold as a blue diamond. "I wish

there was some other way, but I can hardly scold you considering that the money will go towards food for my belly.”

“Rowe would be furious,” he muttered, kicking at some garbage lying in the street.

*Interesting.* Any guilt Johann felt came more from his lover’s disapproval than from any morality of his own. “You disagree with that.”

“You don’t know what it’s like,” he said unexpectedly. “It’s a skill, Gwendith, one I’ve worked very hard to perfect. It isn’t any different for me than blade work is for you.”

“I don’t cheat people.”

“No, you kill them. Don’t look so offended—you can’t tell me that every opponent you’ve ever faced has had the skill necessary to make the match an even one.”

Gwendith frowned at her boots, not liking the turn the conversation was taking. “I’ve only fought a few duels in my life, Johann. I never issued a challenge, but I had to accept them. Otherwise, my reputation as a fencing master would have been destroyed, and Caitlin and I would have been out on the street.”

“And your challengers were all masters? All able to face you?”

“Of course not. Two of them were fools too young to understand that they were mortal.”

“So you killed them to survive. And I take people’s money to survive. Don’t tell me that’s less acceptable.”

They lapsed into silence after that. Gwendith mulled over his words, looking for a loophole. She had the feeling that the ghost eater would have continued the argument, but his people obviously valued warriors and courage very highly, and she doubted he would see it in the same light as a Rhylachan might. Which of course made the situation even more complicated than before. *Viewpoints multiplied by viewpoints, and no way of saying which is right or wrong.* She wasn’t sure if the thought was depressing or liberating.

At last Johann found what he was looking for. The large tavern was in the better part of town, yet not so fine that the stakes of a game there would be impossibly high. The place was near the river, and travelers, boat captains, and sailors crowded its large main room. A rather harried-looking woman sat near the entrance, perched atop a pile

of luggage, her feathered hat tipped precariously on her coiffure. She glared at one of the busy tables, perhaps cursing a husband or companion who had left her to guard their belongings while he enjoyed himself.

There appeared to be several card games in progress, as well as dice and a wheel of chance. Johann paused a moment to press a coin into Gwendith's hand and nod towards the bar. She took the money and slipped away, leaving him to join the gamblers.

The coin barely covered the expense of a single whiskey, and Gwendith hoped she could nurse it long enough not to look too suspicious. She stationed herself on a leather-covered barstool, her feet propped up on the rungs of the one beside her, and scanned the room silently. Truth be told, she had not been in very many taverns before, and certainly never in one that doubled as a gambling house. She had spent most of her youth in her father's salon, practicing, and later there had been Gairin and Caitlin to absorb her time. She sighed for a moment, picturing Gairin's pale hair and quick smile. It had been thirteen years since he had died in a fall from the roof of a house he was building. She had been eight months pregnant with Caitlin at the time; it had seemed that the world was at an end.

But that had not come to pass for another ten years.

She shook her head and turned her attention to her surroundings in an attempt to distract herself from her gloomy thoughts. Although most of the tavern's patrons were clustered around the gambling tables, a few sat alone or in pairs near the bar, eating bean soup or guzzling whiskey. There was a couple with children, and a grizzled riverboat captain paying court to a young lady. A black-robed priest sat alone in a far corner, an expression of utter despair on his features. He cradled his head in his hands, eyes swollen from tears. After a moment, he reached a limp hand out to his whiskey, which shifted of its own accord to meet his fingers halfway.

Gwendith sat up straighter, trying not to stare openly even as her heartbeat sped up. The movement had been so small that it was hard to be sure she had really seen it. Somehow, she had thought that this business of Ways concerned herself and Johann, and no one else in all of New Rhyllach. It had not occurred to her that other people might be finding themselves exhibiting strange powers that they didn't understand and

couldn't control. She chanced another glance at the priest, saw again the expression of complete defeat on his face. Did he think himself possessed by demons, damned by the Wizards despite a lifetime of piety?

*I should help him*, she thought, tightening her grip on her glass. *Tell him that he isn't damned, just as I wasn't mad.*

But would he even believe her? Or would he continue to think that devils rather than nature inspired his powers?

*He won't be the only one*, she thought with a sudden feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. For all she knew, thousands of Rhylachans might be waking up to find that they could spontaneously light fires, or read minds, or cast illusions. And if so, what would the Church have to say about it? Chances were, the tormented priest in the corner hadn't told any of his superiors that he could push a whiskey glass across a table without touching it. If he did tell them, or if he was discovered...what would happen?

The possibilities were frightening.

Gwendith rose to her feet. She needed to tell Johann about this. Then they would both confront the ghost eater when they got back to camp and find out what he knew or guessed about the situation. Collecting her hat from the bar, she turned and saw soldiers coming in the door.

Her heart froze for an instant. Then she forced herself to take a breath and look normal. There were soldiers in Haynesville ordinarily; certainly it could not be an odd thing for them to seek entertainment in taverns, no matter the early hour. No one was looking for a bodyguard lounging at a bar, waiting for her employer to finish his gambling. They were combing the roads for a helpless, half-drugged captive.

The soldiers paused for a moment, surveying the room. Two remained at the door, while the rest split into two groups. One contingent made its way towards the gambling tables. The other came straight for Gwendith.

She took a step back to get a column behind her and rested her hands on her pistols. Their eyes were focused on her face—there was no chance that they were simply coming to get a drink at the bar. *I won't draw a weapon until they do*, she decided, feeling the cold detachment of combat sweep over her.



The ones making for the gambling tables had to be looking for Johann. Taking a deep breath, Gwendith opened her mouth to shout a warning—but was cut off by Johann's sudden cry.

"This man is cheating!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. Startled, Gwendith and the soldiers both looked at him, only to see him waving a marked card in the air. The other men at the table sprang to their feet, glaring at the one Johann had accused. He, in his turn, stared at Johann in affront.

"This is an insult—some kind of trick—" he began.

He never finished, because one of the other gamblers threw a punch at him. He ducked, and a moment later his friends from other tables joined him. Within seconds, the confrontation had degenerated into a brawl that threatened to consume the entire room.

*Thank the Wizards for Johann's quick thinking!* Hoping that Johann had the wits to extricate himself from the fight and slip away unnoticed, Gwendith let go of her pistols, grabbed a barstool, and swung it at the nearest soldier's head. The wood splintered with a crunch and a shock that penetrated her bones. The soldier collapsed, blood pouring from ear, nose, and mouth. The others yelled and came at her, but at that moment a knot of combatants from the brawl careened into them, shoving them into the bar. Ducking a flying bottle, Gwendith slithered over the top of the bar and made for the kitchens.

The cooks and waitresses were running to stop the fight. Gwendith slipped between them and calmly made her way to the back door, which opened into an alley. There was no one outside except for a young woman laden with a basket of fresh-baked bread. Gwendith stepped into the street and passed the girl.

"Stop."

Gwendith glanced back over her shoulder and saw the muzzle of a pistol peeking out from beneath the breadbasket. A moment later, two male soldiers in full uniform came out of the kitchen exit. "Good work," one of them said to the girl. Then he turned to Gwendith, and his expression hardened. "Now hand over your weapons."

Unable to see any options, Gwendith lifted her hands in surrender.

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She expected to be taken to a brig somewhere, or at least a nasty, unpleasant cellar. Instead, they whisked her quietly through a set of half-deserted alleyways, before emerging into the street in front of a large, well-appointed house in what was clearly the better part of town. They escorted her through the carved oak doors, down a hall richly carpeted in jewel-toned rugs, and into a small but elegant sitting room.

Primrose cloth covered the walls, making the room look warm and inviting. Delicate white curtains had been pulled back from a bay window, letting in a spill of sunlight. In the center of the room stood a small cherry table, with two very comfortable-looking chairs drawn up on either side. A silver teapot steamed on the table, two porcelain cups waiting decorously by it.

Startled, Gwendith stopped in the doorway, and her captors didn't force her inside. Instead, the room's lone occupant looked up, and a broad smile crossed his face. "Gwendith!" he exclaimed warmly, rising to his feet.

Astonished relief flushed through her. "Colonel Talys!" *Thank the Wizards!* Of all the officers who could have been in charge here, he was the only one who might turn a sympathetic ear to her story. It made sense, when she thought on it—after all, Johann had said that the colonel was personally heading up the search for her. But she had never expected to be so fortunate as to be delivered straight to him.

The soldiers looked at her uneasily. "We found the woman, sir," one of them said stiffly. "She was in a tavern with the man. So far, he has eluded our search. Should we find a secure place to hold her?"

"This woman is not a prisoner," Talys said sternly. Looking quickly to Gwendith, he asked, "Did they do anything to harm you?"

She shook her head. Talys made shooing motions at the soldiers, and they promptly left the room, closing the door behind them. As soon as they were gone, Talys pulled out a chair at the table for her. "I'm sure you're very tired—please, sit down. Would you like some tea? Everyone was extremely worried about you, Gwendith."

She sat and accepted the tea gratefully. The warm cup felt good against her hands. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you, Colonel."

He sank into the chair opposite her, frowning slightly. "Gwendith, what happened to you? You vanished the night of the party at General Paywin's house. That same night, there was trouble on the Sanctuary. Everyone was worried that you had somehow been caught up in it."

"I was caught up in it," she admitted. "But not how you think. No one kidnapped me, Colonel. I left Fort Ironwood of my own free will."

"Then tell me what happened."

She shook her head, suddenly wondering what she could say that would make any sense to him. "I don't think you would believe me."

A little smile touched his handsome features. The sunlight pouring through the window flashed off his golden hair, the brass buttons of his uniform. "There you're wrong, Gwendith. The woman who disappeared from the Sanctuary was seen to kill a man with fire that seemed to come from her hands. She's a flame-caller, isn't she?"

Her expression must have been one of complete shock, for he chuckled mildly. "I know all about Ways, Gwendith. I've been married to a native woman for almost eleven years now. And I know that some of our own people are beginning to have Ways as well. That was the reason I approached you at General Paywin's house back in Fort Ironwood. I've been gathering the gifted to me for many years. I've listened to them, as I listened to you that night, and then I've done my best to find a way for them to put their talents to good use. Some serve New Rhyllach in the army. Others, like the owner of this house, serve in a different fashion, but their roles are no less important."

"Then—you knew I had a Way?"

"I suspected as much. I have friends who keep an ear out for news of people who exhibit odd abilities. When I came to Fort Ironwood, I didn't know if you were truly gifted, or if you were simply mad. Fortunately, it didn't take long for me to realize which." His smile turned warm.

She found herself returning it. Here, at last, was a Rhyllachan other than Johann who didn't think her insane. Even better, it was a man of position and authority. She felt as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

"So tell me what happened," he prompted.

She hesitated, thinking of the ghost eater. Would he appreciate her telling anyone about the Ahkan'it? "I'm not certain I have that right," she said apologetically.

But he nodded, as if he understood perfectly. "Then just listen. There are things happening in New Rhylach that no one outside the army knows about. Let me explain them to you, and then you can determine for yourself whether or not I'm worthy of your trust. If you decide that I'm not, you're free to go from here."

She cocked her head suspiciously, looking for any trace of deception. All she saw was earnest honesty. "Truly?"

"You have my word."

"Then I'll listen. After all, you listened to me when no one else would. I suppose I owe it to you."

"Thank you." He settled back in his chair, brow furrowed with thought. "It's difficult to know exactly where to begin. About two years ago, a coalition of merchants from Aneirach proposed an unusual expedition. Ever since the Wizards brought us here three-hundred years ago, no one has ever left the land they gave us. I suppose people thought that it was all we were meant to have. But the merchants reinterpreted scripture and decided that we were destined to go everywhere in this world."

"But where else is there to go?"

"Across the sea."

She started to laugh, then stopped when she saw that he was serious.

"An odd idea at first, I know," he said. "But think about it. Why *couldn't* there be other lands like this one? The merchants knew that it would be a dangerous undertaking to find such places, but if they exist, then the rewards for discovering them could be great. So they built special ocean-going vessels meant to sail out beyond sight of land, then crewed them with men who had been condemned to the gallows. I believe the theory was that such sailors would have nothing to lose by going on such a perilous venture.

"The expedition was kept quiet—undoubtedly the merchants didn't want word getting out to their competitors. The ships sailed due south, across the New Sea, guided only by the stars. For a long time they saw no land. They were about to turn back for lack of supplies, when an island came into view. It was a small, deserted place, but half-

buried in the sand they discovered a gold necklace of exotic and unknown workmanship.”

Gwendith sat up straighter, realizing immediately what it meant. “There are other people in the world.”

He nodded gravely. “Indeed. Other natives, besides the ones we met when we first came here. Needless to say, the merchants were ecstatic. They immediately outfitted another ship, this one better equipped, manned, and stocked. It, however, failed to return. So did the next—except for a single man.”

“One man?”

“The captain appeared one night, months after his ship had left, lying alone and bloody on the dock he had sailed from. He died screaming moments after he was found, half his body torn to shreds, as if from the claws of some terrible beast. At first, it was thought that he had not sailed with the ship after all, but two of the merchants investing in the vessel had seen him on the deck as the ship left dock. That was when they brought the problem to the army. And that was how it came to my attention.”

Gwendith swallowed uneasily. “How...what do you think happened?”

“I believe that the people across the sea have Ways, just like the natives here do. But I also think they have more than that. They must have found some stronger magic, because no Way I’ve ever heard of could send a man instantaneously over thousands of miles, so that his death could serve as a warning to others.

“After that, the Citizens’ Assembly became worried and wanted to know more about these people. I have been occupied with other tasks closer to home and unfortunately was not involved in the decision. A ship full of soldiers was sent out in an attempt to intimidate the unknown people and make them see things our way.” He paused and took a deep breath, as if to steady himself. “The ship sailed back into harbor only a few days ago. Everyone on board had been dead for some time. Somehow, whoever killed them also caused their ship to sail home by itself.”

Gwendith felt as if skeletal fingers walked down her spine. “I saw it,” she whispered. “In a vision.”

Talys looked up sharply. “Did you?” He paused, then leaned over the table and held her gaze intently. “Gwendith, I’ll be honest with you. New Rhyllach is in the greatest

danger it has ever faced. If our neighbors across the sea decide to attack us, we have no defense against them. They have twice displayed the kind of magic that we can't muster—couldn't, not even if every person in New Rhylach developed a Way overnight."

A shiver went through her. "Why are you telling me this? What do you want me to do?"

"When I first learned the truth about Ways, I started to wonder about the Wizards' magic. To wonder whether or not there might be any way of combining the two, and so regain the power of the Wizards."

"Isn't that blasphemy? Ways are one thing—all the natives claim to have them. But the Wizards' magic was supposed to be unique, divine. Not the kind of thing an ordinary army colonel might hope to control."

He smiled ruefully. "Only too true. Except that I know the truth about the Wizards."

"I don't understand."

He rose and paced to the window, then came and sat again. "I know that you aren't devout, Gwendith—you told me so yourself the night we met. From the day I found out about Ways, I began to read everything I could find about Wizard magic. Not just scripture or approved texts—diaries, personal journals, field reports, everything I could find dating back to the Migration. It wasn't easy. It's taken ten years for me to piece together the entire truth. But now I know.

"The Wizards were nothing but charlatans."

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

Gwendith gaped at Colonel Talys, feeling all the blood drain from her face. “Charlatans?” she whispered.

He held up a restraining hand. “Perhaps ‘charlatans’ is too strong a word. But certainly the Wizards were never divine. Powerful, yes; learned, yes. But they were just men, no different from me or anyone else.”

She sank back in her chair, stunned. Her faith might have lapsed, but she had never thought to actually reduce the Wizards to the stature of hucksters. “Tell me.”

“Apparently, back in old Rhylach, the Wizards *weren’t* the only men with magic. Not everyone had it, not like here, but a select few who studied and trained could in time learn to wield it. Apparently they weren’t born with their power but had to acquire it through schooling, the way you or I might learn our letters. But the group that we now refer to as the Wizards wasn’t content with the great power of their magic. They wanted followers as well. They set themselves up as divinities and attracted the weak, the fearful, and the dispossessed. From what I’ve been able to learn, the rest of the population of old Rhylach didn’t believe that there was anything special about the Wizards other than their great power—indeed, they referred to the Wizards’ followers as ‘cultists,’ with all the derogatory connotations of the word.

“But the Wizards didn’t need to put up with that. How convenient to tell your followers that you could lead them to the promised land, then actually open a gate to another world right before their eyes. The actual process of it eludes me, but somehow they managed to create a sort of portal that allowed them and their followers to simply step from the old world into New Rhylach.”

“But there were already people living here.”

“Yes—that must have given them pause. But the Wizards quickly learned that magic here didn’t work the way it did back on old Rhylach. Remember, Gwendith, the powers of the Wizards were phenomenal. They threw lightning bolts, rained death down

on armies, and opened a gate from one world to another. Large, spectacular things, but the doing of them was limited only to a handful of people.

“Here, everything was different. Magic wasn’t limited to a few—literally everyone and everything had it. The very air and earth and stones were imbued with it. But it was of an entirely different order than that of the Wizards’. Most Ways are very practical. To make plants grow better. To sing to the animals and make them come within the hunter’s range. To find water. To make fire. To be able to look ahead down the road for trouble. Simple things vital for day-to-day survival. Nothing big, nothing spectacular, but cumulatively very powerful.”

He paused and looked out the window. “I like to think of an analogy to help understand what happened next. I’m sure you realize that some of our everyday plants came with us from old Rhylach. Wisteria is one example—it took root here and thrived, until today you find it growing wild, strangling the life from entire groves of trees. But other plants didn’t do so well and today can’t be found at all outside of expensive greenhouses maintained by the very wealthy.

“I think of the Wizards’ magic as the latter. It did well at first, but this world wasn’t its own, and it couldn’t adapt. Almost as soon as the Migration was complete, things began to fail. Within fifty years, even the simplest spells no longer worked. Only two things remained: the gate to old Rhylach and the phoenix stones. And when the gate began to show signs of weakening, the Wizards decided they’d had enough. They left, went back to the old world, and let the gate collapse behind them, cutting us off from our former home forever.”

*The Wizards are a lie.* It was too much, too huge, for her to assimilate. Perhaps she had never worshipped them with much devotion, but at the same time she had never doubted their existence, their power. She wanted to dispute with Talys, but in her heart she knew that she had heard the truth.

And if the Wizards had been false, then there was no magical heaven awaiting the souls of the dead. And what, then, had become of all those she had loved and lost?

“I felt much the same way that you do, when I first realized the truth,” Talys said softly. “I almost abandoned my researches altogether, quit the army, and became a



priest to atone for my sin. But then I realized that if there was nothing divine about the Wizards' magic, then there might be a way to revive it.

"We Rhyllachans are finally beginning to adapt to this world. After living in its magic for generations—eating it in our food, drinking it in our water, breathing it in our air—it's gotten into us, changed us. And now that we have access to the magic of this world, there might be some way to take the knowledge of the Wizards' magic and modify it, until we can once again wield the power they had.

"We might be able to save ourselves from the people across the sea."

She nodded thoughtfully. His words made a great deal of sense. A fusion of native and Rhyllachan magic might result in a hybrid more powerful than either one alone. "So what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to bring me the ghost eater."

"What—why?"

"Just to talk to," Talys said hurriedly. "We *need* his help, Gwendith. The Skull People have found a way to cheat death. By this time you must know what the ghost eater is and what his powers are. A man who has literally been brought back from the dead, with the ability to kill with a touch. That's a powerful talent, Gwendith. It's also the only native magic we know of that can't be ascribed to a Way. True, some of the natives claim to be able to use chants to prevent pregnancy or attract love, but I am convinced that those spells are merely outgrowths or aspects of Ways already within them. The ghost eaters are the only thing even close to Wizard magic. If we could talk to this one, make him understand our need, I'm sure he would want to help us."

"You want to make him a weapon against the sea people?"

"Not necessarily." Talys hesitated delicately. "And not him, per se. But you can imagine what an asset ghost eaters would be in any war."

She didn't think the ghost eater would be inclined to cooperate. "I can ask him, Colonel, but...he needs to get back to his own people. And I'm afraid that they don't bear any great love for us."

He leaned forwards, fixing her with his gaze. She tried to look away from his bright blue eyes but found that she couldn't. "We *need* to talk to him, Gwendith. His

powers might be the very salvation of New Rhyllach. But even if they aren't, think of the possibilities. *To be able to bring the dead back to life.*"

A painful shiver went through Gwendith, and her mind went automatically to Caitlin. Caitlin running, laughing, dancing. "It's not possible," she whispered. "He said it wasn't."

"Of course he did. And, as far as he understands, it isn't. But he isn't a learned man, Gwendith. He isn't a Rhyllachan—he hasn't even had access to the education that our natives in the Sanctuaries have had. He doesn't know anything about the Wizards' magic, or what might be possible if it were to be combined with the coal."

*How does he know coal makes a ghost eater?* she wondered dimly. But the thought was taken up, swept away by the overwhelming desire to know if it was possible. If, perhaps, Caitlin might be resurrected.

"Do you think it could be done?" she heard herself ask. Her voice sounded oddly far away, as if it belonged to another.

"I do."

The words were low, persuasive, demanding that she believe. And, looking into his eyes, she found that she did.

She couldn't do otherwise.

"You would give Caitlin back to me? As she was before...before she died?"

"I would. I *will*. Trust me, Gwendith. Believe, as I believe."

*If it is true...if I could give her back her life...really give it back to her, not with the limitations of a ghost eater, but as a living, breathing girl....*

*It's my fault she died. I was her mother; I failed to protect her.*

*Oh, Caitlin, I'm sorry, darling, I'd do anything for you, anything....*

"You won't hurt him?" she asked slowly.

Talys smiled gently. "I'm sure he'll be eager to cooperate. Will you help me, Gwendith?"

"...Yes."

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Johann was beginning to grow seriously worried about Gwendith. During the tavern brawl, he had slipped away to the inn's upper story, which housed a bordello. When the soldiers had finally come looking, they had seen only the ladies and a few customers in a huff over being disturbed. None of them had matched Johann's description.

He had waited almost an hour in the room of an older woman who looked like she knew a thing or two about trouble, and who had no problem with being paid to let him sit and peer out her window. She was under the impression that he had some kind of military connection—a wife in the army, perhaps—that would make it inconvenient for him to be seen leaving the tavern, and he didn't disabuse her of the notion.

After that, he had cautiously walked the nearby streets, wondering where Gwendith might have gone to ground and praying that she hadn't been captured. The idea of staging a dramatic rescue did not appeal to him in the slightest.

Just as he was about to give up and return to the camp in the hope that she had already made her way back without him, he caught a glimpse of a familiar tan duster in the late afternoon crowds. Relieved, he hurried through the press to catch at her sleeve. She looked down at him, and for a moment her face was blank, as though she didn't recognize him. Then a wooden smile touched her lips.

"Johann. I'm glad you didn't get caught."

"I was starting to get worried about you!" he exclaimed. "It's dangerous here—now that we've found one another, we'd best leave as soon as we can. We can get supplies somewhere else."

"No need." She hefted the pack over her shoulder, and he saw that it bulged with food. "It would have been too conspicuous for me to just loiter around, keeping an ear out for word that the soldiers had captured you. I bought most of what we need."

"With what? Your good looks?"

"I took some money off one of the soldiers after I knocked him out."

"Oh."

She began to head purposefully away from the market. Confused, he watched her go, then hurried to catch up when she failed to slow for him.

*The close call must have scared her*, he thought uncertainly. But somehow the reassurance rang hollow in a way he could not quite define.

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That night, the ghost eater finally slept.

He had spent a restless day worrying over Johann and Gwendith. He tried to tell himself that they knew what they were doing and that, even if soldiers spotted them, no one would have any cause to know who they really were. And it wasn't as if they would be in the same kind of danger that Stands-in-Smoke or No Tongue would be in should they be captured.

Even so, he felt great relief when they finally reappeared. Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue had also seemed glad, and had immediately set about making supper with the new food. Envy had touched the ghost eater as he watched them eat, particularly when they came to the grits, a dish that formed a staple of Ahkan'i diet as well.

Afterwards, when everyone else settled in, Gwendith had volunteered to sit watch while he slept. He accepted her offer gratefully, pulled his threadbare Rhylachan coat around himself, and was asleep almost before his head touched the ground.

It was after midnight when he woke. He came to consciousness suddenly, as if someone had called his name. Startled, he sat up and looked around. Everyone else still slept in their blankets, except now Johann was sitting the watch. The Rhylachan man looked straight through the ghost eater, as if his pale gray eyes had gone blind.

"He cannot see you. You walk only in dreams," said a voice from behind. The ghost eater turned and beheld a white stag crowned with a great sweep of antlers.

"Little Deer!" he exclaimed, relieved. "I've done all that you asked. I found the woman—"

"With my help," Rabbit put in, bounding up out of the darkness. A moment later, a saw-whet owl so tiny it could have fit inside a drinking gourd flew up on silent wings. It perched on Little Deer's antlers and peered solemnly at the ghost eater. The ghost eater lowered his eyes respectfully, but a surge of excitement rushed through him. The owl was his clan's totem. Or, he corrected himself automatically, the totem of Tamaugua's clan.

*No...mine! Why else would Owl be here if I wasn't still of the Owl Clan? Surely this is more proof that I am Tamaugua, that my spirit is the same even if it has to share this body with the bhargha.*

"Come, ghost eater," Little Deer said mildly. "You have a journey to make this night. Prepare yourself."

The ghost eater nodded, and then sang the chant for leaving on a long journey. He faced the seven directions—the Sun Land and the Darkening Land, the Frigid Land and the Mountain Land, Above and Below, and Here—and hailed each in turn. When he was done, Little Deer nodded shortly.

"Put one hand on my back," he instructed. "And walk with us."

The ghost eater did so. Little Deer's short fur felt soft and warm under his fingers, and the familiar sensation of deer pelt brought a sudden lump to his throat. Saw-Whet Owl glanced at him once out of yellow eyes, then launched itself and disappeared into the night. Where Rabbit had gotten to, the ghost eater didn't know.

They faced the direction of the Darkening Land and began to walk. Although sheltering trees had surrounded the camp, the space they traveled through now was open. Dry dust susurrated around the ghost eater's bare feet. The night-shrouded ground felt smooth and flat, easy to walk over.

After a time, a bright orange light appeared in the vast darkness before them. As they drew closer, it split apart, and the ghost eater saw that it was in fact a multitude of bonfires. Figures moved in front of the flames, and he realized that a great dance was being held, with the dancers moving in interlocked circles that would in time bring them around each fire in turn.

But the dancers were no ordinary people. Or, rather, some of them were human, but others were animal people, or plant, or things so strange that the ghost eater had no name for them. All of them looked happy, and the air was full of voices and laughter.

"What are they celebrating?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"Everything."

The ghost eater looked at the fire and the dancers, and thought he understood. "This is the Darkening Land, isn't it? Where the souls of the dead go." *Except for the ones that go to feed me.*

“They come here for a time, yes. The circles of the dance reflect life. Eventually, everyone ends up where they began.”

The ghost eater pondered the answer for a moment, then looked at Little Deer. The flames danced in minute reflection in the stag’s nearest eye. “Why have you brought me here?”

“There is one who wishes to speak with you.” Little Deer started off, towards the nearest fire. The ghost eater followed, his hand still on the stag’s back. As they drew closer, one of the dancers turned towards them. It was a little girl, no more than ten winters old. Her hair was white-gold, her eyes gray, and she wore a Rhyllachan-style dress trimmed in white lace. She glanced up at the man she danced beside, whose looks were so close to her own that the ghost eater guessed he must be her father. The man nodded and smiled encouragingly at her. Letting go of his hand, she ran out of the circle, coming to a stop only a few feet from the ghost eater.

The ghost eater dropped to one knee, so that their eyes would be more on a level. He felt a smile touch his face at the sight of such a happy child. She smiled sweetly back, the blush of summer on her skin.

“Tell Mama to stop,” she said.

Puzzled, the ghost eater put his head to one side. “I don’t understand, little spirit.”

“Tell Mama don’t do it.”

“Who is your mother?”

But instead of answering, she turned and ran back to the circle and the man. The man patted her back, as if at a job well done. Then he looked back over his shoulder, straight at the ghost eater. An odd smile touched his mouth, as though he bestowed some sort of blessing. Then both fire and dancers seemed to move away at great speed, disappearing into the night and the blackness.

The ghost eater found himself back at the camp, lying in the same spot that he had been in when he went to sleep. Johann glanced over at his startled movement, then smiled an acknowledgment.

The smile, like Johann’s pale hair and gray eyes, were a match for those of both man and girl.

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The next day, the ghost eater pondered the meaning of his dream-walk. The weather was halfway in between spring and winter, and the air grew cold whenever clouds passed over the sun. The road itself looped through low hills, at one point drawing close to the main highway, which led to a town that Johann claimed was home to both a fort and a gold mine. Even so, they saw no other travelers, and Gwendith assured them that the way was clear for as far ahead as she could see.

Gwendith had seemed unusually withdrawn that morning. Or rather, she had been bright and cheery whenever anyone spoke to her but had otherwise remained silent. Now that he thought about it, even her good spirits rang false—she was *too* buoyant, her answers too quick.

*Perhaps she dreamed last night as well,* he thought, worried.

From their resemblance to Johann, he guessed that the girl and man he had encountered in the Darkening Land were none other than Gwendith's dead daughter and husband. *And the girl told me to tell her "don't do it." Don't do what? Don't come with me?*

That was the possibility that had kept him from waking her immediately last night. It seemed nonsensical that Little Deer would first send him on a quest to find Gwendith, then take him to the Darkening Land just to have someone tell her to turn back. Still, humans could not always fathom the ways of spirits.

*But I don't want her to leave,* he thought fretfully. It wasn't just that he worried the entire quest would have been a waste of time, not to mention of no help to his people. He, personally, did not want her to leave.

*She's treated me like a friend. I don't want to go back to being alone.* And he liked her company because he found her interesting, intriguing. There was a great deal about her that he didn't know yet, this strange woman who fought like a warrior and yet remained completely female. It would take years, maybe a lifetime, to discover everything about her that he wanted to know.

He bowed his head and stared at the ground in front of him. He knew what he had to do, whether he wanted to or not. Who knew, maybe he had interpreted the message wrong. Or maybe she was being sent away *because* he wanted her to stay.

Because he was the ghost eater, and wasn't supposed to want anything except for his people's safety.

"I had a dream last night," he said aloud.

Gwendith walked briskly beside him, staring straight ahead. That struck him as odd, because she normally looked around and enjoyed whatever landscape surrounded them. Today she moved as though she had somewhere very specific to go and was in a great hurry to get there.

"I said I had a dream."

"Really?" Her tone did not encourage him to speak further.

"Yes. But it was more than a dream." He took a deep breath. "The animals came to me last night—Little Deer and Owl and Rabbit. They took me with them to the Darkening Land. To the land of the dead."

She slowed slightly, as if his words had physically restrained her. Then her pace quickened again. "I don't want to hear about it."

He blinked, shocked. This disinterest did not seem like her. He had expected her to be as eager to listen to him as usual. Perhaps she was sick? Or was it time for her moon blood, and she had to put her concentration into holding back the heightening of her Way that came with it? Maybe he should ask Stands-in-Smoke to talk to her the next time they stopped for a rest.

"I'm sorry, but this is important. Please, Gwendith!" At this point, he had to trot to keep up with her long strides. The rest of the party, who gawked at them curiously, was being left behind. "They took me to the land of the dead. I saw your daughter!"

Gwendith's face went white. She spun around, walking backwards and staring at him. They were drawing close to a place where the road narrowed and dove between two hills. The land was too steep to farm, and a tangle of trees grew to either side, branches interlacing overhead to create a tunnel.

"I saw your daughter," he repeated, thankful to have finally caught her attention. "At least, I think I did. A little girl, about ten years old, with Johann's hair and eyes? She was wearing a white dress."

The devastated look in Gwendith's eyes confirmed that his guess was accurate.



“She spoke to me,” he went on, more slowly now that the dreaded words approached. “I don’t know exactly what she meant. We’ll have to talk about it together, think about it, and decide what to do. But she told me to ask you to stop. She said, ‘don’t do it.’”

Gwendith came to a halt, and the expression on her face slowly transformed into one of utter horror. She glanced around at the woods like a trapped animal. Concerned, he reached toward her. “Gwendith? What’s wrong?”

“Run,” she whispered, her voice ragged.

“What?”

“Run! *Run!*” she screamed suddenly, shoving him back. “It’s a trap!”

And then the soldiers burst out of the woods.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

Gwendith whipped out both pistols, as the soldiers boiled out of the woods. She felt as though she had slept, only to awaken suddenly into nightmare.

*What have I done?*

Then the soldiers were on them, and there was no more time for thought. Raising the pistol in her right hand, she sighted and fired. The bullet took the closest man in the head, and he collapsed backwards into a lifeless heap. Without pause, she repeated the action with the pistol in her other hand, the second bullet catching another soldier in the shoulder, spinning him around in a gout of blood.

Dropping the now-useless guns, she tore her saber from its sheath and rushed towards the soldiers who were falling back in confusion before her attack. Their shock wouldn't last long, and she expected to feel a bullet in her back even as she brought her saber down in a glittering arc—

"No! Gwenny, stop!"

A heavy weight struck her from one side, knocking the saber from her grasp. She had a moment's glimpse of Beoch's familiar face and pulled the punch she would have otherwise thrown. Then hands were holding her down, pinning her to the ground, wrenching her arms behind her back.

With a wordless cry of anger and frustration, she twisted her head about, trying to see what had happened to the others. Of Johann, Stands-in-Smoke, and No Tongue, there was no sign. They had fallen behind herself and the ghost eater, she remembered—perhaps they had been far enough back to escape when she prematurely sprang the trap awaiting them.

The ghost eater had not been so lucky. A wide circle of soldiers had formed around him, rifles leveled. A look of fury flashed across his face, and Gwendith shivered at the sight. Living soldiers, no matter how well armed, could never stand against him.

The sound of hooves thundered against the ground, and a group of riders emerged from the wood where they had been hiding. But these horsemen were not

clothed in the standard soldier's uniform, but instead were clad from head to toe in heavy plate armor, like something out of the history books about old Rhylach. Even their horses had armor on their heads and necks, and long skirts of linked plates guarded their flanks.

The horsemen rode through a gap in the ring of soldiers and began to circle the ghost eater. Confused, he fell back, trying to track the fast movement of the horses. Three of the armored men raised what looked like harpoon guns. They fired, the harpoons dragging long lengths of chain rather than rope as they cut through the air. One missed its target, but the other two both struck the ghost eater, once in the thigh and once in the chest.

His body jerked from impact and pain. Then the chains tightened, dragging him off his feet and tangling his limbs as he tried to fight back up. The horsemen halted, several dismounting and clanking over to where the ghost eater lay thrashing. As they approached, the *bhargha* unfolded and reached out hungrily to claim their lives....

Only to be stopped by their armor. The bright tendrils slipped across the metallic surface, unable to find purchase or to penetrate. When they saw what was happening, one of the men gave a victorious yell and rushed forwards to pin the ghost eater's chain-entangled arm. Others fell on the ghost eater, holding him down, while another soldier approached bearing a sharp iron spike. Going down on his knees, the armored man set the point of the spike against the ghost eater's chest, above his heart. His other hand raised a heavy mallet.

The spike made a hideous crunching sound as it drove through bone. Gwendith howled a protest, struggling frantically against her captors, but she was as helpless as the ghost eater.

Two more hard swings drove the spike all the way through, its tip emerging bloody from his back. The ghost eater went limp, eyes staring blindly at the sky. The armored men slowly released their grips and backed away, all the while keeping hold of the chains in case the ghost eater's immobility proved a ruse. But he continued to simply lie there in a welter of blood and shattered bone, like the corpse of a dog struck down in the road.

"It worked, Colonel!" one of the armored men yelled, his voice muffled by his helmet.

At the call, the soldiers parted, and Colonel Talys rode slowly out of the woods on a fine chestnut mare. The sight of him broke Gwendith's paralysis, and a mixture of horror, grief, and guilt impaled her heart with a spike of its own.

"He's dead!" she cried, fury making her voice shake. "You said that you wouldn't hurt him, and now you've killed him, you monster!"

Talys looked down at her with regret. "He wasn't alive to begin with, Gwendith. But don't fear. I haven't destroyed him—he is merely immobilized. My reading in old journals from the war with the Skull People told me what I needed to know to catch a ghost eater. They have no power over metal—they can't reach through it to kill, and it can be used to bind them."

*The ghost eater said that the bhargha has power over anything that's ever been alive, she remembered with a chill. But metal doesn't live, has never lived.*

"You're a liar, Talys. You said you wouldn't harm him."

"And I haven't. Not really. He'll recover easily enough. All this was necessary, Gwendith, you must see that. He wouldn't have come on his own, and any lesser amount of force would have only succeeded in getting my own men killed."

Beoch knelt down by her, touching her face in confusion. "Gwenney, what's wrong? We're trying to help you! You're free now—free from those horrible muddies." His mouth twisted into a flat line of hate.

Talys narrowed his eyes slightly. "Gwendith isn't feeling well, Beoch. I'm sure she'll be more cooperative once she's rested."

"No, I won't." But fear fluttered in her gut—something had happened to her, something had caused her to agree to this to begin with. Could it happen again?

"There are questions I need answers to, Gwendith. I want you to tell me all that you've observed about the ghost eater, all that he's told you."

She shook her head grimly. Beoch cast a stricken look at Talys. "Don't make her relive that, Colonel. Please...she's suffered enough."

"Can't you just *make* me cooperate?" she asked quietly. "Didn't you do that before?"

Talys arched a blond brow. “Nothing has happened that you didn’t agree to, Gwendith. You consented to this because I promised to find a way to restore your daughter to you. Then you went back on your word to me, killed one of my men, and endangered the lives of everyone here, including your own husband. Think on that before you start handing out blame to others.”

He kicked his horse over to where the ghost eater lay. The creak of wheels sounded from farther down the road, and a few minutes later a wide-bottomed cart appeared, driven by two soldiers. At a nod from Talys, the armored men lifted the ghost eater’s body and carried him to the cart. His head sagged back, the long hair of which he had been so proud dragging in the dust.

The soldiers who had chased after Johann, Stands-in-Smoke, and No Tongue came back, looking dejected. Gwendith’s heart lifted a little—at least they weren’t all captives. At least she hadn’t doomed everyone.

Her eyes went to the ghost eater, and her heart constricted painfully. *I’m so sorry*, she thought, bewildered. *I don’t even understand how I could have done such a thing. I failed you.* She remembered his dream, and tears collected in her eyes. *And I failed Caitlin.*

An older soldier wearing a pince-nez approached Gwendith, a medical bag in his hand. Gwendith tried to struggle as he knelt down by her, but there were too many restraining hands. Beoch eyed the soldier warily as he began measuring thick syrup into a spoon. “What are you going to give her, doctor?”

“Just something to calm her,” the doctor murmured absently. “And make her more cooperative.”

They held Gwendith flat against the ground and forced open her jaws. She tried to push the syrup back out with her tongue, but they poured water into her mouth, giving her the choice of swallow or drown. By the time the soldiers were ready to move, a heavy lassitude had settled over her body, and the struggle to stay awake grew more hopeless by the moment. Vaguely she realized that Beoch had picked her up, that she was being laid down against a splintery wooden surface. The rusted smell of blood filled her nose, and she turned her head to see who was injured. She found herself staring into glassy dark eyes in a blood-flecked face. She didn’t know whether the ghost eater

could see her in this state, but just in case, she held his gaze for as long as she could, and it was the last thing to follow her down into darkness.

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Johann half-collapsed against an oak tree, gasping for breath. His head spun, and a blinding headache was starting to form behind his eyes. Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue staggered to a halt beside him, both of them looking tired, though not in nearly such bad shape as himself. He forced his body into a sitting position, saw Stands-in-Smoke's dark eyes staring at him. For a moment, her brown skin seemed like a mask, a barrier. Then he realized that she wasn't looking at him with her usual scorn but with worry.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

He took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then took another. "I threw an illusion. Of us. Four or five of each of us, actually, all running in different directions." He grinned tiredly. "Let them figure out which one to chase."

"Why did you run?"

He looked at her in surprise. "What else was I going to do? If you'll recall, Talys sent me out to stop you, not join you. Just by traveling with you, I've made myself an accomplice to murder. Or that's what they would say, anyway, if they caught us. All things considered, no one in the army is going to be very happy to see me right now, are they?"

"No." She frowned, and anger crept into her eyes like ice covering over a pond. "Did Gwendith betray us?"

The question he had been avoiding sank its teeth into him, as though he had stepped on a rat in the dark. "...I don't know. Maybe she had a vision, maybe that was how she knew the soldiers were waiting. It doesn't make sense—if she'd wanted to turn you all over to the soldiers, she had plenty of better opportunities before now."

"Except that they weren't prepared for the ghost eater until now. I looked back before we got to the trees—they had men in armor coming for him. The *bhargha* is powerless against anything such as metal or stone. They knew *exactly* what they were

facing.” Stands-in-Smoke drove her fist against a tree in anger and frustration. “I swear, if she gave us over to them, I’ll kill her myself.”

“Let’s not go passing death sentences before we know a bit more, shall we?” he replied testily. “They didn’t just open fire on us—they must have been trying to catch us. So there’s a good chance that Gwendith and the ghost eater are still alive. Or as alive as the ghost eater was to start with, anyway.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “We need to free him. He’s the only one who knows where his people are, how to contact them.”

Johann had never been exactly certain why Stands-in-Smoke was with the party, especially given that she seemed prone to quarreling with the ghost eater. Hoping to get the hell out of New Rhyllach, find another life for herself with the Ahkan’it? Or had she just not known where to run once she got out of the Sanctuary? *The former, maybe, since she’s worried about not being able to find the Ahkan’it. Or who knows—maybe she really is concerned about this Devourer thing.*

“We’ll free them both,” he said aloud, deciding for the moment to act as though Gwendith was unquestionably innocent. “The nearest garrison is at Fort Reed, not too far from here. That’s Colonel Talys’ command, if I’m remembering correctly. It’s a good bet that they’ve been taken there. Maybe I can disguise myself as a soldier, reconnoiter a bit, and find out where they’re being held.” He paused thoughtfully. “And maybe find out why the army would be so interested in catching a ghost eater.”

No Tongue shivered and looked away.

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Colonel Talys poured himself a cup of tea liberally laced with brandy. He should be happy, he knew. He had the ghost eater—and thus possibly the salvation of New Rhyllach—in his hands. No amount of bad news should be able to counter the triumph of that.

But there was bad news and plenty of it. The first had come that morning, before he had set out for the ambush that snared the ghost eater. It consisted of a report of terrible sickness in Twelve Mile Creek, a farming community dependent on raising livestock. Nearly half the populace had developed a severe swelling of the joints that left

them crippled from pain. Some had reportedly died from dehydration, when an entire household came down with the malady at once and no one remained hale enough to bring water in from the well.

The worst part was that Donia was convinced this was no ordinary malady. She thought it came from the cows. Cows, using their Way against the humans who had herded, bred, and slaughtered them.

Cows! And what was Donia's suggestion? Discover how to propitiate the cow spirits—what chants to say, what offerings to make, so that they would not send affliction to everyone who killed one of them. Humans abasing themselves before cows! The entire idea filled him with outrage. This was not how it should be. Once he had mastered a hybrid of native Ways and Wizard magic, it would be this way no more.

The other bad news was of a more personal sort. Colonel Ebrim, a man who had dogged his tracks and tried to thwart his every move since his first promotion, was being sent to Fort Reed. Ebrim would “supervise” Talys’ handling of the ghost eater and look into “the muddy problem,” as the letter from the Citizens’ Assembly had phrased it. In other words, they thought Ebrim could find a quicker solution to New Rhylach’s troubles with a gun and a sword, than Talys could with logic and magic.

*Fools, all of them, fools. They have no understanding of how the world works outside their rich mansions and petty politics.*

If only he could have spared a half-year to go to the Assembly and ingratiate himself with them. He could have won enough converts to his cause that no one would have even thought to question his handling of things. Unfortunately, the time spent would not have been worth the effort. In a few years, a significant number of the assemblymen would be cast out of office, and he would have to start the entire process over again.

To make matters even worse, Colonel Ebrim was one of the few people Talys had met who were completely immune to his unique brand of persuasion. No amount of talking or talent would sway Ebrim once he had his tiny mind set on whatever idiotic solution it came up with.

*Damn Ebrim. Damn him.*

*And damn Gwendith Smithswife, too.*



No, that wasn't quite fair. She *had* brought him the ghost eater, just as she had said. And he still intended to give her back her daughter, as soon as he figured out how to do so. Of course, chances were good that by that time Gwendith would be either in jail or in an asylum for the murders she committed during the ghost eater's capture. The wounded soldier had died from blood loss on the way back to Fort Reed, bringing the tally of deaths to two.

*I don't like the fact that she turned on me*, he thought. That almost never happened, and it rankled. *She was difficult to convince to start with. I had to talk to her a great deal longer than it usually takes. If it hadn't been for her need for her daughter, I don't think I could have convinced her to hand over the ghost eater under any circumstances.*

Getting a person to act completely against their nature was difficult to the point of bordering on impossible. Generally that wasn't a problem he had to deal with—most of the things he required of his followers didn't force them to violate deeply held beliefs. Normally the biggest obstacle was getting someone to change their opinion on some small matter, such as which soldier would be quickly promoted through the ranks. But he had asked Gwendith to betray a comrade. If she hadn't had the terrible, soul-deep need of a parent mourning a dead child, it probably would not have been possible at all.

Small surprise then that the hold had been a fragile one and that she had reverted back to herself. But why couldn't she have done it earlier, before two of his men had to die? Or later, when the situation was more under control?

*If only there was some chance that I might be able to persuade her again. But I don't think the same need will serve as a foothold twice, not when she's already slipped the leash once. A pity—I had hoped to recruit her. I know she would have been willing to help against the sea people.*

*I'm not through with Gwendith Smithswife yet, not by a long way. She's traveled with the ghost eater—chances are she knows things about the Skull People that we might not be able to get from him. Especially if Donia is right, and my Way will not affect him.*

"The ghost eaters aren't human," Donia had said emphatically when they first discussed this scheme. "Worse, the Skull People themselves were nothing more than

barbarians. They didn't even have an organized chiefdom, just a bunch of wandering bands that happened to speak the same language and have the same customs. He isn't going to understand or care about Rhyllachan concerns. He won't be able to see that New Rhyllach is the future of this world while his people are its past. You won't be able to use your Way on him, and you won't be able to persuade him with logic. You might as well not even talk to him."

Perhaps. But Talys wouldn't feel right subjecting the ghost eater to what was to come without at least making a token attempt at getting his cooperation.

A soft rap on the door caught the colonel's attention. He looked up to find his aide waiting for him. "The prisoner is ready, sir."

Special preparations had been made to accommodate the ghost eater. He was being held in what had been a granary before soldiers removed all of its contents and stored them elsewhere. Two guards in protective armor stood to either side of him, heavily armed with archaic-looking swords and axes. The ghost eater himself sat in a crude metal chair, dozens of heavy chains binding him to it. A far more comfortable chair awaited Talys, well out of reach of the ghost eater's life-draining abilities.

As Talys sat down, he took the opportunity to take a good look at his captive. Although his clothes were Rhyllachan, his hair, ornaments, and tattoos were flagrantly otherwise. The iron spike and the harpoons had been removed, and flesh had healed over the wounds as if they had never been. Even so, the ghost eater appeared oddly haggard, and there was a hungry look in his eyes.

*Savage*, Talys thought automatically. Natives across New Rhyllach had adopted Rhyllachan styles of dress. Although it was not really a choice, Talys believed that, even if the laws were repealed, most would continue to dress and act like civilized people. They *were* civilized people, and if they were removed from the Sanctuaries and given the benefits of a Rhyllachan education, they would certainly embrace Rhyllachan culture as their own, and the two societies would integrate into one. That was one of Talys' great goals, which he would start attending to as soon as the current crisis passed.

This ghost eater, however, had not even had the minimal exposure to Rhyllachan culture that his distant cousins in the Sanctuaries were granted. Still, savage or no, Talys needed his help.

The colonel looked at his prisoner with unfeigned sympathy. "I apologize for the restraints," he said sincerely. "But with your powers, you could kill a great many of us very easily. I need to know that I can trust you not to do that before I can set you free. May I trust you?"

The ghost eater glared at him with bottomless brown eyes, his lips pressed into a tight, angry line.

Talys nodded equitably. "Very well. I understand that you are angry and suspicious. After all, our handling of you was not gentle." *Even though you never cried out from it, even when other men would have been screaming with pain.* Perhaps this was evidence of what Donia had said, that the ghost eater was no longer human. "I hope, however, that once I explain our situation to you, you'll understand why it was necessary. I need your help."

Still the ghost eater glared at him, silent and menacing. Talys got the distinct feeling that the man was contemplating what sort of meal his soul would make.

Talys took a deep breath, trying not to let on that he was more than a little unnerved. "Let me explain."

In a calm, rational voice, he outlined his proposal to fuse Ways and Wizard magic to make a hybrid more powerful than either alone. He kept the rest of the story to himself. The ghost eater would not likely care about New Rhylach's problems with the sea people. And as for the other part—the part he *hadn't* told Gwendith—well, there was no point in angering and alienating the ghost eater even further. And there could be danger if the ghost eater pretended to cooperate, then somehow managed to escape back to his people. The Skull People most definitely did not need to know what was going on in their mountains. Meddling on their part would only make the army's job harder in the end.

At last he stopped and sat silent. Although he had strained his power to the utmost, he had gotten no hints from the ghost eater, no instinctive understanding of what his listener most needed to hear.

But the ghost eater seemed to know what Talys wanted. He gave the colonel an unnervingly level stare, a mixture of hate and anger in his eyes. "You captured me because you want to learn how to make an army of ghost eaters."

It was dangerously close to half the truth but comfortably missed the rest. “No. My vision is greater than that. I want to understand the ghost eater phenomenon and find a way to combine it with Wizards’ magic so that anyone could be raised from the dead, yet still live a real, natural life. It would keep us from having to worry about casualties in war, yes, but there is so much more to it than that. *Anyone* could be resurrected. Humans would no longer be subject to the tyranny of death. Wouldn’t you like to see that? Isn’t there anyone you’ve loved who has been taken from you?”

The ghost eater stared at him incredulously for a moment. Then, softly, he began to laugh.

“You Enemies have been here for three-hundred winters,” he said quietly. “And you haven’t learned one damned thing.”

Talys sat speechless, astounded by the resistance. It was as if the ghost eater was totally oblivious to anything he had said. That had been his trump card—the natural desire of anyone to want to cheat death, to be reunited with lost loves. And this man simply did not care. “Aren’t you listening?” he demanded.

The ghost eater did not reply, only sat shaking his head, as if he had just witnessed some supreme folly.

“Very well, then.” Talys rose to his feet. The ghost eater was not human, was without feeling or comprehension. That left only the crudest of routes to the knowledge he needed.

Talys turned to where his aide waited by the door and nodded his head sharply. She left, returning a minute later with a string of armored soldiers behind her. The men carried knives, hacksaws, pitch, and braziers of hot coals. The ghost eater’s eyes widened with understanding.

“If you won’t cooperate and give us what we want willingly,” Talys said with soft menace, “then we’ll get our information without your consent. Begin the experiments.”

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It was the next day before Johann found a way into the fort. At first, he had thought to simply disguise himself as a soldier, walk in through the gates, and learn what he could about Gwendith and the ghost eater’s whereabouts. After that, he would

do his best to devise some means of freeing them that wouldn't result in all three of them getting killed.

Unfortunately, it looked like his plans wouldn't even get past the first step.

*Too damned efficient*, he thought, aiming a baleful glare at the two gate guards, who were scrupulously checking the passes of everyone who either entered or left Fort Reed. *One of those passes wouldn't be hard to fake—if only I knew what they said in the first place.*

He had briefly contemplated creating an illusion that would divert the guards while allowing him to slip through the gates behind them. The biggest problem was that anything spectacular enough to lure them away from their posts was bound to attract attention. Which was the last thing he wanted, because it would only result in more alert guards and increased security. Another problem was that, if he had to sustain a complicated illusion for long, it would drain his strength to the point where he might not be able to create another when he really needed it.

He also considered attempting invisibility. But that was problematic as well—invisibility for him tended to be a matter of degree. He could mask himself well enough so that, if he was still and in a shadowy spot, a person might walk right past him without ever guessing he was there. Hiding himself well enough to stroll past two alert soldiers in the bright daylight required an entirely different level of ability, one he didn't think he possessed.

So instead he had spent the morning loitering outside the fort, in front of one of several small taverns that seemed to make up the mainstay of the town's business establishments. Nothing surprising there—Fort Reed had originally come into being due to a farmer's lucky gold strike, which quickly resulted in an influx of men looking to make their fortunes fast. The fort had been built to protect the mines and keep order amongst the miners. Brothels, gambling houses, and taverns had naturally accrued to such a place. Someday, the gold would run out, and Fort Reed would either become a respectable farming community once again, or else go back to woods and wilderness.

At any rate, the sight of a half-drunk miner slouched in front of a tavern could be nothing new to the gate guards, and Johann felt safe with the disguise. The illusion of a long, tattered duster over his real clothes provided all the deception needed; the

soldiers' own imaginations filled in the details. Like most people Johann knew, they saw what they expected to see, and only a few subtle cues were needed to help them along.

As he sat and wondered what to do next, the sound of hoof beats approached down the dusty road. It was not just the isolated clop-clop of one or two horses but the low rumble of a large contingent. He glanced in the direction of the sound, pretending only the most casual interest.

A large squad of soldiers made their way through the bustling town, their uniforms covered with road dust. In the front of the formation rode perhaps twenty horsemen, and twice the number of foot soldiers followed behind. At their head was a man who caught Johann's attention immediately—tall, imposing, with the heavily-muscled build of a wrestler. He was mounted on a white horse, which would have been impressive had the red clay dust not turned its coat a bizarre shade of orange.

The company clattered up to the gates, which swung open to receive them. For a moment, the formation broke apart, men and horses jostling each other to get through an opening not nearly big enough for them all. Seeing his chance, Johann came to his feet and used the confusion to fall in behind the foot soldiers, the illusion of the duster transformed into that of a private's uniform.

*At last!* he thought jubilantly as he passed unnoticed through the gates. *Now to make myself inconspicuous.*

He slipped away from the milling soldiers, who were quickly forming up into ordered ranks once again. Looking as if he knew where he was going and had every right to go there, Johann was starting off across the large yard, when Colonel Talys came out of the main body of the fort.

"Colonel Ebrim," Talys said with distaste.

The burly man on the white horse gave Talys a withering look of contempt. "Colonel Talys. I have orders from the Citizens' Assembly, giving me authority over this detestable business. They've finally seen that answers won't be found in books but on the battlefield. You are to immediately hand...the creature...over to me."

Talys' brows drew together in anger, then quickly smoothed out again. "At least hear my reports on the matter, Colonel. I have been experimenting on the subject since

yesterday, and I believe that I have made some progress on the question that awaits us in the mountains.”

“You’ve found a way of destroying it?”

“Perhaps of controlling it. Of—”

Ebrim snorted and waved a negating hand. “Fine, fine. I’ll read your report later. Right now, I’m taking your creature back to the base camp with me. Fire may not be practical, but I’m sure this one will show me some other way of annihilating *it*.”

Talys’ hands curled into fists. “No! You can’t move him—it’s too risky—”

“That’s my decision, Colonel. Now....”

*They’re talking about the ghost eater*, Johann realized in horror. He remembered that he was supposed to be a soldier passing casually through the yard and got his feet moving again. The voices faded away behind him. *I’ve got to find out more. There must be guards—someone I can talk to who knows what’s been going on here. Who might be able to tell me if we’ve got a prayer in hell of getting him away from them again.*

Straightening his shoulders and trying to look purposeful, Johann began his search.

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Gwendith moaned and tried to peel her eyes open. Something was wrong, that much understanding forced its way through the heavy fog that wrapped around her mind. Her tongue felt dry and swollen, and nausea nestled in her belly. A terrible lassitude gripped her limbs and threatened to pull her back down into oblivion.

*Crippleweed?* she wondered groggily. But no, crippleweed wasn’t this strong. Something else then. She tried to remember what she might have been given, couldn’t.

The room she was in was unfamiliar—a simple box with four plaster walls and no windows. She lay on a cot in the center of it, a small table with an oil lamp to her right. It was cold, and she realized that she wore only a thin shift. When she reached blindly to pull up a blanket to cover herself, her arm stubbornly refused to move. With a great effort, she turned her head and saw that she had been securely strapped to the bed with a heavy leather cuff.

*I'm in the asylum?* she thought, confused. She hadn't expected to be there, somehow. The last thing she remembered was....

"Ghost eater?" she tried to say. But her mouth was so dry the words came out as a distorted whistle.

A shadow came between her and the lamp. Beoch knelt down by the bed, taking her bound hand tenderly in both his own. "Shh. It's all right, Gwenny. It was all just a bad dream."

"W-water?" she managed to croak. He stood up for a moment, returning with a pitcher and cup. The tepid water tasted like the finest wine to her parched tongue, and she had to restrain herself not to gulp it down too fast. When she had finished, she let her head drop tiredly back against the pillow. Her thoughts were slightly clearer than they had been, but even so her memories were nothing but disjointed fragments. One image rose up out of them all, sharp and sure—a young native with a gentle smile that warped the death's head tattooed over his features.

"What happened...the ghost eater?"

A shadow went over Beoch's face. His hand tightened on her own. "You're in the asylum, Gwenny. Don't you remember? You...you had another breakdown, at General Paywin's party. We found you lying in the garden, moaning. Don't you remember?"

No. No, that wasn't right, she was certain of it. Almost certain. "I...I left," she whispered, fighting to hold onto memories and thoughts that tried to fly away like brightly-colored birds. "There was a woman...Stands-in-Smoke...and No Tongue...and the ghost eater."

But Beoch was shaking his head. "You've been incoherent ever since we found you that night. Colonel Talys and some of his men helped me put you in a carriage and bring you back here, to Aneirach and the asylum. You haven't been out of my sight the entire time." He stroked her forehead gently. He hadn't been so loving towards her since...she couldn't remember. "It was all just a dream. No matter how frightening or terrible your memories seem...it was all just a dream. There's no such thing as a ghost eater."

"No." She pulled back, sudden fear seizing her. "No, he came looking for me. He said I was needed, he said—"



*That I was sane. That I was magic.*

Her heart sank as she recognized what anyone else would say if she told them that. Wish fulfillment. A lonely, desperate madwoman—of course she dreamed up an exotic young man to come tell her that she was something special. That she wasn't crazy, that her insanity was really some magic power no one else recognized.

*No, that can't be true. The ghost eater's real, he's....*

It was hard to think with the drugs clouding her mind. Hard to remember anything clearly. Or else she couldn't remember things clearly because they were already starting to fade, just like any other dream.

"No," she whispered again, looking up at Beoch for some kind of confirmation that her travels of the last few weeks hadn't just been a warped perception of the trip back to the asylum.

His face went dark, and for a moment she thought she saw what might have been either rage or fear flicker in his eyes. Then he suddenly pulled away and stumped towards the door. "It's the doctor's potions talking," he said gruffly, not looking back at her. "Once you're better, I'll take you away from here. We'll find ourselves a little house somewhere far out in the country, where no one will bother us ever again." The door closed behind him.

A man in a purple doctor's coat appeared at the edge of her sight. He must have been lurking in the room outside her range of vision. She felt horribly exposed, strapped to a bed with only a thin shift to cover her. It was a trick she had experienced at the asylum before, the use of humiliation to degrade the patient's sense of self and to emphasize the power the doctors held over her. It had always made Gwendith feel violated in some subtle way.

"I'm glad you're awake and coherent," the doctor said with a friendly smile. "I take it as a great sign of improvement." He paused, then gave her an earnest look. "I spoke with Colonel Talys when they brought you here. The colonel said you had talked with him at the party shortly before your collapse. He mentioned that you seemed very eager to share your visions with someone, as if exorcising them from you somehow. I think that he's likely right. I encourage you to feel free to talk to me about your most

recent...relapse. Anything you remember about the hallucinations, no matter how trivial. This 'ghost eater' in particular seems intriguing. Would you like to talk about him?"

Suspicion tried to seep through the fog in her mind. They had never encouraged her to talk about her visions before. "No...no. Not right now. Is the colonel here?"

"Oh no, he had to go back to his command. You should be honored that such an important man escorted you this far out of his way." He hesitated, then moved towards the door. "Perhaps we'll talk later, then. I'll send in an assistant with something for you to drink. It will help you rest."

The door shut softly. Gwendith went limp against the restraints, all the tension draining out of her. The doctor was lying—had to be lying. She *remembered* the ghost eater, remembered talking to him and traveling with him. But the memories felt oddly disconnected, as though they were only things she had read in a book. *The potions*, she told herself frantically. *It's just an effect of the potions.*

She moaned softly, feeling sick. It had to be true. Had to be. If it wasn't, if the ghost eater was nothing more than a product of her deranged mind....

A tear slipped down her cheek, warm and wet against her skin.

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Johann settled himself near the hearth in the fort's mess hall. Dinner was long over, and the room was now filled with off-duty soldiers taking advantage of the space to drink, play games, and share in the general camaraderie. Because there were so many new faces from Ebrim's contingent of soldiers, Johann hoped that anyone from the fort who saw him would simply assume that he had come with Ebrim, and anyone who had come with Ebrim would think him assigned to the fort. So far it had worked, especially when he combined it with a faked cough and runny nose to put off anyone looking for some friendly banter.

He had been here half a day, and he still didn't know where Gwendith was being held. The ghost eater, yes, although he gathered that some of those higher in the fort's chain of command were a bit upset at all the gossip concerning their undead prisoner. Apparently they had hoped to maintain some kind of secrecy concerning him, which worried Johann. The easiest way to make the ghost eater—or at least his

whereabouts—secret again would be to whisk him away in the middle of the night with only a select few aware of it. Which in turn meant that Johann might not hear of it, and the ghost eater might disappear beyond all hope of rescue.

Not that there seemed much hope of rescuing him now. Or Gwendith, for that matter.

The outside door opened, letting in a gust of cold night air. Johann glanced casually over his shoulder, then froze. There was no mistaking the hulking frame and tangled brown beard of one of the newcomers. *Beoch! Oh, Wizards, if he recognizes me—*

Johann ducked his head and tried to remember if anyone had taken a close enough look at him earlier that the illusion of a nondescript face would be noticed. His heart pounded frantically. Beoch was working with Colonel Talys—and had always despised Johann. No doubt he would turn him over to the colonel without a second thought.

But...if anyone here knew where Gwendith was being held, Beoch did.

“—Colonel Talys will listen to me,” Beoch was insisting in his usual bellow. His companion, a man in a purple doctor’s coat, looked skeptical. “He will! I’ve helped him ever since Fort Ironwood. I told him that the phoenix stones I used in my forge were disappearing—”

“He already knew that the phoenix stones were going out.”

Beoch waved a negating hand. “Even so, who do you think made the suits of armor? The colonel entrusted *me* with the task. We spoke together often when he came to check on my progress. He’ll listen to me about Gwendith.”

One of the soldiers near the door sat up straight, aiming a look of hate at Beoch. “Your wife killed my best friend. Shot him in the shoulder, so that he bled to death in front of my eyes! That woman ought to be in the brig awaiting trial, not in some fancy quarters—”

“It’s an old storage room,” the doctor corrected tiredly.

“—being seen to by our own sawbones!”

Beoch drew himself up, so that he towered over the soldier. “Gwendith’s a very sick woman. It wasn’t her fault.”

“Not her fault? Cavorting around the countryside with muddies—”

“No!” Beoch slammed his fists down on the nearest table, making everyone jump. “That’s a lie! She didn’t go with them voluntarily! She wouldn’t have chosen to run off with an undead abomination, rather than stay with her own husband! She was their prisoner—she was the victim! Wizards only know what she must have suffered at their hands. She was scared and sick, and didn’t know what was going on. It was the fault of those accursed muddies and that bastard Johann. If I ever see him again, I’ll kill him myself!”

For a moment, Beoch just stood there, staring wildly at everyone, as if challenging them to disagree. When no one spoke, he turned on his heel and went back out into the night. For a moment, all was quiet. Then voices began to murmur, quickly swelling to a crescendo of gossip. The soldier whose friend Gwendith had killed glared at the closed door, refusing to answer the insistent questions of those gathered around him.

Johann eased himself back in his chair, trying to assimilate everything he had just learned. First off, Gwendith was being held not in the brig, but in a storage room somewhere inside the fort itself. Chances were it would be somewhere on the lowest floor of the main building, near the utilitarian rooms and away from the quarters of the higher-ranking officers. Second, she was being attended by a doctor, which suggested she had been hurt in the fight. He could only hope that she wasn’t so badly wounded that she wouldn’t be able to walk when the time came.

He frowned slightly, Beoch’s first comments nagging at his brain. Something about the phoenix stones going out. He knew little of the residual magic that the Wizards had left behind in the form of the stones. Smiths used them in their forges, potters in their kilns, and a few affluent families in their kitchens and bakeries. Rowe’s house in Whitefoam had such amenities. Apparently, this last remnant of Wizard magic was dying. But what did that have to do with Colonel Talys, Beoch, or the ghost eater?

*Priorities first*, he decided. He had to rescue Gwendith. Finding her room shouldn’t be too difficult, now that he had some idea of where it was—he had only to look for the guards. Actually getting in would be more of a problem. And as for freeing

her—well, he hoped that the ghost eater's spirits would deign to watch out for him as well, because he was going to need all the help he could get.

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Gwendith dozed restlessly, her body fighting to rid itself of the doctor's potions. Sweat bathed her skin, which only seemed to add to the chill that penetrated her thin shift. Attendants came and went at intervals she couldn't judge, allowing her to empty her bladder into a bedpan. She had some vague notion that it might be night, and she dreaded the morning when the doctor would return and dose her into oblivion once again.

Her body ached horribly from being restrained in the same position for so many hours. Once she begged an attendant to release her, but he claimed that she had tried to mutilate herself earlier and refused to even loosen the straps. Another time she woke from a painful half-sleep only to see an Ahkan'i man standing over her, long rabbit ears sticking out incongruously. "I told you not to want anything too badly," he said in disgust. "But you went and just handed your whole soul over to the needfinder, didn't you? You and that fool ghost eater go together like bow and string!"

She might have tried to make some reply, but if so it was lost in dreams.

The troubled sleep ended at last, and she woke feeling not quite as devastatingly tired and confused as she had been earlier. The events of the last few weeks seemed more solid in her mind—but then again, all of her visions had seemed completely and utterly real at the time. If what Beoch and the doctor had said was true....

*And why would Beoch lie?* she asked herself in despair. *There's no reason for it.*

*There is one test I can make. I dreamed that I no longer hungered for crippleweed. If the hunger doesn't come back....*

Unless she really had lost her addiction because her troubled mental state had prevented her taking any on the trip to the asylum.

*I could go on like this forever, never deciding one way or another,* she realized miserably. How did one prove what was real and what was hallucination? She tried to remember what it had been like not to question her own perceptions of reality and failed. Somewhere over the last three years, it had become habit.

She faded in and out, the lingering drugs and her own exhausted body scattering her thoughts. Only the soft scuff of the door opening pulled her back to a semblance of consciousness. She forced herself to look up, saw a nondescript attendant slip into the room. With a sigh, she let her head fall back.

“Gwendith?”

Shocked, she opened her eyes to see Johann in his battered green coat, dark circles of exhaustion ringing both eyes. “Johann?”

He grinned faintly. “Who’d you think it was? The Wizards in their next coming?”

Giddy delight fought through the drug haze, made her feel like floating. “It’s true! It wasn’t a dream! Our Ways—Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue—the ghost eater—all real!”

“I’m afraid so.” He crossed the room quickly, put a loose bundle of clothing down on the table, and began to work at her restraints. “Wizards, Gwendith, what did they do to you? Never mind—there’s no time now. I’ve been using my Way all day, and I’m about at the end of my strength. I started off as a soldier, then switched to one of the civilian servants they have working here, so I could get your clothes and weapons out of Beoch’s quarters.”

“Where are we?”

“Fort Reed. Then I had to be one of your attendants. This has *not* been an easy day for me.” He stepped back, while she sat up and rubbed her numb wrists and feet. “How are you feeling? Are you hurt?”

“No.” The room spun madly around, and she had to grip the edge of the bed to steady herself. “But they drugged me.”

“I know.” He smiled tiredly. “I encountered one of the doctor’s assistants on his way here with some concoction for you. I managed to convince him that orders had changed, and only soldiers were to be allowed in with you from now on. Then I used the potion he gave me to, ah, *enhance* the whiskey of the guards outside the room. They’re both passed out in the hall. Hopefully no one will find them at this time of night.”

She slid off the edge of the bed, then half-grabbed and half-fell onto Johann. She took several deep breaths, struggling not to vomit, then gave up and let her stomach rid itself of anything that might be left of the potions. Johann winced but didn’t let go of her.

“Can you make it?” he asked.

She wiped her mouth. “I don’t have much choice, do I?” He started to hand her the bundle of clothes and weapons, but she shook her head. “No time, and I don’t think I can fight anyway. Do you have anything to defend yourself with?”

He took out a large, wicked-looking knife. “I, er, *obtained* this in town earlier today. Just in case.”

She nodded, forgoing the question of whether or not he could actually use it. “What about the ghost eater? Where is he?”

Johann hesitated, then looked away. “I don’t think we can help him. We’ll have to settle for getting you out of here now and trying for him later.”

Guilt went through her—if her other memories were true, then surely the last ones were as well. “I...I betrayed him, didn’t I?”

Johann didn’t meet her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“I didn’t...I don’t understand what happened. Talys caught me that day in Haynesville, when we went for supplies. I remember talking to him, and...somehow I ended up agreeing to lead the ghost eater into an ambush. But...it feels like recalling a dream. I don’t understand how I could have done such a thing.”

He shook his head. “There’s no time for that now. We have to get you out of here.”

Leaning heavily on his arm, she allowed him to lead her out of the tiny room where Talys and the doctor would have broken her mind and spirit. The two guards lay on the floor outside, drooling, and she stopped to relieve them of their rifles. The guns were heavy, but she had the feeling that, if they escaped, they would need all the weaponry they could get.

No one stirred in the corridors, and Gwendith guessed that it was the wee hours before dawn. They made their way as quickly as she could manage to a side door and slipped outside. The night air was cold and bit cruelly through Gwendith’s thin shift, but it helped revive her a little. The sky was clouded over, and the only illumination came from torches set along the walls. The faint, incongruous sounds of someone hitching a cart came on a wind laden with the smell of rain.

“What’s that?” she whispered hoarsely.

“I don’t know.” Moving as quietly as they could, they rounded the square building in the direction of the noise. A large cart was drawn up to a structure that was probably a granary. The cart was weighted down by what appeared to be a large, iron coffin bound heavily with chains. A group of men and women hurriedly loaded wooden crates, carefully arranging them to conceal the coffin. The workers didn’t wear uniforms but instead dressed in ordinary clothing. Had Gwendith met them anywhere else, she would simply have thought them a small family of traders on their way to market.

She glanced at Johann and saw that he had gone pale in the dim light. “What is it?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “Unless I miss my guess, it’s the ghost eater. They were going to move him—only I didn’t think it would be so soon.”

She swayed and snatched at his arm for support. “We have to help him!”

“What, the two of us alone, surrounded by hundreds of soldiers? What would that accomplish?”

“We can’t just leave him here!”

“We have to.” He patted her hand awkwardly. “But you’ll keep an eye on that cart with your Way. We’ll have a chance to get him away from them.”

Gwendith wasn’t sure whether Johann actually believed his brave words or not. They watched in silence as the disguised soldiers finished loading the cart and climbed into it themselves. The driver clicked his tongue, and the horses moved forwards, one snorting a protest at the late hour. As the cart approached the gate, the soldiers on duty hurriedly swung it open. Johann grabbed her hand and dragged her forwards, until they were dangerously close to the gate guards.

One of the horses pulling the cart reared suddenly, spooking the other as it did so. The cart rolled back, one wheel dropping sharply into a ditch. As the gate guards ran to grab the horses and stop the slide of crates, Johann and Gwendith slipped past into the night.



## CHAPTER TEN

Rain came with the dawn, cold and merciless and bitter as tears. They stopped long enough for Gwendith to change into real clothes, but even so she was shivering and wet when they stumbled exhausted into the camp where Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue awaited them. The cousins had constructed a small shelter of pine boughs and blankets. Stands-in-Smoke crouched in the entrance, blocking their way and glaring at them. *No*, Gwendith corrected, *at me*.

"I see you managed to free the traitor," Stands-in-Smoke said icily. "Did you save one of your own and leave the ghost eater to rot?"

"I couldn't get near him last night," Johann replied tiredly. "But they're moving him somewhere—westward. Gwendith's keeping track of him. He's in a slow-moving cart that's going to be bogging down every few feet in this rain. If we hurry, we may be able to get ahead of them and set up an ambush."

The last words belied his haggard appearance. Johann's face was drawn, and he looked to have aged five years in the previous night. Purple rings encircled his eyes like bruises, and all the color had drained from his lips. The rain plastered his white-blond hair to his head, making him look like a drowned man.

Stands-in-Smoke's lip curled into a sneer. "As if I'd trust *her* to take me anywhere, after what she did. Tell me why you did it, Outlander woman. And why you came back. Wasn't the ghost eater enough—did your masters send their hunting-dog back for No Tongue and me as well? Well, bitch, aren't you going to say anything?"

She had emerged from the shelter as she spoke, until her face was only inches from Gwendith's. Helpless rage filled her eyes, and for a terrifying moment Gwendith thought that Stands-in-Smoke might burn her to ash where she stood.

"I...don't have an answer to your questions," Gwendith said softly, lowering her gaze. Guilt and confusion waged a battle in her gut. "Talys captured me in Haynesville, and...somehow...I agreed to do what I did. He said he would study the ghost eater, find a way to bring my daughter back to life."

“The ghost eater already told you that wasn’t possible!”

“I know. I know! But he made it sound so...real. I believed him, even though I can see now that I shouldn’t have, that I shouldn’t have done it—”

Stands-in-Smoke snorted contemptuously. “I’m sure. You’re a poor liar, Gwendith. And to think that you almost had me convinced that Rhylachans might have some redeeming virtues after all. Tell me why I shouldn’t just kill you now.”

Gwendith resisted the urge to look in the direction of the weapons she and Johann had brought back. She had already betrayed the ghost eater. She didn’t want to kill Stands-in-Smoke for an encore.

*If* she could get to the guns fast enough, before Stands-in-Smoke set her hair and clothes on fire. The rain might help her there, might slow the flames just long enough—

No Tongue suddenly shoved his way between them, his back to Gwendith and his angry stare fixed on Stands-in-Smoke. His shoulder-length hair brushed against Gwendith’s face; it smelled pleasantly of smoke and pine needles.

*Needfinder.*

Gwendith shook her head sharply, wondering why such a strange word had popped into her thoughts, particularly at a moment like this. Stands-in-Smoke’s eyes widened, and she fell back from No Tongue. “A needfinder? Colonel Talys is...a needfinder?”

No Tongue nodded.

“How—are you sure?”

He looked once at Gwendith, his brown gaze deep and unnerving. She felt as if he had peered straight into her soul.

“You read her thoughts, to see if she would betray us again, if I would have to kill her? You saw that Talys had tampered with her mind?” Stands-in-Smoke guessed.

Gwendith blanched. “You read my thoughts?”

He shrugged, and she felt an odd sense of inevitability. No Tongue’s way of saying that he had no choice.

Anger surged through her. “If you could see that something had been done to me, why didn’t you speak up earlier? Before the ghost eater was captured?”

“He doesn’t listen all the time,” Stands-in-Smoke snapped. “Who’d want to be constantly bombarded by other people’s thoughts? He blocks them out, unless there’s a need to look. And Talys did his work well enough that none of us realized anything was wrong until it was too late.”

“But what did he *do* to me?”

Stands-in-Smoke sighed, crossed her arms over her chest, and leaned wearily back against a tree. “Needfinders can’t read a person’s mind, not the way that a thought-whisperer like No Tongue can. But they do have an ability to sense what a person needs the most. Wants the most.”

“Rabbit warned us about that. He said that it wasn’t good to want things too much.”

“I remember. But we didn’t know enough to understand what he meant. Needfinders don’t simply know what people want, though. It’s almost as if they use that need as a crack to force their way into their victim’s soul. Once they have that foothold, they can convince people to do...whatever they want, almost.” Her eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion. “Only people don’t usually break free of a needfinder’s hold. After all, he’s giving them what they want most, even if it is for a price.”

Gwendith shook her head miserably. “He had me. He said he would bring Caitlin back to life, just as she had been. That she could have her whole life ahead of her once again. I would die myself in exchange for that.”

Johann closed his eyes briefly, in grief and sympathy. “What happened, then? You and the ghost eater were arguing just before you warned us about the trap.”

Not even the lingering effects of the potions could obscure that bitter memory. “The ghost eater told me that he’d had some kind of dream-vision. He said he went to the land of the dead...that he saw Caitlin. She told him to tell me to stop.”

She stuck her hands in her belt to keep them from shaking. “It was like I was asleep and someone threw a bucket of cold water on me. I realized what I was doing and tried to warn everyone. But it was too late.”

“Not for all of us.” Stands-in-Smoke sounded subdued. Then she looked up, meeting Gwendith’s eyes squarely. “Come on. We’ve got to hurry if we want to get the ghost eater back.”

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By sundown, the rain had slackened to a drizzle, and then finally stopped altogether, but the clouds still looked threatening. Gwendith tried to take the weather as a good omen; she had been worried that the rain would keep their guns from firing. If that had happened, the ambush would have degenerated into hand-to-hand combat—and they couldn't hope to win.

Earlier, she had asked Johann if he couldn't cast some illusion that would frighten the guards and swing things their way. Looking exhausted, he had simply shaken his head. He had tried to use his Way and had been completely unable to do so. He had overextended himself at the fort, and there was no knowing how long it might be before he could do anything more.

Gwendith had monitored the cart all day with her Way. Just as Johann predicted, the wheels bogged again and again, but the disguised soldiers had nevertheless pressed on. Gwendith guessed that they were under strict orders to cover as much ground as possible. Or else they didn't relish the thought of waiting out the storm with the undead at their backs.

The light was failing, and the soldiers would have to stop soon. There was a good camping place only a short distance up the road, and they were betting that the soldiers would head for it. The ambush had been set up in a spot where the road wound between two wooded hills, well away from any farmhouses or small communities. Gwendith and Stands-in-Smoke crouched in the pines to one side of the road, while No Tongue and Johann waited on the other. The two cousins were armed with the guns that Gwendith had stolen from the drugged soldiers back at the fort.

Gwendith set her back to a pine tree and closed her eyes, restlessly taking one last "look" at their quarry. Her inner sight flitted down the road, circling the small cart and soldiers. One of the men cursed, but the rest remained silent and downcast. The youngest, a boy of perhaps seventeen, kept glancing nervously back at the piled boxes, as if he expected the ghost eater to emerge from them at any moment.

"They're almost here," Gwendith reported softly. Then she sent her sight down the road in the other direction. After all, it wouldn't do to have an innocent traveler stumble into the middle of a melee.

But the travelers she found were far from innocent.

A group of twenty mounted soldiers came down the road, moving at a fast clip despite the mud. They wore oiled capes and hats to keep off the rain, and their weapons were wrapped to keep them dry. The soldiers didn't speak, but their pace indicated a clear purpose and a goal close at hand.

"Wizards," she hissed, horrified. "Soldiers! They must be coming to meet the cart and give it an escort, now that it's gotten past all the prying eyes in Fort Reed and the surrounding communities."

Stands-in-Smoke swore softly. "How long until they get here?"

"Not long. We're going to have to do this fast and get out of here quickly."

"Or else abandon the plan altogether."

"No. This is our last chance. He'll be heavily guarded from here on out."

Stands-in-Smoke gave her an odd look. "You're loyal for a Rhylachan."

"It's my fault the ghost eater was captured in the first place."

"So if it had been, say, Johann whom Talys had worked his trickery on, you wouldn't be here?"

Gwendith shot her an annoyed look, but Stands-in-Smoke only nodded thoughtfully.

The faint creak of wagon wheels came to them through the gathering gloom. Gwendith hurriedly rolled onto her knees, peering out between the brush they had arranged to conceal themselves. Stands-in-Smoke did the same, and both women lifted their weapons and got ready to pick a target. The cart emerged from the bend in the road with nerve-racking slowness, and started in between the two hills. Gwendith kept her breath deep and controlled as she waited for the cart to pull even with her position. She caught a glimpse of the youngest man's face, and her heart contracted painfully. If she hadn't waited unusually late to wed, she might have had children his age.

Her fingers felt slick with sweat. *I've never done this before*, she reflected with a sinking heart. She'd fought in duels, the first at age fifteen, over which her father had come close to permanently exiling her from his salon and his teachings. And she'd killed the two soldiers during her capture. But she had never sat crouched and hidden, waiting to cold-bloodedly shoot unsuspecting passers-by.

It was the safest way, she knew, maybe the only way. But it didn't seem right—were these men and women truly her enemies, or were they simply unlucky enough to get the wrong assignment?

The cart was passing between the two groups now. Taking a deep breath, Gwendith aimed and shot the driver through the head.

There immediately came the flash and crack of the two weapons across the road, and the acrid smoke from Stands-in-Smoke's rifle blew into Gwendith's face. Gwendith discharged her other pistol, but missed. Two of the soldiers were dead, the other three digging their weapons out and firing wildly at attackers they couldn't see. Someone killed another soldier, leaving only two.

Both of them had discharged their rifles and were hurrying to reload. With a wild yell, Gwendith burst out of hiding, saber drawn. One man shouted and brought up his weapon, but his haste in loading had been too great, and it failed to fire. Then Stands-in-Smoke was racing past, flames coruscating about her hands. She leapt on the soldier, fingers driving into his eyes as his hair ignited. A moment later, Gwendith's saber silenced his screams.

The last soldier shrieked and fell back. "Take him prisoner!" Stands-in-Smoke yelled. A moment later, No Tongue appeared, rifle leveled at the man's chest. The soldier stopped and dropped his own weapon to the ground.

Gwendith ran to the cart, heart hammering. She shoved crates off the back, into the mud, until her hands touched the cold iron of the coffin. "I found him!" she cried, getting ready to clamber into the cart.

"Stop!" shouted Stands-in-Smoke. There was a grim set to her face. "Move away from the cart, Gwendith. Well away."

"Why?"

"You're not opening that coffin." She went to No Tongue's side, took the gun from him, and pointed it at the soldier's head. "He is."

Their captive was the youngest soldier, Gwendith realized with a sinking heart. His face went pale, and he looked terrified. "No—please, no!" he whimpered.

"Don't hurt him, Stands-in-Smoke," Gwendith pleaded softly. "He's just a boy."

“I won’t hurt him. Not so long as he cooperates.” Stands-in-Smoke waited until Gwendith had stepped back from the cart, then motioned with her gun. “Get the keys.”

The boy hesitated, then complied, going down on his knees and searching the body of one of the women. He kept his eyes averted from where a bullet had passed through her neck, leaving her to drown in her own blood. When he retrieved the ring, his hands shook so hard that the keys chimed together loudly.

“Don’t dawdle,” Stands-in-Smoke snapped. She looked pale, and there was a hint of fear in her eyes. Because of the soldiers coming, Gwendith wondered, or for some other reason?

Under the unwavering muzzle of the gun, the boy climbed onto the cart and began to release the locks that held the chains wound around the coffin. Then he unlocked the coffin itself. “Open it,” Stands-in-Smoke ordered coldly. But she moved back from the cart as she gave the order.

The boy swallowed fearfully and threw open the lid.

And horror emerged.

The thing that came out was a nightmare of blood and madness. A bullet had taken it in the face, blowing out eye and skull and brains, until half its head was gone. A hand with only stumps for fingers reached out towards the sky; its counterpart was nothing but a slag of charred bone and melted flesh. It was naked, and livid burns showed against torso and legs, organs protruding through a long slit in its belly. A spray of blood from another gunshot made a ragged halo across its lower stomach and thighs.

And for the first time, Gwendith realized the true penalty for not being able to die.

The soldier screamed in terror, but the ghost eater latched onto him instantly, *bhargha* lashing out and devouring his soul in a second. The boy’s life must have fueled some sort of healing, but the ghost eater’s injuries were so extensive that it didn’t show on the outside. For a moment, he crouched still over the body, neither moving nor speaking. A thin line of bloody drool dripped from one corner of his expressionless mouth. Then he slowly turned towards his companions, and there was neither recognition nor sanity in the single remaining eye.

*Oh Wizards*, Gwendith thought with a sudden, odd calm. There was no mind in that shell with a good portion of its brain gone. Just instinct. Just hunger.

*He's going to kill us all.*

The contingent of soldiers appeared from the west in a thunder of hooves.

"Get to cover!" Gwendith shouted. Caught between death on the road and death in the cart, she sprinted towards the bushes alongside the road, the others on her heels. It would take only a moment for the soldiers to connect the fleeing figures with the motionless forms on the road. Indeed, a shot cracked out, sending a plume of mud up directly in front of her. Heart pounding, she swerved back towards the cart, in time to see what remained of the ghost eater launch himself over the side and rush the approaching soldiers.

There came a burst of gunfire, and Gwendith flung herself down, skidding over the soggy ground and beneath the cart, where No Tongue and Johann already crouched. The horses hitched to it snorted and backed up, almost rolling a wheel over Johann's hand. No Tongue twisted around, reaching for her pistols, and she saw that he had already reloaded the two rifles. There came a closer gunshot, and then Stands-in-Smoke was jostling them for room.

Gwendith grabbed No Tongue's rifle, cautiously slid out from under the tailgate, and peered over the cart towards the road. Several of the soldiers' shots had probably hit the ghost eater—they could hardly miss at that range. But these men had come from some garrison other than Fort Reed and had no armor to protect them.

Then the ghost eater was among them. The first two soldiers died in seconds, falling from their saddles before their comrades even knew what was happening. The horses panicked and tried to run, throwing the less experienced riders. A few better horsemen forced their mounts forward, only to be dragged from their saddles, their bodies collapsing into lifeless husks a moment later. Fueled by soul after soul after soul, the *bhargha* flared, glowing with a white-hot light that made it look like a star fallen to earth.

Not allowing herself to think, Gwendith aimed and fired, took the next loaded weapon from No Tongue, and repeated the action. A moment later, she was joined by Stands-in-Smoke and Johann, who planted themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with her and enveloped the road in a haze of gun smoke.



Despite the vastly superior number of soldiers, the battle lasted only a few minutes. The survivors broke and fled in panic, their horses vanishing back the way they had come. Slowly, Gwendith lowered her weapon and looked dazedly at the battlefield. The ground was covered with the bodies of the fallen, and the smell of blood and bowels coated the air. A few horses that had been well trained for the sights, scents, and sounds of battle lingered riderless, their eyes showing white.

The ghost eater stood in the center of it all, motionless. The *bhargha* had healed his wounds; only dried blood remained, black against his bronze skin. Then, slowly, he sank to the ground, like a marionette with all its strings severed, his arms dangling limp and his legs folding at awkward angles.

No Tongue began to scream.

The sound was high, wild, a quavering wail that went on and on and on. His body jerked sharply, and he raked his nails down his face, as if he would gouge out his eyes. Stands-in-Smoke grabbed his wrists and pulled his hands away hard. "Stop! Block it! Block it out!"

No Tongue's screams died to a moan, then ended. He stood with his head down, shuddering hard, like a horse run too hard. "That's it," Stands-in-Smoke murmured encouragingly. "You can do it. Block him out. The pain isn't yours. Set it aside."

Gwendith tore her eyes away, to where the ghost eater sat brokenly, unmoving and silent. It was his pain, grief, and rage to which No Tongue gave voice. Agony spiked her heart, and she bit her lip hard, denying tears that she had no right to cry. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she began to walk over the battlefield towards him.

"Don't go near him!" Johann exclaimed, staggering after her despite the fact that he could barely stand for exhaustion. "He might kill you and never even know who you are!"

Gwendith paused, glancing back over her shoulder. "What else are we going to do? Sit here until those soldiers bring reinforcements?"

"It's too much of a risk!"

She turned back, started walking again. "I owe it to him."

She stopped when she was only a few feet away. He was so still that it was hard to believe he hadn't simply died. Only his hair moved, the wind brushing the black

strands like the hands of a lover. She felt suddenly that she ought to call his name, to summon him back from wherever he had wandered. But he had no name for her to speak.

“Ghost eater?” she asked softly.

He made no response. She walked around in front of him, where she could see his face. His expression was slack, eyes staring blankly at nothing. “Ghost eater? It’s me, Gwendith.” Cautiously, she touched her fingers to the back of his hand, but he made no response of any kind.

Guilt swamped her—this was her fault. She had let Talys’ men capture her, had let him enchant her, and had finally led the ghost eater into a captivity that had stripped away his mind. It would have been better if she had forced the soldiers to shoot her in Haynesville.

*Hindsight*, she thought ruefully. *And not something we have time for now.*

They captured some of the stray horses, soothing them as best they could. There was little they could do for the ghost eater save shove him on the back of one and tie his legs and hands to the saddle to keep him from falling off. Johann had found some trousers to cover the ghost eater’s nakedness, and they settled a coat with a bullet hole about his shoulders. Both were too large for him and, combined with his diminutive height, made him look like a child once he was on the back of the destrier.

“We’ll give him some time,” Gwendith said softly, staring up at him. “Perhaps he will come back to himself.”

Stands-in-Smoke sighed. She looked tired, as if she hadn’t slept for days. “If he doesn’t...we’ll have to commit him to the flames. It would be kinder than leaving him like this. And safer. The next time he hungers, if there’s no mind to control it, he could kill anyone around him. I don’t think he would want to exist like that, even if we could let him.”

*He didn’t want to exist the way he was before, either*, Gwendith thought sadly. The old one he spoke of must have been a disastrously poor judge of character, to pick him to be the next ghost eater. Nothing in his makeup seemed to have suited him for such an existence.

She went to her own mount, to which the lead of the ghost eater's horse was tied. As she swung up into the saddle, she looked around at the exhausted, miserable faces of her companions. "Where are we going?" she asked softly.

Johann lifted his head and stared at her with hollow, haunted eyes. Before today, she realized, he had never killed anyone. "Whitefoam. It's to the south, out of our way, but I have a friend there. Someone who will give us shelter, even if we are wanted by the army."

*His lover, the mysterious Rowe.* "All right." She kicked her horse into a canter, and they started forwards, passing the bloodstained bodies of men and horses. They had won a victory here. They had gotten the ghost eater back, fought off a contingent of soldiers, and survived. A victory.

But it sure as hell felt like defeat to her.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

The ghost eater lay still, eyes tightly closed. He had been...somewhere else. A cold, dark place, yes, but a safe place. A place far away from pain, far away from comprehension and thought. His mind turned inwards and tried to find that safety once again. He wouldn't leave it, he told himself fiercely. He wouldn't go back to the world outside.

But the peaceful oblivion he had hidden in refused to return. Instead, memories began to seep back, like dirty black water leaking into his mind. There had been pain, horrible pain. But he had borne it like an Ahkan'i warrior, hadn't he? He hadn't brought dishonor on himself by crying out. His brother Tihune would be proud.

But that line of thought led to another, black with the smell of burning flesh, the sight of cold eyes, the agony of not being able to escape, through either death or unconsciousness. Anything was better than going back there—even opening his eyes.

He lay on his back beneath the stars, the cool wind on his skin. A ring of cedar trees towered above him, illuminated by firelight. Somehow he had gotten away from that place of torment, but his soul tensed up, fearing new horrors to come.

"He's awake," someone said, and a moment later four shadows loomed over him: Rabbit, Little Deer, Owl, and Vulture.

"Well, now what?" Rabbit asked irritably. "The Enemies have broken him like a badly-made arrow."

Little Deer blew out a puff of breath that turned to steam in the chilly night air. "Vulture, you're the doctor. Is there anything we can do for him?"

Vulture came closer, thrusting his head down at the ghost eater's face. An unpleasant smell came from him as he ruffled his feathers. "I don't know. Disease I'm good at. But this one's hurt in his mind. Not responding to anything around him, not seeing, barely hearing. The *bhargha* is simply acting on instinct, healing his wounds and keeping the body alive, but there's no conscious thought directing it."

Rabbit cocked his head to one side, the mica gorget around his neck swinging back and forth. "Then this would be a good time to start him down the path he needs to take."

"Not now," Little Deer said with authority.

Rabbit looked at him resentfully. "Why not?"

Little Deer bent over to inspect the ghost eater, his breath warm against skin. "His mind isn't in the proper state. To try anything now might do more harm than good. We can't afford to waste him out of impatience."

"*You* say. I say different."

Little Deer raised up until he towered over Rabbit. His antlers seemed to cradle the moon. "The council of animals made *me* the leader in this. And *I* say we will wait and let Vulture do his work."

Rabbit gave him a resentful glare and hopped away.

"All right, then," Vulture said. "I've an idea of some things to try." He changed himself into man-shape and bent over the ghost eater, his hand extended. "Come on now, boy, don't dawdle."

*I'm not a boy, I'm a man*, the ghost eater started to say. He reached up and touched his face, felt only emptiness where the copper nose ring that would have marked him a man should have been. His ear pins were missing as well. Dismay filled him—the Enemies had taken everything from him. Everything.

Reluctantly, he took Vulture's hand and stood up. He found himself standing in front of a small, round house such as his own people lived in. The familiar sensation of deer hide touched his skin, and he looked down to discover himself dressed in the deerskin breechclout that he had worn before trying to disguise himself in Rhylachan clothing. His leggings were still missing, but the air felt warm now, so he was not uncomfortable.

Vulture went ahead into the house, and the ghost eater followed. The ceiling was so low he had to stoop over. A fire burned cheerily in the clay hearth in the center of the room, its scented smoke disappearing through the hole in the roof above. The dim light showed walls hung with split-cane mats and a bed covered with fur-lined blankets.

“You just lie down now,” Vulture instructed, waving vaguely at the bed. The ghost eater obeyed, then watched as Vulture moved about the house. The shadow he cast on the wall was winged, and in an odd way that was comforting.

Time seemed to stretch and blur after that, as if the ghost eater was caught in a state between waking and sleep. Sometimes he heard Vulture chanting healing songs; others, he smelled the scent of burning cedar and herbs. Once Vulture smoothed a salve over his chest, hands, and face, and the ghost eater wondered what was in it. Finally, Vulture took out a flint knife. Leaning over, he made a long slit down the ghost eater’s forehead, but there was no pain and no blood. Vulture pressed his lips to the wound, as if sucking something out. Then he moved away, taking what looked like an ugly lump of iron from his mouth.

“The immediacy of your pain,” Vulture said, studying the twisted iron thoughtfully. Then he flung it hard into the fire, where it vanished with a flash and the smell of sulfur. “And that’s all I can do for you, I’m afraid. It won’t seem quite so near, quite so raw, when you go back. You’ll have enough distance to function, to see clearly, and to go on. I wish I could do more.”

He came over and helped the ghost eater to his feet, then led him to the door. A small bearskin pouch lay on the ground outside. Vulture bent over and picked it up, and then handed it to the ghost eater. “One of the others must have gotten these for you,” he said.

Inside were a thin copper ring and two bone ear pins.

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The ghost eater opened his eyes, saw stars and a circle of cedars illuminated by firelight. Startled, he lifted his hand to his face, felt the coolness of his nose ring against his fingers. *Then it wasn’t just a dream*, he thought in wonder. At least, he didn’t think so. He remembered one of the soldiers tearing the ring away, so that it left a trail of blood dribbling down his chin, right before they—

*No.* He took a deep, shuddery breath. Not now. Later, maybe, but there was no time now. He had to find out where he was, whether he had truly escaped the room and

the metal-clad men, or whether this was only a brief respite before they inflicted even worse on him.

*I'm not bound*, he realized, cautiously moving his hands and feet. And someone had draped a blanket over him, as well as dressing him in Rhylachan trousers and coat. Turning his head slightly, he peeked out under lowered lids, saw firelight and a circle of dark shapes with their backs to him.

He swung into a crouch, moving fast to catch them off guard. Someone yelped, and he caught a glimpse of Stands-in-Smoke's fearful expression. Then everyone was scrambling back, putting distance between him and them. Except for Gwendith.

She had been sitting the closest, her back to him. Now she pivoted slowly about, an odd look of resignation on her face. He met her eyes, and memory came between them, sharp and cold as a wall of ice. She had betrayed him, had handed him over to Talys' sadistic torments.

The *bhargha* flared, tendrils uncurling to hang poised about his head in a glittering nimbus. "You," he whispered hoarsely: an accusation, a question.

She merely closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Rage filled him, but with it was mixed a grief for things lost: her smile, her laugh, and the trust that had been between them. To his surprise, the grief felt familiar, the same that had overwhelmed him when he had first returned home as ghost eater, only to find Siska-init's belly swelling with his brother's child. Then, he had thought he might die or go mad from the pain.

Somehow, this was worse.

He lunged forwards, grabbed her wrists, and jerked her to her feet. She flinched and tried to pull away, but he held her the way the iron manacles had held him. "*Why?*" he shouted at her. "*Why did you do this to me?*"

She stared at him, hopelessness hollowing out her eyes. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out, as if he held her by the throat rather than the wrists.

Johann had retreated to the other side of the fire. Now he moved slowly around, one hand outstretched in a placating gesture. "Please, don't kill her," he begged.

Kill Gwendith? He realized that the *bhargha* remained uncoiled, ready to strike. But she had never been in any danger. He couldn't kill her, couldn't even bring himself to hurt her, no matter what she had done to him.

He let go of her and put both hands over his eyes. The *bhargha* curled back into his bones and blood. He didn't want to deal with this, wasn't even certain he *could* deal with it. "Leave," he heard himself say softly. "Just go away. Go back to your own kind, Enemy woman. I never want you in my sight again."

He heard her boots crunch loud on fallen leaves and sticks. She made some small sound as she passed him by, like an animal in pain, but he was beyond caring.

There was silence for a long time after her footsteps had faded, broken only by the mutter of the fire, the far-off hoot of an owl. The ghost eater eventually let his hands fall; he stared blankly at the ground, mind empty of thought. He didn't know what to do next. Just surviving long enough to reach the next moment seemed a task too enormous to contemplate.

Johann cleared his throat and took a step closer, reaching out as if to lay a comforting hand on the ghost eater's shoulder. The ghost eater jerked away. "Don't touch me!" His eyes narrowed in sudden fury. "Why don't you leave with her, Enemy man? The old stories are right—your kind aren't human at all, just soulless monsters. I'm not bringing such poison back to my people, no matter what the animals say."

Johann paled a little but didn't move. "No, I'm not leaving. Not until you can stop shouting and start hearing."

"What did you say?" He stared at Johann, at the ugly pallor of his skin, the corn silk color of his hair. *Men who looked like that made me suffer, humiliated me, tormented me. I could make this one pay for it.*

"I know that you went through a great deal—"

"You know nothing, Enemy man."

Johann swallowed, nodded. "You're probably right. But I need for you to listen, not have a nervous breakdown. You're too damned dangerous for hysterics. You could kill me right now, kill all of us if you really wanted to. But I don't think that would help things in the long run, even if it did make you feel better for the moment. Which, if I



know you at all, it most likely wouldn't. I'm asking you to just hang on a little longer, don't eat anybody, and listen to what we have to say. All right?"

A part of him knew Johann was right, but he didn't care. "I won't listen to Enemies," he said and shoved Johann aside. Johann fell hard, scraping his hands in the dirt.

"Then listen to me," Stands-in-Smoke said, planting herself squarely in his way. They glared at one another, all the arguments, distrust, and dislike between them boiling to the surface.

"What could a Hut Sitter have to say to me?" he sneered.

Anger sparked in her eyes. "So that's how it is, is it? *You're* hurting, and *you're* mad, and you feel so damned sorry for yourself, and everyone else can just go to hell! Stop behaving like a child, and start acting like the warrior you say you are!"

"I am not acting like a child!"

"You're certainly whining enough for one! Just stop the self-pity for one second, and listen to us when we tell you that Talys is a needfinder!"

The words had the same effect as leaping into the river in winter. A retort died in his throat, and all the fury drained out of his mind, replaced by the icy beginnings of fear. "A needfinder?"

She and No Tongue both nodded.

He stared at the fire, at the stars, at the trees. If Talys was a needfinder...he was the most dangerous person the ghost eater had ever met. Maybe the most dangerous person in the world right now. There were stories of needfinders who had driven their people into orgies of war and death, which had resulted in the destruction of entire peoples. Stories of ones who had slept with every woman or man in a town, then laughed at the strife their actions caused. No needfinders had been born among the Ahkan'it for a very long time, but those that had been in the past were killed as soon as they were found out. It was simply too dangerous to do otherwise.

"What did he offer her?" he asked softly.

Johann picked himself up, brushing dirt and leaves from his sleeve. "Her daughter. Caitlin, restored alive and well."

"Tell me."

Horror rose in the ghost eater as he listened to Johann's explanation. Talys was cruel to use such a ploy, unless he truly believed in his own promises. Certainly he had seemed sincere when he confronted the ghost eater. That brief conversation made more sense now—Talys had hoped to use his Way, perhaps not knowing that a ghost eater would be immune to such persuasion. But even so, there were still parts that the ghost eater did not understand. What had Talys hoped to gain from his cooperation? And why the torture afterwards? The things done to him had been deliberate and seemed to follow some sort of pattern, but they had not been trying to get him to *tell* them anything. Somehow, it didn't fit with Talys' explanation of trying to raise the dead as living beings, or even of trying to make some kind of undying soldiers for his army.

Eventually, Johann's voice stumbled into silence. The ghost eater sighed and shoved his hair out of his eyes. He felt tired suddenly, as if he had not slept in years.

"You've got to understand," Johann said awkwardly. "This was her only child we're talking about. I don't think that it's unreasonable for a woman to be susceptible to that promise."

The ghost eater stared at him as if he had gone mad. "Why are you explaining that to me? Who wouldn't make such a choice?" He glanced worriedly at the forest around them. "I...should try to find Gwendith."

She had not gone far. The ghost eater followed her tracks down the slope of a ravine, to where a small creek raced, fed by earlier rain. At first, he mistook her for a stone, the way she sat hunched in on herself, her face pressed against her knees.

"I'm sorry," he called. "Johann explained about Talys."

She didn't move. He made his way to her and sank down on the wet ground a few feet away. The smell of rain hung heavy on the air. Spring peepers sang stridently, the sound dinning in his ears.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," he said again.

She shook her head but did not look up. "My fault," she said, and her voice was choked with tears.

"No. Talys is a needfinder. And even if he wasn't, who wouldn't give anything to get their child back? Once his needfinder's talent had convinced you that he could do it, that his words made sense...what other choice was there?" He sighed and looked up at

the few stars he could see through the web-like pattern of interlaced boughs. “Among my people, when an enemy attacks a town, all the men run out to fight, while the women and children flee. And if the men fall, the women turn and fight to protect the young ones.”

“It was my fault,” Gwendith said hoarsely. “My fault she died. I was supposed to protect her, and I didn’t. I might as well have killed her myself.”

The ghost eater frowned. “She died of sickness. What could you have done against that?”

“It wasn’t the influenza. I lied to you, because...because I just didn’t want to talk about it. Just didn’t want to have to go through remembering. She was murdered.”

“H-How?”

Gwendith sniffled, wiped her eyes with one hand. “It happened three years ago, on her tenth birthday. I’d bought her a new dress, white with frills and ribbons. She was so happy, so proud, and so beautiful. She showed it off to everyone we passed on the street. I stopped for a moment at the house of a friend—a gunsmith, who wanted to show me some pistols he had just completed. His daughter went outside with Caitlin, to look at their rabbit hutch. It...I lost track of time, it only seemed like a few minutes had gone by, and then there was Adrienne back by herself. I asked where Caitlin was, but she, she was young, and she could only say that a man had admired Caitlin’s dress and asked her to help him find a lost puppy....

“I wasn’t too worried at first...I went out to look for her, figured I’d find her in the street outside, but...she wasn’t there. I kept looking, but I couldn’t find her, and I started to get worried. I got Beoch and some friends, who got other friends, until it seemed like half the people in Aneirach were looking for her, but there was no trace. By the time it started to get dark I was so scared, terrified that I’d never see her again. I *needed* to know where she was, so badly...that I did.

“I’d never had any kind of Way before, never seen any visions, but at that moment when I needed to so much it came...something that had always been in me, maybe, but didn’t wake up until then. I saw...what happened to her.”

Gwendith rocked back and forth on her heels, and the silence stretched between them until he wondered if she even remembered he was there at all. When she finally

spoke, her voice was oddly flat, emotionless, as if she recited events that had happened to someone else.

“He was raping her. And when he was done, he put his hands around her little neck and strangled her to death.”

For a moment, the words made no sense. The immensity of the atrocity she described defied the ghost eater’s understanding. Things like that didn’t happen. Rape almost never occurred among the Ahkan’it, and not even most monstrous of men would think of harming a ten-year-old child in such a way. He had to have misunderstood her words. He had to.

“I came out of it screaming her name,” Gwendith went on, sounding numb. “I had seen a waterwheel against the sky in the vision, and I tore myself away from Beoch and ran to the nearest mill I knew of, outside of Aneirach. All the men ran after me—I don’t know what they thought at the time. There was a lot of undergrowth, and I remember pushing my way through, trying to get to the edge of the millpond. And there, on the bank, was that white dress she had been so happy to get, spotted with blood. Men were yelling, running past me into the water, but I couldn’t look. I just stood there and stared at that damned dress.”

Her voice caught on the raw edge of emotion. “It was my fault! People kept telling me that there was nothing I could have done, but they were wrong! I was the best fencing master in Aneirach. I was the one who was always trying to convince women that they could defend themselves and their children. I had the skills, and I had the weapons. I should have been able to keep my own daughter safe! Instead I let her be taken, let her be raped and murdered, and there should have been something that I could have done!”

She put her hands over her eyes, nails digging into her skin, and her body shook with sobs. “When Talys made his offer, I saw a way to do it all over again. I thought I could make everything all right, change the world so that it was as if none of that had ever happened, give Caitlin back everything my failure had taken from her! But instead I failed her a second time, and then failed you! I wish I had died with her that day, and then none of this would ever have happened!”

His heart broke at her anguish. He got to his knees and put his hands on her shaking shoulders. For a moment, she tried to draw away, to be strong. Then something in her seemed to surrender, and she crumpled against him.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. She returned the embrace, holding him with such desperation that it hurt, her hands tangling in his hair. He had not thought until that moment that he was going to weep, but suddenly he was crying for himself, for her, for her lost daughter, for a world in which such things could happen.

He thought that at some point Johann appeared on the crest of the hill above and watched them cling together, as if they both might fly apart into pieces otherwise. But if so, he left without speaking, and the ghost eater and Gwendith huddled together until dawn.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

It took them two days of exhaustion and misery to reach the outskirts of Whitefoam.

Contrary to its name, the town of Whitefoam was near neither the ocean nor a waterfall. Rather, it had been named after its founding family, aristocracy from old Rhylach who had managed to maintain their wealth and prestige in New Rhylach as well. The community was an agricultural one, consisting mainly of miles of open fields clustered around a small town, which offered whatever goods the farmers couldn't raise for themselves. It surprised Gwendith that Johann would spend time in such a bucolic area. She had always pictured him in expensive gambling houses, surrounded by glittering painted ladies and dashing rogues. Certainly that was the image he cultivated.

Right now, however, he would more likely be taken for a highwayman than a gambler with a taste for the rich life. *Or maybe the victim of a highwayman, left for dead,* she corrected. *He'll probably be arrested as a vagrant before he gets to his friend's house.* He had left them huddled in the shadows between a grain silo and a barn, hoping that the farmer who owned this property wouldn't pick today to come out and repair any damage winter had done to the buildings.

Johann had promised to be back as soon as possible with help, but she still didn't see how he expected them to travel inconspicuously through Whitefoam once he returned. *Unless he comes back with a bathtub, a new change of clothing, and three days of sleep to make us look normal again.* She glanced briefly at the ghost eater's tattooed features. *Scratch the part about normal.*

They could certainly use baths and sleep. Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue were so exhausted that pallor showed even under their darker skin, and Stands-in-Smoke had not complained about all things Rhylachan in at least a day. Riding horseback for long periods of time had done them no good, either—they'd been left so stiff that they could barely walk at the end of the day. Gwendith could sympathize; she was as unused

to the activity as they, and the pain she experienced when dismounting almost made her cry out. As for her own appearance, she didn't even want to imagine.

Only the ghost eater looked unscathed. If he felt any fatigue, it didn't show on his face, and not so much as a scar remained from his ordeal at the hands of the soldiers. *Not externally, anyway*, she thought, glancing at him where he sat close by her. She wished that there had been more time for them to talk over the last two days. But, since the night he'd awakened, they'd had only a few chance moments of privacy.

"What did they do to the man who killed your daughter?" he'd asked softly, as they were setting up camp one night.

She paused, biting her lip. "He was hiding in the bushes by the pond when we came up. They flushed him out and hung him from the nearest tree."

He'd nodded, hands stilling in the act of laying wood for the fire. "I know about needfinders, Gwendith. I've never met one, but I've heard stories. Believe me when I tell you that my capture wasn't your fault, that there wasn't anything you could have done against Talys. Not when he had such a powerful weapon to wield against you."

She had shut her heart to his words. "No. The responsibility is mine."

He looked up at her, eyes troubled but clear. "It isn't. No more than it is for Caitlin's death. Blame those who committed the crimes, Gwendith, not yourself. You hate to admit that anything is out of your control, beyond your power to correct, and in a way that is admirable. But you have to know when to let go of that, and quit holding yourself to impossible standards."

She had swallowed against an irrational threat of tears. "I'll try."

Now Gwendith became aware that the ghost eater was looking at her curiously. Shaking herself back to the present, she tried a weak smile. "Just worrying about Johann."

He nodded but didn't offer any platitudes.

The faint creak of wheels came to them on the wind. Instantly tense, Gwendith climbed to her feet and drew one of her pistols. She hoped it wasn't the farmer who owned these fields. The idea of shooting an innocent man sickened her, but she knew that she'd do whatever it took to protect herself and her friends.

As she watched the narrow, rutted road, an incongruous sight appeared. A finely appointed carriage, drawn by four black horses, jounced along the ruts and mud of the rural lane. As it drew abreast of the grain silo, it came to a halt, and one of the curtained doors opened, allowing Johann to spring down.

"It's all right!" he called, waving his arm.

Gwendith gaped at the carriage, then turned to look at the ghost eater, who was staring at the conveyance curiously.

"What is it?" he asked, frowning.

"A carriage. Only very wealthy people own them. I've seen some in Aneirach."

"I've never even seen one," Stands-in-Smoke murmured, gawking herself.

Johann waved again, impatiently, and they hurried towards him. As they did so, an extremely handsome young man leaned out of the carriage. His curly brown hair was slightly longer than fashionable, and framed a studious face equipped with a pair of bright blue eyes. His coat, shirt, and trousers were all well cut and made of expensive materials.

Stands-in-Smoke drew back from the stranger, and Gwendith tightened her hold on her pistol. Johann gave them both an impatient look. "Gwendith, this is my friend Roland Whitefoam. I've explained our situation to him, and he has generously offered us refuge at his house for as long as we need it."

Gwendith looked at the young man in surprise. A member of the Whitefoam family—Johann had been making friends in high circles. "Aren't you in the Citizens' Assembly?" she asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "That would be my older brother you're thinking of."

Johann gestured towards her. "Rowe, this is my sister-by-marriage Gwendith. The rest are Stands-in-Smoke, No Tongue, and the ghost eater."

*Rowe! It didn't stand for Rowenna, but for Roland.* She felt vaguely disappointed somehow. She had thought from his manner that Johann had referred to a long-time lover, but obviously that was not the case.

Rowe bowed gravely to them all, then extended a hand to help them into the carriage. "Llew! Please be so kind as to assist the ladies."



An immensely aged coachman climbed down from the high seat. "This way, my lady," he said, taking Stands-in-Smoke's hand to help her into the carriage. She stared at him as if he had sprouted wings.

"What about the horses?" Gwendith asked quickly.

"Llew's son Matthew will come fetch them once it's dark," Rowe explained as he assisted her up and in. Once they were all inside, even the large carriage was cramped. No Tongue sat beside Johann and Rowe, while Gwendith found herself wedged in between Stands-in-Smoke and the ghost eater. Llew shut the door, closing off all sight of the outside world, and a few moments later they were jostling down the road.

For the first time in a long while, Gwendith felt herself starting to relax. It seemed that they were safe, at least for a while. "Thank you for helping us, Rowe," she said tiredly.

He glanced at Johann and smiled. "Think nothing of it. I've known about Johann's Way for...oh, years now, I suppose. Even so, the rest of it seems a bit fantastic." His gaze went to the ghost eater, but he was obviously too well bred to point out the oddities of a guest.

"You don't mind that we're being hunted by the army?" Stands-in-Smoke asked. "I find that hard to believe."

Rowe's lips pressed into a thin line. "Johann explained the entire situation, at least in outline, while we were on our way to get you. Who is in the right, and who in the wrong, seems clear enough to me. I will not cooperate with a bunch of bloodthirsty cutthroats, no matter how high their military rank. They will have to burn Whitefoam Manor down around me first."

No one said much of anything after that. Gwendith let weariness overtake her. She trusted Johann's judgment. And even if he was wrong, and Rowe Whitefoam intended to turn them over to Colonel Talys first thing tomorrow morning, there was nothing she could do about it now. Her eyes fluttered closed of their own accord, and she found a semi-comfortable position with her head pillowed against the ghost eater's shoulder. His skin felt slightly cool against her cheek, but it was not unpleasant. The jolting of the carriage kept her from doing anything more than dozing; at one point, she

half-opened her eyes to find Rowe looking at her curiously. Snuggling closer into the ghost eater, she wondered why.

At length Stands-in-Smoke elbowed her, and she groggily lifted her head to realize that the carriage had finally stopped. The ancient coachman opened the door, allowing the men to pass by before holding out his hand to assist Gwendith and Stands-in-Smoke. Gwendith hid a grin at that—the old man was so frail that either of them could have snapped him in half just by falling on him.

As she climbed out, Gwendith caught in her breath. Whitefoam Manor unrolled around them, the most impressive house and grounds she had ever seen. Manicured lawns and spacious gardens stretched out to every side, and the wall surrounding the grounds was only a faint line in the distance. The house itself towered a staggering three stories, its white walls dazzling in the sun. The largest house in Aneirach could have been dropped into it three times over and had room to spare.

“This...is all yours?” she gasped.

Rowe’s mouth twitched into a half-smile. “Technically, it all belongs to my brother. However, as a member of the Citizens’ Assembly, he finds it more convenient to reside year-round in the capitol. He spends his time with drink, loose women, and other debaucheries, and leaves the manor to me. A good arrangement, as we only see one another during the Migration Festival, and are therefore free to spend the rest of the year quietly disapproving of each other’s lifestyle.”

Johann grinned at that. Gwendith wondered what anyone could possibly disapprove of concerning the impeccable Rowe.

“I fear, however, that we have only a small staff of servants to see to your needs,” Rowe went on. “I’ve taken the liberty of arranging a room, a hot bath, and fresh clothing for each of you. If you should need anything more, please ring the bell, and either Llew or his wife Helga will come to attend you as quickly as possible. Food will be served as soon as everyone feels they can manage it.”

“That’s very generous of you,” Gwendith said warmly.

Rowe waved a dismissive hand. “It is only what courtesy demands. If you will excuse me now, Llew will show you to your rooms.”

With that, he turned and strode off in a swirl of coattails. Johann watched him go, a fond look on his face. "He might seem a bit stuffy, at first," he confided. "But Rowe is as true as they come, and his servants' family has been with his own since before the Migration. We're safe, for now at least."

"We'll see," Stands-in-Smoke muttered.

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Gwendith sighed and leaned back in the chair in her room, feeling as though she might never move again. The promised hot bath had loosened all the kinks in her muscles, something the ghost eater's cold-water baths had not been very good for. Her filthy, bloodstained clothing had been whisked away by the efficient Helga, who had left behind an elegant gown, which apparently belonged to one of the numerous consorts of "Master Whitefoam's brother." From the low cut of the bodice, Gwendith guessed that the man's taste in women ran to those who could be rented rather than wooed.

Shadows moved under the door, but instead of the expected knock, she heard the ghost eater's soft voice. "Gwendith? Are you in there?"

"Come in," she called, then belatedly wondered if he knew about doorknobs. Apparently he had picked up the trick at some point, because he let himself in without trouble, trailed by no less than three of the manor's many cats. Like her, he had been clothed from someone's spare wardrobe. A pair of white, knee-length trousers looked startling against his bronze skin, even more so as he went shoeless. He had been given a warm cotton shirt dyed a striking shade of blue, but had disdained to button it, instead crossing the sides over his chest and tucking the ends into a red scarf worn like a sash around his waist. With his long, crow-black hair, tattoos, and dark skin, it made an interesting combination of the familiar and the exotic.

He returned her appraising look, and she lowered her gaze to her own bodice. "I'm afraid this gown is meant to show off charms more ample than mine," she said with an embarrassed laugh.

"I'm sure that if I had any taste at all for Rhyllachan clothing, it would look very nice on you."

"I can't tell if I've just been complimented or insulted."

He went to the bed and sat on it cross-legged. The cats immediately swarmed up, all vying to occupy his lap simultaneously. "In that case, we'll say it was a compliment."

"Ah." She gestured to the cats. "They seem to like you."

"Yes." He stroked the fur of a fluffy gray tabby. "I had two cats of my own, before I left Bird Creek. Corn and Bean. They attached themselves to me after I became ghost eater. I hope someone's looking after them."

"Ahkan'i warriors keep cats?" she asked incredulously. It wasn't an image that would have occurred to her.

He smiled slightly. "Some would say that they're the only good thing the Rhyllachans brought to this world. When we were a wandering people, long ago, we had mostly dogs to help us hunt game. But after we settled in the mountains and had to learn how to farm, we found that some cats had meandered into our towns. None of us knew the chants that the settled peoples used to keep mice out of the grain. With the cats, we didn't need them." He frowned thoughtfully. "It's always been thought that cats have great skill, but no Ways. Now, though, I'm starting to wonder if that's true."

"Maybe." One of the cats hopped off the bed and crossed the room to station itself in Gwendith's lap. She stroked its long hair, feeling its purr vibrate through her fingers. *Sitting in a strange manor house with a dead man, petting cats. Who would have thought that could be such a peaceful scene?*

"May I ask you something, Gwendith?"

"Of course. Anything."

He hesitated, as if what he was about to ask was not something he felt comfortable speaking aloud. "I don't mean to give any offense. I understand Rhyllachan customs are different from Ahkan'i, and I can accept that. But I don't always understand the manner in which they are different. Is Johann or Rowe a Changed One?"

"I don't understand what a 'Changed One' is."

"Among my people, women go down to the Long Man—the river—when they are pregnant. It brings good luck and good health to the child. But sometimes Rabbit tricks the Long Man into going to sleep and takes his place. Then he'll reach into the child and swap its ghost with that of another. A male for a female."

“Nobody knows when this happens. But as the child grows, sometimes it acts differently than expected. Maybe a boy shows a preference for baking bread, or a girl pesters her uncles to take her hunting. Or as he grows older, perhaps a young man finds that he prefers to have relations with other men instead of with women. Then we know that Rabbit switched their souls around. If it’s decided that the boy is really a girl, she dresses in women’s clothing, and does women’s tasks, and finds a husband for herself. She’s still got a man’s body, but she’s really a woman. Or the other way around.”

Gwendith drew her brows together. An odd idea, and one that made her a little uneasy. “I don’t understand what this has to do with Johann and Rowe.”

“When I first saw you, you were dressed in trousers, and I thought you were a Changed One, until Rabbit told me otherwise. So I know that the way you dress doesn’t mean you’re a Changed One. And I understand by analogy that just because Johann and Rowe are like husband and wife doesn’t mean that they’re Changed Ones either. I’m just trying to understand your customs in this area. I’m sorry—did I say something impolite?”

Gwendith gaped at him. “Johann and Rowe are like what?”

He drew back a little, eyes troubled. “Have I said something that should not be spoken of?”

“No, it’s just that you’re mistaken. That kind of thing doesn’t happen among Rhylachans. It...the Wizards condemned it...”

He cocked his head to one side, mimicking the position of the egret tattooed on his chest. “To be condemned, something must exist,” he pointed out mildly.

“No, you’ve misunderstood somehow. Johann is a ladies man...,” she trailed off, realizing suddenly that she had absolutely no proof of that. She had never seen Johann with a woman, but had simply accepted the image he cultivated, that of a dashing rogue who left a string of broken female hearts behind him.

*“A good arrangement, as we only see one another during the Migration Festival, and are therefore free to spend the rest of the year quietly disapproving of each other’s lifestyles,”* Rowe had said of his brother. Certainly this was something of which even a drunken, womanizing assemblyman would disapprove.

"I've upset you." The ghost eater rose quickly to his feet. "I should leave."

"No, don't." She put her hand to her eyes. "This is just unexpected. I'm still not sure you're right."

A gong rang out suddenly from the depths of the house. The ghost eater started and shot a worried look in her direction. She grinned reassuringly, climbed out of the chair, and tugged her bodice back into place. "Dinner's ready."

The meal was served on the bottom floor, in a large dining hall that looked as though it did not get a great deal of usage. The table was already laid out when Gwendith and the ghost eater arrived. A silver service sat on a starched white cloth, beeswax candles shedding yellow warmth over the scene. The three servants stood about the plaster walls, looking as stolid as if they served such an odd company every day. Stands-in-Smoke sat in her chair as if she wanted to sink into it and disappear. Like Gwendith, she wore a borrowed gown. Unlike Gwendith, she filled out the bodice rather well. Gwendith glanced at the ghost eater to see if he had noticed, but he was busy staring at the table with a worry line between his brows.

No Tongue wore trousers, shirt, and a coat that looked like they might have belonged to either Rowe or Johann. As for Johann, he seemed more his old self than he had in weeks. Gone were the bloodied, mud-incrusted clothes and wildly unkempt hair. Now he wore his normal fashionable clothes, his hair carefully brushed and tied in a queue with a green ribbon, his boots bright with polish. But his face was thinner than it had been, and there was a haunted look in his eyes that would take a long time to fade.

Rowe sat at the head of the table, opposite Johann. He smiled and rose as the ghost eater and Gwendith approached, moving to pull out a chair for her. She sat, then turned to find the ghost eater gingerly lowering himself into his own chair as if he expected it to be whisked out from under him. It suddenly occurred to her that, when they camped, he tended to sit cross-legged or perched on a low log. Perhaps Ahkan'it did not have chairs, or at least not the kind to which she was accustomed.

"Well, then, I think we're ready to begin," Rowe said, retaking his seat. The servants came to the table, uncovering dishes of ham and gravy, red beans and rice, and boiled greens. The enticing smells made Gwendith's stomach growl.

"Forgive me if I offend," the ghost eater said quietly. "But I cannot eat."

Rowe exchanged a look with Johann, then nodded. "Would some wine be out of the question?"

"I cannot drink, either." The ghost eater looked regretfully at the food. "I'm sorry if this violates your hospitality—I mean no disrespect to my host."

"None at all taken." Rowe hesitated. "But I don't feel it polite to eat in front of you. Is there...anything...I can offer?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, he doesn't devour virgin sacrifices," Johann exclaimed from the other end of the table.

"At least not every night," the ghost eater said deadpan.

Helga paled sharply. Johann sighed and pressed a hand to his temples.

"Er, of course." Rowe smiled wanly. "Forgive us—this is taking some adjustment on our part. I suppose the food is suitable for everyone else?"

"No Tongue won't be taking any wine tonight," Stands-in-Smoke said firmly. No Tongue gave her a hurt look, which she ignored. "Neither will I. Water or tea will do us."

There was little conversation after that. All of the travelers who could eat did so ravenously. When Gwendith finally paid attention to something other than her plate, she noticed that Rowe was trying to engage the ghost eater with small talk, probably attempting to make him feel a little more at ease. From their expressions, it didn't seem that the conversation was helping either of them. Even though Rowe did his best to hide it, Gwendith sensed that the ghost eater made him nervous. And certainly it wouldn't be easy for the ghost eater to act completely normal, when he could see that his presence made his host profoundly uncomfortable.

At last Rowe pushed his chair back from the table. "I know that most of you are very tired and will be wanting to get to sleep," he said, then looked at the ghost eater. "Um, that is, if you do sleep."

The ghost eater rose, small and lithe compared to his host. "I do." He looked out the long windows to the formal gardens outside. "Would you mind if I went outside for a while?"

Rowe shook his head, and Llew scurried to unlatch the enormous, glass-paned doors that opened onto a raised patio. Gwendith rose, pulling her bodice back up and mentally cursing the heavy skirts that wrapped around her legs. "I'll go with you."

The night air was cool, but still far warmer than it had been the last time she had been in a garden. That had been the night Stands-in-Smoke had kidnapped her and set in motion the events that had brought her here, so far away from where she had begun.

"I hope I'm not intruding on your privacy," she said, as they made their way down the patio steps and into the garden proper. A boxwood hedge rose around them, defining the space. Inside, rose bushes getting their first buds surrounded a small fountain. The sound of falling water was soothing.

He shook his head, waist-length hair susurrating over the borrowed shirt he wore. His bare feet made almost no noise on the brick path. "No. I'm glad you came. I spent too much of the last year alone."

She nodded, understanding the feeling. "Do you need to feed?"

"No." His mouth, half-seen in the light spilling from the manor, quirked slightly. "Not yet. The soldiers—"

He stopped and looked away from her, into the night. "How much of that do you remember?" she asked softly.

"Too much." He wrapped his arms around himself, as if holding something in. "I'd prefer not to talk about it. Not now. Maybe someday, when all this is over."

*"When all this is over."* Gwendith hadn't thought of the future at all, she realized. It was as if she didn't really believe anything existed after today. An end to their journey seemed an impossible fantasy that had no real bearing on her life.

Strains of music filled the air, borne on the wind from the manor house. Someone was playing a violin, while another accompanied on a harpsichord. The servants? Johann and Rowe? Gwendith didn't even know her brother-by-marriage well enough to guess whether he had any musical talent.

The ghost eater stopped, listening. "Is that music?"

"Yes."

"Why is it being played? Is there a ceremony being performed?"

She shook her head, going over to sit on the edge of the fountain. "No. Someone's just playing for enjoyment. To pass the time. Do your people have music?"

He smiled suddenly. "Oh, yes. We love music. And dancing. But it isn't anything like this."



She leaned over, interested, then pulled back with a curse as her bodice tried to flop too far forward. “Damn it! What was the woman carrying in this thing, watermelons?”

The ghost eater arched an eyebrow at her. “You had better fix that, or else Johann will think I forgot I’m a ghost eater and tried something inappropriate.”

“Ah. Seduce me with your rapier wit and lightning charm, eh?” She grinned suddenly, feeling relaxed and reckless. “Or perhaps I tried something with *you*!” So saying, she leaned over, and yanked the ends of his shirt loose.

“Gwendith—!”

“What?” She smiled innocently, then suddenly snatched away the scarf he had worn as a sash. “Better be faster than that, or you’ll have to go back to the house naked!”

“Gwendith—!” he repeated, as if he couldn’t think of anything else to say. He lunged for the scarf, but she danced away, twirling it around her head and laughing. He jumped up after her, but she ran around and got the fountain in between them.

“Now what are you going to do?” she demanded.

He made a grab for the scarf, but she dashed around the other side. He started to dodge after her, then feinted back the other way, but the trick didn’t work. Giggling and yelling, they chased each other around the fountain, Gwendith waving the scarf wildly over her head like some bizarre war trophy. The pursuit ended only when the ghost eater suddenly sprang onto the fountain rim, made a prodigious leap over the water, and knocked Gwendith off her feet. They both rolled onto their backs in the grass, laughing hysterically.

“Here,” Gwendith said, when she could catch her breath again. She dropped the scarf squarely over his face. “You’ve earned it. I haven’t laughed like that in...I don’t even remember how long.”

He tugged the scarf aside and rolled onto his elbow to look at her. “Same here.”

She returned his gaze and found herself holding it far longer than she had intended. His brown eyes looked black in the night, and she felt that, if she stared at them too long, she might be drawn up into something deep and vast as the sky. The world took a sudden slip to one side and resettled itself in a new pattern.

He touched her cheek lightly with his fingers. His skin felt cool against her own. For a moment he looked at her in puzzlement, as if noticing some feature of her face for the first time.

Then he took his hand away and climbed quickly to his feet. "We should go back inside," he said, reaching to help her up. She nodded, wrapping her fingers around his, even though she knew that she wouldn't want to let go again.

Back on the patio, he wished her a good sleep and left in the direction of his room. She sank down on an ironwork chair near an empty urn, which would hold flowers once the weather was reliably warm again. She didn't know how long she sat there, staring out into the garden, until footsteps broke into her reverie. Looking up, she saw Johann coming towards her, Rowe trailing behind.

"Good evening," she said listlessly. She wished vaguely that he had not found her just yet.

"Listen, Gwendith, I've always had a great deal of respect for you, ever since you married Gairin," Johann said, as if working up to a lecture or an argument. "And now that I've come to know you better, I can see what made Gairin choose you. I don't want to lose the friendship that's built up between us, but you have to understand that I love Rowe. We've been together for six, almost seven, years now. I know you thought I was living some wild life of gambling and traveling, but the truth is I've been dwelling here quietly with Rowe, Llew, Helga, and Matthew. The most exciting thing I've done is help plow the manor fields in the spring.

"I know that Rowe and I may not meet with your approval. I hope you can accept us, but if you can't, then realize you can't change things between us."

*The ghost eater was right*, Gwendith thought distantly. "Johann, you have a better home life than most people I know," she said tiredly. "To be honest, I'm thrilled to find out that you've been living somewhere stable and secure, instead of cheating gamblers in sordid dens at risk of getting your throat cut."

Johann blinked, at a loss for words. He had obviously come here prepared for a fight, and anything less left him floundering.

Rowe came closer, putting his hand lightly on Johann's shoulder. "Johann, Gwendith has a lot more to worry about than us," he said gently.

Gwendith looked up, surprised, and found comprehension in Rowe's blue eyes. She sighed. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"What to happen?" Johann demanded suspiciously.

Gwendith stared at her skirts, fingers playing nervously with an edge of lace. "Did you know, the ghost eaters aren't even supposed to have friends?" She shook her head unhappily. "The ghost eater told me a story one day, about the original ghost eater, the one who started all this. Apparently the man was attacked by enemies shortly after the Ahkan'it first came into the mountains. He fell down a hole and was left for dead. But after a while, he woke up, and thought everything was fine, and went back to his band's camp. His wife greeted him with joy. But when he went to embrace her, the *bhargha* devoured her soul, and she died in his arms."

"Must it always be that way?" Rowe asked softly.

"It doesn't matter. The ghost eaters are resurrected looking just as they did when they died, but not everything is the same. Their hearts don't beat, their digestive systems don't function, and they can't...*be* with a person. Intimately."

"That was a *lot* more than I really wanted to know," Johann muttered. Rowe shushed him.

Gwendith raised her head, looked back up at Rowe, and shrugged. "There isn't any hope for it. It's insane from the start. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't felt it building between us, but...somehow I never thought tonight would come. I was so busy trying to get through each day alive, I never thought that I'd have to deal with it."

Rowe leaned against the wall and smiled at her ruefully. "I know exactly how you feel."

She shook her head. "You can't. There was always hope for you, hope that's been fulfilled. There isn't any for me."

Rowe touched her lightly on the wrist. "Go get some sleep, Gwendith. You're tired, and things always seem worse in the depths of the night. Perhaps your situation won't seem so bleak with the dawn."

"I don't think so. But thank you for being kind."

She rose, left them standing on the patio, and went inside. Although she had intended to go straight to her own bed, she found her footsteps slowing as she

approached the door to the ghost eater's room. The door stood partially open, either because he didn't like being closed in, or because he wanted to let the manor's cats move freely in and out. Gwendith pushed it open a little farther and stuck her head inside. The moonlight coming in through the window illuminated the ghost eater where he lay sleeping on top of the bed covers. He looked peaceful, with a strand of black hair straggling across his face and one hand curled loosely near his head. Peaceful and young. Wizards, he was young. Even if he had been a normal man, falling in love with him would have been insane.

Gwendith eased the door back into its original position. Gathering her skirts in one hand, she went to her own room and the cold bed that awaited her.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

The party spent the next four days at Whitefoam manor, recuperating from their hard journey. The black iron gates opening onto the grounds were locked, and Llew and Matthew kept a sharp eye out for soldiers. But if Colonel Talys still searched for them, he did not look in Whitefoam.

Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue spent most of the time eating and sleeping. Johann could have stood to do the same thing, but instead he chose to pass the days with Rowe: riding the bounds of the manor, planning what crops to plant in the distant fields, and attending to the daily details of life. During those days, his Way finally returned to him, but it seemed to sap his strength far more easily than it had ever done before.

Gwendith should have spent her days sleeping, or relaxing alone, or doing something at least marginally sane. But she persuaded herself that someone should keep the ghost eater company. After all, he didn't require food or rest the same way that they did, and would otherwise find himself alone and bored. So they roamed the grounds together, or sat by the small pond and tossed bread to the fish, or watched the spring birds returning from wherever they went in the winter. Enormous maples and gargantuan oaks spread heavy branches over them, pollen streaming in the wind. Sometimes, they held hands, but neither ever made any mention of it aloud, as if leaving feelings unspoken made them unreal as well.

One day, she took him into the library and tried to explain books to him. He listened carefully as she read a brief passage from a history that predated the Migration.

"We have such things," he said when she paused. "Things to help us remember. But not like this."

"What then?"

"Objects. Spear points, or baskets, or bundles of sacred feathers. Some people can put their own memories into things, so that when others touch them later, they can

relive those memories. We don't have many from before When the Enemies Came, but there are a few. Perhaps you will see them, once we get to Bird Creek Town."

She folded the book closed and looked out the tall window. The last rays of the setting sun burnished the sky gold. The ghost eater perched on the sill, peering outside, and she studied the patterns of light on his dusky skin. The tattooed skull on his face stood out starkly, the black lines like unhealed wounds. She reached out impulsively, touched the long fall of his raven hair, and twined it around her finger. He said nothing to dissuade her.

"How much farther do we have to go?" she asked softly.

He tilted his head west, into the blazing sun. "Not too far. Two weeks at most." He sighed, almost as if he regretted going home at all. "In the direction between the Darkening Land and the Frigid Land. The time of the snake will be here by then."

"The time of the snake?"

"The warm season."

"Oh." Gwendith frowned thoughtfully. "Could you show me where we're going on a map?"

"A map?"

"I'm sure Rowe has some around here." She stood up. "Let's find him."

Rowe gladly brought out an entire sheaf of maps, some yellow and cracking with age, others new and brightly-inked. He, Johann, Gwendith, and the ghost eater spread them out on the library floor. "Look," Gwendith said, pointing. "Nothing is shown beyond Hanging Dog. That's the farthest out of the border towns."

Indeed, the land of New Rhylach simply trickled to a halt only a week's worth of travel west of Whitefoam. "Why do you think that is?" Rowe asked in puzzlement. "I always knew that there wasn't anything beyond the border towns, but I never really wondered why."

"Probably the army didn't want anyone going too close to the mountains," Johann suggested. "I've always heard that the border towns have a big military presence. The army suffered a defeat at the hands of the Ahkan'it before—I doubt they'd be too happy about some civilians stirring up trouble. Over the years, as people started to forget what had happened, the orders probably became more of a tradition than anything else."

“Perhaps.” Rowe glanced over his shoulder at the ghost eater. “So no one else lives in the mountains except for the Ahkan’it?”

The ghost eater nodded. “That’s right. Unless you want to count the Immortals.”

“The Immortals?”

“They’re a little like us. They look human, and they live in houses and farm fields. But their towns are built under the mountains. They live in complete health and happiness, and some believe that they don’t die, or at least live a very long time. They came from their underground towns to help us during the decisive battle against the Rhylachans, but no one has seen them since.”

“Oh.” Rowe continued to frown at the map, as if it had done something to personally offend him. “And what lies beyond your mountains?”

“Water. Once, there were other lands beyond us. When we first fought your people, we sent runners in the direction of the setting sun, where we came from long ago, to warn anyone who might still be living there. None ever returned, and when more were sent, they came upon a vast expanse of water that had not been there before. I don’t know what lies beyond, if anything. And I don’t know what happened to the people who used to be there, if they live beneath the water, or if they died, or if they fled. I think they put the water there themselves, in case we failed to hold the mountains.” Pride sparked in his dark eyes. “But we did not fail.”

Later that evening, as the entire party sat together on the verandah, talking and watching the stars, Gwendith wondered if there could ever be any hope of reconciliation between Rhylachan and Ahkan’i. The Ahkan’i world had been nearly obliterated, their way of life changed forever. Only their fierce determination to hold the mountains at any cost had kept them from the fate that had befallen the Proud Ones and other peoples.

Until a few weeks ago, she had always viewed the Migration as a positive thing, a great event in history. She had never thought about the people that the Migration had dispossessed.

But it had happened, and it was centuries too late for the Rhylachans to leave again even if they had the means. Perhaps this quest to defeat the Devourer, where Rhylachan, Ahkan’i, and Proud One worked together, would mark some sort of turning point. Maybe there was some kind of hope, after all.

If only her heart hadn't grown too bitter to believe that.

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They left on the fifth morning, dressed in new clothes, the panniers on their stolen horses stuffed with supplies and ammunition. Rowe stood at the gate and watched them vanish into the mist, his hand raised in farewell and a grim look in his eyes. Gwendith wondered if he had tried to talk Johann into staying behind.

They took to the back roads once again, the horses giving them speed. Within a few days, they acclimated to the saddle, and the journey became more bearable in the absence of sore muscles. For most of them, at least—the ghost eater disliked their method of travel. Sometimes he dismounted and jogged alongside them, easily pacing the horses and covering miles without tiring. She watched him, long black hair blowing out behind, lean muscles moving under bronze skin, and wondered if she really understood what he was.

They met only a few other travelers, which Gwendith's sight or Johann's illusions allowed them to avoid or trick. There seemed to be no soldiers anywhere, which worried Gwendith more than a little. Colonel Talys did not seem like someone who would easily give up on something he wanted. Either he truly had no idea where they were, or else his soldiers were all occupied with something far more urgent than a small band of fugitives. The enemy from across the sea? Or something as yet unsuspected?

As they went west, they saw fewer and fewer Rhyllachan settlements. Ancient oak-hickory forests replaced fields and roads became animal paths. The lack of human habitation made Gwendith oddly uneasy, as if they had suddenly become more vulnerable to some unknown danger. She had never been anywhere so wild before. The ghost eater, on the other hand, seemed to relax, as if relieved to finally be away from the Enemy territory to which his quest had exiled him.

It rained a great deal, and for days low clouds blanked out the sky. But one day Gwendith woke to the sun on her face and the sound of birds singing amidst the new foliage on the trees. Groggily, she propped herself up on her elbow. The ghost eater crouched near her, a grin lighting his face.

"I have something to show you," he said.



Wondering what it could be, she gave him her hand and let him lead her away from the camp and up a small rise. The dense trees that had surrounded them broke away atop the low hill, giving them an unobstructed view into the west. Directly before them, the land buckled suddenly, like a giant heaving itself towards the sky. Forests ran up steep slopes, broken by the shadows of deep gorges. Balds of gray stone showed on the higher elevations, like ragged holes in a green coat. Bright gleams of reflected light betrayed the presence of waterfalls. A blue haze seemed to hang over the farther peaks, a shroud of pollen and distance.

Gwendith's breath caught in her throat. She'd seen illustrations of mountains before, in books and scripture dealing with old Rhylach, and she had glimpsed them close at hand in her visions of the ghost eater's life. But distance lent them a beauty and majesty she had never imagined.

"I...This is your home?"

"Yes. The wings of Vulture formed the mountains, a very long time ago. Once, there was nothing in the world except for water. The animals all lived beyond the arch of the sky. They wanted to know if there was anything under the water, so the Water Beetle dove down and brought up some mud, from which the earth was formed. Vulture flew down to see if it would be a good place to live, but the earth had not fully dried yet. The valleys and the peaks were made where his wings fell and lifted."

"I see."

He squeezed her hand. "Only another day or two, and we'll be at the lower slopes. We'll have to turn then and head towards the Frigid Land for a few days, until we come to Bird Creek Town." He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. "I never realized how much I missed the mountains, until now."

She could understand how someone could ache for such a place. "Do you have a name for your land?"

He nodded. "Where the Laurel Blooms. Soon the slopes will be ablaze with color from the rhododendron and laurel. I can't wait to show it to you."

"I can't wait to see it."

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Two days later, they made their way across the lower slopes. The air was still and cool, and the smell of evergreens and flowers drifted among the trees. The horses picked their footing cautiously across the springy, black soil that lay like a thin blanket over the mountain's bones. The ghost eater led them on foot, dark eyes drinking in the misty green of new leaves. Finally, he had returned to a world he knew and understood, and left behind the madness, violence, and confusion of Enemy lands. He glanced back at Gwendith from time to time, to see the sunlight spark on her honey-colored hair whenever they crossed a meadow. He hoped that she would be happy here. Maybe once she saw that the entire world wasn't filled with monsters like Colonel Talys, or like the man who had killed her daughter, she would be able to find the peace her life had lacked.

If only he could be there to see it.

As he walked, he tried to scout ahead for paths for the horses. Thickets of laurel covered the slopes in places, their twisted boughs forming a tangle too dense for horses to fit through. Privately, he doubted the wisdom of bringing the animals with them, but everyone else seemed to think it a good idea, so he let it pass. Knowing that the horses would need to rest often after covering such difficult and unfamiliar terrain, he angled their path towards a shallow ravine that promised water in its depths. While everyone else wearily dismounted, he went ahead to the creek side, bending over to taste the water and make sure it wasn't too heavy with minerals for the horses to drink. The tracks of animals crisscrossed the soft mud at the edge of the water: deer, possum, raccoon...and horse.

He caught in a sharp breath and held up a hand to keep the others back. "What's wrong?" Stands-in-Smoke called nervously.

"Someone on horseback crossed the stream not too long ago." He looked at the tracks again. "Make that a number of people."

"There aren't any horses in these mountains?" Johann asked. The ghost eater shook his head.

"Could we have gotten turned around? Could we have left the tracks ourselves, earlier?" Gwendith suggested weakly. She winced at his look of annoyance. "Maybe

they're feral, or escaped from some farmer somewhere and happened to wander up here."

"Or maybe the Enemies have come here before us." He stood quickly, looking in the direction the tracks led. "We've got to find out who they are and what business they think they have in Ahkan'i lands." He glanced at Gwendith. "Will you look for them?"

She nodded uncertainly and closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed, until she seemed still as the stones. Then a little frown line appeared between her brows. "I see them, moving through the trees. There might be ten of them...I can't tell exactly, with all the underbrush in the way." Her breath caught sharply. "Soldiers."

The ghost eater felt a knot of ice form in his belly. His mind blanked, shying away from images of cruelty and terror. Every fiber of his being wanted to run, to put as much distance between himself and the soldiers as possible.

"We should avoid them," Stands-in-Smoke said decisively, echoing his own desires.

Reluctantly, he shook his head. "No. We can't. We have to find out what they're doing here, how many of them there are, so we can warn the towns to prepare for war."

Gwendith flinched. "Do you think it will come to that?"

He met her eyes briefly. "What do you think?"

She looked away hopelessly.

They followed the soldiers' tracks up the mountainside, angling back in the direction from which they had come. The ghost eater cursed the ill luck that had let the soldiers invade the mountains without anyone the wiser. There were no Ahkan'i towns in this area, no one except the occasional wandering hunter to have seen any intruders. Once, warriors had moved up and down the length of the mountains, alert for Enemy invaders. But that had been hundreds of winters ago. To most people these days, the Rhyllachans were little more than a myth, something out of the past that had no direct bearing on the present.

*And now we may pay for our lack of vigilance,* the ghost eater thought grimly.

Nightfall brought a halt to both the soldiers and their pursuers. The ghost eater sat awake all night, while the rest made due with a cold camp, unwilling to light a fire that might betray their presence. He roused them at dawn, forcing them eat their

breakfast on the trail. He feared that any delay might have grave consequences. Even more, he feared that a delay would not matter at all, because they were already far too late.

He moved relentlessly up steep slopes, ignoring the tired, pinched expressions on his companions' faces. For once, the needs and limitations of the living annoyed him, and he thought about leaving them behind to wait. But there might be more dangers in the mountains than the single band of soldiers they followed, so it seemed safer to hold in his impatience and match his pace to theirs.

By mid afternoon, Gwendith announced that they had almost caught up to the soldiers. The ghost eater stopped. "We don't want to walk straight into them." A raven croaked harshly as it rode the winds, drawing his gaze along the path of its flight to the tall trees crowning the ridgeline. "If we make for the heights, we might be able to spot them from above, watch them as they travel. Gwendith will be able to rest, and it will give us time to decide what to do next."

They climbed slowly to the ridgeline. As they neared the crest, the ghost eater caught sight of a flash of light against the sky. A chorus of faint yells drifted up suddenly, whether cries of triumph or terror he couldn't tell. Startled, he sprinted up the hill, too scared to wait even the few moments it would take Gwendith to use her Way.

He found himself looking out over a shallow, bowl-shaped valley. A broad swath of dead, brown trees led from the opposite side of the vale, as if some force had reached down and wiped away all traces of life. On the near side swarmed hundreds of soldiers. Using trees whittled into support poles, heavy chains, and horses, they were frantically erecting what appeared to be a wall made entirely of stiff sheets of iron.

Light glowed from within the circular wall of metal, boiling through where gaps had not yet been sealed. Men dressed in armor struggled to crank iron plates into place with the use of pulleys. A man on horseback rode from one group to another, staying well back from the streamers of light. Even from a distance, the ghost eater recognized the golden gleam of Colonel Talys' hair.

"That's it!" Talys' shout of encouragement echoed faintly up the mountainside. "Hold it long enough without food, and it will begin to weaken! Just a few more minutes—"

At that moment, a horse shied violently. Chains snapped, widening the juncture between panels. Light burst forth in long tentacles, snatching at men and animals. The horses collapsed in their traces, while two men unlucky enough to be caught without armor fell beside them. Screams sounded from nearby, and a general rout began, soldiers dropping the remaining lines and fleeing, their courage broken by the deaths. The wall shuddered, then began to fall apart, sending up a loud clanging that dinned off the mountains and shook the stones themselves.

Light emerged, radiating out in groping tendrils. A human figure appeared, stepping over the remains of the wall. A moment later, he was joined by another, then another, until scores of men were slowly pouring out of the metal cage Talys had tried to build for them. All were Rhyllachan, dressed in rough workmen's clothes, some clutching shovels, picks, and other implements the ghost eater didn't recognize. The light came from them, centered in their hearts and knotting them together, until they were all bound in a single, monstrous blaze. As they emerged, the trees nearest them began to brown and wither. Dead fish floated to the top of a stream that crossed their path. While Talys and the soldiers watched helplessly, the men began to walk in perfect unison, a slow march that would carry them relentlessly from valley to valley, from peak to peak—and, eventually, straight into the heart of the Ahkan'i towns.

"What are they?" Gwendith gasped, her face gone white with fear.

"They are the Devourer," the ghost eater whispered, horror unfolding in his heart like the blooming of a deadly flower. "And they're...they're a ghost eater."

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They fled, riding the horses recklessly fast down the slopes, heading back up the ridge line toward the Ahkan'i towns. Only when the sun set did they slow, to exchange looks of fear and confusion. "We need to set up camp," Stands-in-Smoke said at last, and that practicality pulled them back into themselves a little. They went about their normal tasks in silence, until the horses had been groomed and fed, the fire built, supper eaten, and no more activity remained to hide behind.

Johann cleared his throat, eyes on their small fire. "You said those men were a ghost eater. I don't understand."

The ghost eater shook his head wearily. "You saw them, Johann. They had a *bhargha* in them. They all moved as one, did you notice that? Walked in step, perfectly, as if only one mind controlled them."

"But how did they get to be that way?" Stands-in-Smoke asked quietly. "Was Talys trying to make his own ghost eaters?"

"They were miners," Gwendith said abruptly, her fingers shredding a leaf, flinging bits of it into the fire. "I could tell by their clothes, their tools."

"That's right. They were like some of the miners I saw outside Fort Reed," Johann agreed, puzzled. "But what would they be doing here?"

The ghost eater frowned, trying to quell the fear in his heart. "The *bhargha* comes from the life inside of coal," he said slowly. "I was put into a cave to become a ghost eater. It's possible that they came here to dig through the earth to reach the coal."

Gwendith bent her head, staring at the ground in front of her as if it would offer up some answer. "You said once that coal burns."

"Yes. There was a great fire many winters ago, when the Dead Trees Town ghost eater went mad and took a torch into the place he had been made. The old men say that it burned for moons."

Gwendith nodded. "Coal burns. And the phoenix stones are going out."

Johann looked up sharply. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that maybe those miners weren't looking for coal to make ghost eaters. Think about it, Johann. Colonel Talys told me that the phoenix stones are dying—if they vanish, we won't have anything but wood to burn in our forges to make weapons. And, with the enemy across the sea, we can't afford to be caught with no way to make rifles. Instead of waiting around for the phoenix stones to burn out altogether, someone started looking for a substitute. Somehow, they found out about the coal in the these mountains."

Stands-in-Smoke fed a twig to the fire. "Then why the ghost eaters? Why the Devourer?"

Gwendith shrugged. "I don't know. An accident, maybe? Perhaps there was a cave in? That would explain why there were so many of them."

“Yes.” The ghost eater sat up suddenly. “If they all died at once in the presence of coal, the *bhargha* might have come into them all at the same time, linking them together into a single entity. None of them knew what had happened, or understood how they could have died and yet continue to walk and speak and feel. All they knew was that they hungered.” He put his head in his hands. “So they started looking for something on which to feed. *This* is what the animals warned me about. If left to itself, the Devourer will drink the life from everything in its path. No one—not the Ahkan’it, not the Rhyllachans, not the other peoples—is safe from it. It will strip this land bare.”

Gwendith shuddered and cursed softly.

“Talys knew about this all along,” the ghost eater went on quietly. “That was why he wanted me. He had this thing loose in the mountains, and he didn’t know what to do with it. He...experimented...on me to find a way to stop it. To control it.” Despair closed around him like a granite fist. “All the years of war, all the dead, to keep the Rhyllachans from unleashing a horror like this. And in the end, we failed.”

“Whatever Talys got from you, it didn’t help him much,” Johann pointed out. “I don’t understand how he can even think he’s got a hope in hell of controlling that thing. It’s too big, too powerful. When I was in Fort Reed, I overheard a conversation between him and another colonel. Ebrim—the one who wanted to move you. Knowing what we know now, I think Ebrim was in favor of destroying the Devourer, instead of recruiting it.”

“Good luck to him,” Gwendith muttered.

“Is there a way of destroying it?”

The ghost eater shifted uneasily. A more personal fear whispered in the back of his mind, but he strove to ignore it. “I don’t know. Fire is the only thing that I know of which can kill us, and Ebrim would have to burn down half the mountain to make certain he destroyed the Devourer. Even then, it might not work—the body has to be so badly burned that it becomes uninhabitable for the *bhargha*. If there’s enough left, the *bhargha* will simply regenerate whatever was burned. It’s possible that only one of the Devourer’s bodies would have to remain partially intact for it to survive. So I don’t think fire would work.”

“But...?” Gwendith asked softly, hearing the unspoken qualification in his words.

“There is another way to kill us. But I don’t know what it is. Whenever a ghost eater decides to die, he has to make a replacement. Sometimes, the one he chooses...is not a very good ghost eater. Some run mad, some become killers, some simply sit and stare into nothingness without speaking. Some cannot learn to control their hunger and so could never be allowed among the living. Others...there are many rules surrounding a ghost eater. Some break them.

“The old ghost eaters have a way of destroying their students, if they prove to be flawed. But they don’t pass on the knowledge until after they have determined that their successor is worthy. My time of trial had not ended when I left Bird Creek Town. So I don’t know what it is, or if it would work against the Devourer.”

“But the old one will be able to tell us, once we get to your home,” Johann said uncertainly.

“Yes.” The ghost eater looked down at his hands, so that he wouldn’t have to meet any of their eyes. “I’m sure that he will do whatever he can, once he understands the danger. But I can’t help but remember that Little Deer didn’t send me back to the old one—he sent me into New Rhylach to look for Gwendith. And maybe for the rest of you, if he saw that far.”

Stands-in-Smoke lifted one hand and watched flames dance and weave between her fingers. “And what does he think we could possibly do against something like the Devourer?” she asked softly.

For that, no one had an answer.



## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

The party turned away from the Devourer, putting its destruction and the army trying to control it at their backs, as they hurried up the mountains towards the Ahkan'i towns. Whatever fragile peace the ghost eater had felt at returning to his homeland had been thoroughly destroyed, replaced by nagging fear. How could they hope to stop something so huge and powerful? And even if they did, how could the Ahkan'it stand against the Rhylachans when they returned to try again? Hundreds of winters had passed since the last time an Ahkan'i warrior engaged in anything more violent than the ball game. How could a society of settled agrarians armed with bows and atlatls fight off the might of the Rhylachan military?

*Perhaps this enemy over the sea will distract them,* he thought one night, as he sat watching Gwendith sleep. *If the sea people even care enough to come looking for the source of the ships bothering them.* Chances were, the Ahkan'it would have to find a defense on their own.

If it was possible.

A few days away from Bird Creek Town, the ghost eater drew No Tongue aside and asked him if he could give the Ahkan'i language to the rest of the party. To his relief, No Tongue simply nodded and went from person to person, using his Way to put the knowledge in their minds, just as he had done for the ghost eater so many weeks before.

Afterwards, Gwendith came to walk by the ghost eater, at least as much as she could considering the dense laurel thickets that often blocked their path. "This is strange," she said, the words halting and uncertain. "I keep thinking I won't know the next word, but it comes out of my mouth anyway."

He thought back to his own experience. "I know. It won't seem so odd after a few days, though."

By the next day, they were close enough to Bird Creek Town for the landscape to become painfully familiar. Sadness pricked the ghost eater—here he had hunted with

his brother, walked with his friends, wandered alone with his dreams. When he had been alive, and named, and had a future before him.

As if in answer to his thoughts, a sudden whoop shattered the stillness. Startled, he stopped. His eyes found a moving shadow; a moment later, a familiar figure burst out of the trees.

Joy surged through him, and he sprinted away from the party. "Sihun! Brother!"

Sihun flung his arms about him in a glad hug. Laughing happily, the ghost eater embraced his oldest friend. *Kani, but I missed you*, he thought silently.

"I am come," he said, the words catching in his throat.

"You are; it is good."

They stepped apart and eyed one another. Little had changed about Sihun over the last six moons. He was dressed as befitted an Ahkan'i warrior, in breechclout and half-leggings. A turtle tattoo on his left breast marked him a warrior born, and a woodpecker on one arm represented his clan. His shining black hair fell below his waist, proudly proclaiming that he had never suffered dishonor. But on his face he had painted two lines that fell from his eyes like tear tracks. The paint's blue color signified defeat and shame.

The ghost eater touched the paint lightly. "You still wear this, Sihun?" he asked softly.

Sihun dropped his eyes. "Nothing has changed, Tamaugua. Nothing has absolved my guilt."

The ghost eater shook his head silently. Sihun had first painted those lines the day Tamaugua had died. Bound by an oath, Sihun could tell no one why he chose the paint, only that he blamed himself for what had happened to his friend. The ghost eater knew that he had probably suffered a great deal of questioning and ridicule for his silence. But Sihun was not one to break a vow, no matter how reluctantly given.

"But you have changed," Sihun went on, putting his head to one side and frowning. "You hugged me. You didn't object when I called you by your name."

The ghost eater winced. "It isn't my name anymore. Not really. I've come to believe that I am the same person I was before I died. But I've changed too much to call myself by the same name."

“What happened to you? Where did you go? Why did you leave? Who are those people?” Sihun frowned and reached for his bow. “Are those Enemies?”

The ghost eater grinned suddenly. “They’re friends, Sihun. Very good friends. Come meet them, and I’ll explain everything to you.”

They walked down to where the rest waited, and the ghost eater introduced them one at a time. “And this is Sihun, of the Woodpecker Clan. He is as close to me as a brother.”

Everyone looked at Sihun in obvious puzzlement. Johann cleared his throat delicately. “Um, ghost eater, I know that it might not matter to you anymore, but your ‘brother’ is a woman.”

Sihun gave Johann a scandalized look, then turned to the ghost eater. “I don’t...are they always this rude?”

The ghost eater glared at Johann. “I’m sorry, Sihun. Please forgive them. The Rhyllachans do things differently than we do. He doesn’t mean to be rude—his customs just aren’t the same as ours.”

“Oh.” Sihun continued to look nonplused.

*Wonderful.* The ghost eater turned to his companions. “If there’s something that you don’t understand about our customs, try to be a little more discrete next time. Or ask Sihun if I’m not there. To answer your question, Johann, Sihun is a Changed One. Whatever the physical body he was born into, I assure you that Sihun is a man.”

Johann looked confused but nodded anyway.

“And, Sihun, so that you understand a little better also, Gwendith is *not* a Changed One.”

Sihun’s brows drew together slightly. “You are a warrior?” he asked Gwendith uncertainly.

“You could say that,” she agreed mildly. “I’ve spent the better part of my life training how to fight, or teaching others what I’ve learned.”

“But you are a woman?”

“Definitely.”

Sihun smiled suddenly and shrugged. “As Tamaugua says, your people do have strange customs. I’d like to hear more about them.”

The ghost eater clapped him on the shoulder. "You will. Let's find a place to set up camp, and I'll tell you everything that's happened to me."

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The ghost eater and Sihun sat up long into the night. He told his old friend all that had passed, from his abrupt departure to his discovery of the nature of the Devourer. He kept the details of his capture to himself, but something in his voice must have betrayed him, because rage and grief bloomed in Sihun's eyes.

"I will kill as many of them as I can for you," Sihun said softly, when he had finished. "Perhaps it will pay back some of my blood debt."

"There is no debt," the ghost eater said tiredly. He looked across the camp, to where Gwendith lay rolled in her blankets, her honey-colored hair gleaming in the light from the fire's last embers. "And I don't want you to blindly kill every Rhyllachan in your path."

"After all that they've done to you, they aren't Enemies anymore?"

"No. It's hard to call an entire people Enemy once some of them have become your friends."

"This woman-who-is-a-warrior, Gwendith. She seems intriguing."

"She is."

Sihun's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Her looks are hard to get used to, though. Even so, there's an exotic appeal about her."

The ghost eater nodded regretfully. "She is very beautiful."

"I knew it!" Sihun hissed, shoving the ghost eater so hard he nearly fell over. "You love her!"

"Keep your voice down!" the ghost eater whispered, mortified. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it's true. Don't give me that look! I've known you all your life—we played together when we were Boys, wrestled each other when we were Young Men, and hunted together when we were Warriors. I told you earlier that you had changed. The man who left here last Spider Moon would have been begging for news of Siska-init the first moment you saw me. But you haven't even mentioned her name."

The ghost eater shrugged uncomfortably. "Wounds heal. The thought of her still hurts me, but it's the dull ache of a long-ago injury before a rainstorm. Time will do that."

"I know. But it's more than that. She isn't the center of your heart anymore. I sat here and listened to your story, and you told it well. But I heard the note in your voice when you spoke Gwendith's name, and I saw the expression on your face when you looked at her."

"And if I do care for her?" the ghost eater asked bitterly. "What difference does it make to anyone? I've already condemned myself by running away from the old one—I doubt very much that this transgression could add any more fuel to his wrath."

"And her feelings?"

"I don't know. I'm not so stupid as that, Sihun. Whatever you insist on calling me, I *am* the ghost eater. I am not alive. My touch is death. And even if it wasn't, I can't be as a man with her."

"But you're still able to find her attractive."

"Oh yes." He laughed a little, but it had more sorrow than humor in it. "Do you remember when we were young, Sihun? We'd dream of all the glory that we were certain lay ahead of us. We would become the greatest ball players ever, and warriors from every corner of the mountains would come just to pit their skills against ours. Or else the Enemies would return and attack, and the two of us would single-handedly defeat them, and our names would be sung for generations. Do you remember that?"

Sihun smiled ruefully. "I do."

"My dreams were so big then. Do you know what I dream about now? I'd give everything I have left to me for a single night in her arms. Kani curse it all."

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Gwendith woke to a hand on her shoulder. Startled, she opened her eyes, saw that the sun was only a dream of lighter gray in the east. Sihun crouched above her, a deeper patch of shadow against the stars.

"What is it?" Gwendith asked quickly. One hand went automatically to her saber hilt, which always remained close by when she slept.

Sihun sat back, hands folded across her—Gwendith simply couldn't bring herself to think of someone so feminine as a male—knees. Her long, raven-dark hair hung bedraggled, making her look like some kind of wood-sprite from old Rhylach. She dressed in a breechclout of deerskin dyed green, its apron-like flaps hanging to her knees before and behind. She also wore knee-length leggings of the same green. A sash woven of plant fibers hung about her waist, threaded through several pointed pouches. Bracelets of bone beads decorated her wrists, and beaded leather bands encircled her upper arms. A smear of ash across her chest obscured the tattoos there.

"Can you hunt?" Sihun asked bluntly.

Gwendith shook her head. "I've never needed to."

Sihun considered for a moment, probably trying to puzzle out the strangeness that Gwendith obviously represented to her. Then she shrugged. "Would you like to learn? I supposedly came out here to hunt deer, even though it's past the good season for that. I needed some kind of pretext to look for Tamaugua—the ghost eater. After an entire winter of this, people are starting to think I want to kill everything on the mountain. I had almost given up hope, until a few days ago, when I heard a chickadee singing on a branch near my house. I knew then that an absent friend was coming home, so I told everyone that I was going deer hunting one last time. They laughed at me, but I came anyway. So, are you coming with me or not?"

Gwendith hesitated, glancing over to where the ghost eater sat watch across the camp. He smiled and nodded, as if hearing her unspoken question.

"Do we have enough time?" Gwendith asked uneasily. "With the army and the Devourer loose—"

"If we're going to war, we men will be spending the summer fighting, not fishing or hunting. And it'll be a while before the first corn harvest. We might need the extra food." Sihun shrugged. "Anyway, daybreak and sunset are the best times for hunting deer. If we don't find anything this morning, we'll give up and go home. Agreed?"

"All right."

"I already sang to Water and Fire last night—hopefully they listened, and we'll find something this morning." Sihun stood up, beckoning for Gwendith to follow.

"What about breakfast?" Gwendith asked.

Sihun shook her head. "No. We have to fast until nightfall. This is a sacred undertaking, Rhylachan."

They left the camp, walking quietly as they could through the wood. Sihun glanced at Gwendith several times, as if wondering how anyone could make so much noise. Eventually, they stopped, and Sihun motioned for them to conceal themselves. What made this place a likely one to find deer, Gwendith couldn't guess. To her, it looked like any other stretch of forest.

Sihun pulled a pouch from her sash and showed it to Gwendith. Inside was a great deal of red ochre and a small quartz crystal. "If you need to, there's a chant you can use to help you find your quarry," Sihun explained. "You have falcons where you come from? You use the ochre, draw lines under your eyes the same way that the falcons have lines under theirs. Then you say: 'I am a real falcon. My prey cannot evade me. I am too fast, and my sight is too keen. Yi! I am a real falcon.' That will give you the falcon's sight, to find your prey with." Sihun grinned suddenly. "Or say something different, and it will make you irresistible to the opposite sex." Her smile faded. "I would have used it to find game this morning, except for the shame-marks I already bear. It's just as well, maybe. They say if you do it too often, it drives you mad."

They fell silent as the sun began to come up. Sihun put on a leather wrist guard and strung a bow of black locust. She pulled an arrow from the quiver at her side and held it ready to nock. After what seemed like a long time sitting in the damp, there came a faint rustle of leaves. Trying not to breathe too loudly, Gwendith peered out of their hiding place and saw a small herd of deer.

Sihun sat poised, waiting for them to draw closer. When one finally wandered near their hiding place, Sihun whispered a chant and let her arrow fly.

The arrow took the animal in the eye, dropping it too quickly for it to even make a sound. The rest of the herd fled, white tails bobbing in alarm as they leapt gracefully over snags and thickets. Watching them move, Gwendith felt a stab of regret for the one they had killed.

Sihun ran to the side of the fallen animal, bent down, and began to talk to it in a calm voice. Apologizing for killing it, Gwendith realized. Afterwards, Sihun set about efficiently gutting and dressing the carcass. Copious amounts of blood spotted the

leaves carpeting the ground. Once she had finished, Sihun carefully cut off a small portion of meat and laid it aside. "This is for Little Deer," she explained.

Slinging the drained carcass over her shoulders, Sihun started back towards camp in high spirits. Gwendith followed slowly, a little disturbed, although she couldn't say exactly why. Only a few yards from the site of the kill, she heard a sudden noise behind them. *Scavengers already?* she wondered, turning back.

To her amazement, a deer exactly like the one they had slain heaved itself up from the bloody leaves. It paused a moment to shake itself off, then bounded hurriedly away in the direction the other members of the herd had gone.

"Sihun!" Gwendith ran to catch up with the Ahkan'i warrior. "There was—I saw—"

Sihun gave her a surprised look. "You really aren't supposed to watch, although I've never heard of any harm coming from it."

"But it—I don't understand."

Sihun stopped dead, eyes widening. "What do you mean you don't understand?" Dread and horror crept into her voice. "Kani curse it—you *don't* know, do you?"

Gwendith shook her head.

Sihun closed her eyes, as if she had seen something terrible. "The ghost eater said that there wasn't much game left in your lands. No wonder. You've been killing things for three-hundred winters and never giving any of them a chance to finish out their lives."

"What do you mean?"

"Animals have a certain span of life given to them that isn't supposed to be shortened. If you hunt and kill one properly, it reclaims its body from the blood."

Gwendith's hair tried to stand up on end. "You mean like the ghost eaters?"

"Kani, no! No, not at all. Humans are different—once we're dead, that's it. But slay an animal with all the proper ceremonies, and in the right way, and it just goes on with its life. Do it wrong, though, and its ghost will haunt you forever. If I hadn't done things right and with respect, I would have killed the deer in truth. It would have had its revenge by inflicting me with rheumatism, until I couldn't stand up straight any more." She shuddered. "Your people have been protected by not walking in the world like everybody else. But now that's ending—and you're living in a land packed with three



hundred winters' worth of angry animal ghosts. I think that your people have a lot more to worry about than this enemy across the sea."

They went back to the camp in silence. The ghost eater gave Gwendith a curious look when he saw the chilled expression on her face, but accepted her quick shake of the head. Sihun gave part of the deer's tongue to the fire and fed the remainder of its blood to a nearby stream by washing the flesh. The meat and skin they packed onto one of the horses. Sihun stepped back, grinning at her handiwork. "Soon I'll be as good at hunting as Tihune." Her smile wilted in dismay as soon as the words came out.

The ghost eater shot her a dark look. "Yes," he said, cold and clipped. "Let's go. We've wasted enough time as it is."

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As they walked that day, Sihun dropped back to talk to Johann and Stands-in-Smoke, questioning them about Rhylachan customs, life on the Sanctuaries, and any other topic she seemed able to come up with. Gwendith listened for a while, then drifted up to walk by the ghost eater.

"You've been quiet today," she said.

"I have a great deal to think on." He made an effort to smile. "Nothing to worry yourself about, though."

She doubted that. "Can I ask you something about Sihun?"

"What?"

She lowered her voice, not wanting the Ahkan'i warrior to overhear. "She—he—whatever—said this morning that those blue lines on her face are marks of shame. It didn't seem right to ask her what had happened to make her wear them."

The ghost eater's expression hardened. "He blames himself for what happened to me."

"How?"

He took an unneeded breath, then expelled it sharply. "I suppose it's something you should know, since you'll be meeting the people involved soon enough. Sihun and I have been friends for a very long time, ever since his parents realized that he was a boy. When a child is of ten winters, they go through a ritual marking their transition from

being a Boy or a Girl to being a Young Man or Young Woman. The town's ghost eater gives them a tattoo that he's seen for them in a vision. Sihun and I are the same age, and we went right after one another. The ghost eater gave Sihun a turtle to wear, the turtle being the great warrior among the animals. Then he gave me an egret, the wing of which is a symbol of peace. People used to tease us about that—about War and Peace being the best of friends.

"A few winters passed, and I...fell in love with a young woman." Suddenly his eyes were anywhere but Gwendith's face. "Her name was Siska-init, and I thought she was the most beautiful and perfect woman to ever live. As soon as I had seen my eighteenth winter and become a Warrior, I asked my aunt to go to her mother and find out if we could be married."

He folded his arms across his chest defensively. "I may not be a very good ghost eater, but I was even worse at being alive. As Tamaugua, I was the most lazy and selfish person on any mountain."

"I'm sure that's not so."

He smiled bitterly. "I assure you that it is. I constantly shirked my duties. When I was supposed to be helping clear new fields, I found an excuse to go 'hunting'—really just wandering around in the woods. When I was supposed to be fishing, I slept by the stream. When we raised a new townhouse, I managed to find some reason to absent myself and passed the time gambling with a visitor from another town." He shook his head angrily. "I was a fool and worse. Most people didn't have any respect for me, and I can't say that I blame them.

"For some reason, Siska-init still loved me, no matter what I did. I had been getting closer to her for a long time, and I cared for her more than anything. But her mother, needless to say, didn't think the match a good one. After all, I was lazy and shiftless. I depended on my brother for food and my aunts for clothes. How could I provide for Siska-init and our children?

"I was angry when Seku refused to agree to our marriage. I thought she was being terribly unfair. Apparently I was blind, as well as stupid. But Siska-init had a suggestion. If I could prove to Seku that I had changed, that I could provide meat and a home, she might agree to the marriage after all.

“It was the impetus I needed. I swore to Siska-init and to myself that I would change. I was going to become a great hunter, a hard worker, a man other men could admire. The kind of husband she deserved.

“To that end, I decided to go hunting. I went during the Moon When the Deer Rut, when the deer would be the fattest. Sihun naturally wanted to accompany me. And I asked my brother Tihune to come as well.

“Tihune...was everything that I was not. Tall, handsome, respected. Everyone knew that he was the best hunter in the town, the best ballplayer, and the best toolmaker. Men admired him, and women...well, he seldom had to spend a night alone if he didn't want to.

“He was two winters my elder, and I adored him. He was always kind and a little protective. He helped me when I had trouble learning to make arrows and cheered me on when I played the ball game. Later, once it became obvious that I was less than self-sufficient, he provided meat and skins for me. It was only natural that I ask him to go with us on the hunt.

“We observed all the proper rituals, and fasted, and then started out. We had been hunting for several days, with good success, when...something terrible happened.”

He was silent for a long time, as if formulating what words he wanted to speak. His long hair hid his features from her, so it was impossible to tell what feelings went through him. “Sometimes a hunter will wear a decoy made from a deer's head. Rutting males will come up to him, looking for a fight, and he can shoot them. It's dangerous for two reasons. One is that if he misses, or isn't fast enough, the deer could attack him. The second is that there might be other hunters around, who from a distance don't realize that he isn't a real deer.

“That was what happened to me. There were some other men in the woods, from the next town over. I saw one I thought was a deer, and I killed him.” He swallowed thickly. “I was horrified—we all were. And then his companions came upon us. One of them was his brother, Tskua of the Rhododendron Clan. Tskua fell into a rage and demanded a life in return for that of his brother.”

“But—but it was an accident!” Gwendith exclaimed. “Surely you couldn’t just be killed for something you didn’t mean to do!”

The ghost eater spread his hands apart. “He was within his rights, Gwendith. Normally, when a death is accidental, the clan of the dead man does take some other form of compensation. We offered him everything we could think of—skins piled tall enough to equal the slain man’s height, copper bracelets, corn sufficient to last him throughout the winter. But he refused. Even men from his own party begged him to take our offer, but he was adamant.

“We could have gone back to Bird Creek Town and gotten the rest of the Owl Clan involved. But we were afraid that would only lead to a blood feud, and we didn’t want that. So I surrendered myself to Tskua.”

Gwendith shook her head, feeling sick. “Wizards.”

“Tskua took me to a clearing. I told myself that I would be brave, that I would die with courage. I told myself that I would be no great loss to the Ahkan’it—certainly not as great a loss as someone such as Tihune would have been. After all, I was the one who hadn’t done anything to contribute to the town’s welfare. I had brought this on myself—my own shiftlessness was the reason I had been out hunting in the first place.

“And then...the ghost eater came. He told Tskua that I would die as promised—but that my body would belong to him.

“Even Tskua was horrified. I remember him asking the ghost eater to reconsider, trying to take back his claim on my life, offering to settle for something lesser. Not even he thought I deserved such a fate. And I...I couldn’t face it. My courage snapped, and I ran like a coward. The ghost eater ran me down, and I died the dishonorable death I deserved.”

Gwendith shuddered. “I saw it happen.” She slipped an arm around his shoulders in a gesture of comfort. “And I saw what happened later, when you revived in the cave. It was what finally put me in the asylum.”

“Then I’m sorry.” He laid his hand over her own. “For the next three moons, I was kept apart from others. The old one taught me to be Bird Creek Town’s new ghost eater. How to control the *bhargha*, to hold it tight inside of me so that I didn’t accidentally devour the ghosts of those around me. It is not an easy training, and he was not gentle

with me, but it is necessary to keep a new ghost eater from harming those he is meant to protect. Then, when that time had passed, he proclaimed me ready to go among the living, and we went back to the town.

“Everyone had come out to see our return. They just stared at me, like I was some stranger they had never seen before. Sihun broke away and came up to me, and I saw that he had painted the color of shame on his face. He blamed himself for my death, you see—thought that he should have done something to either convince Tskua to let me go, or to stop the ghost eater from taking my body. He declared in front of everyone that, so far as he was concerned, I was still Tamaugua and still his friend.

“It was a shocking thing to say. According to what I had always been taught, I was now nothing more than the *bhargha*. Tamaugua’s ghost had gone on to the Darkening Land, and only his body and his memories remained behind. As the ghost eater, I had no name, no kin, and no friends.

“Everyone was very angry with Sihun, and some of the older men tried to insist that he remove his face paint. He refused and swore that he would still call me Tamaugua, until someone proved to him that I was not.”

“He’s a loyal friend,” Gwendith murmured.

“Yes. If only all were like that. After such a display, no one wanted to leave. So I had to walk through the crowd of people who had been my friends and kin, and who now looked at me as a stranger. They parted before me, and I saw Siska-init and Tihune. For a moment, all I felt was a mixture of joy and sorrow. Joy to see her again, and anguish to know that I could never tell her I loved her, could never hold her, never even talk to her as a normal man might. Women can cut their hair without shame, and I saw that she had shorn hers off as a mark of her grief. I can’t describe how it made me feel, to know she had done that for me.

“And then...then one of her hands dropped to her belly, curled around it protectively. I remember being surprised, because it was an odd gesture, and because it looked like she was a little thicker than usual there. Then she reached out to Tihune with her other hand, and the look on both their faces was one of such wretched shame that I knew the truth. Siska-init, my love, was pregnant with my brother’s child.”

“I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I just...I still don’t understand it. Siska-init loved me, I *know* she did, and yet...according to Sihun, Tihune had to marry her only fifteen days after coming home. They must have lain together practically the first night after she learned I was dead.” He rubbed one hand angrily across his eyes. “I can’t understand it. I cared for both of them, and I thought that they were devoted to me as well. But while I was waking up dead in a cave, they were making love.”

Anger coalesced in Gwendith’s heart—a cool rage at those who had dared to betray him like that. *Bastard*, she thought furiously. *Bitch*.

But anger wasn’t what he needed from her, so she swallowed it back. “I don’t know what to say,” she said at length. “I wish that there was something I could do to make you feel better.”

He shrugged. “It isn’t so bad now. Not like at first.” He looked away, out over the mountainside, to the blue peaks that surrounded them. “I left seven moons later, after the baby was born. Siska-init named her son Chiaha—regret.”

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That night, after they had made camp, the ghost eater called them all close around the fire. “We’ll be at Bird Creek Town tomorrow,” he announced with a singular lack of enthusiasm. “There are some things I need to tell you first, things you’ll need to know.”

Gwendith frowned slightly but held her peace. There had been a gloom around the ghost eater ever since their conversation earlier that day. Truthfully, she thought, he had been in low spirits since entering the mountains.

“Sihun will give you whatever help you need,” he went on, glancing briefly at his friend. “He’s promised to ask his grandmother, Hilaka, to get the Woodpecker Clan to adopt you. If she agrees, you’ll have the same status as anyone born Ahkan’i.

“You can trust Hilaka. She’s seen at least seventy winters, so she’s one of the wisest people in the town. Just be sure that you show respect towards her. That goes for any old people you meet.

“Hilaka is a truth-seer. She doesn’t use her Way all the time, not unless there’s a reason, because people don’t want someone constantly finding out whether they’re

lying or not. But if no one else suggests it first, you can ask her to hear your story out as a truth-seer, so that she knows you're here to help.

"And...you can trust my brother, Tihune. There's been some bad feelings between us, but that doesn't change the fact that he means well." Sihun snorted at this, but the ghost eater ignored her. "Sihun will make sure he knows that you are all my friends, are all under my protection. He'll do whatever is necessary to help you."

Johann cleared his throat. "Er, it sounds like you aren't going to be there with us."

"I won't."

"What!" Stands-in-Smoke exclaimed. "Where are you going?"

"I won't be *going* anywhere. I'll be dead."

Gwendith's heart seemed to stumble to a stop. "W-what?"

He avoided her gaze. "I abandoned my duties as the ghost eater. The rules surrounding my kind are very strict, because it would be so easy for us to become a danger to the living. We are not allowed to deviate, even a little, from the traditions set down by the original ghost eater.

"A few winters from now, after I had been the ghost eater for a time...perhaps I could have left and come back without worry. But I was still under the tutelage of the old one. It is the duty of the old ghost eater to make certain that his replacement will follow the traditions. I broke the rules by deserting my place. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the old one has already judged me unfit and will destroy me the moment I return."

"But—but the animals told you to go!" Gwendith protested. "Surely he would take that into account!"

"You don't know the old one," Sihun remarked dryly. "He isn't what you would call entirely sane."

"That isn't the point," the ghost eater said. "Yes, I did as the animals asked me—but I also turned my back on the traditions and rules that bound me. By doing so, I have marked myself as a danger to the Ahkan'it. No one will ever be sure what I might or might not do.

"The things we are asked to do in life are seldom without consequences, especially if they are important. I knew that when I left, and I accepted it. I have done as the animals asked me—I went out into Rhyllachan lands, and I brought Gwendith back. I

even discovered the nature of the Devourer, if not how to fight it. My part is finished. All that remains is to face the repercussions of my actions.”

Gwendith stared at him, unable to believe what she was hearing. “So you’re just going to let him kill you?”

“Yes.”

The world seemed to stop. There had to be something she could do, something she could say, but her mind blanked. The memory of Caitlin’s death came back sharply—she had been utterly helpless to save her own daughter. How could she hope to do any better now?

*Come on, Gwendith, pull it together. Now is not the time for panic. There has to be something I can do. He thinks he’s doing the right thing. That he’s being courageous, and—*

*Courage.*

She stood up slowly, walked over to where the ghost eater sat, and looked scornfully down at him. “Coward.”

His head snapped up, eyes going wide. “What?”

“I said that you are a coward.”

He came to his feet, face flushed with anger and hurt. “I am not.”

“Then prove it by fighting for your life, instead of giving in to this!”

“Don’t you understand?” His hands clenched into fists at his side, skin going white over the knuckles. “I was a coward the last time! I *ran away* when the old one came for me. This time it will be different. I *won’t* dishonor myself by fleeing.”

“I didn’t tell you to flee death, I told you to fight it! Damn you, listen to me! The animals gave you a task—do you really think they meant for you to just submit to some lunatic and die before it was half done? You’ve brought us all here; you’ve seen the Devourer. You know good and well that we still need your help. Why do you think the animals chose you?”

“Because a living warrior wouldn’t have survived the journey.”

“True. But they could just as easily have sent the old one in your stead. More easily, maybe. He already had a replacement picked out and trained. Yet they sent *you*. And, no matter what anyone says, whether spirit or ghost eater or human, I know that



we need you. *You* are the one who understands Rhylachans; you are the one who's been out beyond the mountains. You're the one who's seen what the army is capable of doing and what we are capable of doing. Not Sihun, not Tihune, not the old one. You."

The ghost eater remained silent, but now his look was more uncertain than angry.

Gwendith sighed and brushed her hair back from her eyes. "If that can't convince you, then ask yourself this. We have a hard fight ahead of us—against the army, against the Devourer. Does the brave man abandon his friends, leave the field? Or does the brave man stay and fight for his people, no matter how difficult or how hopeless that fight may seem?"

"All right!" he exclaimed suddenly, flinging up his hands. "I surrender. I'll do whatever I can to keep the old one from killing me tomorrow. Does that satisfy you?"

Relief went through her, and it was all she could do not to shout her reply. "Yes."

"Good." He glared at her for a moment. Then, slowly, it turned into a rueful smile. "Sometimes, you make me angrier than anyone else I have ever known in my entire life."

Johann grinned. "Gairin used to say the exact same thing."

They settled down for the night soon after. Sihun insisted that the ghost eater get some sleep, so the watch would be sat in shifts, starting with No Tongue. Gwendith lay awake for a long time, watching the moonlight illuminate the ghost eater's sleeping profile.

"I'm going to hold you to your promise," she whispered to him softly. But she remembered what he had said before, that the old one knew ways of killing ghost eaters that he did not. And she wondered if the promise she had extracted would make any difference.

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Talys sat on the edge of his cot, too tired to work at his desk but too worried to sleep. The camp outside had settled down for the most part. The only sounds were the occasional tread of footsteps as someone passed by the tent outside, or the hushed

voices of the watch. A wolf howled somewhere nearby, and Talys shivered at the desolate sound.

All of his hard work, and it had so far come to naught. Beoch had spent his strength like a dying man, working insane hours to make chains and panels to cage the undead miners. Talys had been so certain that it would work. His experiments with the ghost eater he had captured had shown him that such creatures could be injured, if they were deprived of lives to feed on. It was even possible that they could be starved to death, or at least rendered nearly harmless. Unfortunately, he didn't know that for certain, thanks to Ebrim's bungling loss of their only specimen.

That in itself was bad enough. But the reports he was getting from his men back in New Rhyllach were enough to put ice in his blood. Over his ten years of seeking out the gifted, Talys had thought that he had seen a gradual increase in the number of people with Ways. The disaster with the angry cows at Twelve Mile Creek had seemed to confirm the theory. But now...now there was no denying that New Rhyllach was experiencing what could almost be described as a plague of Ways.

The reports were scattered as of yet, but many were frightening. Horrible floods had inundated the southern part of the country, apparently the work of an uncontrolled weather-shaper. Fire had consumed most of Fort Ilyich after an angry merchant had suddenly begun striking at those about him with hands wreathed in unnatural flames. A priest in Haynesville had been found hanging in the bell tower of his own church; a suicide note claimed that he had been possessed by devils that allowed him to levitate objects. And a young woman had been stoned to death by an angry mob in Aneirach after using a thought-whisperer's power to blackmail everyone within reach.

And there was more bad news, in the form of sudden outbreaks of strange illnesses or unexplained insanity. It didn't take a native to recognize the revenge of animal ghosts.

He sighed and closed his eyes. The damnable thing was that the situation was as much an opportunity as a threat. If only he could go back to New Rhyllach, his knowledge of Ways would allow him to take command of the situation. Not only would he be hailed as a savior for calming the populace, but his new followers would make it easy to instigate the changes Rhyllachan society needed.

But instead, he was stranded here, in these Wizards-forsaken mountains, captive to Ebrim and the undead miners. The gigantic ghost eater was the key to Rhylachan defense, if the enemy across the sea chose this vulnerable time to attack. But before he could make use of it, he had to figure out how to control it.

Rubbing wearily at his eyes, he picked up an ancient journal and began to read.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

The next day, they reached the end of their long journey.

They came up over the sharp crest of a ridge, and a wide valley opened out before them. A river ran through the center, silver in the morning light. Fields interspersed with towering oaks lay along the wide flood plain. Even from the heights, Gwendith could see the small shapes of people hard at work with the spring planting.

The town itself stood on a bluff above the flood plain. Unlike Rhyllachan towns, this one was loosely organized, scattered far up and down along the river's course. The structures seemed to stand in small clusters comprised of at least one round building and one square, and sometimes another one or two round outbuildings. Trees provided shade and shelter. Close to the center of the town was a wide cleared space, surrounded by four large square buildings. Nearby stood another circular structure of enormous proportions.

"That's the square ground and the townhouse," the ghost eater said, pointing to the plaza and large building. "That's where we're going."

"If we get that far," Sihun added ominously.

They started down a well-worn path that curved beneath the trees. About halfway down, they turned a sudden corner where the trail avoided a tall mound of rocks. Two small children, who had apparently been playing in the path, stood up quickly. They were both boys, Gwendith saw—twins. They wore only short breechclouts and lacked both tattoos and jewelry. Their eyes widened sharply, and one of them took a step back, his frightened face riveted on Gwendith.

"Tskiya, Une-ti," Sihun said sharply, catching their attention. "Run down to the town and gather everyone together. Tell them the ghost eater has returned."

One of the boys nodded, then grabbed his twin's arm and pulled him hard in the direction of the town. Within seconds, they had vanished down the trail.

"They were afraid of us," Johann said quietly.

The ghost eater nodded. "Mothers sometimes discipline their children by telling them that the Enemies will come get them if they misbehave."

"It was always the water cannibals with me," Sihun said. "At least, until I refused to go bathe in the river one morning for terror of them. My uncles had to all but drag me down there."

They walked the rest of the path in silence, the horses on leads behind them. At last the trail opened out, and Gwendith saw the first houses of the town proper. Between the houses and the travelers, there waited a wall of people. The twins had apparently wasted no time alerting the town.

The men stood in front, holding bows or atlatls. They dressed like Sihun, in breechclouts and leggings, their feet bare. Most of them had very long hair, though there were a few with locks shorn to their shoulders. All were tattooed to varying degrees with stylized animals, plants, stars, or suns.

One man stood out before them all. His breechclout was stained and dirty, and one legging was missing. Ashes had been smeared into his hair, turning it into a gray, clotted tangle. Black lines traced the outline of his skull across his living features.

*The old one*, Gwendith realized, startled by his appearance. Somehow, she had envisioned him as an elderly man. But, like her ghost eater, he looked eighteen at the most.

"Young one," he said. There was a high, thin edge to his voice, identical to the note Gwendith had heard from some of her fellow inmates in the asylum. "You were a fool to return."

Another man moved forwards. His dark hair had gone mostly gray, but his body still looked hale. His features were austere, as if wind and years had honed them to sharpness, and the expression in his eyes was severe. "Sihun," he said, "who are these people you have brought to our town?"

The ghost eater straightened his shoulders and stepped into the older man's line-of-sight, forcing him to look at him. "Jilhe of the Owl Clan," he said respectfully. "I am the one who brought them here from their own lands. If you will allow me to explain...."

"No explanations!" the old one shouted, making a cutting motion with one hand. "There are no words you can speak which will explain either your presence or theirs!"

Gwendith went tense, seeing an ugly gleam that presaged violence in the old one's eyes. One hand went automatically to her pistols. The men saw her movement, and several nocked arrows or lifted atlatls.

"No!" the ghost eater exclaimed. "Gwendith, please."

Gwendith forced her hands down to her sides. "I'm sorry," she said, directing the comment towards the assembled townspeople. "I have been a warrior for a long time, and some things become habit. I do not mean any harm to anyone here."

A soft murmur went through the crowd. Jilhe looked at her thoughtfully. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gwendith." She couldn't bring herself to add *Smithswife* after Beoch's betrayal at Fort Reed.

"Your clan?"

"My people don't have clans." This evoked a louder murmur, plus a number of incredulous stares.

"Let me explain," the ghost eater said again. "I left here during the Spider Moon because Little Deer and Rabbit came to me and gave me a warning. They said that there was a terrible danger to the Ahkan'it. They showed me a vision of an Enemy woman and told me to find her, to help in the coming battle. That woman was Gwendith."

"Lies!" cried the old one. "If he speaks the truth, then why didn't he come to me first and ask my guidance?"

The ghost eater flushed angrily. "Because I thought that you would believe my desire to leave a sign that I was unfit, and kill me for it. The animal spirits gave me a task—I had to fulfill it."

"You are a liar, trying to justify bringing this poison, this filth, into lands our ancestors died to protect from them. There is no danger!"

"The threat is real! I have seen it with my own eyes! Call a truth-seer!"

The old one's mouth curved into a sneer, hideously distorting the tattooed lines on his face. "You know that a truth-seer's Way will not work on a ghost eater."

"No. But it will work on my companions, who have also seen the danger. There is war coming, whether you wish to acknowledge it or not."

“No! We will not hear the lies of Enemies—”

“Two of my companions are Hut Sitters!”

“—or those of cowards!” The old one’s *bhargha* unfolded suddenly, like a deadly anemone reaching out of his heart. “You will all die.”

“Stop this at once!” snapped a new voice. An old woman made her way slowly through the wall of warriors. Her hair was white, her skin deeply seamed. She leaned heavily on a wooden staff, and her lower jaw had the thrust-out look of one who has lost all her teeth. Ignoring the *bhargha*, she tottered determinedly up to the old one and glared at him. “You may have authority over that one—” she pointed her staff at the ghost eater “—but it is the women who say what is to be done with prisoners.”

If ghost eaters could have killed by their eyes alone, the old one would surely have dropped the woman where she stood. “They aren’t prisoners, Hilaka. They are invaders!”

“Of course they’re prisoners. Sihun captured them, didn’t you, dear?”

Sihun nodded quickly. “Uh, yes, Grandmother. That’s just what happened.”

“That’s what I thought. Well, then, if they’re prisoners, it isn’t your place to go deciding what to do with them, is it?” She looked at Gwendith speculatively. “I say we take them to the square ground and hear what they have to say. Then we’ll make any decisions that need to be made.” She waved a hand at the travelers. “Come along, then.”

“Wait.” The old one had pulled the *bhargha* back in, but the look in his eye was still fatal. “Whatever is done with these ‘prisoners,’ I am still this town’s ghost eater. I still have say over what becomes of the young one.”

Hilaka nodded. The ghost eater stiffened but bowed his head courteously to the old one. “I would not have left if the animals had not come to me.”

“Nevertheless, you abandoned your duties. You proved yourself unfit to replace me.” A twisted smile crept over the old one’s mouth. “And now, you will be destroyed.”

And he lunged at the ghost eater.

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For an instant, the ghost eater froze, shock at the suddenness of the attack robbing him of precious moments. Then the old one was on him. Hands like iron manacles locked around his wrists, jerking him close. He saw the old one's face from only inches away, like a lover about to be kissed. Saw the look of mixed rage, madness, and terror in his eyes.

Then the old one's *bhargha* unfolded and sank its tentacles into him.

The ghost eater gasped, feeling a sudden, pervading numbness creep into his body. The old one's *bhargha* reached inside towards his own, tendrils fastening hold and then ripping away pieces of it. Ripping it away—and adding those chunks to its own being.

Understanding flooded through the ghost eater. This was no physical contest—the assault had just been a distraction before the true attack. The old one would kill him by devouring his *bhargha*, scooping it out of his undead body like the meat from a gourd. It was almost like killing a living person, with one difference—the ghost eater's *bhargha* would not go to feed that of the old one. It would literally be added to it, making the old one even stronger and more terrible.

*And what about me, about my soul? Will I find myself trapped inside the old one's mind, screaming to be let out? Or will I instead be merged with him somehow, lose myself in his identity?*

Either option was horrible, terrifying. Feeling pieces of himself slipping away with every second, the ghost eater tried to tear away, but the old one's grip was too strong. So he let out a war cry and fought back.

The ghost eater sunk tendrils into the old one's *bhargha*. Fragments of memory and thought floated past him—bleak years of uselessness, the memory of a well-loved cousin, the long anguish of watching everyone he had ever known die. Then, suddenly, an urgent thought: *What is he doing?*

*I'm doing the same to you that you are to me, old one!* he thought fiercely.

Confusion, the beginnings of fear. *No. You can't. You don't know how.*

*I'm learning.*

*I am older than you! Stronger, wiser, more experienced. You can't hope to defeat me.*



The old one's memories opened up before him like one of Gwendith's books. *You've never killed anyone. Never had to fight anyone, ghost eater or human. But I have.*

He thrust back the old one's assault, tore into his *bhargha* in a frenzy. He felt the old one falter, glimpsed thoughts skimming past by him. *I thought I wanted to die, but not like this...Kani curse it, the woman!*

The ghost eater's heart went cold. The old one had seen everything—had seen his love for Gwendith, his friendship with his other companions. Had seen him commit the heinous crime of acting like a living man. For just an instant, he wavered in his attack.

The old one wrenched free, stumbling back with a cry of either pain or terror. Then he turned on his heel and raced away towards the forest, the fight abandoned.

Hunger burning through him like a fire, the ghost eater collapsed to his knees.

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Several things happened at once when the old one attacked.

Gwendith instantly pulled out her pistols, aiming at the old one's head. It wouldn't kill him, but it might slow him down long enough for the ghost eater to fight back.

"Tamaugua!" Sihun yelled and lunged forwards—directly into Gwendith's line-of-fire. Stands-in-Smoke plunged after, arms wreathed in flames. A man started out of the ranks of warriors, hand upraised, then stopped.

Three men tackled Sihun, knocking her to the ground. Stands-in-Smoke avoided them, then hesitated as the two ghost eater's *bharghas* flared into life with the brilliance of stars. Gwendith swore and tried to aim again now that Sihun was out of the way, then stopped when Jilhe's hand came down on her wrist.

"It is not for us to interfere," he said, but there was a strange look of pain in his eyes.

"To hell with that—" Gwendith started. But at that moment, the old one let out an anguished cry. Wrenching himself away from the ghost eater, he fled into the woods.

Gwendith shook off Jilhe and ran to where the ghost eater had sunk to his knees on the leaf-carpeted ground. He looked up slowly, and the blank hunger in his eyes made her pause. "Are...you all right?"

He climbed slowly to his feet. "I'm fine," he said hoarsely. His hands trembled slightly, and he quickly tucked them into the pockets of his stolen coat. "I defeated him."

Jilhe took a step forwards, then stopped. "This has never happened before."

"Then take it as a sign that I am doing the right thing," the ghost eater snapped. "The old one has fled. I am this town's ghost eater now."

Hilaka's eyes narrowed speculatively. "I've never seen a ghost eater so assiduously defended by the living."

Jilhe nodded his agreement. "I don't like it. It isn't the way things are done."

The ghost eater stared at him, as if hurt by his disapproval. "Then perhaps things need to be done differently."

"You'll bring bad luck on us all."

"I'm the least of your worries right now!" The ghost eater closed his eyes, checking his temper visibly. "I am going to think on this a while. Hilaka, I entrust my charges to your wisdom."

The old woman nodded. Gwendith watched as the ghost eater headed off in the opposite direction from where the old one had fled. He was, she knew, going to feed.

The women led them through the town to the large open space in the center. Four long buildings surrounded it. Their roofs were sharply gabled, perhaps to keep them from collapsing under snow in the winter. Only three walls of each were enclosed, the sides facing the square ground left open. Spaces below the roof peaks allowed air to circulate freely through them. The wattle-and-daub walls were elaborately decorated with paintings of stylized humans and animals.

Inside, the buildings were mostly open. What might have been either benches or beds were built on posts against the walls. Split-cane mats were brought for them to sit on. Hilaka and the other women sat facing them, waiting quietly while the last few drifted in. Gwendith wondered if the entire female population of the town waited to sit judgment on them, or if some had gone back to their daily tasks. Certainly someone must be watching the children. The majority of those facing her seemed middle-aged or older,

but there were some who looked close to Stands-in-Smoke's age. Not a few held sleeping babies, or nursed them at their breasts. They all dressed similarly, in a wrap-around skirt of deerskin with a loose poncho-style shirt above it. Some wore leggings beneath their skirts. Although they wore similar bracelets and necklaces as the men, they lacked the copper nose ring and ear pins, and sported fewer tattoos.

A young woman scuttled in, dropping down to sit by Hilaka. The old woman gave the younger a reproving look, as if they had been waiting on her arrival, and received a quick nod of apology in return. Then, smoothing her skirt, Hilaka turned to Gwendith.

"Now, child," she said calmly. "Tell us why we shouldn't have the men kill you, as befits an Enemy come into our lands."

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The ghost eater slipped back into town like a thief, ashamed that he'd had to leave in the first place. But the hunger had been on him after the struggle with the old one, hunger too great to ignore. Even the slow-dreaming ghost of a tall oak had failed to ease the hollow ache inside him. Would the other inhabitants of the town, those who had once been friends and kinsmen, see his leaving as evidence of danger, of instability? He didn't know and feared the answer.

At least he could be dressed decently when he faced them, rather than in the cast-off rags of their foe. The ghost eater's house, which he had shared with the old one, was set well apart from the rest, so it was easy to reach without coming across anyone else. It was the only house inhabited solely by men, although the ghost eaters were not quite considered "men" anymore. The town as a whole owned the house, no different than the townhouse or the square ground.

Unlike other houses, this one had no storage sheds or corn cribs near it. There had been a summer house once, but it had fallen some years back, and the old one had ignored all suggestions towards fixing it. The round winter house was in disrepair, with holes in the roof and walls, but at least it didn't seem in imminent danger of collapse. The roof of the entryway had sagged so that he had to duck to go inside. The single room was cold and wet, although at least Corn and Bean had kept the mice out of his

things. The two tabbies followed him inside and arranged themselves on one of the beds.

The ghost eater gratefully stripped off the uncomfortable Rhylachan clothing, setting it aside in case any of the women wanted to use the odd cloth for anything. He replaced it with an undyed breechclout and wrapped a soft sash woven from linnwood bark around his waist. A necklace of rabbit scapulae went around his neck, along with a polished stone gorget. After a moment of hesitation, he added an armband of copper beads, which his mother had given him shortly before she died. As the ghost eater, he was not supposed to have any sentimental attachment to it.

*But things are changing*, he thought hopefully. He remembered how Owl had come to him, surely a sign that he still belonged to the Owl Clan, whether the living of that clan chose to acknowledge the tie or not.

He left Corn and Bean sleeping on his bed and walked slowly towards the square ground. Most of the men were gathered within shouting distance of the women's council. They fell silent as he approached. For a moment he paused, eyes sweeping their familiar faces in the mad hope that he would meet a look that still named him friend. There was none.

Jilhe shifted slightly, as the ghost eater's gaze lighted on him. The old man had not borne the winter well. His hair had gone almost all gray, and lines creased his craggy face. It was hard to recall him as he had once been: hale, strong, and laughing. Jilhe flinched under his inspection, and for an instant fear flickered in the old man's eyes. The fear ate into the ghost eater's heart like the acid the soldiers had poured on him.

*You are my mother's eldest brother!* the ghost eater wanted to scream. *You taught me how to knap an arrow point, how to help the women clear a field, how to sing the songs of a man. You loved me then—how can you fear me now?*

But he was the ghost eater, and to say such a thing would push the bounds of tradition and propriety beyond anyone's acceptance. Later, perhaps, but for now he had confused and frightened them all enough.

"I am come," he said quietly, respectfully.

No one replied. He looked beyond Jilhe, to where Tihune stood, a solid presence in the midst of the men who so admired him.

*If they knew....*

But there was no good in that.

"Tihune of the Owl Clan," he said mildly. "How is your son?"

There came a general murmur of shock. The ghost eater expected Tihune to blanch, but he did not. Instead, his gaze remained steady, and he inclined his head slightly. "Well, ghost eater. It is kind of you to ask."

"I am glad to hear of it."

Jilhe looked away, a frown of worry creasing his brow.

Tihune saw it and walked away from the rest. He tilted his head slightly as he passed the ghost eater, beckoning. The ghost eater turned without comment and went with the man who had once been his brother.

"Jilhe is afraid of what you might call down on us," Tihune said quietly, once they had gotten beyond earshot. "He doesn't like that you aren't acting the part of the ghost eater. He thinks you will bring us bad luck."

It had been more than a full turn of the seasons since they had spoken to one another. The last time there had been words between them...they had been said in farewell, in desperation, thinking that they would not see one another again outside the Darkening Land. He had still loved Tihune then, admired and respected him. But that was before the sight of his brother made him feel like he was bleeding inside.

The ghost eater took a deeper breath than necessary to speak, then let it out in a silent sigh. "And what do you think?" Challenge, that, no easy question meant to salve over the wounds they had made between them.

Tihune watched the flight of an eagle over the distant peaks. "I think you've done well for yourself. I've never known anyone who would have lifted a hand to save a ghost eater. People respect them and rely on their memories, but they don't care for them. They aren't supposed to."

"No," the ghost eater agreed bitterly.

"But you...you have a Hut Sitter fire-caller trying to save you. Not to mention the two Enemy men."

“Gwendith isn’t a Changed One. Their customs are different than ours.”

“Really? Intriguing.”

The ghost eater frowned, not liking Tihune’s speculative look. *Don’t be foolish*, he told himself. *Tihune has a wife now, and a child. His days of secret assignments in the corn cribs are over.*

*And even if they weren’t...what business of mine would it be?*

*Stupid. Stupid, stupid.*

“That isn’t an answer,” the ghost eater said instead, coldly.

Tihune shrugged. “You’ve seen spirits, talked to them. I doubt the old one ever saw anything mystical in his life. Or his death, for that matter. If you say that things are changing, then I guess I’ll have to accept that. You’ll have my support, Ta—ghost eater.” His mouth twisted into a pained smile. “I owe you that much, at least.”

“Yes,” the ghost eater agreed, no yielding. Tihune looked hurt, but any sympathy remained beyond him. *What right have you to sorrow, alive and married to Siska-init, with a healthy son to call you father?*

*Even so....* “I forgive you.”

Tihune stopped, looking surprised. “You...do?”

“Yes.” The ghost eater kept walking, forcing Tihune to run to catch up. “I’m sure you’re a better husband to Siska-init than I would have been. Time...things...have changed me. Even if I could somehow alter everything now, I don’t think that we would wed.”

“Why not?”

The ghost eater only shook his head, not wanting to explain. At one time, he had shared everything with Tihune. But that closeness was gone forever. Impossible to admit that, were he made living again that very day, he would make his suit before sundown to a woman lacking black hair, or skin of the proper hue.

They emerged from the houses, into the clear space where the horses had been left hobbled. A crowd of children stood gawking around the animals, along with several of the younger warriors, who cast nervous looks at the beasts and reached for their bows every time one snorted.

“Those are horses. They won’t hurt you.” The ghost eater eyed the creatures askance. “I don’t think. One of them was supposed to be mine, but in truth I would rather walk.”

Tihune approached slowly, eyes avid. “They’re beautiful. What is their Way?”

“I don’t know that they have one. Gwendith says that they can always find their way back to their home. Maybe that’s their Way.”

Tihune glanced at him imploringly. “May I draw closer?”

The ghost eater showed him how to approach and hold his hands out for the horses to investigate. The animals lost interest and went back to grazing as soon as they realized no treats were forthcoming. Tihune reverently stroked the flank of the nearest. “Could I learn to ride one, do you think?”

The ghost eater shrugged. “Perhaps.” He turned at the sound of approaching footsteps and saw Sihun with a grin stretching his face.

“The women have spoken,” Sihun declared. “Woodpecker Clan will adopt both the Rhylachans and the Hut Sitters. Food is being brought to them now. Jilhe’s sending runners out to the other towns. They’ll be carrying the red stick.”

*War.*

The ghost eater nodded. “I should go to my friends,” he said, ignoring the shocked looks of the young warriors at his use of the word.

Tihune let his hand drop from the horse. “I will come as well. I’m anxious to meet these strangers you’ve brought us.”

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Gwendith self-consciously accepted the delicate pottery bowl one of the women set in her hands. Now that the council was over and her story told, she felt suddenly awkward among these people, where her own customs, dress, and looks so clearly marked her an outsider. *The ghost eater must have felt the same in New Rhylach*, she realized ruefully.

She sat crossed-legged in the summer townhouse, where the council had been held, Johann to one side, and No Tongue and Stands-in-Smoke to the other. Now that the council had ended, and Hilaka had exonerated them, the Ahkan’it seemed

determined to show their guests every hospitality. Food had been prepared immediately: corn grits flavored with bear oil and last autumn's walnuts. Gwendith hesitantly dipped a horn spoon into it and took a small taste. It was delicious.

The young woman whose late arrival had delayed the council sank gracefully down beside No Tongue. Copper anklets glittered briefly as she tucked her feet beneath her. The smell of good earth was on her, as if she had been working in the fields. "Do you like it?" she asked, gesturing to the food. She smiled when they nodded, an expression which transformed her otherwise plain face into something lovely. "Wonderful! I am A'na of the Rhododendron Clan. I hope you like it here." She sighed wistfully. "I think I would like to see other lands some day, if it were possible. You must have seen many interesting things on your journey here."

The last comment was directed at No Tongue, who looked rather startled. After a moment, he nodded uncertainly. A'na smiled again and began to tell him about the town. Although her questions to him were by necessity limited to ones with yes or no answers, she nevertheless managed to make it seem like an actual conversation.

The woman who had served the food returned, bearing gourd cups filled with a steaming liquid. Gwendith reached to relieve her of the burden, when A'na said, "Sassafras tea! Thank you, Siska-init."

Gwendith's hand jerked, dropping the cup. Hot tea spilled over her fingers, scalding them.

Siska-init's brows pulled together, and she reached quickly for the dropped cup. "Are you all right?" She had a low, husky voice, the sort that some men found irresistible. Unlike the rest of the women, she wore her hair cropped off around her shoulders, the cut ragged as if it had been done in a moment of wild passion. Her face might have been pretty—beautiful, even—but for the hardness of its expression, as if she had long ago forgotten how to smile.

"I-I'm fine," Gwendith stammered, trying to cover her flustered reaction. Siska-init looked at her for a moment, as if she divined that there was more behind the dropped cup than a simple burned finger.

"Excuse me," she said coldly. "I left my son in my sister's care. I should go tend to him."



A'na sighed once Siska-init had left. "And here I thought she'd remembered how to be polite," she muttered. No Tongue gave her a questioning look. "All right, not polite, exactly. Warm? Alive? I hoped that the baby might change her, but sometimes I think...." She trailed off, as if it was something that should remain unsaid.

Gwendith tried to go back to eating, but now her stomach wanted to rebel at the food. It was foolish, she knew, but she had taken an instant dislike to Siska-init. For the ghost eater's sake, perhaps? Siska-init *had* hurt him badly.

*Or maybe I should be honest and admit it's jealousy.* Stupid, that. But the thought that the ghost eater might still be in love with Siska-init gnawed at her like a rat in her gut.

Shadows darkened the interior for a moment, and she looked to the entrance. The ghost eater and another man came inside. His appearance shocked her for a moment. Gone was the semi-modest covering of the Rhylachan trousers and coat; now he wore only an aproned breechclout. Of course, so did the other Ahkan'i men...but it was different, somehow, with him. She looked quickly away from the sight of his bare legs—and found her eyes irresistibly drawn to his companion.

He was, very simply, the most beautiful man she had ever seen. His proud features were flawless, his body smoothly muscled, his long hair shiny and dark as obsidian. Warm brown eyes met hers and lingered. Peripherally, she was aware that Stands-in-Smoke and Johann had both stopped eating to gawk along with her.

"This is my brother, Tihune," the ghost eater said harshly.

Gwendith blinked, then looked at him. He folded his arms defensively across his chest and turned his face away, the lines of his diminutive body taut.

*Uh-oh.*

Tihune crouched down beside them. "I wanted to meet you all," he said. He had a lovely voice. "To journey here from your own land—that took great courage."

Johann shrugged. "Not a lot of choice, really. It was either come here, or sit and wait for the Devourer to come eat us in our own houses."

"Even so." Tihune smiled his approval. "It is a good thing to know that not all Rhylachans are Enemies to us. Will you help us fight the Enemy warriors if we must?"

Johann exchanged glances with the rest, then nodded uncertainly. "Um, we'll do what we can. But Gwendith's the only real fighter among us. The rest of us just muddle through as best we can, and hope that we don't accidentally shoot ourselves instead of the soldiers."

Tihune turned curiously to Gwendith. "You are a warrior, then?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "I suppose."

He folded his hands together carefully. "We Ahkan'it have not fought anyone since the great oaks outside were merely acorns. Would you come and meet with the other warriors and me, and teach us what to expect? It might give us a better chance, should it come to that."

"Yes. I will."

He gave her a smile that sent warmth throughout her body. "Good. I look forward to it."

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Siska-init walked quickly through town, avoiding the gaze of everyone she met. Tskiya and Une-ti raced across her path, laughing and carefree. She envied them their light hearts.

She had gone to the women's council, as was her right, and listened throughout with a growing sense of horror. The Enemy woman's voice had been eerily calm when she described the atrocities and abominations of her people, the madness they had loosed on themselves and Ahkan'it alike. That had been hard to listen to.

The ghost eater's part in the tale had been almost as difficult to hear.

Her heart contracted sharply, though whether with grief or pride she didn't know. He had been brave and fierce, had won his way into Enemy lands and back again. For that, she was glad, but guilt tinged the emotion as it did every thought of him. It might have been easier if he had simply run off the way people had thought. If he had never returned to Bird Creek Town.

*It wasn't supposed to be this way.* But then it never was, was it?

Her younger sister Mahi sat in the sun, arranging the baby in his cradleboard. Still only a Young Woman, it would be another winter before Mahi was old enough to

marry and have a child of her own. She looked disappointed when she caught sight of Siska-init, but gathered the baby up to hand over.

"I've just cleaned him," she explained. "I think he's hungry."

"Thank you," Siska-init said woodenly. She glanced down at her son's tiny face, searching as she always did for some trace of Tamaugua in him.

Her arms tightened around the cradleboard, and she went into the summer house even though it was too nice to be out from under the sky. In here, people were less likely to bother her. The baby whimpered, and she freed him from the cradleboard and unwrapped the cougar skin that swaddled him. She stared fixedly down at him, until he threatened to cry. There was no shadow of his father's brother in him. None at all.

It had all gone horribly wrong somehow, maybe had all been a mistake from the start. It had seemed so clear in her grief. Tamaugua, her love, had been cruelly taken from her. She had wished, desperately, that he had done the dishonorable thing and lain with her despite her clan's objections. At least then she might have had his child for comfort.

And then...Tihune had come to her, looking for someone who shared his loss. And it had occurred to her that this was Tamaugua's brother, the closest thing to Tamaugua himself that she would ever get again. Maybe there was some way to preserve at least some small piece of him after all.

Tihune had not expected her to use the chant *for* pregnancy, had been shocked when she came to him shortly thereafter and declared herself with his child. On the surface, her clan approved the match with him, even though most thought it unseemly for her to wed so quickly after Tamaugua's death.

Even then, she hadn't been sorry for what she had done. The child growing in her was her last connection to Tamaugua—that was something, at least. And it wasn't as if the ghost eater wearing Tamaugua's body would care.

*How could I have been so wrong?*

When the old one had brought back the new ghost eater, she'd *known* what she would see—a cold-faced stranger without feeling or attachment to her, who only *looked* like her lost love. The ghost eater was not the same person whose body he wore—that was what everyone had told her, over and over again.

But the instant she'd met his eyes, she'd known. The hurt in him...had ripped what little was left of her own heart to shreds. She'd done the wrong thing—betrayed the man she loved with the brother he had worshipped. In her mind, she'd named her baby that instant: *Chiaha*. Regret. Terrible regret.

It had been a little easier, once he'd left. She hadn't forgotten him, but at least she didn't have to see his worn, grief-stricken face hovering around every corner. The wound had started to scab over.

Except that he had come back. Not just slunk back, beaten and hopeless as he had been the last time she had seen him. He had come back with *friends*, which the ghost eater was not supposed to have. With people who had obviously shared a great deal with him, who had formed bonds with him, who cared about him and were cared for in return.

It wasn't fair, Kani curse it. *She* should be with him now, not some scraggly group of Enemies and Hut Sitters. Not fair at all.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

They arose early the next morning and went out to bathe in the river, the act become a habit from their time with the ghost eater. Breakfast came after, in the form of A'na bearing a pot of corn bread flavored with last-year's sunflower seeds. Curious people passed by, wanting to see what the strangers did. They were the first non-Ahkan't seen in well over two-hundred years, and that, Gwendith realized glumly, made them bizarre as the freaks displayed during fair-time in Aneirach.

Tihune came with his easy smile, settling by them while they ate. "The warriors are going to gather in the square ground," he explained to Gwendith. "You can show us these...*guns* there."

Gwendith shook her head sharply. "No. We need to meet somewhere outside the town, away from the houses. Bullets go a lot farther than arrows or sling stones, Tihune. I don't want to accidentally kill anyone."

He looked worried at that, but rose with smooth grace. "Then I'll let the others know and find another place."

Gwendith spent the rest of the day with all the able-bodied warriors. She used a few precious shots to demonstrate the dangerous power of Rhylachan weaponry, sending the bullets into old gourds and a broken pot. There was a frightened silence afterwards.

Tihune broke the paralysis by asking calm questions about the guns' abilities. What was the range, how accurately could they be aimed, how useful were they in the wood as opposed to open ground? She answered honestly, explaining both the limitations and the advantages of firearms.

Tihune heard her out, then nodded thoughtfully. "If we came upon them in ambush, in the dense wood, and got them to shoot, we might have a chance of hurting them badly while they were reloading."

"Possibly," she admitted.

“What about the fire-caller?” Sihun asked. “Could she set fire to the powder before the soldiers knew we were there?”

“I don’t know. I think Stands-in-Smoke has to actually be touching something before she can set a spark to it. Otherwise, she probably would have done it before. But we can ask her.”

“What if we...?”

“How are the Enemy warriors...?”

“Is there any way to...?”

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At the end of the long day, Gwendith found herself tiredly walking back to town beside Tihune. The sun was starting to disappear behind the mountains, turning the tops of conifers into spears of burning gold. The smoke from cook fires stained the air, mingling with the smells of pollen and flowers. The breeze caught at Tihune’s long hair, sent a few strands cascading over his flawless features.

“You did well today,” he said unexpectedly. “I think you earned their respect.”

“I’m glad. I just wish that I wasn’t the only source of knowledge about the soldiers. I was never in the military myself. My father was, but he had retired by the time I was born. My husband was also, for a brief time in his youth. Most of what I know is second-hand from them.”

“You’re married?”

Her mouth quirked slightly. “According to the law of the Wizards, the marriage bond can’t be broken except by death. Considering that I now know the Wizards were frauds, I don’t know how much stock I put into their decrees. I...Beoch betrayed me. He used my trust in him to try and trick me, hoping that I would tell Colonel Talys all that I knew about the ghost eater.” Her hands clenched painfully at the memory. “According to the ghost eater, the day I chose to walk away from Fort Ironwood and leave Beoch behind, I declared myself no longer his wife. And if not then, surely I couldn’t still be considered bound to him after what he did to me.”

“I would agree with that.”

“But that’s the Ahkan’i way of seeing things. I don’t know...it’s hard, Tihune. This is what I grew up with. Even after all that’s happened, a part of me still considers Beoch my husband. A very poor husband, true, but bound to me in the sight of men and the Wizards.”

Tihune put a comforting hand to her shoulder. His fingers felt warm through her shirt. “I think I understand how you feel, although the customs surrounding it make little enough sense to my mind.” He sighed suddenly. “Maybe I understand too well.”

*Trouble at home?* she wondered, her curiosity piqued. Had Tihune betrayed his brother, only to find himself in a marriage he didn’t really want? She remembered what A’na had said, that Siska-init had grown cold and distant, without warmth even for her own child. Perhaps things here were not so simple as they seemed.

“What if I had been born Ahkan’i?” she asked. “What would I have done to be rid of Beoch?”

“I expect he would have come home one day to find all his possessions in a heap outside your door. That’s the most extreme signal that things are not going well in the household, but hard to misinterpret. Then he would have had to pack them and himself back to his clan and live with his mother or a sister, until they found someone else to agree to take him.”

“And if there were children?”

“They would stay with you, of course,” he said, surprised. “They belong with their own clan.”

“Oh.” That might explain why he stayed with Siska-init, even if there was trouble between them.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said earlier,” he said after a moment of silence. “About wishing that there was another way to learn about the Enemy soldiers. I think that there might be.”

Her interest perked at that. “What?”

“Come with me.” He put a hand to her arm to guide her. They went through the town, heading for a cluster of buildings near the square ground. “This is where we keep some of our most sacred things. The Feather House is on the left. The Memory House is by it. Some of the memories there are from the time we fought the Enemies.”

“Memories?”

“You’ll see.” He frowned thoughtfully. “I have to get some of the others, so that they can remember with us. And the ghost eater—he is required to be present. Go back to the townhouse if you like, but don’t eat anything. Someone will come for you when all is ready.”

Puzzled, Gwendith went back to the townhouse, where Johann, Stands-in-Smoke, No Tongue, and A’na were sharing a large pot of grits and beans. The smell set Gwendith’s stomach to growling, but she politely declined an offer to join them. Instead, she told them a little about what she had done that day, and then listened to their own stories. Johann and No Tongue had accompanied some of the women into the forest to gather food, because it was deemed unsafe for them to go alone with Enemies loose in the mountains. Stands-in-Smoke had gone down to the fields. By the note in her voice, she was clearly in awe of the abundance of food the Ahkan’it enjoyed.

Several hours passed, and the town settled down for sleep. Gwendith dozed sitting up, until a soft sound caught her awake. The young twins stood gravely before her. One beckoned, and she rose and followed them into the night.

They took her to a low building with stout log walls, which were covered over with a thick layer of earth. Inside, it was very dark, the only light coming from a fire in the center of the room. The fire had been built oddly—a circle of slender pine knots laid over one another in Xs, with the fire burning its way slowly around the ring. As it ate its way along, one of the young boys replaced the burned pine knots with fresh ones, so that the fire would find fuel when it made its way around again.

The small building was fiercely hot; sweat gleamed on the bronze skin of the men gathered within. Tihune smiled when he saw her and moved to make space for her in the circle. A moment later, the ghost eater appeared, tugging a heavy hide door flap closed behind him. He looked suddenly alien in the fire-streaked darkness, the tattoos on his face seeming more real than the flesh beneath. He carried a bundle wrapped in deerskin, which he carefully laid before them. He took a small amount of dried tobacco from a pouch, and tossed it on the fire.

He glanced briefly at Tihune, then focused resolutely on the flames. “You have asked to remember,” he said softly, voice resonating in the enclosed space. He carefully



unwrapped the bundle, exposing what appeared to be a heavy wooden club, polished smooth and decorated with a spray of feathers. The leather binding and the feathers looked ancient, half crumbled into dust. "This is the memory of Ganu'he, put into his war club so that those who came after would not forget. Take it and remember."

Tihune nudged Gwendith, who was sitting closest. Uncertain, she leaned over, hand hovering above the wood. "Pick it up," the ghost eater prompted softly. Her fingers closed over the fire-warmed wood, and she lifted the club.

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*He stood at the peak of the ravine, exhaustion like a net tangled around his limbs. It was very cold, the first edge of winter, and hunger chewed at his gut as the teeth of a wolf would likely soon chew his corpse. His eyes lifted briefly, tracking the ravens and vultures that rode the winds in a black cloud. Perhaps, he thought desperately, they would find the bodies of the fallen warriors and release their souls honorably, even though the dead had not been brought to the Crow House. But he feared that Enemy dogs had savaged the bodies instead, and the dishonor of that stung like a bullet through his heart.*

*Tskla appeared, walking up the trail with a look of grim determination on his face. His strength was failing, no different from anyone else. Once-thick muscles had wasted away through lack of food, and his eyes peered from deep in his head, as if he had already died. His clothing was dirty, torn, and stained, but there was no way to repair or replace it. Seeing Tskla this way made him feel even more tired, and he wondered in despair how they had come to this moment.*

*Tskla stopped by him and looked out over the ravine, perhaps watching for the concealed warriors and ghost eaters. Over fifty men lost that way, giving up their lives to the bhargha so that the Ahkan'it might have some hope of victory.*

*"I'm sorry," Tskla said softly. "Mita was a good woman. I know how much you loved her."*

*It took a moment for the words to penetrate the daze that had settled around him. He had been trying not to think about Mita—he couldn't, not now, not with Enemies marching on them and every man needed at his best. His last sight of her overwhelmed*

*him. She had been so thin, wasted away from starvation, having insisted on giving up all but the smallest portion of her food to the warriors. It had gone against the grain—the warriors were supposed to protect the women and children, not the other way around. But, she had argued, if the warriors failed there would be no more women and children, no more Ahkan'it, not ever.*

*It had taken its toll on her—and on the baby growing in her belly. At the end, she had looked like some horrible parody of herself, her huge belly surrounded by stick-thin arms and legs, surmounted by a cadaverous face. She had died trying to give birth, and the baby died with her.*

*Tears burned his eyes, his face, and he wiped them away frantically. He couldn't afford to be blinded, not now. Later on, if he lived, he would create a Memory of Mita. But he had to survive for that to happen.*

*"The Enemies are coming," he said quietly. "It may be that I will dance with her tonight, in the Darkening Land."*

*Tskla nodded. "There are so many of them. And so few of us."*

*"We should find our places for the ambush."*

*They crouched behind a tangle of undergrowth that had been cut and piled up to provide concealment. One hundred other warriors, some with war-Ways but most without, hid around them. It was more than half the remaining Ahkan'i force.*

*The Enemies came then. They had been lured this way by a runner, a man pretending to be a scout frightened out of hiding and fleeing back to his unsuspecting friends. The man had not come before them; no doubt the dogs had torn the unfortunate warrior down.*

*Gunfire erupted from the sides of the ravine, the rifles stolen from the dead of earlier battlefields. Enemies cried out, scrambling to get into defensive positions, some of them firing blindly at the side of the ravine. The first volley ended, and the ghost eaters launched themselves through the haze of gun smoke, their eyes mad and their bharghas flaring like fire. They tore into the ranks of the Enemy, soldiers screaming and dying before them, the dogs howling and snarling as they succumbed.*

*Three Hut Sitters emerged from the Enemy ranks, shoved forward by the cruel hands of their captors. Their bodies showed bruises, cuts, and burns, the marks of*

*whatever atrocities their masters chose to inflict on them. Fire flared, and one ghost eater was consumed, then another.*

*Living warriors joined the fray then, first shooting arrow after arrow into the Enemy ranks, killing two of the Hut Sitters, before they could decimate the ghost eaters further. Then the Enemy soldiers charged the sides of the ravine, at a disadvantage from having to run uphill. They closed hand-to-hand, bayonets and swords against war clubs.*

*The struggle was brief but fierce. At the end of it, all of the Enemy soldiers lay dead. All of them.*

*Somehow, a victory.*

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Gwendith choked, her entire body shuddering as the Memory let her go. Distantly, she felt a heavy object lifted from her hands, heard a quick intake of breath followed by a low moan.

The air was oppressively hot. Sweat soaked her light shirt, made it cling to her body, so that her nipples showed through like dark moons. Someone touched her shoulder—the ghost eater, she thought. “It’s all right,” he said. “You’re safe. Just try to relax.”

She closed her eyes, concentrated on breathing. Someone else took the war club from Tihune, who shuddered hard, as affected by the experience as she. The club made its way around the circle, passing to everyone except the two boys who quietly tended the fire. The ghost eater took it from the last man, his hands wrapped in the deerskin to keep from touching it.

The door flap opened, letting in a blast of air that felt cold by comparison to the sweltering heat inside. The ghost eater helped Gwendith to her feet. She bent through the low doorway, staggering a little as she stood straight on the other side. She felt odd, almost like she had when No Tongue had given Ahkan’i language to her, as if there was something not herself wedged into her head. She tried to focus on her own memories, to remind herself of who and where she was.

The eastern sky was beginning to pale with the promise of dawn. The ghost eater led them through the growing light to the river, stopping on the bank. His hand touched her again, gentle and perhaps a little concerned. "This is called going to water," he murmured. "Everyone must strip. Normally there would only be men present. If you would like, Sihun can go aside with you—he's a man, yes, but at least his form is the same as yours, and perhaps less embarrassing for you."

She nodded dumbly, and he motioned to Sihun, handing his friend what looked like a long-toothed comb made of bone. Sihun took it in a shaky hand and drew Gwendith aside to where a stand of trees would protect her Rhylachan modesty. They helped one another out of their clothes, still trembling a little from the experience they'd had. Then Sihun held up the comb. "I have to scratch you," she explained. "Not deeply, just enough to draw a little blood."

Gwendith nodded. Sihun drew the comb's teeth down her shoulders, along her arms and legs. The shallow scratches stung. Then Gwendith took the comb, carefully repeated the process with Sihun. As she finished, the ghost eater's voice came to them, lifted in a singsong chant. Sihun quickly grabbed her hand and pulled her into the water.

The mountain-born river was ferociously cold, a shock after the heat of the sweathouse. They ducked under the water seven times, in measured intervals that matched the cadence of the ghost eater's chant. By the last time, Gwendith discovered that the cold water had helped clear her head greatly. The shakiness had gone from her limbs, and her thoughts were her own once again. The Memory felt more distant, like something that had happened in a dream. Even so, it was odd to think that Ganu'he and his sorrows had been dead for centuries.

They dressed and rejoined the others on the bank. "Go to your beds and rest," Tihune advised them. "Once you wake, come back to the meeting place. We have much to discuss." As the men began to scatter, he turned a tired smile on Gwendith. "I'll walk you back to the townhouse, if you're uncertain of the way."

"*You* have a wife to get back to," the ghost eater cut in sharply. "*I* will escort Gwendith back."

Standing so close to his tall brother, the ghost eater looked rather like a child arguing with an elder. Tihune's patronizing smile only reinforced the image. "Of course," he said indulgently, and the ghost eater's cheeks flushed even beneath his brown skin.

"Is there no chance of reconciliation?" Gwendith asked softly once they were alone.

The ghost eater scowled. "For a while, I thought there might be. But time is proving me wrong."

"But if you and I, Rhylachan and Ahkan'i, can come together, perhaps there is hope for you and Tihune as well. You are brothers."

"And brothers make the most bitter enemies of all." He shook his head suddenly. "I don't want to talk about Tihune. It's all I ever hear anyway—see how smart Tihune is, how handsome Tihune is, how great a hunter Tihune is, how all the warriors listen to Tihune and want to follow him. I'm sick of hearing his name!"

Gwendith turned to him, surprised at the venom in his voice. His dark eyes were narrowed with anger, and he glared at the rocks lining the riverbank as if he would shatter them with the force of his gaze. *Jealousy?* she wondered. It would seem natural. Of the two, Tihune was the more physically gifted, with his height and stunning good looks.

But there was something more behind his rage than simple jealousy. Their differences in appearance had been between them all their lives, but by all accounts Tamaugua had worshipped Tihune rather than envied him. The only explanation seemed to be the strife that Siska-init had sown between them. Not that Tihune was blameless, of course...but somehow, Gwendith found it difficult to dislike him for it. Instead, she found him sympathetic, for being bound to a wife who didn't love him. According to his earlier words, if he left Siska-init, he would lose most contact with his son. That was certainly a pain to which she could relate.

But there was no sense in arguing Tihune's case with the ghost eater, certainly not while he was in such a mood. "All right," she murmured instead, and they walked back to town in silence.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

Gwendith spent the next two days with the town's warriors, not only talking and planning, but learning something of their weapons as well. After all, her supply of bullets was far from infinite; soon her dueling pistols would be no more useful than two lumps of iron. And it was always better to be able to fight an enemy from afar, rather than be forced to close enough quarters for her saber. Tihune tried to teach her both the bow and the atlatl. The bow she picked up far more readily. Atlatls consisted of spears couched in weighted throwing sticks, which could be hurled with great force by someone practiced in their use. Unfortunately, accuracy was also something that came only with time, and some of the men jokingly pretended to flee in terror when she agreed to try a second cast.

She walked back to the townhouse with her shoulders and arms aching painfully. Tihune strolled with her, as had become his habit. He followed her inside; it was still late afternoon, and no one else was there. She dropped down on one of the bench-beds with a loud groan.

He grinned. "Sore?"

"I think my arms may simply fall off altogether. It would be less painful."

He chuckled and pulled a pouch from his belt. "I thought you might have some trouble, so I brought a salve for sore muscles with me.

"That was very thoughtful of you."

He hesitated before handing it to her. "Do you need any help? If there are any aches you can't reach, that is."

Now it was her turn to hesitate. Tihune meant to be kind...and her back and shoulders *did* hurt. There was nothing more to it than that, one friend helping another.

*Liar.*

"All right," she agreed. He politely turned his back, letting her slip her shirt quickly over her head and bundle it in front of her. Once she was settled, he came and sat behind her. She jerked a little at the first touch of the cool salve, but the heat of his

hands warmed it, and she felt the soreness ease from her muscles. She sighed, relaxing. His fingers felt wonderful, moving slowly but firmly over her back and shoulders, and it occurred to her that it had been a very long time since anyone had touched her with tenderness. Even before things had gone bad with Beoch, there had not been a great deal of physical affection between them. Some of Beoch's attitudes were rural relics from a time when Rhylachan society had been more straight-laced, when physical love was something to be expressed quickly and in the dark.

This...was nice. Very nice. Her nipples tightened, and she felt a familiar ache between her thighs. Tihune's hands paused, then slowly moved to close around her shoulders, as if he would turn her to him.

*"Excuse me."*

Tihune leapt up guiltily. Gwendith spun around, only to see the ghost eater standing in the doorway. There was a wild look in his eye, and his hands had clenched into fists. An uncomfortable silence stretched between the three of them, broken only when Tihune quickly nodded in Gwendith's direction. "I had best get home. I'll see you tomorrow, Gwendith."

"Good night, Tihune."

The ghost eater moved just enough to let Tihune leave, then strode into the room. He stopped halfway to her, as if he had forgotten what he was doing.

Gwendith turned away hurriedly and pulled her shirt back on, ignoring the protest of suddenly-taut muscles. "I learned the bow and atlatl today, or started on them, at least. It left me sore, so Tihune offered to help me with a salve."

"A salve that couldn't wait for Stands-in-Smoke or A'na to get back?" he demanded. There was anger on the surface of his words, but hurt clearly lay beneath.

"Why should I wait?" Gwendith demanded, cross with either him, or herself, or both. "What do you think was going to happen? Tihune is married."

"As if that's something I could forget. But it seems to me that you and Tihune have grown rather close over the last few days. Every time I see you, it's only to spot him lurking nearby."

She folded her arms over her chest, glaring down at him. "Tihune has been kind to me. I'd like to think he's my friend. You have no right to tell me whom I can spend time with."

"No, I don't. I suppose it's none of my business, is it? None of my concern if you spend time with brave, sweet, oh-so-handsome Tihune. Tihune whom the women can't stay away from, Tihune—"

"Stop this."

"Tihune who wouldn't have to stand on tip-toe to kiss you."

"At least he *could* kiss me," she snapped furiously. Then stopped, putting a hand to her mouth as she realized what she'd said. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean it."

His face blanked, went still, except for the pain in his earth-colored eyes. "Why apologize for speaking the truth?" he asked coldly. "You're right, of course. I *am* the ghost eater. There could never be anything between us. There *is* nothing between us—not friendship, not compassion, *nothing*. Go wrap your legs around him for all I care."

He turned and stalked out. She stared after him a moment in shock, heart hammering against her ribs. Then, realizing it would be a mistake to let him go, she started after. "Ghost eater! Wait, I—"

Johann came inside, almost colliding with her. Behind him, Stands-in-Smoke was staring indignantly after the ghost eater, hands on her hips. "Bastard," she muttered; Rhylachan word, not Ahkan'i. "I think he would just have marched over the top of us, if we hadn't gotten out of his way!"

"Ghost eaters can be like that," A'na offered. She stood behind them, her hand tucked securely into the crook of No Tongue's arm.

Gwendith's shoulders slumped. "No. No, it's my fault. We argued, and I said some things I shouldn't have. Both of us did."

*And maybe I did some things I shouldn't have, too.* But, her reaction to his touch notwithstanding, Tihune was just a friend to her. He was married, she was married, and she didn't love him at any rate. *I told the ghost eater that there was nothing untoward going on. He should have trusted me enough to believe it.*

She frowned, annoyance at the ghost eater growing. If he wanted to go off in a snit, fine. Did he think things were easy for her?



“To hell with him anyway,” she declared, sitting down. “Let’s have supper.”

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The ghost eater walked back to his own house, feeling utterly lost.

Things were going well, or at least not outright badly, he told himself. He hadn’t been driven from the town, Gwendith and Johann had been more or less accepted, and the Ahkan’it were preparing for war. So far, all that he had set out to accomplish had been achieved, even though the hardest part still lay ahead. And yet, he felt as if everything had gone completely wrong.

He wanted to go back and apologize to Gwendith, to tell her that he hadn’t meant his last words. But how could he justify doing so? She had been right to rebuke him. He could never be with her the way she needed him to be. By caring for her, by binding her to himself with emotional ties, was he depriving her of other chances at happiness? Perhaps if he put distance between them, as he should have from the first moment they’d met, she would find a living man who would love her as her Rhylachan husband had not. And as he *could* not.

What had gone wrong was himself. Somehow, he had justified letting himself make friends, had pretended that he was no different from anyone else. In doing so, he had hurt Gwendith, whom he had never meant to give any pain. She shouldn’t have to pay for his selfishness, especially not when she had already suffered so much.

He would lose her, one way or another. It was inevitable. Had always *been* inevitable. Tihune was merely the first sign of things to come.

*Find someone*, he willed her. *But not Tihune*. It had been hard enough seeing Tihune with Siska-init. If Tihune plied his charms on Gwendith, and she accepted...then he would hate his brother for it.

*Perhaps I should tell her*, he thought uneasily. *Surely if Gwendith knew what Tihune is really like, she wouldn’t be so eager to be his friend. But I made Sihun swear not to tell. I was the one who suggested keeping it secret in the first place.*

He went inside the house and stretched out on the bed. He had spent the last two days repairing his dwelling, so that the roof no longer leaked, and the walls were no

longer in danger of collapsing. Bean wandered in, curled up on his chest, and went instantly to sleep.

“What should I do?” he asked the sleeping cat. Probably there wouldn’t be much useful advice, even if he had the Way of talking to animals. Probably feline affairs of the heart were much more straightforward.

There were only two choices that he could see. He could either keep Tihune’s secret and let things fall as they would. Or he could tell Gwendith...and merely draw out the breaking of his own heart that much longer.

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Gwendith had a difficult time falling asleep that night. Something nagged at her, a pricking at the back of her mind that had no form, yet would not let her be. She tossed and turned on the bed, pulled up the bundled furs, then cast them away again. At length, through sheer exhaustion, she sank into a state halfway between dream and waking.

*Her mind slipped free, like a hare from a trap. Its sight moved through the sleeping town, touching here and there. For an instant she saw Siska-init, the infant tucked against her, but none other in the house.*

*Where’s Tihune? she wondered automatically. The house faded, and the riverbank appeared. Moonlight glittered on the water, silvered the trees. Tihune knelt by the river, back straight, hands resting on his knees. A small fire burned before him, and he tossed tobacco on it, inhaling the fumes.*

*“Listen!” he called suddenly, a sing-song chant.*

*“Listen! The spider has taken her soul,  
He brings it me!  
She is lonely; other men are loathsome to her,  
But I am bright and handsome.  
No one is ever lonely with me.  
He brings me her heart,  
She is sad, and thinks on me.*

*I have been made fair.  
No one is ever lonely with me.  
He brings her to me,  
Binds her with white thread.  
I am Tihune of the Owl Clan,  
And so shall it be!"*

Gwendith jerked awake, startled. *A dream*, she thought, dazed. A strange, silly dream.

*No sense struggling to sleep if I'm to be plagued all night.* She sat up and silently pulled her boots on. The night was fairly warm, and she left her coat behind as she made her way outside. Perhaps a walk down to the river would clear her mind enough to let her rest.

She had only gone part of the way, when a shadow along the path suddenly detached itself from the rest. "It's just me," said Tihune.

She found herself suddenly glad to have met him. It was a lonely walk down to the river. Surely it would be better to have some company other than her own night-thoughts. "I guess I'm not the only one who couldn't sleep tonight," she said wryly.

He sighed and shrugged. "I always have trouble sleeping when the nights get warm. Would you like to go sit by the river for a while? The breeze will be refreshing."

They went down in silence, settling together on a bar of soft sand, which had been deposited during some flood. A dark shadow on the rocks nearby caught Gwendith's eye—ashes, probably from the fire of some fisher who had eaten his meal on the spot. Tihune's soft sigh caught her attention away from it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head, then seemed to relent. "You're my friend, aren't you, Gwendith?"

"Of course."

"I just...it wasn't only that I couldn't sleep tonight. Siska-init and I do not have the best of marriages, I'm afraid."

She nodded sympathetically. It occurred to her that she had been expecting this conversation for some time now. "I'm sorry. I know how you feel."

"I'm sure you do. I never meant to spend my life with her, Gwendith. I was hurting from losing Tamaugua, and she was even lonelier than I. We didn't intend anything...it just happened. I assumed that she had spoken a chant to keep herself from getting pregnant." He laughed sadly. "You can imagine my surprise when she came to me a few weeks later and told me that she was with child."

"I liked her, Gwendith. I had been a friend to her, before Tamaugua died. But afterwards...she became bitter, hard, and cruel. I became her husband out of a sense of duty, not out of love. And if I left her now, she would make certain that I wouldn't see my son as often as I would like. And I couldn't bear that."

Gwendith's heart ached for him. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you for listening to me. It means a lot." He took her hand and clasped it to his breast. "You've been so kind."

The motion had drawn them close together. His handsome face was very near her own. His other hand came up, touched her cheek lightly, and then cupped her jaw as he kissed her.

Desire went through her, turning her knees to water. His mouth felt good on hers, and she responded eagerly. His hand moved from her face to her shoulder, and then slid sensuously down to stroke her breast through the cloth of her shirt. He was young, and beautiful, and he was *here* with her now. It had been so damned long...surely, surely there would be nothing wrong in taking the pleasure he offered.

Unbidden, she saw the ghost eater's face: his dark eyes, his warm smile, his quick laugh. He would probably forgive her anything she did with Tihune, or with any other man. He would probably even regard it as inevitable, given his own situation. And that...that hurt.

"N-no," she mumbled, pushing at Tihune's chest. His mouth had worked its way down her throat, warm and erotic. "No. Stop."

"What's wrong?" he murmured, breathing ragged. His lips sought hers once again.

"I can't!" She shoved him back with sudden resolve. Free, she slithered back onto the rocks, in order to put some distance between them. Her hand came down in the ashes she had noticed before.

Pain shot through her fingers, and she snatched them away with a yelp, staring at the redness of the burn. This was no old cooking fire as she had assumed, but one recently extinguished. And was that burned tobacco she smelled?

"It wasn't a dream," she hissed, confused. "I Saw you down here, with my Way. You were burning tobacco and chanting...."

The words came back to her, terribly clear. He reached out a hand imploringly. "Gwendith, please, just listen to me for a moment."

"No! Get away from me!" she cried, leaping to her feet. He called out after her, but she ran full speed back towards the town, yelling for help.

By the time she reached the top of the trail, there were already torch-bearing warriors rushing to answer her shouts. She stumbled when she saw them and turned around to find Tihune toiling frantically after her.

"Gwendith! What's wrong?" Sihun demanded.

"It's Tihune! He tried to use—" but there was no Ahkan'i word for "magic." "A chant. He used a chant on me. To make me love him!"

Silence fell. Everyone was staring down at Tihune, who stopped and stared back helplessly.

"Is this true?" Jilhe asked severely.

"I—" Tihune stopped, and his face went pale in the uncertain torchlight. Gwendith followed his gaze and saw Siska-init standing at the top of the trail, her face frozen in shock. Then, with a muffled cry, the Ahkan'i woman turned and disappeared back the way she had come.

"You've always had a reputation with the women," Jilhe said tiredly. "But what were you thinking, Tihune? It's all very well for an unmarried young man to carry on so, but you have a wife and child!"

"I don't think it's all very well, under any circumstances," Gwendith snapped. Rage, humiliation, and hurt all combined in her belly, constricting her breath. "He tried to force me to lie with him by using a chant!"

“Not force,” Tihune said desperately. “It was just a chant.”

“It was like what the needfinders do!”

“No! Not like that, not so powerful. Love chants only...lower one’s inhibitions. Make you more sympathetic towards the chanter. I just wanted you to come down to the river with me, that’s all. Whatever you *felt* came only from inside you, Gwendith. And in the end, what you felt...was not for me. Please don’t be upset—”

The warriors parted suddenly, a dark shape shoving through them. The ghost eater appeared, staring at his brother and Gwendith with wild eyes. “What are you doing?” he shouted at Tihune. “Have you gone insane?”

Tihune took a step back, his hands held up to ward off attack. “Tamaugua—”

“No!” The ghost eater leapt down the steep trail, landing beside Tihune. His hands closed around Tihune’s waist, hefting him into the air with inhuman strength. “What’s wrong with you? *You* were the one born with the good looks, the skill, the charm, *everything!* When was I ever competition to you? And yet you’re determined to take everything from me! Everything! Even my *life* wasn’t enough! *Why are you doing this to me?*”

Tihune made a garbled sound, his eyes wide with terror. “He’s going to kill him,” someone gasped, and for a moment Gwendith almost believed it. Then, with a strangled cry, the ghost eater flung Tihune into a blueberry bush. Ignoring all questions and pleas, he fled past them back towards the town.

For an instant, there was nothing but shocked silence. Gwendith gave Tihune one last scathing look, then ran after the ghost eater.

She went to his house, not knowing where else he might have gone. He was there, sitting hunched over on the bed, shoulders shaking. He looked up when she came in, and she saw the tracks of tears gleaming in the meager light of the banked fire.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

“No.” He came to his feet, staring at her helplessly. “How could I be?”

“Nothing happened.”

“It isn’t that. How can I deny you a life, just because I am dead? But Tihune...Kani curse him, why couldn’t he keep his breechclout on just this one time? Does he hate me so much?”

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I’m so sorry. I know that he hurt you terribly when he married Siska-init.”

“This isn’t about Siska-init! Don’t you understand that? I never loved her the way I—”

He caught himself, but it still hung between them, as surely as if he had shouted the words aloud. *The way I love you.*

He let out a low cry, pushed past her, and vanished into the night. He could run much faster than any mortal; there was no hope of catching him now. Gwendith sank wearily down on the edge of his bed. She wished, desperately, that she had this night to live over again. Or that she had thought a little more about how the ghost eater might feel, seeing her grow close to the man who had betrayed him.

Two tabbies disentangled themselves from the pile of furs on the bed. One insinuated itself into her lap, its purr a low throb in her bones. She rested her face against its fur and tried not to think.

“Gwendith?” said a tentative voice from the doorway.

A’na stood there, her young face drawn with concern. Sihun hovered behind her, obviously looking for the ghost eater. Gwendith sighed and gestured at the otherwise empty house. “He isn’t here. I don’t know where he went.”

“What about you?” A’na asked softly. “How are you feeling?”

Gwendith shook her head and rose to her feet. “I don’t know. I’d just...I’d like to go outside for a while, clear my head.” She wasn’t certain whether she wanted to face Johann’s eager concern, or Stands-in-Smoke’s hard eyes, or even No Tongue’s gentle silence. They knew her too well by now. Knew both of them too well.

“Come, then.” A’na took her hand, leading her out into the night and down towards the river. It was a different spot than where she had gone with Tihune, and for that she was grateful. She took deep breaths of the water-scented air and felt a little of the ache ease from her throat.

Sihun had followed them. Now she stepped to the water's edge, resting the butt of her spear on the rocks. Doubtless she had snatched up the weapon at Gwendith's alarm. "I'm going to tell them," she said fiercely. "I know I promised...but Tamaugua said it himself, tonight!"

A'na sat down, smoothing her skirts with a graceful hand. "He is the ghost eater, Sihun."

"I don't care." Sihun gripped her spear, as if it were the neck of an enemy she meant to throttle. "Tihune lied about what happened when Tamaugua died. And I swore I'd keep silent. But no more. Not after this."

The ghost eater's blur of words came back to Gwendith, and her heart suddenly skipped a beat. "The ghost eater said that Tihune had taken everything. *Even his life*. What did he mean by that?"

Sihun bowed her head. "You both know how we three went out hunting the winter before last, so that Tamaugua could prove himself to Siska-init's family. And you know what was said—that Tamaugua accidentally killed a man of the Rhododendron Clan.

"It was a lie. Tihune killed that man."

A'na half-rose to her feet, brows drawn together in consternation. "Sihun...is this true?"

"Of course it's true! Kani curse it, why do you think I wear these marks on my face? *Tihune* shot the man, thinking he was a deer. When the man's brother came demanding a life for a life, it should have been Tihune who died. But Tamaugua spoke up and said that he would die instead."

"That is the blood law," A'na pointed out, probably for Gwendith's benefit. "Any man can pay for crimes of any other in his clan, if he so offers."

"I know, but it wasn't right! Tamaugua tried to tell me that it would be better this way—that Tihune was too important to the town to lose. That Tihune's skill and intelligence would serve our people far better than anything he could offer. And he made me promise not to tell anyone, because otherwise everyone would think Tihune a coward. I didn't want to do it, and I've openly worn the signs of my shame ever since. But I saw Tihune's face, when Tamaugua offered his own life in exchange. He was *glad*. He was afraid to die, and he was willing to trade his own brother to live."



Gwendith closed her eyes. Tamaugua had died for love of his brother...and the ghost eater had come back to find that his sacrifice had been repaid with betrayal. "I didn't know."

Sihun slammed the butt of her spear into the rock for emphasis. "Tihune's a coward and liar, Gwendith. And by tomorrow morning, everyone in this town will know it. I won't bear this shame any longer, not when Tihune proves himself more and more dishonorable at every turn."

"No! It isn't true!" cried a young voice.

The twins stood on the edge of the path above them. One looked solemn, but the other stared wild-eyed.

"Tihune's not a coward," he protested frantically. "He's a great warrior!"

Sihun's mouth quirked wryly. "Come here, Une-ti. You too, Tskiya." The two boys walked down to the edge of the river, their hands clasped firmly. "I know the truth is hard—worse since he's your cousin. But don't you think I felt the same way when it happened? Don't you think I expected Tihune to overrule Tamaugua, to insist on taking the punishment the Rhododendron Clan demanded? Just because someone's tall and strong and smart, it doesn't mean that he's an admirable person. Learn that, and you'll be one step closer to being men."

While Sihun lectured, A'na slipped one arm around Gwendith's shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"No. I'm furious."

"At Tihune?"

"At myself. I didn't know...but knowing or not knowing, my actions hurt the ghost eater. I know it isn't right by your standards, but he's my friend. Tihune cost the ghost eater his life and his love, and put him in the position he's in now. What did he think, seeing me making friends with the one who'd betrayed him the worst?"

A'na shook her head. "I don't know. Don't blame yourself. You know now, and you won't be fooled again." She dabbed lightly at Gwendith's face with the edge of her skirt. "Would you like some space to yourself, to get composed? There's a still place in the river behind those trees—it will give you a little privacy, but we'll still be close at hand if you need us."

"I think that would be a good idea."

"Then, after, we'll talk if you like. Woman to woman?"

Gwendith smiled at the kindness. "That might be good. You probably weren't even born the last time I did that." She rose shakily to her feet and made her way behind the screen of trees. Crouching down on the bank, she splashed water on her face. A headache was forming behind her eyes, from stress or lack of sleep she didn't know. By the position of the moon above the peaks, the night was not far advanced, but it seemed as though it had lasted forever.

She took a deep breath and sank back on her heels. She heard the faint murmur of voices, but the sound of the river turned them into an indistinguishable blur. Bowing her head over the still water near the bank, she saw herself only as a shadow against the stars. The ghost eater had told her that the great river of stars across the sky was really corn meal, spilled from the mouth of a thieving dog. The tale had made her laugh, lying on her back by him in the cool night, listening to the crackle of the campfire.

The sound of anger in one of the half-heard voices caught at her attention. Surprised, she raised her head and listened more carefully. The voice was that of a man—a man who spoke Rhyllachan. Fear thrumming along her limbs, she carefully swung into a crouch, making her way towards the trees that obscured her sight.

Five soldiers stood on the riverbank. All of them had guns leveled threateningly at the small gathering before them. Sihun had moved to stand between them and the rest, her spear raised in warning. Gwendith gasped and drew her pistols, but her friends stood between her and the soldiers, blocking any shot.

"Look at that bitch!" one of the soldiers exclaimed wonderingly. "Waving that stick at us!" He grinned at Sihun. "I've got a better stick than that for you, girl."

Sihun couldn't understand the words, but she undoubtedly comprehended the threatening tone well enough. "Run!" she cried suddenly, lunging at the soldiers with her spear.

Several things happened at once. A'na ran instantly, screaming as if to wake the mountains themselves. Two of the soldiers fired. One bullet caught Sihun in the chest, sending her sprawling onto the rocks at the edge of the water. The other took one of the young twins in the head.

His brother stopped running, staring at the blood. A thin shriek tore loose from his throat, escalating into a high wail that went on and on. "Damn it!" shouted one of the soldiers. He wrapped one hand about the boy's mouth and used the other to heave him off his feet.

"What are you going to do with him?" demanded another man. The sound of his voice turned Gwendith's stomach with its familiarity.

*Beoch.*

"We might need a hostage. That other bitch will have their men down on us before too long." He kicked viciously at the soldier who had fired, and who was now standing over Sihun, hands fumbling with his belt. "There's no time for that, you idiot!"

"You're supposed to be able to obscure our trail! That's why the colonel sent you with us in the first place!"

"I can't obscure anything if they can see us, fool! Now let's move!"

They retreated, dragging the boy with them. In a moment, they had disappeared into the trees.

Gwendith swore in fear and grief. Then she sprinted from her hiding place, through the river's shallows. The soldiers might have a Way for covering their trail, but she had a Way of finding them. And she'd be damned if she let them hurt another child.

She paused for a second to snatch a pouch from Sihun's belt. Then she followed the soldiers into the forest. As she moved, she dipped her hands into the pouch, covering her fingers with red ochre. Two careful swipes, and she wore the falcon's marks on her own face. "I am a real falcon," she whispered. "My prey cannot evade me. I am too fast, and my sight is too keen. Yi! I am a real falcon."

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

The ghost eater ran.

The ground sloped up beneath his feet, angling towards the peaks above. He staggered once or twice, the tangled roots of laurel and rhododendron conspiring to trip him. Branches whipped his face and gouged his eyes, but the *bhargha* healed the wounds before they could so much as bleed. It maddened him, a mocking reminder of how different he was from everyone else.

After what seemed an eternity of running, the trees opened up, and he stumbled onto the bare gray rock of a bald. The wind was strong here on the heights, whipping his hair into a black storm cloud around his face and arms. He was far up on the mountain now, in the domain of ravens and thunder. In the domain of the ghost eaters.

A shiver went through him, and he wrapped his arms around himself, even though the reaction hadn't been born of any outside chill. The tall conifers edging the bald hissed and whispered among themselves. Perhaps they commiserated with him, or perhaps they simply laughed. Here, where the ground sloped up sharply to the ridge, where the trees grew close along the edge of the bald, half-concealing a deep split in the rock...here was where he had been born, a thing of earth and stone in the stolen body of a man.

"It was badly done," he whispered. Then he raised his voice to a shout. "It was wrong!"

There came the sound of hoof clicking on stone. He turned to discover Little Deer, Vulture, Owl, and Rabbit, all staring at him solemnly. "What was wrong, ghost eater?" Little Deer asked. His voice was deep, wild, as if the mountain itself had spoken.

"The old one should not have made me. I am flawed, no matter what Gwendith says. He should have let me pass on to the Darkening Land and found someone else."

"Tell me why are you so unfit, ghost eater."

"Because I cannot bear this existence. Before you came to me, I was so miserable I thought of casting myself on the fire. I watched everyone I had ever loved,

and I couldn't speak to them, couldn't share their joys or sorrows. Some of them feared me, who would never have believed Tamaugua capable of harm. I told Sihun that Tamaugua didn't die, but it was a lie. His own friends and family killed him bit by bit, every time they turned their eyes away, until there was nothing left.

"Maybe it would have been different if I'd felt I had some kind of purpose. But we hadn't fought anyone in hundreds of winters. There was nothing to do but sit in the rain and feel sorry for myself. That changed once you came to me. I felt like I had a purpose in life again, like I could still be of use to my people. But somehow, when I left the Ahkan'it, I forgot what I was supposed to be. I pretended to be alive again, when I should have been using the time away from my friends and family to put emotional distance between myself and the world." He shook his head. "I was a mistake. I can't do it. The old one should have chosen someone stronger than I."

The moonlight caught in Little Deer's eye, making it glow with cold fire. "And do you think *our* judgment so poor?"

That stopped him, caught his next words in his throat, so that he had to draw a second breath to speak. "Your judgment? But the old one told me he had decided to go on to the Darkening Land. He chose the first unmarried young warrior that he had an excuse to take."

Rabbit laughed, long teeth gleaming in the night. "And how do you think he knew to find you, fool? You were out hunting—you weren't exactly marching down the middle of Bird Creek Town, proclaiming that the Rhododendron Clan was about to kill you."

"But...the old one never told me...."

"The old one never knew," Little Deer said scornfully.

"Then I don't understand. Why me, of all those you might have taken? If you wanted Bird Creek Town to have a new ghost eater, why not pick someone who could be all that a ghost eater is supposed to be?" Shame suddenly bit into him. "Or have I been that much of a disappointment to you?"

Little Deer snorted, his breath making two white puffs even though the night was warm. "You do not even understand yourself, ghost eater. How can you then hope to understand us?" He fixed the ghost eater with a piercing gaze. "The ghost eaters are all but immortal, unless they choose to die. And yet the oldest of your kind is but a newborn

babe to us. For as long as the Ahkan'it and the other peoples were here before the Rhylachans came, we were here a thousand, thousand, thousand times longer, before ever a human stepped on this earth. Why do you think that humans alone can die at any time and are not be reborn to live out your natural span? At one time, even you were invaders here."

The ghost eater felt cold. If Rabbit had spoken the words, he would have doubted their truth. But coming from Little Deer, they held an awful certainty.

"We are not human," Little Deer continued, "but we have had a long time to study humans. We chose you. You aren't able to follow the traditions of the ghost eaters. Therefore, we must not have chosen you to follow those traditions."

"I don't understand."

"Then I will help you."

Little Deer lowered his head, the tips of his antlers gleaming. Then, without warning, he charged.

The ghost eater tried to get out of the way, but somehow Little Deer was still before him. The antlers impaled him from chest to belly, dozens of points slamming into his flesh. He cried out even as he felt the *bhargha* stir to close the wounds.

"Do not heal!" Little Deer commanded. He lunged forward convulsively, driving the antler tines deeper. "Do not heal!"

"I can't control it!"

Deeper the antlers bit. "Do not heal!"

He closed his eyes, desperate to follow the command. The *bhargha* moved in him like a live thing, reaching implacably for the wounds, stanching blood and drawing torn flesh back together.

"No!" snapped Little Deer. "When the branches cut you in the wood, did you see the *bhargha* as something apart from yourself, did you think about it as some other thing? What do you do when you want to move your foot? Do you think of it as something not attached to your brain? *Do not heal!*"

It was agony. The ghost eater moaned in pain, then gritted his teeth against the sound. *I will not heal!* he told himself fiercely. His will—not its. The *bhargha* had no will. The *bhargha* had no existence. There was only him.

Little Deer tore free in a blaze of pain. Every wound felt as though it had been stuffed with live coals. But they were still open. He dropped to his knees, felt the wetness of blood trickling down his belly and thighs.

“Good,” said Little Deer. The ghost eater opened his eyes, saw the dark gleam of blood and entrails on Little Deer’s antlers.

Vulture strode over the stone with long, stork-like legs. The stench of him was strong in the air, even with the wind. He examined the wounds critically, and for a terrified moment the ghost eater thought he might take a taste of exposed flesh. But he only bobbed his head in satisfaction. “Now close them—slowly. Pay attention to what it is you’re doing. You’ve been healing yourself since you were made, but you don’t even know how you do it. Take control of the process, don’t just be overwhelmed by it.”

The ghost eater strove to follow Vulture’s instructions. He closed his eyes, focused his attention on one of the wounds, and tried to close it. The *bhargha*’s tentacles resolved themselves from the whole, thinner than the finest hairs. It felt strangely as though he had dozen of fingers there, touching the edges of the wound, probing. He could sense it, if he tried, all the infinitesimal parts that made up the whole of his flesh, each tiny particle bound up and sustained by the *bhargha*. There was an instinct there, either in his flesh or in the *bhargha*, which somehow knew what had to be done to heal the hurt. He let it happen, watched everything grow and mesh together, the *bhargha* pushing blood back into the area in the absence of a beating heart.

He did it again and again, on each wound, until he had finished. Then he opened his eyes and looked up, hands shaking. “That was...amazing. There aren’t any words for what I saw.”

“No human words,” Vulture corrected.

Little Deer flicked his tail, as if impatient. “Do you hunger now?”

The ghost eater sighed. “I always hunger.”

“Then feed.”

The ghost eater hesitated, then loosened his careful control slightly. The *bhargha* unfurled, tendrils shimmering like Rhyllachan glass in the moonlight. With a flare, the small lichens and shrubs near him died, their dreaming green ghosts absorbed into his own. He started to refold the *bhargha*, but Little Deer snorted sharply. “Do not.”

Fear gripped him. "But if I don't, I'll kill everything around me."

Little Deer gave him a reproving look. "Relax. Let go. Take all the threads the old one bound you with, and throw them aside."

He had spent three moons struggling to learn how to hold the *bhargha* tightly inside. It was hard to simply relax, to let it halo out around him. Several tendrils sparked suddenly, and he felt the prick of life from some tiny thing in the air. Then the light drained from them, and he could no longer see them with his eyes, only feel them, like an extra sense that told him the warmth of the air, the roughness of the stones.

"Walk into the woods," Little Deer instructed.

"I'll kill the trees!"

"If you go expecting to kill them, you will. Empty your mind of such thoughts. Just walk into the woods, as you've done thousands of times before, without expectation."

The ghost eater rose carefully and made his way over the bald. The stone still retained some of the day's warmth, and it felt good against his bare feet. He concentrated on the sensation as the trees closed around him.

Nothing happened. He felt the *bhargha* brush across leaves, over bark, against the detritus on the ground. Tiny sparks of life came into him, picked from trees and earth and air. Not enough to kill anything, unless he remained in the same spot for a very long time. He reached out hesitantly and touched the closest pine. So far as he could tell, it took no damage.

He walked back out and stood before the animals again. "Nothing died. The *bhargha* fed—is feeding now. But only a little at a time. It's almost like it's continually grazing."

"Yes."

"I don't understand. The old one told me the story of the first ghost eater. He had no training—he must have been like this. But he killed his wife when he touched her."

Little Deer fixed him with a black eye. "You are quick to believe that you are flawed, but cannot imagine that no other ghost eater has ever been so. He was ill made, and afraid, and so apt to do things out of fear and confusion. Or perhaps he hated his wife, or was angry with her. You can still kill, if you wish to. The *bhargha* goes where the



mind wills it, just as your limbs do. You will not be as efficient at killing, nor will you be able to kill so many at a time. But as you are now, fed, you do not *have* to kill.”

“But the Devourer kills everything in its path, and it’s feeding all the time.”

“The Devourer is too big. Too many of any creature will strip the land bare of whatever food it requires. The Devourer could not sustain itself on the comparatively meager amount of life that you consume.”

The ghost eater held himself still, mind spinning. Everything he had thought he knew about himself as a ghost eater had been turned on its head. It was almost too much to grasp. “The *bhargha* goes where the mind wills it,” he repeated slowly.

“It is why you were able to heal or not heal yourself as you chose. Why you have been able to hold it inside yourself, even as you starved. Think on all that the old one told you, then think on the things that he repeated the most often. Over and over again he told you that you had to withhold the *bhargha*, had to deny yourself, because you had to become convinced of that for it to work. If your mind had not clung to that conviction, you might have become as you are now. And then he would certainly have destroyed you.”

Thunder rumbled somewhere far away. Vulture looked up, and then spread his massive wings. “There is one more lesson for you this night, ghost eater,” he said. “It waits for you in the town below. Learn it...and nothing will ever be the same again. Not for you, and not for any other like you.”

He launched himself into the wind, vanishing instantly into the black sky. Owl followed him, silent as the clouds. Rabbit winked slyly at the ghost eater, then dashed away into the scrub. Little Deer lingered for a moment, considering him with dark eyes. Then he turned, white hide fading gradually as he made his way through the trees.

The ghost eater stood still, his mind in turmoil. The animals had given him this knowledge for a reason...but he was still unsure what he was supposed to do with it. It came to him suddenly that all his moons of isolation had been for nothing. He wasn’t dangerous to those around him. There was no reason to fear growing close to someone. How many ghost eaters had existed alone and in pain, how many had gone mad for lack of anyone to share their lives with? And all because one foolish man had killed his wife and thought that he’d proved himself a menace to everyone around him.

Fragments of conversations drifted through his thoughts, teasing him.

*“Think on all that the old one told you, then think on the things he repeated the most often.”*

*“That’s the one part that doesn’t work anymore.”*

*“You aren’t a man. You’re a ghost eater.”*

*“I’m not so stupid as that, Sihun. I can’t be as a man with her.” “But you’re still able to find her attractive.” “Oh yes.”*

He closed his eyes, tried to relax, to let go of the thought patterns the old one had taught him. He took an unneeded breath, pictured Gwendith as she had looked the other night in the sweathouse. Her face had been tilted back when she held the war club, her lips slightly parted. Sweat had soaked through her white shirt, revealing the faint brown moons of her nipples. Desire awakened, and he let it flow through him, felt his body stiffen in response.

He flung his head back and let out a whoop that echoed off the mountains. Giddy excitement ran through him, and for a moment he felt as though he could dash back and take every available woman in the town. “Gwendith,” he whispered aloud, and laughed. He would surprise her with a kiss, would surprise her even more when he held her against him.

He started back down the mountain at a quick pace, trying to stop grinning. A love song came to mind, and he sang it gleefully to the stars. As he drew closer to town, the light of pine knot torches twinkled in the night, beckoning him. For a moment he started to smile at the sight, then frowned instead. This was not a dance night—there was no reason for anyone to be about at this hour, unless things were still stirred up from his earlier confrontation with Tihune.

A woman’s voice came to him on the breeze, the words indistinguishable but the sound of alarm terribly clear. Someone else wailed, a cry of grief that turned his heart to ice. All his high spirits gone in an instant, he ran the rest of the way to town.

Chaos reigned. People clung to one another, or rushed about, or tore their hair with grief. A group of men hurried up from the direction of the river, carrying two burdens with them. As the ghost eater drew closer, he saw Une-ti’s blood-masked face, its skin gone pale in death. Behind him came Sihun, equally pallid.

“No,” he whispered, agonized denial. He ran to them, sliding in between grieving relatives as the men lay their burdens in the grass. The back of Une-ti’s head was missing, and one of his eyes had been reduced to a bloody hole. A similar hole showed in Sihun’s chest. Bright blood poured out of the wound, and Sihun’s breathing was frightfully labored.

Hilaka knelt down by Sihun and shook her ancient head. Her face was drawn, haggard with the grief of an elder who sees her children and grandchildren die before her. “The wound is fatal. There is nothing I can do.”

“What happened here?” the ghost eater demanded frantically. Several people sidled away from him, as if they had only just now become aware of his presence.

Jilhe emerged from the crowd and faced him across Sihun’s body. “We don’t know yet. A’na came running, screaming that they were being attacked by the river. We went down to the waterside and found Une-ti and Sihun like this.”

A’na pushed forward, her face streaked with tears. No Tongue supported her, even though her hand clung to his tightly enough that it must have been causing him pain. “We were by the river,” she sobbed. “I thought Gwendith might need to get away, to talk to another woman.”

“Gwendith was with you?” the ghost eater asked, going cold.

“Yes. And then the boys came and talked to Sihun. Gwendith left—she went to the river to compose herself a little. And then the men came. They were Enemies, and they all dressed exactly alike. I couldn’t understand what they said, but they sounded angry. They pointed guns at us. Sihun tried to protect us—he distracted them for a moment, and I ran as fast as I could.”

“What happened to Gwendith?” Johann asked, pale with worry.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what happened to her or to Tskiya. I didn’t even know that Une-ti was dead.” She broke down then, hands over her face. No Tongue put his arms around her, drawing her in to cry on his shoulder.

Sihun turned his head slightly, lips moving, though no sound came out. The ghost eater dropped down by him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Rest, Sihun,” he whispered, tears blinding him. “You need to rest.”

Only it didn't matter what Sihun did at this point. The inexorable flow of blood would kill him before the moon rose much higher in the sky.

*If only I could heal him the way I can heal myself*, the ghost eater thought desperately.

Something stilled in him, a moment of clarity in which everything came more sharply into focus. The *bhargha* could manipulate his body, but it could also affect anything else that lived or ever had lived. He had destroyed dead wood and rope before, only half-understanding what he was doing. But now, able see and feel what the *bhargha* did a little better...could he use it to help Sihun?

He bent over Sihun, pressing his hand to the wound. Jilhe let out a cry of disgust and struck him away. "Let him die an honorable death, monster!"

The ghost eater stared up at the one who had been his kinsman and felt something die inside. "I am not going to eat his ghost, *uncle*." Jilhe flinched at the word, but the ghost eater took only barren satisfaction from it. "Trust me just once in your life."

He pressed his fingers to the wound again and closed his eyes, shutting out everything else. The truth was, he wasn't certain that what he was doing wouldn't kill Sihun even faster. Concentrating, he carefully extended the *bhargha*, until it touched Sihun's flesh. He used the control he had learned over moons of denial to force it not to feed now. He felt Sihun's skin and blood, then felt all the little parts that made up those substances, for which he had no names. Carefully, he threaded the *bhargha* through the flesh all around the wound, then used it to manipulate skin and veins and muscle.

It seemed to go very slowly. After a length of time that might have been minutes or days, he sat back and opened his eyes. Sihun's wound was gone, the skin smooth and unmarred, as if nothing had ever happened. All around him was a dead silence.

A man stepped from the crowd. He was bald, and a fine gorget engraved with a stylized vulture dangled about his neck. He smiled a little, as if giving approval. One hand reached out, lay briefly against the left side of the ghost eater's chest. Then it withdrew, and the man departed in a sudden flurry of black wings. Startled, the ghost eater looked down and saw that a tattoo matching the design on Vulture's gorget had appeared on his chest, next to the egret.

He turned his eyes to Jilhe, saw naked shock on his uncle's face. "What are you?" Jilhe gasped.

"He's marked," Tihune said softly. He stood a little apart from everyone else, his face in shadows. But his voice was filled with wonder. "The healer of the animals touched him." One hand gestured to the tattoos. "Peace and healing."

The ghost eater looked away, uncertain what to make of the sudden reverence in his brother's tone.

Jilhe's eyebrows crooked sharply together. "Peace and healing? But...the purpose of the ghost eater is to kill the enemies of his people."

"It was," the ghost eater whispered.

Sihun made a small noise in his throat. Alarmed, the ghost eater looked down, and then saw that his friend breathed easier than before. Obviously weak from loss of blood, Sihun opened his eyes a crack, lips trying to shape words. The ghost eater bent down close to his face. "Sihun?"

Sihun's words were barely audible even at a close distance. "Une-ti?"

"Dead."

His eyes closed. "They took Tskiya."

A dozen terrifying possibilities leapt through the ghost eater's mind, fueled by Gwendith's tale of her daughter's death. "We'll find him."

"Can't...said had an obscuring Way...Gwendith went after them. Took my pouch."

The ghost eater sat back on his heels. The soldiers had obscured their own trail...but Gwendith's would be clear to follow. "Everyone stay here. I'm going after them."

Jilhe frowned. "We should send out as many men as we can to get Tskiya back."

"And what if it's a trap? What if they want us running around in the woods, while their forces circle around and attack the town?" The ghost eater rose to his feet in a single, smooth motion. "Stay here and guard the town. If I haven't returned by sundown tomorrow, then consider us all lost."

He turned and ran, before anyone could gainsay him. But instead of heading down towards the river and Gwendith's trail, he raced to the square ground where the

horses had been tied. They shied when he came among them, but he murmured to them softly, and they calmed. He awkwardly put the saddle and bridle on the one that was nominally his.

“I know I called you a monster,” he said to it. “But as fast as I can travel, you’re faster, so long as you’ve got your wind. Run well now, and I’ll tell the story of your bravery for as long as I am the ghost eater.”

It snorted sharply as he mounted. He bent low over its neck and set his heels to its flanks. It sprang forwards like an arrow, galloped through the town and down the steep slope, flashing past those who bore Sihun and Une-ti back to their homes. The horse stumbled once on the rocks, and the ghost eater swore softly, praying that this mad ride through the dark didn’t end with the poor creature breaking its neck. Then they were in the forest, Gwendith’s trail before them, and they passed through the trees like the wind.

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Gwendith crouched down among a stand of laurels, their twisted branches concealing her presence. Firelight flickered through the trees, marking the spot where the soldiers had at last decided to make camp. She had followed them using her Way, stopping every few minutes to make certain that she was still moving in the right direction. She’d had no trouble finding them; perhaps the falcon had indeed lent her some of its sharp sight.

Now she sat crouched in the dark, wondering what she should do next. She had been unable to fire on them by the river because of their hostage. That situation had not changed. Perhaps if she waited long enough, they would fall asleep, and she would have a chance to slip into their camp unnoticed. Or, if they prudently set a watch, perhaps she could overpower the man without waking everyone else. Tenuous plans at best, but they were all she had.

There came the sound of clanking pots. Footsteps crunched through fallen leaves and sticks, and a dark shape bulked briefly against the firelight. Gwendith’s breath caught in her throat as she recognized the familiar gait.

*Thank the Wizards.* Surely she could convince Beoch to help her free Tskiya, even if it meant offering herself as hostage in return. Moving quietly, she slipped from her hiding place and followed Beoch down to where a small spring streaked the mountain rocks with rust. He bent down and began to diligently scrub the pots. The smell of an unwashed body came to her, and she crinkled her nose in distaste, before remembering that she had once smelled no better. No wonder the ghost eater had been so insistent on having them bathe every morning.

“Beoch,” she called softly.

He started wildly, one hand reaching for his gun. Then he saw her face in a shaft of moonlight shining through the branches, and his eyes widened. He opened his mouth, but she quickly motioned for quiet. He kept his voice to a hoarse whisper. “Gwenny? What are you doing here? What are those streaks on your face? Are you...are you escaping from the muddies?”

Her heart sank at his words. She wished that she had better light to see him by. His face was little more than the impression of dark hair and beard, the expression hard to make out.

“I was nearby when you took the boy. I followed you.” She gestured to the uniform he now wore. “So, you’ve joined back up?”

He rubbed his hands together uncomfortably. “I thought it would be best. I’ve been working with Colonel Talys and Colonel Ebrim...it made more sense to be a real soldier again, instead of just a civilian.”

“And is this what Talys has you doing? Hurting children?”

“No,” he hissed, glancing briefly in the direction of the firelight. “Listen, Gwenny, there’s a danger in these mountains you don’t know about.”

“The Devourer? The undead miners?”

“Yes! The muddies know what to do, Gwenny, how to stop it. How to control it. But they won’t tell us. That...thing...we caught outside Fort Reed proved that to us. Colonel Ebrim wants to attack, to kill as many as we can, so the rest will fall in line and tell us what we need to know. Talys said no, send some scouts first. I volunteered to go with them, hoping...to find you.” His rough hand closed over her wrist with sudden

urgency. “Gweny, I know you must be scared. The Wizards damn that Johann for stealing you away!”

“How do you know he did it?”

“You weren’t exactly in any condition to walk out on your own, were you?”

“No.” She pulled her hand away sharply. “Thanks to you. You and that doctor drugged me, Beoch. You lied to me. How could you do that?”

He hung his head. “It seemed kinder that way. I know what you must have suffered at the hands of those muddies. If you thought it was all just a bad dream, maybe you could bear it better.”

She closed her eyes, feeling vaguely sick. “Beoch, listen to me for once in your life. Just listen. The Ahkan’it don’t know how to stop the Devourer. They don’t know how to control it. Don’t you think that if they did, they would stop it themselves, before it eats their homeland? Or is that too rational for Talys and Ebrim?”

“Then tell them that yourself when we get back to camp.”

She caught her breath, unable to believe it had been so easy. “So you’ll release the child and take me as a hostage instead?”

He stared at her, clearly puzzled. “Of course not. You are coming back with us, aren’t you?”

“Only if you release the child.”

“But you’re my wife!”

Her hands curled into fists, nails biting her palms. “Beoch, I left you! Can’t you see that? I walked away from Fort Ironwood on my own, without anyone forcing me. Johann may have helped me escape from Fort Reed later on, but he didn’t *make* me leave. Beoch, please, you don’t belong here, in this place and in that uniform. Go home, back to Fort Ironwood. Forget about me and marry Aerwyn.”

“I’m already married to you.”

“Not after this! I left you, and then you betrayed me by trying to trick me into thinking I was insane! What kind of marriage is that? There’s nothing left for us, Beoch. Give yourself a chance at happiness with Aerwyn. I know that the two of you fell in love practically the day you met.”

“I don’t love Aerwyn. I love you.”



“What you feel isn’t love. You only want me back because you can’t bear the thought that I chose being hunted through the woods with a band of renegade natives over staying at home with you. But I didn’t do it out of spite, or because you’re a bad person. The ghost eater offered me my very last chance at living a real life, instead of continuing on like some kind of shade. *That* was the choice I made. Try to understand.”

He drew away stiffly. “I *don’t* understand, Gwendith. You aren’t the woman I knew. What have they done to you, to make you like this?”

She took a deep breath, torn between incredulity and rage at his deliberate blindness. “Beoch—”

A child’s high, thin scream cut through the night air, sending ice through her veins. Beside her, Beoch shuddered and put a hand to his mouth. “Wizards,” Gwendith hissed, and ran for a vantage point.

The soldiers stood grouped around the fire, all their attention on the small boy in their midst. Two of them held him pinned to the ground. Another held a knife in the fire until it glowed red with heat. Then he pressed the searing metal to the bottom of the child’s foot.

A chorus of laughs broke out at the boy’s shrieks. “Look at him squirm!” one soldier exclaimed, as unconcerned as if he remarked on a clown at the fair.

Rage slammed through Gwendith, stopping all thought. She pulled a pistol free from her belt even as she ran into their midst. Her other hand tangled in hair, jerking a soldier’s head back so that she could press the pistol’s muzzle to his temple.

Someone cursed, and then the soldiers were scrambling for their weapons. “Stop, or I’ll kill him!” Gwendith shouted. They froze, staring at her with hate-filled eyes.

“You,” one snarled. “You’re the bitch who killed Aric outside Fort Reed. You’re going to hang, slut, but not until after everyone in the whole damn company has a chance at you.”

“Shut up, or he dies.” She jerked the soldier roughly, heard his whimper of fear. “Can you walk, boy?”

The child staggered up, then moaned when his wounded feet touched the ground. Fresh tears spilled over his cheeks, joining many already shed. He could barely hobble, but nevertheless he headed for the safety of the woods. Gwendith hoped he

would make it far enough to get out of the soldiers' reach. Hoped that no wild animals ate him before one of his own people could find him. Because she strongly doubted that she would live long enough to help him back home.

When the sound of his uncertain footsteps had disappeared into the distance, she shifted her grip on her pistol. "All right," she said quietly. "I'm leaving this little gathering. As you were kind enough to invite the boy to your party, I think I'll invite this man here to mine. If I think you're following us, I'll kill him on the spot. Understand?"

The one who had spoken earlier nodded, but the look on his face was enough to chill her blood. She prodded her captive to his feet. As soon as he was steady, she took a step back, intending to retreat into the forest without taking her eyes off the soldiers.

And fetched up against the cold muzzle of a rifle.

"I can't let you do this, Gwenny," Beoch said softly.

"You won't kill me," she said, hoping that she sounded more certain than she felt.

"Let him go."

She had lost. With a nod, she held out the pistol, felt it and the one at her belt snatched away by eager hands. Her captive instantly scooted away, then turned and glared at her with anger born of shame. The soldier whose friend she had killed walked up to her and gave her a vicious smile.

His fist connected with her jaw, hard. Stunned, she dropped to the ground, felt a boot slam into her ribs. She tried to cry out, but there was no air in her lungs. A hail of fists and boots pelted down, sending agony through her body. Helpless, she curled up in an instinctive attempt to protect her vitals, felt a blow on her unprotected back send a wave of pain into her kidney.

*They're going to kill me!* she realized in sudden terror. *Beoch, stop them!*

But Beoch wasn't going to stop them. No one was.

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The ghost eater had been forced to slow his horse. They were in the deep woods now, away from familiar paths, and the darkness under the trees made it hard to see. He bent low to keep branches from sweeping him from the back of the beast, and

peered forwards in a desperate attempt to see the faint traces of Gwendith's trail. *I can't have lost her. She was going on foot—I should be close now.*

The sound of something stumbling through the darkness caught his attention. The horse swiveled its ear in that direction, the whites of its eyes showing. He tightened the rein, hoping desperately that it didn't decide to bolt. "Don't run," he murmured to it. "It's just a raccoon, or a possum, or a deer. Not a bear, or a cougar, or a wolf. Just a raccoon."

A small shape burst through the laurel thicket before them, let out a cry of terror at the sight of the horse, and fell down. "Tskiya?" the ghost eater gasped. He slithered down from the horse to kneel by the boy in the leaves. "Tskiya, what happened? How did you escape? Are you all right?"

The boy drew in a long, sobbing breath. "They hurt my feet."

The ghost eater touched the wounds lightly. They didn't look serious, only very painful. He would take the time to heal them later, after he'd found out what happened to Gwendith.

"Tskiya, Gwendith followed you. Have you seen her?"

"Y-yes. S-she made them quit h-hurting me. I don't k-know where she is. I'm afraid they'll hurt her, too."

Fear went through the ghost eater like a winter wind. "Quickly." He grabbed Tskiya, lifting him to the back of the horse. "Hold on with your legs. I'm sending you back to the town, now, before anything else goes wrong."

He grabbed the horse's bridle, dragging its head down close to his own. "Horse, if your Way is to find your path home, then use it now! Find Bird Creek Town!" He slapped the creature on the rump, then leapt back as it took off running down their back trail. With any luck, it would have Tskiya home safe with his family before dawn.

He ran in the direction from which Tskiya had come. The boy's bloody trail was as easy to follow as a Rhyllachan road. Within a few minutes, he saw the faint flicker of firelight through the trees. Not slowing in his dash, he burst from the wood and into horror.

Gwendith lay on the ground, surrounded by a ring of men savagely beating her. A familiar bearded man stood off to one side, his face twisted with remorse and fear.

With a scream of fury, the ghost eater launched himself at the men hurting Gwendith, arms locking around the nearest one and bearing him to the ground. The *bhargha* coalesced, and this time its touch was deadly once again. The man's ghost came into him, a blur of images and sounds that he didn't even try to comprehend.

Someone shouted a warning. One of the men ran instantly, followed closely by the bearded onlooker. The remaining two divided, one scrambling for his weapon, the other swinging knuckles red with Gwendith's blood. The ghost eater grabbed his wrist, jerked his arm hard enough to feel the bones snap, and shoved him into the fire.

The last soldier came up with his weapon and fired futilely. The bullet went wild, barely nicking the ghost eater's hip. The ghost eater grabbed him, swallowed his soul fast, and tossed his empty husk aside.

The man who had gone into the fire was staggering off, having extinguished himself. From the look of him, he wouldn't survive the night. The ghost eater left him for the predators. Turning away from the retreat, he ran to Gwendith and dropped down beside her.

They had hurt her badly. Her face was a ruin, green eyes swollen shut, nose shattered, mouth a bleeding bruise. Blood poured from her temple, where a boot had scraped away flesh to expose the bone beneath. More blood showed from other places on her body, soaking through her clothes.

She was dying.

He drew on all the discipline he had ever learned from the old one to keep himself from crying. Instead, he forced himself to put his hands on her body and sent the *bhargha* in search of the worst damage. What he found inside her appalled him.

He could heal himself very fast. But it had taken time to mend Sihun, and that had only been one wound. This would be a race to see how many organs he could put back together before failure in another killed her.

Terror froze his mind—how could he do it? He had just learned that he even had the power to heal others—he needed time, practice, before attempting something so complex as this. And underneath the fear was the sickening knowledge that, all his life, he had been a failure. How could he hope to accomplish something so impossible as this?

*Because if I don't do it, Gwendith dies. Simple as that.*

He closed his eyes, went into her lungs, and stopped the blood that had started to fill them.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

Gwendith gradually became aware of movement. Pain was a live thing in her, shredding thoughts, chasing her away from consciousness. Her breath came thinly through her mouth. When she tried to breathe through her nose, she succeeded only in sucking blood into her throat. Coughing racked her, a spasm that tore at the damaged muscles of her chest and stomach.

She tried to open her eyes. One refused to work at all, but the other inched open a crack, giving her only a blurry impression of the world. She felt arms around her, the sensation of being carried, but by whom or to where she didn't know. She tried to speak, but only a low moan came out.

"Shh, it's all right." The ghost eater's voice, soft and resonant. "You're safe now. Tskiya is safe. I put him on a horse and sent him back to town."

Gwendith let her eye slip back closed. It had been worth it, then.

"Try to stay awake," the ghost eater urged, shifting her body against his, so that her head was propped up more. "The soldiers are gone, understand me? You're safe. I know you're hurting right now, but I wanted to get you away from their camp, so you could wake somewhere else. There's a place I know, not too far upstream. I used to come here to fish in the summer, when the heat in the valley grew unbearable. You'll be perfectly safe with me there, understand?"

She drifted for a while then, his words sliding into an incomprehensible blur. One ear didn't seem to hear as well as it should, and that made it easier to become detached, as if she floated somewhere just above her body. After a while, she felt herself laid down, and a whole new host of pains made themselves known at the change in position. Something soft was propped under her head, and the warmth of a fire brushed her cheek gently.

"Gwendith," the ghost eater called softly. She cracked her good eye again, saw him as a water-blurred shadow against firelight. "I can help you feel better. I'm going to touch your face for a moment. You know I would never do anything to hurt you."

*I trust you*, she thought, but the words were beyond her.

Fingers tenderly framed her face. She felt oddly as if a soft blanket had been laid over her features. Then a tingling sensation replaced it, strange but not unpleasant. Lassitude enveloped her, so that everything seemed very far away from her dreaming mind. Slowly the fierce pain in her face and mouth faded to a throb, then an ache, and then was gone. She moved her tongue, felt solid teeth, even though she knew that some had been loosened or knocked out altogether.

She opened eyes she didn't remember closing and found that they both worked as they should. Her hearing seemed restored as well. Breath flowed easily through her nose, and any taste of blood in her mouth was leftover from before.

"W-what did you do?"

The ghost eater smiled a little. One hand stroked her cheek gently. "I healed some of your hurts."

"How is that possible?"

"I didn't imagine it was, before tonight. After I left you, I saw Little Deer and Vulture, and some of the other animals. They taught me some things about myself and about the *bhargha* that no ghost eater has ever known. I'll explain it all to you later, I promise. I used it to heal the worst of your wounds earlier, before you regained consciousness. If you let me, I'll finish now."

The ghost eater carefully freed the edge of her shirt, slipping his hand underneath to rest lightly on her aching side. She felt the same tingling sensation, the same lassitude, as she had before. The tingling moved through and over her body, first up through cracked ribs and bruised breasts, then down. It went through her womb and thighs, and she shivered at the oddly sexual feeling. By the time it reached her toes, all the pain had been washed away, leaving behind only a pleasant glow.

The ghost eater had stretched out beside her, his head pillowed on his arm. The warmth of his hand remained on her side. She looked at him in wonderment, then reached out to touch his face, the corner of his mouth. His lips kissed her fingers.

"Tell me," she whispered.

He was silent for a while, thinking. "I'm sorry that I ran away from you, after the confrontation with Tihune," he said at last. "I was a coward yet again, I suppose. I was

distraught, and I didn't pay much attention to where I was running to, so long as it was away from the pain. Of course, since the pain was in me, that didn't work very well."

"I'm so sorry," she began, but he put a finger to her lips.

"Don't be. I do understand that this has been hard for you as well, Gwendith. You've been better to me than I had any right to ask or expect." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "When I was alone, the animal spirits came to me. They showed me that I could control the *bhargha* consciously, that I could make it heal or not heal me as I willed. And more—they taught me that I don't have to kill to live. The first ghost eater got it all wrong.

"I used the control of the *bhargha* to heal Sihun and you. It can manipulate anything that lives or has ever lived—I know I've said as much to you before. That control extends to flesh, that of others...and my own." He dropped his eyes, looking suddenly embarrassed. "Including...well. It seems that everyone was wrong about the ghost eaters not being able to, ah, be intimate with a woman."

Her heartbeat picked up, and a smile touched her mouth at his expression. "And you found this out how?"

A self-deprecating grin flashed over his mouth. "It was one of the first things that occurred to me, I'm afraid. I was running back to you when I found out what had happened."

"I see," she said with another smile, and imagined him rushing back to her, ready to sweep her into his arms. What would have happened if not for the raid? "And where does that leave us?"

"Wherever you choose, Gwendith. Do you have feelings for Tihune?"

Her mouth tightened sharply. "No."

"Because he tried to manipulate you?"

"I didn't know about the love chant at first. Not until after I'd already turned him down." She sighed wistfully. "Try to understand, please. It's been a long time since anyone touched me like that. For three years, there's been nothing but loneliness, or the cruel hands of the doctors at the asylum. I won't lie to you. I thought about just letting go and taking whatever pleasure I could, and to hell with everything else. But I couldn't. I



told Tihune no, because I would rather never be touched again than ever do anything to hurt you.”

Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes. She kissed them away, then found his mouth with her own. He responded tentatively at first, then with more passion. His lips tasted like the wind.

“So,” she said, when they broke apart again, “are you going to answer my question? Where does this all leave us?”

He stroked her hair lightly. “The answer’s no different, Gwendith. Wherever you like. I love you, completely and utterly. If you want me to lie here beside you while you sleep, I will. If you want me to go sit on the other side of the fire, I will. Just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

“And if I ask you to make love to me?”

He chuckled deep in his throat. “Gladly. But that isn’t a decision you have to make tonight. It might be better if you think on it first.”

Perhaps he was right. The residual glow of the healing was still on her, putting everything she had suffered at such a distance that nothing seemed to matter. There had been a great deal of pain and death earlier, and she had come frightfully close to dying herself. Sometimes that could awaken an instinctive reaction in people and make them want to affirm that they still lived. Perhaps that was even what had happened between Tihune and Siska-init.

The ghost eater could be right. Except that, had she thought it possible, she would have cheerfully shared his bed the first night they’d stayed in Rowe’s house.

“I already made that decision a long time ago,” she said quietly. “If you would like to.”

He answered her with another kiss. His hand moved over her skin beneath her shirt, tender and sensual. After a moment, he withdrew it and brushed off half-congealed blood from her wounds.

Her mouth crooked wryly. “I’m sorry. I can’t look very appealing right now. Maybe we should stop and let me wash off a little.”

He took her hand, helping her to her feet and over to the stream. He eased her clothes off, the light touch of his fingers erotic, then stripped himself and came into the

water with her. Using a scrap of cloth torn from one of the blankets he had taken from the soldiers' camp, he scrubbed the blood out of her skin and hair, and removed what had gotten smeared on him during her healing. Then they went back to the fire and made a comfortable nest for themselves out of the remaining blankets.

They made love until the moon began to set. Afterwards, she lay in weary contentment in the circle of his arms, head against his chest. It was odd not to hear a heartbeat beneath her ear. His hand stroked her hair rhythmically, then touched the corner of her mouth. "What are you smiling about?"

"You. Us." She found a strand of his copious hair and wrapped it around her finger. "I was remembering the night we met. It's odd to think of myself as I was then. I wonder what I would have thought if someone had told me that the party would lead to me sleeping with an undead native."

"You probably would have thought that they were even more insane than you."

"Probably." She closed her eyes, snuggling closer. After a while, she fell asleep twined in his arms, and no evil dreams disturbed her rest.

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The sun was already fully in the sky when Gwendith awoke again. She felt stronger for her sleep, and a little more clear-headed. The ghost eater had allowed himself to doze off, so she woke him by straddling him and grinning into his startled eyes. He laughed and responded enthusiastically to her advance.

They rose and dressed afterwards, Gwendith making a face at her bloodstained clothing. The ghost eater laughed ruefully. "I should have thought to bring your clothes with us to the stream last night."

"I think we had other things on our minds at the time."

He smiled. "Yes." The smile faded into sudden seriousness. "Gwendith...I'm not sure how to ask you this. You don't have any close kin for me to talk to, and as the ghost eater I don't have any women kin to speak to you on my behalf. Was last night just a pleasant moment? Or are we married now?"

She stopped dressing, shirt dangling from her hands. "What do you want?"

“You must know what I want. I love you. I want you with me, always.” He laughed shortly. “A ghost eater and a Rhylachan woman—Jilhe will have a seizure if you accept me.”

She pulled her shirt on. “I haven’t had a great deal of luck with husbands, you know. Gairin died, and Beoch...”

“Well, I’m already dead, so there goes half your problem right there.”

“Then what do we have to do? To get married?”

“Given our respective situations, nothing more than we’ve already done.”

“All right.” She came over to him and kissed his brow softly. “I think I’d like that.”

“I’m glad.” He returned her kiss to her mouth. “Here. Let me give you something.” He undid one of the bead-worked bands around his arm and carefully tied it around hers, over her shirt.

“Thank you.”

He shrugged awkwardly, then kissed her again. “You’re welcome. Love, I’m going to have to leave you alone for a little while. Does that sit well enough with you?”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the soldiers’ camp. We could use their rifles and maybe their blankets as well. I’ll see what I can find in the way of food for you.”

Her stomach turned queasy, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “I’ll come help you.”

“No.” He touched her face, his expression concerned. “There’s no need. I can manage well enough by myself.” He sighed and looked away for a moment. “I would rather die than have to go back to that room at Fort Reed. I won’t force you to go back to the camp. I’ll return as quickly as I can.”

She found herself forced to resist the urge to call out after him as he flitted into the woods. With him there, she had felt safe, protected. Now that he was gone, the forest suddenly seemed far more threatening. She put a hand to her waist automatically, but both pistols and saber were back at the soldier’s camp. Instead, she picked up the largest rock she could easily heft and stood in the center of the clearing, nervously eyeing every swaying branch or snapping twig.

True to his word, the ghost eater was not gone long, although it seemed an eternity to her. They couldn't have been all that far from the camp, and she shivered a little at the thought that one of the men who had escaped might have circled back and come upon them in the night. Rationally, she knew it unlikely that soldiers who fled in terror at the first sign of a ghost eater would want to stalk one through the dark. But the thought disturbed her nonetheless.

The ghost eater came back weighed down with blankets, rifles, and Gwendith's weapons. She took pistols and saber, but he refused to let her carry anything else, arguing that she was still weak from loss of blood. They started back through the forest together, moving at a relatively slow pace.

After about an hour or so of walking, Gwendith finally worked up the courage to ask the question that had haunted her all morning. "Ghost eater...did you kill Beoch?"

"No." His eyes darkened with anger. "He ran as soon as he saw me. He should hope that we never meet again."

She nodded, feeling relieved. She still felt some sympathy for Beoch, some lingering trace of loyalty. It was likely that he had started out on this course doing what he thought was right. It would have been easy for Talys to use Beoch's guilt over deserting the party with Aerwyn to convince him to do what Talys asked. But either blind stubbornness, a sense of betrayal, or Talys' influence was slowly twisting the man she had known into someone else.

She thought of the rifle he had kept over the mantle, of the hank of black hair tied around its stock. Perhaps that should have been warning enough that she had never known him as well as she had thought.

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Gwendith and the ghost eater reached the town shortly before noon. They came up the path from the river, where someone had apparently set a watch. They didn't even reach the first house before a flood of people descended on them.

Johann came first, leaping down the steep path with the sureness of a running deer. He let out a wild whoop, grabbed Gwendith, and hugged her hard. A moment later, No Tongue, A'na, and Stands-in-Smoke were all around her, making exclamations

of relief, while she tried to insist that she was all right, only tired. The ghost eater smiled, left her in their capable care, and started up the incline by himself. Sihun appeared, leaning heavily on the arm of one of his cousins. Weariness had etched lines around his eyes, but he broke into his normal grin as soon as he saw the ghost eater.

“I see you brought her back in one piece,” he said, draping his free arm around the ghost eater in a rough hug. The cousin stared at the ghost eater, but his look was more one of awe than fear.

“It took some doing, but yes. Tskiya returned safely, then?”

“Yes. He told us Gwendith got him away from those monsters.” His eyes glittered with rage. “If it weren’t for Gwendith and Johann, I wouldn’t believe their kind to be human at all.”

“I know. I took these weapons and supplies from the soldiers—I’ll leave them at the townhouse, and we can—”

He broke off, staring at the head of the trail. Others had grouped there, watching the reunion with curiosity. Some of them were strangers.

Sihun followed his gaze. “The other towns are sending their warriors. Men from White Cat and Corns Grows Tall got here this morning, not too long after dawn. The rest are coming, they say, to make a stand against the Enemies. But that’s not all—”

There was a sudden movement among the watchers, men and women scrambling to either side. Through their midst stalked the old one, his eyes alight with maddened triumph.

And behind him came no less than four other ghost eaters.

If the ghost eater’s heart had still beat, it probably would have stopped at that moment. All the euphoria that he felt over the dramatic changes in his existence evaporated instantly, leaving him cold. A part of him had feared that the old one would go to the other towns, tell their ghost eaters that his pupil had gone rogue, and demand their help in exterminating him. But he had not thought that it would come so soon.

Earlier, he had made light of Gwendith’s fears when she had warned him about her luck with husbands. Now it looked like he wouldn’t even survive the first day of their marriage.

“That’s him!” shouted the old one dramatically, pointing an accusatory finger. “The rogue who defies our traditions, who scorns our ways and endangers the life of every Ahkan’i!”

Silence fell instantly. “No!” yelled Gwendith from below. “The ghost eater wouldn’t hurt anyone who wasn’t a threat to the Ahkan’it!”

“And what else are you?” challenged the old one mockingly.

“That is enough,” said a quiet voice. One of the other ghost eaters stepped forwards. He was short for a man, not too much taller than the ghost eater himself. His face was startlingly youthful, no more than fifteen winters old. Even though that was too young for the ceremony to make him into a warrior, he nonetheless wore the copper nose ring of a man. “You are a fool, Bird Creek ghost eater. The woman saved the life of a child of your own town. To accuse her of being a threat turns the hearts of all here against you.” He looked down at Gwendith thoughtfully. “Nevertheless, the living have no place in this.”

“If you think we’re just going to stand here and let you kill him, you are sadly mistaken,” Johann replied hotly. Other voices murmured agreement, more than could be accounted for by the small band of friends.

A smile flitted over the stranger’s mouth, which shocked the ghost eater. Their gazes met, and he saw that his first impression of the stranger’s youth had been mistaken. A terrible age lay in his eyes, as if he had been there to witness the world’s making.

“I am the Worn Rock ghost eater,” he said softly. “Some of these others call me ‘eldest.’ I was made when last we fought the Enemies. Times were desperate. Those who should have been Young Men were made Warriors, so that we would have more men to fight. The one who wore this body was dying from a slow wound in the stomach when the call went out to make more ghost eaters. After the Enemies retreated, most who had been made ghost eaters went into the flames, but I chose otherwise. I did not believe that the Enemies would leave forever, so I took up the burden of remaining in this existence until my knowledge of fighting them should be needed again. For it is the function of the ghost eater to remember.”

“That’s all well and good,” interrupted the old one harshly. “But the reason I called you here was to help me destroy this abomination!”

The eldest’s eyes were cool and remote. A mixture of fear and rage rose up in the ghost eater, and he glared at the old one. “So you brought four others, because you feared to face me alone again? Coward! I challenge you! And when I defeat you again, I will cut the hair from your corpse and wear it at my belt!”

Several people gasped at the insult. The old one stared at him for a moment, trembling with rage. “You may be able to best me,” he said finally. “But you can’t survive us all at once.”

*Kani curse you.* He flung back his head, glaring proudly at them all. “Then come! I don’t fear you! I am Ahkan’i!”

The old one started forward, followed closely by three of the others. But the eldest held up his hand, and they stopped. “Bird Creek ghost eater, I have called you a fool, and the rogue has called you a coward. You are making it difficult to determine which of us is the most correct.”

The old one gaped at him.

The eldest ignored him, turning his eyes once more on the ghost eater. “Unlike your teacher, rogue, I listened to what the people of your town said when we arrived here. Their tale of an attack by soldiers contained many odd things about you. They say that you touched your hand to a warrior’s wound and it closed, saving his life. They say that Vulture appeared and placed his mark on you.”

A little of the ghost eater’s fear drained away. Were they actually going to give him a chance to explain himself? “That is true, eldest. But there is more to it than that. The one who made me named me rogue, but it isn’t as simple as he insists on believing. At least hear my story before you condemn me.”

“There is nothing to hear,” the old one snapped. “He just admitted that he’s stepped outside the boundaries set for our kind! The penalty for that is death. It doesn’t matter how good his intentions may have seemed, either to himself, or to the living. I say again that he is a danger to the Ahkan’it.”

“Show them!” Sihun yelled suddenly. “Tskiya’s feet were burned by the soldiers. Heal him, and let them see!”

The eldest cast Sihun an annoyed glance but did not disagree. "The suggestion has its merit. Take us to the house of this child, and we will see for ourselves."

"Very well." The ghost eater took a step towards them, then heard Gwendith call out to him. He turned, tried to memorize the sight of her upturned face, in case things went wrong and this was the last time he saw it outside the Darkening Land. He wished that he was a thought-whisperer and could send her the words he didn't dare yell out in front of hostile ghost eaters. "I will join you as soon as I can," he called instead. Then he turned back quickly, before she could object, and went among the others of his kind.

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The ghost eater sat in the center of his house, surrounded by a ring of judging faces. He had taken them to Tskiya, and they had watched while he healed the boy's feet. He wished that he could do as much for Tskiya's heart. The child seemed lost without his twin, all the bright mischief that had once burned in him extinguished. The ghost eater hoped that it would come back someday, but he feared that the scars on Tskiya's soul would run too deep.

Afterwards, they all went to the ghost eater's house, to hear him tell his story. He told them everything, beginning with his first contact with Little Deer and Rabbit. Everything he had done, he pointed out carefully, had been at the instruction of the animal spirits. How could even a ghost eater refuse to listen to them? He also mentioned his discovery that the ghost eaters were capable of interacting with normal humans, even to the point of sleeping with them. He hated to speak something so personal aloud, especially without Gwendith's permission, but he felt that they would look on him more kindly if he told them everything to begin with. Holding anything back might be seen as deception rather than privacy.

As he spoke and answered their questions, he tried to get a feel for them as people. The eldest and the old one he had already spoken with. Among the other three, two had been ghost eaters for some time. But the third, the Corn Grows Tall ghost eater, was even younger than himself. In fact, his maker had consigned himself to flame less than three days before word of a possible Enemy invasion came. This youngest



one hung on every word, and there was a hunger in his eyes that the ghost eater recognized all too well. In this one, he thought, he had a possible ally.

When he came to the events of that morning, he stopped and sat in silence. The youngest and the White Cat ghost eater both looked thoughtful. The old one appeared angry. The Sharp Shell ghost eater wore an implacable expression on his face, as if it would take the collapse of the entire world to change his mind about anything.

“Have you anything else to say?” the eldest asked quietly. It was impossible to tell what he thought.

The ghost eater nodded. “One last thing.” He took a deep breath, then cursed himself as they all looked at him askance. It seemed he would never break the habit. “When the ghost eaters were first made, the Ahkan’it were warriors. We lived not just here in the mountains but ranged into the lowlands, through all the hills and rivers and forests. We went wherever our whim took us and fought anyone who tried to stand in our way. And so the ghost eaters needed to be warriors as well, to fight beside the living and destroy anyone they named enemy.

“At that time, being a great warrior was the highest of honors. Who, then, wouldn’t want to become a ghost eater, who could fight better than any other? So to keep everyone from throwing away their lives and their ability to create children, terrible restrictions were placed around the ghost eaters. We were stripped of our families, our friends, almost all human interaction. It was necessary, both to keep us from growing too numerous and to keep us from becoming so powerful that we took control over the living.

“But when the Rhyllachans came, everything changed. The Ahkan’it changed. Our people stopped wandering and fighting, and became settled farmers. Men sought honor from the ball game and from their skill at providing food, or making arrows, or other things.

“Yet the ghost eaters did not change. And there was no place, no purpose, left for us. You all know it as well as I. What do any of you do, except sit in silence, alone, and hope that someone will have some need for a story that you remember? We have wasted two hundred winters. We have become artifacts from a past age, like the strange spear points we sometimes find in the earth. We have turned bitter, and twisted,

and insane. How many towns have ghost eaters they never even see, who hide alone in the wilderness because they have no reason to go among the living? How many run mad, like the one who set fire to the coal he was made from?”

He curled his hand into a fist and struck his leg for emphasis. “It’s long past time for change. The animals showed me a way to become useful to the Ahkan’it once again. If we can become healers instead of killers, we can make a place for ourselves among the living. They will be able to look at us with respect instead of terror. And we will have a purpose once again.

“I know that some of you look at me and see a man out of control, with no limitations or restrictions. I will agree that some restrictions need to be made, for the same reasons that they were before. But not necessarily the *same* restrictions. Maybe we don’t need to lose our friends and kin. I don’t know. That is something which should be decided by all the Ahkan’i ghost eaters, over time, as we grow and find our way down this new path. Some limitations are already in place—we still can’t have children, no matter how much we want to do so. And if we keep ourselves to one ghost eater per town, that will help things as well.

“The world changed when the Rhylachans came. And now it’s changing again. If we don’t change with it, then we’ll never serve our people again. And if that happens, I question why any of us remain out of the fire at all.”

He fell silent, praying that they would listen to his words. The eldest looked at him gravely. “You have obviously given this a great deal of thought.”

The ghost eater bowed his head. “I’ve thought more in the past day than I did the entire time this body lived.”

The eldest smiled slightly. “What do the rest think?”

“He’s mad,” the old one said shortly. “I don’t believe that he’s ever spoken to spirits in the first place.”

The Sharp Shell ghost eater frowned. “I think that it will take more than the words of one young ghost eater to convince me to agree to such sweeping changes. I see no reason to go on any differently than we ever have.”

The White Cat ghost eater paled a little—perhaps he was intimidated by the age and experience of the others. “I...don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe we should consider it some more.”

“I agree with the Bird Creek ghost eater,” the Corn Grows Tall ghost eater declared, pointing at the ghost eater instead of the old one to make it clear to whom he referred. “The animals have guided him. What more do we need to know? We should declare his maker rogue, not him.”

The old one bristled. “Don’t be stupid, youngest. Even if the animal spirits came to him—which I’m not convinced they did—they didn’t tell him to make these changes! They didn’t give him any instructions as to what to do with this newfound power of the *bhargha*!”

“True,” the eldest said. “Very true. Your explanation of why the animals came to you is very interesting, rogue, but not the only option. When the first ghost eaters were made, it was decided that every band of Ahkan’it would have only one. But when the Enemies came and pushed us into these mountains, we set aside that tradition for a time. After they were driven back, however, we returned to the old ways, rather than throw them aside.

“Now we again face a terrible threat. Is it not possible that you have been shown these powers because they are needed for the coming conflict, and can be put aside once again afterwards?”

The ghost eater’s throat tightened. “You mean that I might be meant to heal our wounded now...and go into the fire after the Rhyllachans have been defeated.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think that’s right.”

“You may be correct. Or I may be. Or neither of us.” The eldest put his head to one side and frowned to himself. “I think that we will let you continue as you have, for a time. But we will keep close watch on you. And if we decide that you are truly rogue, or that the changes you suggest are not meant for us, then you will obey us and be destroyed. Do you agree?”

He stared hard at the eldest, trying to read some sympathy in his eyes. If there was any, he did not see it. If he did not agree, they would most likely destroy him now.

“I will do as you ask,” he whispered.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

Johann, Stands-in-Smoke, No Tongue, and A'na took Gwendith back to Sihun's house. Because so many new visitors had come, there was little room in the townhouse, and anyone with clan ties was asked to stay with relatives. Since Hilaka had adopted them into the Woodpecker Clan, the travelers had moved into the house shared by the old woman and Sihun. Sihun's parents were dead, A'na explained, and all her brothers and sisters married and with their own households.

Old Hilaka rose to creaky feet when they came up and extended her hands to Gwendith. "Come into your home," she said, in a manner that made Gwendith think it a ritual invitation. She nodded and smiled weakly. "You must be hungry," Hilaka concluded, fixing her with a beady eye. "I have some grits left over from this morning. That armband looks familiar."

Hilaka didn't miss much. Johann noticed it for the first time and examined it critically. "Didn't the ghost eater have one like that?"

"He gave it to me," Gwendith said shortly, worry for the ghost eater straining her patience. Johann gave her an odd look but let the matter pass.

Gwendith told them of her adventures, glossing over the injuries done her by the soldiers, and stopping with the ghost eater's healing. Johann nodded thoughtfully. "I was there last night, when he healed Sihun. I couldn't believe it. I'd never imagined such a thing before, and to see it...it was amazing."

"It was amazing to experience it," Sihun said from the doorway. She came in and sat down slowly by them. "Odd. It made me feel so relaxed, like I was floating. Or maybe it was just loss of blood."

"No, I felt it, too." Gwendith frowned, glad to have something to distract her. "The ghost eater told me that the *bhargha* somehow paralyzes its victims, almost like a spider subduing its prey. And I've seen it myself, the night when he killed the soldiers on the road. They froze for a moment, unable to move. Maybe what we felt comes from the same source, but the effect is milder because he's not trying to kill us."

"Maybe." Sihun sighed. "I hope he's all right."

"So do I. I tried to warn him that I'm bad luck for husbands, but he wouldn't listen."

Johann choked on the mouthful of food he'd been about to swallow. No Tongue pounded him helpfully on the back. "What!" he yelped once his coughing had subsided. "You're joking, aren't you?"

"No."

Stands-in-Smoke eyed her levelly. "Your Rhylachan doctors were right. You are insane. I thought that wasn't possible."

Gwendith shrugged defensively. "Ghost eaters aren't supposed to be able to heal people, either."

Sihun burst out laughing so hard she flopped over on her back. "Siska-init's going to have a seizure when she hears this! First she throws Tihune out, and now her 'true love' is married to someone else! Ha!"

Stands-in-Smoke arched a brow. "I take it you aren't too fond of her?"

"Let me explain it this way. I eventually decided that I actually approved her match with Tihune, because two people so utterly faithless shouldn't be inflicted on anyone else. She threw Tihune out last night, by the way," she added to Gwendith. "And as soon as I'd recovered enough to talk, I told everyone the true story of what happened when Tamaugua died. Tihune's skulking around here somewhere, ashamed to show his face in front of real Ahkan'it."

The doorway to the summer house darkened. Gwendith felt relief flood through her at the sight of the ghost eater. He returned her smile with a look that utterly transformed his features.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said, managing to keep a quaver out of her voice.

"So am I. They aren't quite certain what to make of me, but they've given me a chance to prove myself, at least." He threaded his way through the crowded room, crouched down, and gave her a quick kiss.

"I still don't believe this," Johann muttered.

The ghost eater grinned at him, then sobered. "I came to give you news. The Owl Clan is going to take Une-ti to the Crow House."

Gwendith felt some of her happiness slip away. "I'll come, if I may," she said dejectedly. "I feel responsible for his death. If I had been with the rest of you when the soldiers came up, maybe we could have fought them off and kept all this from happening."

"You can't blame yourself," Sihun said seriously. "The fault was mine. I failed to protect him."

Hilaka came inside, her hands dusted with corn meal. "Don't be ridiculous. The only blame lies with the Enemy soldiers. Sihun, if you hadn't acted, A'na would not have been able to escape. And Gwendith, if not for your quick action in following the soldiers, Tskiya would be lost to us as well."

No Tongue looked forlorn. A'na poked him in the ribs. "Stop it. The same goes for you. You can't be with me every minute."

He shrugged, staring at his hands instead of at her.

The ghost eater stood up. "If you want to accompany Une-ti to the Crow House, then come now. As the ghost eater, I must go. And when I had a clan, I was his cousin."

Gwendith took his hand comfortingly. He pulled her easily to her feet, then held her hands a moment longer, as if in need of solace. Then he kissed her fingers lightly and let them go, and left the house.

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Gwendith stood in a solemn crowd of mourners as Une-ti was brought from his home for the last time. His uncles bore him on a litter made of cedar, his small body wrapped in woven mats and his face painted red. They carried him slowly around the house three times, then angled off towards the mountain. Une-ti's close family followed behind, weeping. His mother and aunts had all cut their hair to the nape of their necks, reminding Gwendith forcibly of Siska-init's shorn locks.

They took a narrow trail up the mountainside. The going was slow over the steep ground, and in places the trail degraded into a faint path winding over jumbled rocks, making walking even more difficult. Gwendith leaned on Johann more than once, and she wondered how the men carrying the litter managed to keep it so level.

At length the trail came out into a large cleared space. Grasses filled the meadow, giving way here and there to bare expanses of granite. The trunks of a few fire-killed trees stood like white slivers of bone about the meadow. Among the trees and rocks stood several platform-like structures, each raised high above the ground on cedar scaffolding. Bits of woven mats, decayed leather, and fur hung over the sides of some. Gwendith caught a glimpse of bone at the edge of one, and her hands tightened convulsively on Johann's arm.

"They don't bury their dead in the ground," she hissed. "They can't, not without risking having them rise again as ghost eaters."

As if summoned by her thoughts, the ghost eaters came into view, standing before a new scaffold. They had broken into small groups, with the old one and another standing together, her ghost eater and one other, and two separately. Gwendith wondered uneasily if their grouping indicated who did and who did not support the ghost eater's changes.

The men laid the litter down at the foot of the scaffold. Two climbed up, reaching down for the body to be handed up to them. As they did so, the old one began to sing a chant.

"No," someone said suddenly. Gwendith realized it was Une-ti's father who had spoken. He looked at the old one for a moment, then nodded to the ghost eater. If the ghost eater was surprised, he concealed it well and simply began the chant as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The old one stared at him in fury but could do nothing.

*The Owl Clan supports him, anyway,* Gwendith thought. She focused on the ghost eater's problems, trying to blot out the memory of the last time she had been at a child's funeral. Beoch had wept as though there were not enough tears in the world to express his grief. But she had stood cold and remote, while those around her murmured that she was still numb from the shock. It hadn't been numbness, though. Rather, her anguish had been too huge to contain, so enormous that it simply blotted out everything else.

She looked at Une-ti's mother. She wished desperately for something to say to the woman but knew too well that there were no words.



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Siska-init waited near the ghost eater's house, her heart beating hard against her ribs. There was no reason to be nervous, she told herself. And perhaps it was not really nervousness that made her pulse speed and her stomach flutter, but rather anticipation of a fulfillment so long denied.

He had sung the chant for Une-ti, and she had been more proud of him at that moment than she had ever been of anyone. It shamed her to remember how she had felt when he had first returned, how she had almost wished that he had never come back. He had returned, and more—had found a way for them to be together at last.

The ugly Enemy woman was with the Owl Clan. They made much of her, claiming that she had saved Tskiya's life. How could they be so blind? It was obvious that the ghost eater had been the one to rescue Tskiya, not some Enemy who couldn't even be a proper woman.

Some said that she was now the ghost eater's wife. Blind again.

At any rate, the Owl Clan would keep the woman occupied for a while. And the ghost eater would not have gone with her to a gathering of his former clan. Night was falling, so unless the other ghost eaters wanted him, he would soon return here.

Her prediction came true within a matter of minutes. He came through the trees that separated his house from the rest, the familiarity of his gait making her throat constrict. His lovely eyes widened a little when he saw her, and he stopped a few feet away.

"Siska-init? Is there...do you need something?"

Her heart soared. "Yes. To talk with you, if you have the time."

He hesitated, then gestured towards the house. "I'm sorry, we'll have to sit in the winter house. I haven't had time to rebuild the summer house yet."

"I understand." She went inside and settled herself at the edge of the bed, even though it wasn't a proper place to sit. He lit a fire quickly, more for illumination than for warmth. She watched the movements of his muscles beneath the skin and smiled.

"I'm sorry about Tihune," he said once he had finished. He settled back on his heels and looked up at her. "I'd hoped he would treat you better."

She frowned in annoyance. "I didn't come here to talk about Tihune. It's just as well, anyway, isn't it?"

He put his head over to one side, black hair shimmering a little in the firelight. "I don't understand."

She smiled and pulled her loose tunic off.

He stood up hurriedly, eyebrows diving down into a frown. "What are you doing?"

Not the response she had expected, but then she had taken him by surprise. She smiled reassuringly and removed her skirt, so that the light played over the curves of her body. The baby had changed her form, true, but she was still young and beautiful. "What do you think I'm doing? They say that you can be with a woman now. That's so, isn't it?"

"Yes, but Gwendith—"

"Shh." She took a quick step over, put her fingers lightly on his lips. The tips of her breasts brushed against his chest. "I understand. There's no need to explain to me, my love. You couldn't be sure it would work. You couldn't take the risk that you were wrong, that the *bhargha* would kill me. You had to experiment with the Enemy woman to make certain I'd be safe, and I can't blame you for that. But now that that's out of the way, we can be together, just as we've always dreamed."

She leaned into him, closed her eyes, and parted her lips. His hands closed hard on her wrists, shoving her back, and she opened her eyes again in shock, to see him staring at her with a look of utter disbelief.

"Is that what you think? That I would sleep with her if there was any chance of hurting her?" he demanded, outraged. "What's happened to you, that you could imagine something so horrible?"

She drew back, confused. Panic fluttered in her throat, the sudden fear that she had made some mistake. "But what other explanation is there?"

"I love her!"

"No!" The world was starting to slip sideways. She grabbed at his arms for stability, staring desperately into his eyes. "You love me. You always have loved me. We can be married now."

He shook his head regretfully. "No. Even if I thought your clan would agree to it."

“I don’t care about them anymore! I stopped caring when I thought I’d lost you!” Then she realized the real trouble. “It’s about Tihune, isn’t it? You’re angry with me for marrying him? I’m sorry, Tamaugua! It was a terrible mistake! I never loved him—I only lay with him because I thought he was the last part of *you* that I had! I thought that bearing his child would be the closest I could ever come to having yours! Please, I never stopped loving you!”

She had expected him to look happy, or relieved, or even surprised. But sorrow darkened his eyes instead, and he shook his head a little. One hand came up, touched her cheek gently. “Then I am truly, truly sorry,” he said softly. “I wish that you and Tihune had been able to find happiness. And I hope that you will someday find someone who can give you everything you deserve.”

“That someone is you.”

“It’s not. It can’t be. I love Gwendith. But even if there was nothing more than friendship between us, you and I couldn’t go back to what we had before. I’ve changed from the man I was. Tamaugua didn’t die on that mountainside, Siska-init. He died here, in this village, a little bit at a time. You and Tihune killed him.”

No. No, this was not right, this was not how it was supposed to go. She tried to think of some words to say, some action to take, that would change this scene into the one she’d fantasized about. But there was nothing.

“I don’t mean to hurt you,” he went on, perhaps mistaking the reasons behind the bewildered expression on her face. “I know that you had your own pain. I know that you only did what was expected of you, treating me like a stranger, refusing to talk to me. Everyone did. I don’t even blame you for seeking comfort in Tihune’s arms. But the effect was the same as if you’d deliberately set out to destroy me. And over time, what I was died.

“On my journey through New Rhylach, I found other things to replace what had been lost. New ways of looking at the world, new ideas, new desires. New friends. And new love, though it was the last thing I sought.”

He took a step back from her. “I’m sorry. I’m fond of you, and I wish you only good things. I think you should take your clothes and leave.”

It hurt. Siska-init put her hand to her mouth, feeling tears well up and spill over down her cheeks. He looked at her sadly and held out one hand, as if to comfort. Snatching up her clothing, she turned her back and fled.

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Colonel Talys rubbed wearily at his eyes and wondered where everything had gone wrong.

He *needed* to get back to New Rhyllach. According to the stack of hastily scribbled missives he had received from his men back home, the outbreak of Ways had become an avalanche that threatened to sweep away the very fabric of Rhyllachan society. The entire country was on the verge of chaos. Bizarre weather beset the land, from floods to tornadoes to drought to snow, sometimes all in the same locale. Fires raged out of control in many cities. Some people were using their newfound Ways to turn to banditry and mayhem. Others fled for their lives before angry mobs intent on killing anyone who showed the smallest signs of magical ability.

Worse, a staggering number of people were beset by strange plagues, the symptoms of which ran the gamut from rheumatism to insanity to vomiting blood. He had spent enough time with Donia to recognize diseases caused by vengeful animal ghosts. Almost no one in New Rhyllach remained free of some complaint.

It was said that many of the native peoples were on the move. The hysteria besetting Rhyllachan society had opened the door for a mass exodus of the Sanctuaries. Bands of enraged Stone Cougar People had slaughtered their Sanctuary's garrison, then begun attacking anyone in a seven-mile radius. The Hut Sitters had dribbled away, until only a few of them remained in what had been their homes. And the Wave People had simply vanished from their coastal compound, as if they had never been.

But he couldn't leave, couldn't go home to try and check the hysteria. Because if he left now, the massive ghost eater they had inadvertently created would run unchecked over the countryside. All hope of controlling it would be lost, and in a few years New Rhyllach would find it eating its way into the heartland.

And it *could* be controlled. He only had to find the right spell, say the right words, and discover just the right fusion of native and Wizard magic. He would not say that there might not be enough time to discover the arcane secret he needed. He would not think that failure was possible.

And besides, there was still hope that the Skull People would be able to furnish the vital clue he sought. The ghost eater he had captured had proved useful physically but had not *told* him anything. Surely the Skull People had ways of keeping their ghost eaters in line. If he could contact them, perhaps he could convince them of the danger and gain their cooperation. He could offer them so much in return: guns, medicine, and the chance to join Rhyllachan civilization.

"Sir!" called his aide from the other side of the tent flap. Talys sighed and straightened in his camp chair. The aide came in, dripping wet from the steady rain outside. Behind her crowded two other figures: Beoch and Colonel Ebrim. None of them looked terribly happy.

Talys' heart sank, but he smiled and gestured them in. "Beoch! I wasn't expecting you to return so quickly." He glanced at Ebrim to see if he'd forced Beoch to report already, but saw nothing save puzzlement on his rival's face. "Sit down, have a drink of whiskey to warm yourself."

Beoch nodded slowly and did as he was told. The report began in a straightforward enough manner. The small scouting team he had gone with had found a native settlement, had been attacked without provocation by a band of furious warriors, and had then fled into the woods. After that, however, the story took a sudden turn. Gwendith of all people had tracked them, although her motives for doing so were unclear. Beoch had begged her to set up a meeting with the Skull People, but she had stubbornly refused, then attacked the other soldiers once she had lulled them into thinking her no threat. The same ghost eater she had traveled with earlier had come at her signal and killed all the soldiers within reach. Beoch had barely escaped with his life.

Talys sat quietly throughout the tale, keeping a close eye on Beoch. The smith had grown increasingly pale over the last few weeks, and there was a wild look in his eye. His voice trembled slightly at certain points in his account, and sweat broke out

across his forehead. His words grew shrill when he spoke of Gwendith, and he insisted once again that he was certain that Johann was responsible for her strange behavior.

Talys' heart sank. Not only had the encounter with the Skull People turned into a disaster, but he suspected that Beoch's version of things was not quite accurate. He had hoped that the smith would be able to talk to Gwendith and use her as a conduit to the Skull People. But it had proved a wasted hope. And what was more, there would be no more opportunities. Beoch's mind was disintegrating even as he watched.

It had happened before, although he had prayed that this time would be different. Originally, it had not been difficult to use his talent to get Beoch to follow him. But over time, as Gwendith's actions made it more and more clear that she was acting under her own volition, Beoch's guilt had naturally begun to fade. And if it had disappeared, Talys' hold would have evaporated along with it.

But he had needed Beoch, needed a smith to help him put together armor, chains, and other devices effective against ghost eaters. Beoch had been smart, and loyal, and very good at his craft. Talys couldn't afford to let him slip away. So he had found Beoch's deeply-buried need to shift the blame away from himself and Gwendith, to believe that someone else had caused her to abandon him. Johann had seemed to fit the bill.

Only it had been a long time, and Talys had to exert influence every few days to make certain that Beoch didn't start to see things more clearly. There was a great deal of individual variation in terms of his power. Someone like Gwendith would probably have broken free long ago. Beoch simply began to go mad.

It wouldn't be long before Beoch's hatred of Johann soured into a blind obsession that couldn't be turned aside by anyone. His usefulness to Talys would come to an end, despite all that Talys had done to prolong it.

"Well, then, this makes everything clear," Ebrim stated, satisfaction edging his voice. "We've tried it your way, Talys, but it's just as I told you. These muddies are nothing but savages, incapable of listening to reason. Now we'll do things my way."

"What are you going to do?"

“I’m leading this force to the nearest muddy village. Beoch can show us the way. They’ll tell us everything we need to know, or else I’ll kill them all and move on to the next batch.”

“You can’t take a large enough force—the undead miners—”

“We can’t do anything against them anyway! Admit it, Talys. You’ve failed. My way is the only path we’ve got left. I’ll leave you a token force, if that’s what you want. But the rest of us are marching tomorrow morning.”

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Gwendith wiped the sweat from her brow. She had spent the early part of the day with the warriors, demonstrating the power of rifles and pistols to the newcomers. To her surprise, the Worn Rock ghost eater had also come. He had, he explained, stayed from the Darkening Land this long so that there would still be someone who knew what it was like to fight the Enemies. Discussion had quickly turned towards plans and strategy, a conversation that Gwendith felt could be held just as easily without her presence. She had already answered most of the new warriors’ questions previously, and she truly had only limited knowledge of military movements. Instead, she excused herself from the gathering and headed back toward town. A little food and the chance to catch up on her sleep would be more than welcome.

As she started down the path, someone stepped out of the trees towards her. Startled, she had her hand on her pistols, before realizing that it was only one of the Ahkan’i women. Then she saw the hair, half-grown out from its mourning cut. Siska-init.

Sweat immediately slicked her palms. “Uh, good morning,” she said in an attempt to cover the awkwardness of the situation.

Siska-init drew closer, her nearly-black eyes fixed on Gwendith’s face with an unnerving intensity. “Good morning,” she replied stiffly. “I would speak with you.”

What could they possibly have to talk about? “Of course.”

“Not here. Somewhere more private. I know such a place.”

Gwendith nodded. As she turned to follow, she caught a glimpse of Stands-in-Smoke coming up the trail. She made a quick motion to the other woman not to follow—this would be bad enough without a witness.

They left the village, walking along the bluff above the river. As they ascended, the distance between themselves and the water below grew greater and greater. Ravens coasted across the sky, harsh caws echoing off the mountainside. At last, Siska-init stopped, standing on the very edge of the bluff, where a great rock jutted out over the water. After a moment's hesitation, Gwendith joined her.

"There are two stories connected with this place," Siska-init said unexpectedly. The wind gusted wildly, blowing strands of her short-shorn hair over her face. Her expression was as unreadable as the stone they stood on. "The first concerns the river below. The bend in it here has very deep water. It's called Where It Ate Them."

Not a very auspicious name. "Why?"

"Do you know what an uktena is?"

"The ghost eater told me story about one. They're great horned serpents, aren't they?"

Siska-init smiled grimly, nothing more than a brief twitching of her lips.

"Something like. One lives in the water below. Its presence was discovered long ago, when a party of hunters first came into this area and set up their camp close to the water. All of them were paralyzed by the light given off from the great stone set in its forehead. It crawled up and ate all of them, except for one, who knew not to look at the stone, and was thus able to run off. The town is safe downstream, for the river becomes too shallow for the uktena to swim in. But here and higher, no one ever goes down close to the water's edge."

"I see." Gwendith frowned, wondering where all this was leading. "And what is the other story?"

"The stone we stand on is called Where He Blew Away. Long ago, a young man became so distraught over being denied permission to marry his lover that he flung himself over the cliff. If the fall did not kill him, then the uktena surely would. But the wind was so strong that it blew him away, up and over the mountains. No one knows what happened to him." She paused briefly. "Do you think it's a sad story? Of love denied?"

"I suppose."



“I don’t think so. I think the man was a fool. I wouldn’t jump over a cliff out of grief. I’d find some other way of solving my problem.” She turned to face Gwendith. “I also don’t think that the wind would blow an Enemy away, do you? I think she would just fall and fall, and her bones would make the uktena’s nest. Don’t you?”

A searing pain slashed across Gwendith’s arm. Startled, she jumped back instinctively and felt the edge of the rock under her heel. For an instant, her arms windmilled helplessly, trying to catch her balance. Then Siska-init, a bloodied stone knife still in her hand, lunged forwards and pushed.

And Gwendith fell.

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE***

Gwendith was dead.

The ghost eater sat very still, trying to absorb the enormity of what had happened. But it was beyond him. He couldn't get his mind around the fact that he would never see her again, never hear her laughter, and never hold her in his arms.

He hadn't thought it possible to feel such grief.

He sat outside his house, hands lying limp in his lap. There was nothing left of her: no token, no lock of hair, nothing she had owned that she hadn't been carrying with her. He wished desperately for something, anything, that had once been hers, which he could hold in his hands now. Tears welled up in his eyes, dripping unheeded down his cheeks. A cry had lodged in his throat when they first brought him the news, and it remained stuck there, so that he thought he might never be able to speak again.

Footsteps sounded, soft on the new grass, but he didn't look up. What did it matter who approached? It wasn't Gwendith.

"I'm sorry," Tihune said quietly.

He glanced up, surprise trying to fight its way through sorrow. Tihune looked terrible. His hair was tangled, his eyes surrounded by shadows. His mouth had a haggard, pinched look. If Tihune had slept at all in the last few days, it didn't show.

"So am I," the ghost eater replied.

Tihune scuffed the ground with one foot. "There's been no sign of her, then?"

"No. Stands-in-Smoke got the warriors almost as soon as it happened. They looked in the river downstream from the uktena's house. I went to where the uktena dwells myself, searched the banks, even dove all the way to the bottom. I couldn't find her. I didn't even see the uktena."

"Maybe there isn't one. Maybe the one that used to be there died. She could still be alive, if that's so."

"If she lived, the searchers would have found her. Her body's stuck up against a rock, in one of the deep places where the water runs white."

Tihune sighed. "Perhaps her spirit will find the Darkening Land anyway."

He thought about the vision Little Deer had shown him. Caitlin had been buried in the ground, but she had found the Darkening Land. She and Gwendith and Gairin were probably dancing together even now. He wondered if they would be able to find room in their circle for him.

"Everyone's gathering at the square ground," Tihune went on after a moment. "I think...that is, they're trying to decide what to do with Siska-init. I just...I can't believe that she would have done something like that. There must be some mistake."

The ghost eater shook his head. He didn't want to think about Siska-init. It threatened to turn grief into rage, and he couldn't afford that. "Why not? As far as she's concerned, she lost both of us to Gwendith. She was hurt, and she wanted a way to change everything, to turn back time. Maybe she thought that if Gwendith simply disappeared, I'd love her again. Or maybe she was just angry."

They walked together into the square ground, and silence immediately fell over the gathering there. The ghost eater looked around slowly; every adult in town must have been there. Johann broke away from the group, to run over and fling his arms about the ghost eater in an awkward embrace. The ghost eater felt the tension in Johann's shoulders break in a short sob. No Tongue was there also, his eyes red from crying. A'na held his hand, a stricken look on her face.

Stands-in-Smoke stood near the center of the crowd. There was something fierce and wild about her, as if she couldn't let herself feel anything but rage. She stood deliberately apart from everyone else, fists clenched.

And lastly, there was Siska-init.

She was badly disheveled, her hair in disorder and her clothing soiled. There was a burn mark on one side of her face, and a bruise ringed one eye. Stands-in-Smoke had not been kind in taking her prisoner, it seemed. Siska-init cast him a desperate glance when she caught sight of him, as if pleading for him to save her.

The eldest appeared suddenly at his elbow, like the ghost of a raven. There was something calculating in his ancient eyes. "What will you do?" he asked, too soft for anyone else to hear. "There she is, the one who killed your wife. Will you eat her ghost in revenge?"

“Don’t be a fool.”

It was reckless to speak thus to one who was judging whether or not he was fit to live. The eldest raised an eyebrow at the tone, but the ghost eater could not bring himself to care.

“Don’t you want revenge?”

“I want...I don’t know what I want. I want Gwendith back and all of this undone.” He closed his eyes briefly, fighting to keep from crying in front of the eldest’s cold eyes. “It’s for the Woodpecker Clan to decide, not me,” he managed at last.

“And if they ask your opinion.”

“I don’t know what to do. Leave me alone.”

He shoved past the eldest, forcing himself to walk farther into the crowd. Everyone was looking at him. He caught sight of Sihun and made for his friend’s side. Sihun put an arm around him, leaned down so that their foreheads touched. “I sorry,” he whispered softly. “She was a good woman.”

“What is everyone standing around for?” the ghost eater asked, trying to find something else to focus on. If he could just concentrate on something other than Gwendith, he might survive the next few seconds. He would deal with the next few after that.

“Hilaka.”

The ghost eater turned and saw the ancient woman hobbling through the crowd. Her eyes shone with anger as she looked at Siska-init.

“They tell me I need to sort out the truth of this matter,” she said. She stopped a few feet from Stands-in-Smoke, squinting at the young woman. “What happened?”

Stands-in-Smoke shot a dark look at Siska-init. “I was going to find the warriors. I want to do my share of the fighting, once it comes to that. On the way there, I saw Gwendith talking with...this person.” She spat in Siska-init’s direction, the impoliteness of the act causing a murmur of consternation in the crowd. “I didn’t like it—what reason would they have to talk? I learned a long time ago not to trust anything that seems odd, so I followed them at a distance. They went up to a bluff over the river, and *she* attacked Gwendith with a knife, then shoved her over the edge. I couldn’t get there fast enough

to stop her, but I made sure she didn't get away with her crime." She eyed the burn on Siska-init's face with morbid satisfaction.

Siska-init glared at her. "Are you going to believe this Hut Sitter over me?"

"Tell us your side of things, child," Hilaka ordered.

"You've all known me all your life! You only met this woman less than a moon ago! Are you going to listen to her?"

"Did you do as Stands-in-Smoke claims?"

"I didn't do anything!"

"You're lying."

Silence fell. Siska-init turned to the ghost eater, holding out her hand imploringly. "Help me."

He felt as though some part of him had died and fallen away. "Did you do this because of last night? Because I wouldn't sleep with you?"

There was a shocked murmur. Siska-init took a deep breath, let it out. "If this spying Hut Sitter hadn't followed me, no one would ever have known. I did it so we could be together. Can't you see that?"

He felt sick. "What happened to you? What turned you into a person who could do something like this?"

She stared at him, then shook her head. "*You* did. You promised you'd marry me, but you became the ghost eater instead. They say that you could have lived, but you offered to die in Tihune's place. If you had really loved me, you would have come back to me like you promised. All of this is of your making."

Hilaka shook her gray-haired head pityingly. "Now it remains for us to decide what to do with you."

Siska-init laughed suddenly. "Do with me? I killed an Enemy. The last I knew, we needed make no reparations to *them*."

"She was Woodpecker Clan!" Sihun shouted hotly. "We adopted her the day she came here. You have to satisfy us for her murder."

Siska-init frowned, as if something unpleasant began to dawn on her. "You don't mean that. Woodpecker Clan won't press their claim for this *Enemy*. You're better off

without her—it's disgraceful that you would adopt Enemies and Hut Sitters. I did you a favor by giving you one less to be ashamed of."

Sihun's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you questioning the honor of Woodpecker Clan?"

There came an angry muttering from clan members in the crowd. A few moved closer, as if tightening a noose about Siska-init. She looked around frantically, but no one came to stand by her.

"We'll decide on reparations," Hilaka said, but there was no promise of mercy in her ancient voice. "Your clan owes a life to us now."

"Take Chiaha," someone said suddenly. "Her son can become Woodpecker Clan instead. Gunik'a doesn't have any children—let her raise the boy."

Color drained from Siska-init's face. The rest of her clan murmured among themselves, obviously troubled. "No!" shouted her sister Mahi, clutching the baby to her.

"A good suggestion," Hilaka said implacably. "Of course, the child would be sent to another town, so that he could be raised Woodpecker without anyone trying to fill his head with other notions."

Siska-init's lips shaped a denial, but no sound came out. At the back of the crowd, Tihune covered his face with his hands.

Mahi rounded suddenly on the ghost eater. "This is all your fault! By flaunting tradition, you've brought bad luck on us all!"

"No." Tihune's voice cut in unexpectedly. "The fault is mine. If I hadn't been a coward...if I had died as Rhododendron Clan wanted...none of this would have happened. I'm the one who brought bad luck on us through my cowardice. I wish I knew some way of turning it to good."

There was a sudden commotion on the far edge of the gathering. The ghost eater stood on tiptoe to see and caught a glimpse of several young warriors, all of them panting and gasping as if they had run a long way. He recognized at least one of them as a scout sent to keep an eye on the Rhylachan army.

"They're coming!" the man yelled, stumbling to a halt. "The Enemies are on the move. At the rate they're traveling, they'll be here within two days."

Cries of fear and anger broke out all around, even though the news wasn't unexpected. The ghost eater closed his eyes and bowed his head. It felt like the end of the world.

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The pounding rush of water battering Gwendith's body gradually began to slack off. Her fingers had gone numb; the only way she knew that her grip still held was the speed of the water flowing past and the feel of an undulating body against her own. Water closed briefly over her head, then there was air against her face once again. She took a deep, shuddering breath and tried to get her bearings.

Smooth scales lay beneath her cheek. They glittered with jewel-bright colors, each edged in brilliance, as if they burned from within. A blue-white glow bathed her skin and clothes, but she remembered Siska-init's story and tried not to look for its source. Hesitantly, she shifted her grip a little on one of the antlers growing from the serpentine head and wondered whether or not she should let go. She had no idea where she was, or where the uktena might be taking her. Back to its lair for dinner seemed likely. But then again, if that was its intention, why hadn't it already eaten her, or at least used the glowing stone in its forehead to paralyze her?

*Or why didn't it just let me drown?*

The water had felt like a stone wall when she hit it. All the breath had been knocked from her lungs, and she had sunk towards the bottom, too stunned to move. She'd caught a glimpse of light, like sparks under the water. Then something huge had come up beneath her, its muscular body shoving her towards the surface. Her hand found purchase and clung instinctively, even after the great beast had brought her back into the air.

Then it had begun to swim upriver. Still in a daze, Gwendith held on, unwilling to brave the water by herself. At first, she had thought that the uktena didn't even know she was there. But it had swum at the surface, as if it understood she needed to breathe.

The powerful undulations of the body under her came to a sudden stop. Gwendith looked around and saw that they were near a low bank overhung with

basswoods. Did the uktena live in some hidden cave along the riverside? But Siska-init had said that it made its home in the deep waters.

The uktena tossed its head violently. Gwendith yelped and clung tighter to the antlers. It flung its head from side-to-side again, like a dog trying to shake off fleas. This time her hold broke, and she found herself floundering through the shallows. Her hands caught at tree roots going down to the water, and she used them to haul herself up onto the bank. Behind her, the uktena made a sound like a snort. She looked back and saw that it had already turned around and was making its way downstream once again. The stone in its head lit the water around it as it dove deep, the brilliant scales sparking and flashing like fire. Then it was gone.

Gwendith pulled herself away from the waterside, deeper into the grove of basswoods. Her mind reeled, trying to put some meaning to what had just happened. Night was falling rapidly, and her wet clothes chilled her skin. Shivering, she looked for shelter but saw nothing to hand. Her body ached from the fall, and the cold was starting to set into her bones. Blood streamed from the knife wound in her arm, and it grew harder and harder to think.

She dropped into a ball at the foot of one of the trees and closed her eyes. Perhaps if she could just sleep for a little while, then everything would be all right.

"And what do we have here?" asked a cheerful voice.

Gwendith forced her eyes open and found a young woman bending over her. Her clothing was similar to that of the Bird Creek Town women, but the cut was subtly different. A snake had been tattooed in a coil around one arm, reminding Gwendith of the ghost eater.

"Are you an Enemy?" the woman continued. She didn't seem very concerned.

"I'm a friend of the Bird Creek Town people," Gwendith said hoarsely. "Help me."

"Ah. You must be one of those friendly Enemies." The woman laughed at her own wit. "Two runners camped on top of our townhouse a short time ago. We heard them talking about the message they were taking to the other towns. They mentioned you."

*Camped on top of the townhouse?* Gwendith wondered, but didn't have the energy to question. The woman helped her to her feet.



"You can call me Lizard-in-the-Sun. I'll take you back to our townhouse. We'll take care of you."

"That isn't an Ahkan'i name."

"I'm not Ahkan'i."

"I thought no one else lived in these mountains."

Lizard-in-the-Sun laughed. She offered her arm for Gwendith to lean on. Although slender, she had a startling strength. "My people have been here for a lot longer than the Ahkan'it. We were already here when Sun put ashes on the face of her secret lover, who came only in the dark, and thus discovered him to be her brother Moon. But in Ahkan'i terms it has been a long time since we have talked to them."

They made their way slowly through the wood, confined to Gwendith's stumbling pace. At length, they came to the foot of a bald. The great expanse of gray stone glowed amber in the light of the setting sun. Smoke drifted from the middle of the bald, as if escaping through some narrow crevice from beneath the ground. Lizard-in-the-Sun took a firmer hold on Gwendith's arm and started for the nearest rock face, as if she would simply walk through it into the mountain itself.

And indeed, as they approached, Gwendith saw a low, door-shaped cave where none had been before. She stopped, feeling sudden trepidation. There were things in these mountains that she knew nothing of, which might be dangerous. She wished desperately that the ghost eater was here with her, to tell her what to do.

"Come on," Lizard-in-the-Sun said. "Don't be afraid. No harm will come to you."

*I don't know that I've got a choice.* No food, no blankets, no dry clothes, and night on the way. Her pistols were soaked, and the gunpowder in them was ruined. Her saber was the only thing she had to defend herself against whatever large animals stalked the night. With a sigh, she stooped to enter the low cave.

And immediately discovered herself able to stand straight once again. Startled, she looked around and found herself in an enormous open space. An entire town lay before her, complete with fields and a large stream. Above, she could see the sky, as if the inside of the mountain contained its own universe. A cold wind blew, and the husks of dead corn stalks rattled. The trees wore their fall colors, but there was a taste of winter in the air.

“Our seasons down here are opposite from the world above ground,” Lizard-in-the-Sun explained. Gwendith saw that the snake tattoo had become a real serpent coiled around the young woman’s arm.

“What—where is this? Who are you?”

People came out of houses and fields, staring at her curiously. Many smiled and waved, and no few rushed to get drums and flutes. Within minutes, Gwendith found herself whisked towards the large townhouse in the center of the cavern. Dry clothes and furs were urged on her, along with steaming cups of sassafras tea. Someone set about bandaging the wound on her arm, which didn’t look too serious once the blood had been cleaned away. Several of the people, men and women alike, wore snakes like jewelry about their necks, arms, and legs. The serpents eyed Gwendith mildly but didn’t seem particularly impressed.

Finally, she was led before a great fire in the winter townhouse. Smoke from the fire drifted out a hole in the roof, and Gwendith realized that it was the source of the smoke she had seen coming from the bald. The musicians struck up a lively beat, and some of the people drew close to the fire to dance. They moved in two circles, women in the inner, men in the outer, walking slowly around with a shuffling gait. They seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely.

A gigantic turtle lay close to the flames. “Please, sit,” Lizard-in-the-Sun urged, pointing at the turtle.

“On him?”

“Yes. Don’t worry—you aren’t too heavy.”

Gwendith sat down gingerly on the sturdy shell. The turtle looked at her briefly, then went back to whatever thoughts occupied its reptilian mind.

“Wizards,” Gwendith said in wonder. “I must have hit my head on a rock when I fell in the river.”

Lizard-in-the-Sun laughed brightly. “Of course not, silly. Didn’t your Ahkan’i friends tell you about us? They call us Immortals.”

For a moment, Gwendith’s mind blanked. Then she remembered the drawing room back at Whitefoam, Rowe’s lean form bending over an ancient map. It seemed

like a thousand centuries had passed since then. “The ghost eater mentioned you once. He said that your people had helped hold the mountains.”

“We did. I remember.” Lizard-in-the-Sun nodded to herself, like an old woman reaching back to the days of her youth. “So tell me who you are, friendly Enemy who speaks to ghost eaters. Tell me how it came to pass that the uktena brought you to where we would find you.”

Gwendith took a sip of her tea. “You had best pull up a turtle, then. It’s a very long story.”

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The ghost eater dipped his fingers in a small pot of black paint and drew the final lines on his skin. His fellows crouched nearby, preparing themselves for war as he had done. They had painted themselves according to tradition: a thick coating of white over face and body, then black to outline the bones beneath. Black hollows surrounded their dark eyes, making their expressions hard to read. They looked fearsome, like skeletons come down from the Crow House.

The old one seemed in oddly elevated spirits. Perhaps he took satisfaction from the disasters that plagued the town. Perhaps he saw Gwendith’s murder as evidence that he had been right all along, and his pupil’s rebellion would lead only to more tragedy.

The ghost eater tried to care and couldn’t. He had smeared ashes into his hair to show that he mourned, but the approaching Rhylachan force ensured that he had no time to follow through with any of the other rituals his loss should have entailed. A few people had come up to him and murmured words of comfort, or related their own grief over lost spouses. Someday he might appreciate their attempted kindness, but for now it meant nothing. Grief was a path that could only be walked alone.

*Alone.*

He didn’t think he would be able to go on. He wouldn’t have come this far without Gwendith’s encouragement, her strength. What would he do if the eldest concluded that the ghost eaters should change along with the rest of the world? Where would he be able to find the strength to see it through?

He stood up quickly, trying to distract himself. Hollow skulls tracked his movement. Then the eldest arose as well, went out without a word, leaving the rest to follow.

The town was in a state of chaos. Grim warriors gathered in the square, their faces and bodies painted with the red of war and the black of death. Like the ghost eaters, they had tied roaches of stiffened deer and possum hair to their heads, so that a war crest ran down the center of their scalps. They had already gathered everything they would take with them: bows and arrows, war clubs, atlatls, and knives for the fighting; and parched corn, blankets, and cups for the trail. They wore half-leggings to protect their thighs from thorns and low branches, and moccasins to blur their footprints. The ghost eater felt his heart lift a little at the sight of them, so proud and fearsome. It had been a long time since the Ahkan'it had fought anyone, but they had never forgotten that they were warriors.

Most of the old people, women, and children were assembling near the outskirts of the town. The Rhylachans were too near Bird Creek; if the men fell, nothing would remain to stop the Enemies from taking the town. A few warriors from the other towns would escort them up to Corn Grows Tall, where they would at least be out of immediate danger. A handful of old men and childless women were remaining behind to look after the crops. It was hoped that the season was far enough along that they would be able to tend the fields without too much effort. If not, there would be hunger come winter. A'na was among those staying, despite any number of dark looks and angry gestures from No Tongue.

As the ghost eater approached the warriors, he saw Stands-in-Smoke among them, a rifle balanced casually on her hip. She had a sober look on her face, very unlike the rash, angry woman he had met only a few moons ago. Her rage had run out of her somewhere along the path they had walked, leaving behind someone who perhaps could truly lead her people. *If she ever sees them again.*

"You're coming with us," he said when he drew near. It was not a question, because he had expected as much.

She shrugged. "I'm needed. And I can fire a gun." She paused, then shook her head. "I never thought I'd miss an Outlander, but I wish Gwendith was here."

It hurt. "So do I."

Jilhe strode up to the gathering, the gray in his hair looking more pronounced than ever. The men had begun to defer to him because of his years and his talent with weapons, so it fell to him to lead—as much as anyone ever led Ahkan'it, anyway. He began to speak, his voice rolling out over the crowd, telling them of courage and strength, and the honors to be gained through bravery. The ghost eater ignored him, instead searching for faces he had known all his life. He wondered how many more would be lost to him before the next moon.

And then they were off, shuffling into a single-file line going up the path leading away from the town. Some of the younger men began singing a strident war-song, and soon everyone but the ghost eaters and Stands-in-Smoke had joined in. At the verge of the forest, the ghost eater looked back over his shoulder. But the taller men behind him blocked his view, so he made no farewell to Bird Creek Town.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

The Ahkan'i warriors crouched at the edge of a ravine. They had stationed themselves all along the steep slopes, hidden by thickets of rhododendron and blueberries. A great silence hung over the mountains, as if even the birds and squirrels paused to see what would happen.

The ghost eater took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. The other ghost eaters were spread out so that their initial attack would come from many directions, rather than just one. Scouts claimed that the Rhyllachans had already entered the lower end of the ravine, seeking the easier path up the mountain that it seemed to offer. They were slowed by their supply wagons and animals, and by their overweening confidence that told them they could simply stroll into the mountains and do whatever they pleased.

Today, they would learn a different lesson. Today they would have their ghosts eaten or sent to the Darkening Land.

If only that were all that would take place here. But he already knew that today he would see people he had known and loved his entire life die as well. The thought was paralyzing. He had already lost Gwendith. How could he bear losing anyone else?

The only thing more frightening was that their sacrifice might not be enough. If they didn't stop the Rhyllachans here and now...who would? And what devastation would take place in the interim?

*We will win*, he told himself fiercely. *We must.*

The faint sound of voices echoed up the ravine. The ghost eater's muscles tensed, and he leaned forward to catch the first gleam of sunlight on the soldiers' bright buttons. A squad of men marched boldly into sight...and then another...and another...and another....

The sun seemed to lose her warmth. Someone nearby made a sound of disbelief. The ghost eater closed his eyes and felt despair settle into his bones. *Kani, help us.* There were too many of them. At least three Rhyllachan soldiers for every

Ahkan'i warrior, with almost a fourth of them mounted on horses. Their guns showed black in the early light, death made manifest.

The foremost squad of cavalry stopped, and the rest of the column ground to a halt behind them. A man mounted on a white horse glanced around at the sides of the ravine. Although the ghost eater couldn't make out his face at this distance, there was cold arrogance in his bearing.

"That's Colonel Ebrim," Johann whispered. "The one who wanted to haul you off after Talys caught you."

"I know you're there!" Ebrim shouted, his words echoing off the mountainside. A flock of ravens exploded from the trees, startled by the sound.

The ghost eater stiffened. How Ebrim could have known about the ambush, he couldn't guess. Perhaps someone in the ranks had a far-watching Way like Gwendith's. But the sheer arrogance of the man, to march knowingly into a trap...he wasn't certain if it was laughable or frightening.

Ebrim knew all right. He knew that he had them outnumbered, knew that he had guns and they didn't. But he did not *understand*.

"I wish to speak with your chief!" Ebrim continued.

*Chief?* "Translate his words for the others," the ghost eater ordered Johann. Johann quickly did so. Several rifles swung in their direction as his words rang out.

"I speak for the Ahkan'it today," Jilhe called back. More rifles turned his way. Johann translated once again. "Leave this place at once! It is not meant for you."

"These mountains are ours. The Wizards promised us complete dominion over this world—it's our destiny. But we haven't come here to hurt you or your people. We've come to help."

Stands-in-Smoke hissed an oath that earned her shocked looks from the men nearby.

"You will help us most by leaving," Jilhe replied calmly.

Ebrim traded glances with the aides mounted near him. "We can't do that. You know about the undead miners. Tell us how to defeat them, and we'll let you go back to your homes."

"And you will leave?"

“We can talk about that later. We’ll send someone over to your village to talk to you about setting up trade. We have things you’ll want—guns, whiskey, horses. If you tell us what we need to know right now, we’ll give you all those things and more.”

“Surely that isn’t all you want.”

Ebrim chuckled. “You’re canny, I can see that. We’ll trade you all those things in exchange for the fire-rock we’ve been mining. Think of it—guns to help you get game, pretty things for your wives, whiskey to liven up your evenings—all that, in exchange for some rocks!”

Jilhe snorted. “You must think me fresh from the cradleboard. Whether you wish to burn the coal, or to make ghost eaters from it, it will never be yours. I will see the mountains themselves burn before I allow it into your hands.”

“Listen to me, old man! Tell me how to stop that thing, or I’ll string you up by your guts! You can’t win here—you can’t fight against an army this big with nothing but sticks and stone arrows! Either give me what I want, or your sons will die and I’ll make your wife my whore!”

There was no Ahkan’i word for “whore,” but Johann translated it well enough that several of the men shouted in outrage. Ebrim only laughed.

“Yell all you want,” he mocked. “But you know it’s true. Fight us, and we’ll crush you. I have an army behind me, while you stand alone!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, colonel,” called a woman’s voice.

She stood on the ridgeline behind them, tall and still against the sky. Sunlight picked gold out of her honey-colored hair, even from a distance. The wind caught the edge of her duster and sent it flapping behind her, revealing the saber and pistols slung around her waist.

“Gwendith,” Johann whispered.

The ghost eater stared, caught in a moment of disbelief. For an instant he thought he beheld her ghost, returned to exact revenge. Then realization opened up in him, and he let out a wordless cry of joy.

Gwendith’s gaze remained fixed on the colonel. A warrior appeared behind her suddenly, then another, and another. Within a few minutes, an army had materialized along the ridgeline.



Several soldiers moved back nervously at the sight of this second army. “And who the hell are you?” shouted Ebrim, his face going first white, then red.

She pulled out her saber, holding it over her head so that it glittered in the early light. “I am Gwendith of the Woodpecker Clan! The Ahkan’i call the warriors behind me Immortals. And we have come to tell you to leave here or die!”

Ebrim let out a snarl of rage, snatched out his own saber, and made a cutting gesture. “Attack! *Attack!*”

A volley of gunfire ripped the mountain air. Gwendith ducked, and then broke into a crouching run. The Immortals surged forwards, wild war-whoops shattering the air. Halfway down the slope, they suddenly faded from view—except for their arrows, which rained down on the soldiers, and their war clubs, which rushed into the midst of the horses.

The ghost eater leapt to his feet, racing after them. A bullet tore into his shoulder, and he turned the pain into a war cry. A man in armor angled sluggishly towards him. He avoided him, leaping into the midst of an unprotected group of infantry. One yelled and ripped at him with a bayonet. He turned on the man, sent the *bhargha* into his body, and devoured his ghost. It was different than it had been, slower, the images and memories less vivid. The youth stiffened and fell amidst his shrieking comrades.

The world degenerated into chaos. Ahkan’i warriors were running, yelling, killing, and dying. Those with war Ways used them. The ghost eater caught a glimpse of Sihun diving into the ground and coming up from the earth behind his enemies. Jilhe shifted his shape into that of a shaggy bear, which fell upon a soldier and mauled her.

The invisible Immortals had pulled down one of the armored men. Now their clubs fell mercilessly, smashing his helmet into his head. Stands-in-Smoke wrestled with a soldier for his gun; a moment later, the weapon exploded, sending shards of metal into his body. Men fled from the ghost eaters, only to fall dead in their tracks.

Crowded in on all sides, the ghost eater cursed his lack of height. Leaping over a dying warrior, he made for the high ground, pausing there to see what happened and where he might be most needed. A still space had opened up towards one end of the battlefield. Colonel Ebrim stood in the middle of it, his saber in his hand. Gwendith faced him, blood dripping from a cut across her breast. Even as the ghost eater watched,

Ebrim lunged forwards. The blades clashed together, and then leapt apart again. Gwendith skipped back, her eyes narrowed.

Ebrim grinned a predator's grin. He pressed his advantage, using his greater strength and weight to push Gwendith into giving ground. She dropped back, her defense seeming to falter. Seeing his opening, Ebrim lunged, blade striking for her heart.

But the blow never made contact. Gwendith danced aside, all pretense at sluggishness gone in an instant. Her saber drew a line of blood up Ebrim's unguarded side. He cried out, stumbled, and fell to his knees. An instant later, Gwendith's blade removed his head from his body. Ebrim's headless corpse knelt a moment, blood gushing out over his blue uniform. Then he slowly toppled forwards.

Some of the soldiers stumbled back from the sight of their commander's death, then suddenly turned and ran. Their panic spread like a contagion. Within moments, the battle had become a rout, as soldiers fled back down the ravine. Immortals and Ahkan'i alike gave chase, their war whoops echoing wildly. Frightened horses bolted riderless, reins trailing behind them. As the runners disappeared, a sort of silence descended over the battlefield, broken only by the moans of the wounded and dying.

The Corn Grows Tall ghost eater stood amidst a small hill of bodies. His eyes widened, and a look of incredulity crossed over his face. "We won," he said. "We won!"

The ghost eater left his vantage point and ran across the ravine. "Gwendith! Gwendith!"

She turned at the sound of her name, wiping sweat and hair from her eyes. He caught her about the waist, lifted her, and spun her around. She hugged him hard, enthusiastically returning his kiss. When they pulled apart, he saw that he had managed to smear his paint all over her mouth. He laughed at the sight, then suddenly began to cry.

"We thought you were dead," he managed to say at her startled look. "I thought that I had lost you."

"What? No! I...it's a long story." She pulled him close, kissed his black-painted eyelids. "You'll never lose me."

"I hope not. I—" He felt her body tense against him suddenly. "What is it?"

A soldier staggered towards them from among the wounded on the field. His clothing was in tatters, and blood poured from an ugly wound on his temple. A gore-stained rifle gleamed dully in his shaking hands. His gaze was fixed on them, and there was a crazed gleam in his eye.

“Beoch,” Gwendith whispered.

The ghost eater shoved her behind him. Beoch seemed to look through him, all his attention on Gwendith. “You...filthy...whore.”

“Beoch,” Gwendith started calmly.

“Be silent!” Beoch yelled, pointing the gun at them. “I did everything for you—tried to rescue you—and you’ve been spreading your legs for every muddy in these damned mountains.”

The ghost eater tensed, and the *bhargha* flared into visibility around him. “Say that again, and I’ll make you regret it for the very short time you’ll have left to live.”

“No,” said Gwendith softly. Then, to Beoch: “I don’t care what you think of me anymore. Maybe now you’ll go home to Aerwyn where you belong.”

“You left a decent Rhylachan man’s bed to roll in the dirt with this—this animal!”

Black anger settled in the ghost eater’s belly. “That’s right. So leave here now, and for Gwendith’s sake I’ll let you have your life.”

“No.” Beoch’s eyes narrowed as he stared fixedly at Gwendith. “I’m taking you back with me. I’ll remind you what a real man’s like.”

Johann moved towards them, his hands held out in a pacifying gesture. “Stop this, Beoch. Please. This is going to end up with someone getting killed if you keep on this way. Listen to the ghost eater. He’s offering to let you live. You can go back to Fort Ironwood where it’s safe.”

An odd look passed over Beoch’s face. The madness in his eyes became a hideous blankness, as if something from outside himself determined his actions. Then the gleam of hate was back, stronger than ever. “You. You’re the one who started all this.” The barrel of the rifle swung slowly in Johann’s direction.

Johann paled. “That isn’t true.”

“Isn’t it? You didn’t like seeing your brother’s widow married to a decent man, is that it? You with your gambling and whoring and Wizards-know what else. You wanted to drag her down with you. Do these savages pay you for their time with her, is that it?”

“Beoch, don’t be foolish,” Johann began.

The ghost eater launched himself at Beoch, the tendrils of the *bhargha* straining to cross the distance before it was too late. At that same moment, a shot rang out. Johann jerked back with a cry of agony, and he collapsed into the trampled underbrush. Stands-in-Smoke let out a desperate yell and fired her own weapon. Beoch made an odd, half-strangled sound and crumpled.

The ghost eater changed direction and rushed to where he had seen Johann fall. Blood leaked from a wound in his side, and his face was contorted with pain. Even so, he waved an arm at the sight of the ghost eater. “I’m fine,” he managed to gasp. “I think a rib’s broken, but it can wait. Go to Gwendith!”

The ghost eater turned and saw that Gwendith had stumbled over to where Beoch had fallen. Stands-in-Smoke’s shot had not killed the smith. He lay flat on his back, staring at the sky, a confused expression on his face. Blood ebbed sluggishly from a wound in his gut. After a visible moment of hesitation, Gwendith dropped to her knees by him.

His eyes struggled to focus. “Gweny?” His voice was small, plaintive as a child’s. “I can’t feel my legs. Why can’t I feel my legs?”

She bit her lip. “It...it’s all right.”

“I’m cold.” Clarity returned to his eyes, replacing the madness the ghost eater had seen there. “Talys told me....” Then the moment passed, and there was neither madness nor comprehension. “I’m tired. I want to go home.”

Unexpected pity touched the ghost eater’s heart. Whatever had happened to Beoch to make him strike out at them, whether Talys’ influence or some insanity of his own, it had left him now. There remained only someone hurt, and dying, who perhaps didn’t even understand himself how he had come to be here.

The eldest appeared on the edge of the circle of watchers. He crouched down by Beoch, then glanced briefly at Gwendith. She hesitantly reached out to stroke Beoch’s

brow lightly. "Just close your eyes," she said, fighting to keep the tears from her voice. "Go to sleep for a while. You've had a bad dream, but it's over now."

He sighed and closed his eyes as she had asked. The eldest laid his hand on Beoch's chest. After a moment, the labored breathing stopped. The eldest stood smoothly, started away, then paused. "He was not an evil man," he said.

Gwendith only shook her head. "He would have killed Johann, he—" She stopped, wiped away tears. "I don't know anymore."

The ghost eater dropped down by her, putting an arm around her shoulders. "I'll stay with you."

"No. There are people here who are hurt, who need your help. Go heal them. I'll be all right."

Stands-in-Smoke and No Tongue exchanged glances. "We won't leave her alone," Stands-in-Smoke said quietly.

The ghost eater nodded, even though he hated to leave Gwendith's side no matter who stayed by her. He rose to his feet, the moans of the injured and dying in his ears, and readied himself to fight his second battle of the day.

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Colonel Talys sat in his tent, listening to the rain drum against the oiled cloth. So many lives *wasted*. He had told Ebrim that his plan of attacking the Skull People was foolish in the extreme. The Rhyllachan army had faced them two hundred years ago and had lost, even though they'd had seasoned soldiers with the experience of decades of warfare against other native peoples. But Ebrim had always been a fool. If only he had waited another day, had listened when Talys told him that he was close to an answer.

The tent flap opened, and his aide stuck her head inside. She wore an oilskin wrapper to protect herself from the rain. It dripped water into a dismal puddle on the floor. "I think that's the last of them, sir. Any other survivors would have gotten here by now, if they were in any shape to do so."

He bowed his head. Almost their entire force had been wiped out. "I understand, lieutenant. Did Beoch Smith return?"

"No, sir. We lost all the armored troops as well."

*Damn.* That made things more difficult, endangered more lives. He hoped that one of the ghost eaters had devoured Ebrim's accursed soul.

"What are your orders, sir?"

Talys took a sip of whiskey from his hip flask. "I have a special task for you, lieutenant. I need to parley with the Skull People." He tapped the back of an ancient, crumbling book sitting on his camp table. "My studies have finally proved fruitful. I have found a way to revive the Wizards' magic. Unfortunately, it will result in the destruction of our ghost eater, rather than its control. However, there is more coal in the mountains, so the loss will not be irreversible. Indeed, perhaps it will be for the better. With a score of undead miners making up its body, it was too big, too hungry. Next time, we'll make sure there aren't any more accidents."

"What do you wish me to do, sir?"

"I need the cooperation of the Skull People for this. It won't be hard to secure, but I have to be able to meet with them face-to-face. I want you to take a small party of men who didn't go on Ebrim's rampage and make for the nearest village. Carry a white flag with you—if one of the Rhylachans or Hut Sitters with them sees it, they'll know what it means. Tell them that I wish them no harm and that I want to call a truce and speak with their leaders. Of course, Ebrim's foolishness will make your task harder—they aren't going to want to listen to you. Convince them."

She nodded crisply. "You can count on me, sir."

"I know. Dismissed."

He sat alone after she had left, nursing the whiskey flask. He hadn't received any more missives from his followers in New Rhylach for some days. Of course, delayed messengers were nothing uncommon, but nevertheless it worried him. Had things become serious enough at home that his messengers could not get through at all? What was happening back in New Rhylach?

He would know soon, he consoled himself. The undead miners would be the first test of his hybrid of native and Wizard magic. If the experiment proved as successful as he hoped, he would return home with the means to restore order. Not only that, but with the means to usher in a golden age of prosperity, where magic carried Rhylachan

civilization to new heights. But until that time came, worry would be his constant companion.

*Be safe, Donia*, he thought earnestly. If only he had brought her here with him. But at the time he had thought the situation too dangerous, too rigorous, for her. Now, he was beginning to wonder if it was she who faced the greater peril.

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“He wants what?” Gwendith exclaimed.

“A meeting. To discuss what to do about the Devourer.” Stands-in-Smoke shrugged. “His lieutenant didn’t have a lot to say other than that.”

The entire town had gathered in the square ground to hear the news. It had been four days since the battle that had taken the lives of so many. The Immortals had vanished immediately afterwards, leaving the Ahkan’it to mourn and dispose of the dead. Many Ahkan’i warriors had been taken to the Crow House, Jilhe among them. The bodies of the Rhylachan soldiers had been stripped of weaponry and other useful articles, then burned in a great pile. Beoch had been among them. What Gwendith had thought of his treatment, she had not said. Indeed, she had spoken very little since their return, instead spending much of her time alone by the river, watching the water go past.

Now Gwendith folded her arms over her chest defensively. “I hope you told her no.”

“I said we’d consider it,” Stands-in-Smoke replied. “It wasn’t my decision.”

“Do you think he might be able to help us?” Sihun asked practically.

Stands-in-Smoke spread her hands helplessly. “I don’t know. According to Gwendith, Talys has been looking for some way to fuse Ways and Wizard magic. It didn’t really sound possible to me, but who knows?”

“We can’t chance it,” Gwendith snapped. “He’s a needfinder, remember? He doesn’t want to just talk to us, he wants to bend us to his will. It’s a trap.”

Johann nodded. “Gwendith is right. Even if he has done what he claims, we can’t take the chance of actually meeting with him.”

"We might have no other choice," Sihun said softly. "The scouts set to watch for the Devourer came in a short while ago. It's headed towards this town. If we don't do something soon, we'll wake one morning to find it at our doors."

Gwendith paled sharply. "Even so, we can't trust Talys. This meeting is nothing but a trick."

"Probably," the ghost eater agreed quietly. "But there is a way to find out for certain. His Way can't affect the ghost eaters. We could talk to him, then come back and tell everyone else what he had to say. Let the town weigh the merits of his words without fear."

Gwendith glared at him furiously. He winced inside but kept his face carefully expressionless. He had the distinct feeling that Gwendith would refuse to listen to any idea suggested by Talys, no matter how reasonable. It wasn't as if he *wanted* to listen to the man who had imprisoned and tortured him. But the needs of the Ahkan'it outweighed any personal desire for vengeance.

"I agree," said the eldest. He received a murmur of approval from the living. "But we will not bring Talys here. We know where his forces are camped. We will go to him, when he least expects it." He smiled cruelly. "And if he proves treacherous, we will suck his ghost out. Let his Wizards help him then."

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Strange dreams troubled Talys' sleep. He stood on the edge of an abyss filled with swirling mist. Voices wailed on the winds below, calling out to him, accusing him, cursing him. "What do you want?" he shouted back. "I want to help you! Just tell me what you need!"

He awoke suddenly, heart pounding. Thunder rumbled close by, shaking the cot beneath him. Rain pelted the sides of the tent, like a beast seeking entry. Lightning flashed suddenly, illuminating the six figures standing around his bed.

He tried to cry out, but a cold hand clamped down over his mouth, silencing him. A fist knotted in his bedclothes, hauled him out of the cot, and left him dangling above the floor. He fought frantically, half-choked, but the grip was inevitable as iron.



Five ghostly lights flared, bathing the tent in a blue-white glow. To his horror, Talys saw that the light came from the *bharghas* of five ghost eaters. Their radiance illuminated the features of the sixth man who held him, and he saw that it was none other than the same ghost eater he had captured outside of Fort Reed, then lost to Ebrim's stupidity. The look in the ghost eater's eyes was one of such hate and rage that Talys knew himself for a dead man.

"Go ahead, cry out," the ghost eater hissed. "Give me an excuse to kill you."

He removed his hand from Talys' mouth. Talys tried to take a full breath but made no other sound. He felt horribly helpless—nothing he said could influence these creatures, nothing could turn aside their savagery if they decided to kill him. After a long minute, the ghost eater flung him hard against the bed. Talys winced with pain but forced himself to make no sound.

He studied his attackers, wondering desperately if there was any chance of alerting his soldiers before the ghost eaters killed him. Their tattooed faces were impassive, horrible. They dressed and ornamented themselves like barbarians, even the one who had been exposed, however briefly, to Rhylachan influence.

"You will answer our questions," the ghost eater said abruptly. "If you do not, I will show you all the mercy that you showed me."

Coldness went through Talys. The ghost eaters weren't men, only things, incapable of any real human feeling. He had taken that into account when making the decision to experiment on the one he had captured. Still, the ghost eater seemed to hold an inexplicable grudge for what had happened. That made him even more dangerous than he already was.

One of the other ghost eaters said something in their own language. He looked young, hardly more than a child, but Talys knew that looks were deceptive among creatures which never aged. The ghost eater who had held Talys gave the colonel a look of pure hate. "You sent a message earlier. Tell us what you could possibly have to say that would be of any interest to us."

The Ahkan'it were no fools. They had deliberately sent representatives who could not be swayed by Talys' talent. He straightened himself slowly, striving to regain some measure of dignity. "Of course. I have found a way to destroy the undead miners."

The ghost eater translated for benefit of his companions. He looked skeptical. "To destroy the Devourer? Not to control it?"

"That no longer seems practical."

"Tell us."

Talys nodded towards the ancient book lying on the table. "That is a book—we use them to record things that happened in the past."

"I know about books. Get on with it."

"Very well. That particular book is a journal that was written by one of the Wizards. It records some of the spells they used for their feats of magic. Through my studies of it and other records, I've finally found a way to revive the magic and use it against what you call the Devourer."

The ghost eater looked less than impressed. "How?"

"I won't try to go into the intricate details. Suffice it to say that the spells in that book, combined with my Way, will allow me to wield lightning against the Devourer and utterly annihilate it."

The ghost eaters drew back, murmuring in shocked voices. Their translator glared scornfully at Talys. "Lightning and the Thunders are no friends to the Rhyllachans. You cannot *command* them, any more than you can command the Long Man to flow backwards."

"There you're wrong," Talys said softly, triumphantly. "I am not bound by your superstitious regard. You've always tried to placate the elementals, or to simply coexist with them when you could not pacify them. But there is no need for that. In old Rhyllach, the Wizards and men like them summoned and commanded elementals at will. The human mind is greater than any elemental, any animal, and any plant. I can help you throw off the bondage your people have been subject to for so long. *They* will serve and placate *us*, rather than the other way around."

"My Way is to be able to convince people to do what I wish. With the help of the Wizards' spells, I can extend that influence to the elementals. Lightning will *want* to help me destroy the Devourer."

The ghost eaters simply stared at him, incredulous. The translator was the first to recover. "Lightning can't harm ghost eaters. I was struck by him once and took no lasting harm."

"Not from a simple, quick strike, no. Just as a brief exposure to fire does you no permanent damage. But a prolonged or very intense exposure to flames will incinerate you. So it is with lightning."

"Even if I believed you, why don't you just go ahead and destroy the Devourer now? Why do you need us?"

Talys' mouth quirked in displeasure. He disliked being reminded that he was dependent on them. "Because, to be perfectly honest, I need all the help I can get with the spell. If I just cast it anywhere, my call to Lightning and the Thunders might not be strong enough to make it work. I know that your people believe that the Thunders live on certain peaks. One of those places would be the ideal location to cast the spell. The hard part will be luring the Devourer to the correct spot."

There was a brief silence after the ghost eater had translated Talys' words. Then the young-looking ghost eater spoke briefly, sharply, and the rest nodded. The translator looked smugly satisfied by the reply. "You will get no help from us."

"What! That's outrageous—don't you want to keep the Devourer from eating everything in sight? It's only a few days away from your village, don't you realize that?"

The ghost eater remained adamant. "We'll find our own way of dealing with it. One that doesn't involve offending the Thunders."

"My plan will work! After that, you'll never have to worry about offending the elementals or any other nature spirit ever again!"

The lights of the *bharghas* were fading, drawing back into their owners. "You are a fool," the translator said softly, just before the last glow vanished. "You think that you and your kind are somehow exempt from being a part of the world. But, no matter how much you delude yourself, you aren't. No one is."

There came a brief rustle of air and cloth. Then the six ghost eaters were gone, as if their presence had been no more than a dream.

Talys sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, staring at the spot where they had stood. Then he slowly cradled his head in his hands and despaired.

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The ghost eater sat quietly in the midst of the assembly, while the eldest told the story of their meeting with Talys. Gwendith sat by him, holding his hand tightly. She looked worried, and he couldn't blame her.

The voices of those assembled murmured against the walls of the summer townhouse, disturbing the insect-eating birds that nested in the rafters. Everyone spoke at once, demanding to know what would be done to avert the disaster coming towards them. No one offered any solutions.

At last Sihun stood up. "Maybe we should take Talys up on his offer," he said, loudly enough to be heard over everyone else.

Silence fell instantly. "What?" Johann shouted incredulously.

"What other choice do we have?" Sihun exclaimed. "I don't *want* to do it, but we may *have* to."

"The Thunders will be greatly offended," the eldest warned.

"I know. But what good does it do us to escape offending them, only to have everything in these mountains wiped out? We have nowhere else to go—we are facing the end of the Ahkan'it if we don't stop the Devourer. And I haven't heard any other ideas about how to do that."

"I have one," the ghost eater called softly.

Gwendith turned to look at him in surprise. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, then climbed to his feet. "I think...I think I may know how to stop the Devourer."

"Well, by all means, let's hear it!" exclaimed Sihun.

He hesitated, then glanced over at the other ghost eaters. "I've given a lot of thought to what happened when I fought the old one," he said. The old one gave him a venomous glare, which he chose to ignore. "When our *bharghas* merged, I could see his thoughts, and he could see mine. It was almost as if we became part of one another for an instant."

"This is not something to be spoken of before others," the old one snapped.

"The Devourer is made up of miners killed in a cave-in. *Rhylachan* miners, who have no idea what's happened to them. They don't know about ghost eaters. They don't

understand things that we take for granted. They're probably afraid and confused, knowing only that something terrible and incomprehensible has happened to them. Not only that, but their confusion is probably added to by being able to see each other's minds. The terror of one becomes the terror of all. They are merged, individual *bharghas* coalesced into one giant thing of hunger."

He took a deep breath. The next words were the hard ones. "It stands to reason that if an Ahkan'i ghost eater went into the Devourer, he could merge with it as well. His thoughts, his understanding, would bring order to the chaos inside. The Devourer could be brought under control."

"And the individual ghost eaters could possibly be separated out from it and dealt with singly," the eldest mused. "Your idea has merit. You, of course, would be the one to go into the Devourer."

"No," said Gwendith. She came to her feet and grabbed the ghost eater's hand. "Don't do this. It's too dangerous."

He looked up at her lovely face, tried to memorize all its details. "It's my right, love. And my duty."

"You have no idea if it will work!"

"It will." *It has to.*

"I say we let the ghost eater try," called out another warrior.

Sihun looked unhappy. "I don't like it. But if you want to try...I don't see any other alternatives."

The ghost eater sighed. "Neither do I."

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The ghost eater followed Gwendith into their house. With the help of Sihun, Johann, and a few others, he had managed to put up a small summer house over the last few days. The night breeze blew freely through the openings near the roof, cooling the interior. Bean stretched out on the cold clay of the hearth, whiskers in the ashes.

Gwendith stopped in the center of the room, her arms folded over her chest. She kept her face averted, even when he called her name softly. With a sigh, he took her by

the shoulders and guided her over to sit on the bed. His hands massaged the back of her neck gently through her shirt, but none of the tension left her.

“I’m not going to die,” he said softly.

“Everyone else has. Gairin, Caitlin, even Beoch.”

“Johann, No Tongue, and Stands-in-Smoke are still alive.”

“Johann was almost killed. And as for the other two, give it time. Maybe they just haven’t known me long enough.”

He turned her to face him. “Don’t worry. I’ll always come back to you.” He took her hands, holding them against his chest. “You are all my heart. Remember that.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, then nodded. “When will you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning, as soon as the sun is up.”

She sat still for a long time, as if thinking hard about something. Then she sighed and kissed him. They made love slowly, as if she feared it would be the last time and wanted to savor every possible moment. He forewent rest afterwards to watch her troubled face in the spill of moonlight. When the sun lightened the sky, he carefully disentangled himself from the blankets and left her sleeping.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

The ghost eater stood on the ridgeline, staring down into the valley where the Devourer lurked. Its *bhargha* was brilliant, even in the sunlight. Trees withered near it, and a long line of brown death traced its slow progress across the land. The ghost eater found himself deeply glad that it did not move more quickly. Otherwise, it would have crossed half the mountains before he had even returned from New Rhylach.

"I can't believe it," murmured the Corn Grows Tall ghost eater.

"An abomination," declared the eldest, watching it through narrowed eyes.

"And one best ended quickly." The ghost eater glanced briefly at his two companions. They would take word of his success or failure back to Bird Creek Town. "I go."

"You do."

He started down towards the valley. The laurel grew thick on the slopes, its blooms filling the air with a sweet scent. If he didn't succeed, it would all be dead before the sun progressed much further on her daily rounds.

*Confidence. I will succeed. This will work.*

He stopped when he was only a few feet away from the Devourer. The long tendrils of its *bhargha* slashed and waved wildly in the air, reaching for any spark of life to sustain its bloated existence. He could see the faces of the miners from this distance. Their eyes bulged and their jaws hung slack, as if in the grip of some unknowable horror. They staggered along without paying any attention to their steps. Even as he watched, one tripped and fell against a sharp edge of rock, splitting open the side of his face. The *bhargha* healed the wound instantly. He climbed back to his feet and kept walking, with no indication that he was even aware of what had happened.

The small hairs on the back of the ghost eater's neck tried to stand up. He took a deep breath, searching for calm. The Devourer was horrible, yes. But that was what he had come to correct. Closing his eyes, he took three long steps forward—and was engulfed.

For a moment, nothing happened, his own *bhargha* remaining discrete from the rest. Then he felt other tendrils intertwine with it, spiral down, absorb his substance into its own....

*OH WIZARDS HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME*

*THE CAVE THE CAVE THE CEILING'S FALLING IT HURTS CAN'T BREATHE  
IT HURTS CAN'T BREATHE*

*No! You've escaped, you aren't there anymore! Take my knowledge! What's happened to you is terrible, yes, but*

*HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER*

*WHAT'S WRONG WHAT'S HAPPENED I DON'T UNDERSTAND*

*Your bodies have been animated by a spirit called the bhargha. It isn't anything to*

*I'M NOT BREATHING I CAN'T FEEL MY HEARTBEAT I'M DEAD I'M DEAD*

*DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD*

*HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER*

*don't be afraid just calm down*

*HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER HUNGER*

*DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD I'M DEAD WHY AM I WALKING WHAT HAPPENED*

*IT'S A NIGHTMARE JUST A DREAM JUST A DREAM NOT REAL*

*calm*

*HELP ME HELP ME HELP ME*

*THE CAVE THE CAVE THE CEILING'S FALLING IT HURTS CAN'T BREATHE  
IT HURTS CAN'T BREATHE*

*DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD DEAD*

The ghost eater's body shuddered briefly. Then, very slowly, he turned and fell into step with the rest.

And the Devourer continued its inexorable march.

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"I'm sorry to have to bring you such news, Gwendith," Sihun said softly. "I loved him as well. He was my brother in all ways but blood."



Gwendith closed her eyes, clinging to the comforting hand that Johann put on her arm. "He isn't dead."

"But is there anything of him left?" Stands-in-Smoke asked quietly.

Gwendith hung her head, having no answer to give. They sat together in front of the summer house the ghost eater had built. A'na bent her head over a cook pot, hiding her face under the pretext of checking on their meal. No Tongue put his face in his hands.

"What are we going to do now?" Gwendith asked numbly. "We have to save him, if we can. But...we have to stop the Devourer as well."

Stands-in-Smoke watched her bleakly. "Even if it means destroying him along with it?"

Gwendith wrapped her fingers tightly around the hilt of her saber. "Yes. He wouldn't want it any other way."

"Perhaps it won't come to that," Sihun said reassuringly. "Perhaps Talys will be able to direct the lightning."

"Then we're going to accept his offer?"

"A messenger has already been sent to fetch him. There's just no other way that anyone can see."

Gwendith bowed her head in despair. The idea of turning to Talys for help sickened her. But if it would save the ghost eater, she would get on her knees and beg. They had run out of time, run out of options. No other choice remained.

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Talys arrived at night. The entire town had gathered in the square to await his arrival. The five remaining ghost eaters escorted him into the fire-lit square, halting him when he was still far away from anyone else. Since his Way relied on his voice, it seemed unlikely that such a precaution would do much good, but it seemed to make everyone feel better. He stood with his hands folded, looking as unperturbed as he had the first time Gwendith had seen him, on the night of General Paywin's fateful party.

“You will answer any questions put to you,” the eldest instructed him, glowering fiercely. “If we even think that you might be trying to use your needfinder’s Way on anyone here, we’ll kill you in an instant.”

“There’s no need for me to use any talent. Our goals are the same,” Talys said mildly, once Johann had reluctantly translated for him. “I must add that it’s good to see you again, Gwendith. You have my condolences on the death of your husband. He served me well.”

“Shut up,” Johann snapped. “Say anything else that isn’t a direct answer to a question, and I’ll kill you myself.”

“Tell us what you propose to do,” Sihun instructed.

Talys regarded her with a rather startled look, but quickly regained his composure. Perhaps he did not know about the Changed Ones, Gwendith thought. For all his supposed knowledge, she suspected that there was a great deal that Talys didn’t understand about the Ahkan’it.

Talys repeated what he had told the ghost eaters earlier, explaining about the book he had found and about his plan for directing lightning down on the Devourer. “But I need your cooperation,” he added. “If you can just tell me where would be the best place to call on the elementals.”

Sihun was silent for a long time, staring levelly at Talys, as if measuring his heart. “There is such a place near here,” she said finally. “A mountain. Where They Call is its name. If you stood atop the peak, the Thunders would be able to hear you.”

“Good.”

“I just see one problem with this little scheme,” Gwendith said coldly. “How are you going to get the Devourer to go there, instead of coming here?”

Talys’ mouth quirked slightly. “Ah, yes. There is that.”

“A lure? Bait of some kind?” Sihun suggested doubtfully.

But Talys shook his head. “I don’t know that would work. The Devourer mostly ignored my men, when we were trying to control it. It would kill them if they got in its way, but it never even seemed aware of them.”

“Perhaps I can help,” said a quiet voice from the edge of the darkness.

The wavering firelight washed over Tihune as he stepped closer into the circle. He had not been seen much since his disgrace. Mainly he had lurked at the edges of the settlement, occasionally coming to speak with a kinsman, but for the most part keeping to himself. He looked terrible, Gwendith thought, and found herself feeling a sudden pity for him. His long hair had been cut short to mark his shame, so that the ends curled about his ears. Dark shadows surrounded his eyes, and his cheeks looked hollow. Grief etched deep lines around his mouth.

"What do *you* want, Tihune?" Sihun demanded angrily. "We have no need for cowards here."

Tihune flinched. "I know. I want to help. You need a way of drawing the Devourer to Where They Call. It...it is my Way to summon things to me. To call the game to me when I hunt. Or to make women follow my path." He glanced guiltily at Gwendith. "I could use that skill to summon the Devourer."

Sihun frowned thoughtfully. "Would it work on a ghost eater?"

"I don't know. Some Ways do, and some don't. A truth-seer or a needfinder can't touch them, but a thought-whisperer can. We won't know for certain until we make the attempt."

"All right." Sihun nodded reluctantly, then turned her gaze on Talys. "Hear that? You'd better get whatever you need for your chant, because, one way or another, we'll bring the Devourer to you."

"I packed everything I need in my saddlebags," Talys replied calmly. "You can count on me."

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A small party consisting of Gwendith, Sihun, Stands-in-Smoke, Johann, and No Tongue accompanied Tihune south to where the Devourer churned slowly towards them. They went on horseback in order to cover the ground more quickly, as the monster ghost eater was only a day away from Bird Creek Town by now. Another party of warriors had taken Talys west to Where They Call.

"*Can you spare him?*" Gwendith had asked Talys the night before, after everyone else had gone to their beds.

He had looked shocked at her request. "Why? It isn't as if he was ever alive."

"He was alive! He was my husband." She'd stopped, taking a calming breath. "Please. I'll do...anything you ask. Just don't kill him."

"Your *husband*? But Beoch only died a few days ago. And the ghost eaters are just undead things, not true men. How could it be possible?"

"I didn't come here to discuss my personal life, damn you. Just tell me your price."

He smiled thinly. "With such an offer, I hate to refuse. But I won't lie to you, Gwendith. I sincerely doubt that my control over the lightning will be accurate enough to burn the rest of the ghost eaters to ash, yet leave yours untouched. I'm sorry."

She'd nodded and started to turn away. Talys stopped her with a light touch. "I know that you don't care much for me right now, Gwendith," he said. "But once all this is over, I hope you'll consider going back to New Rhyllach with me. There have been some troubles at home that you don't know about. I think your help would be invaluable in restoring order."

"Go to hell."

She'd gone to the ghost eater's house afterwards and spent most of the night crying. The ache still tightened her throat. She wished that she could put it all aside, simply stop thinking altogether. But she had done that after Caitlin's death, and so knew from experience that it would do no one any good.

There came a moment of silence, when they finally beheld the Devourer's destruction. A wide swath of death lay over ridges and valleys, all plant and animal life destroyed, ghosts eaten and bodies left to rot in the sun. The air was preternaturally still, the silence unbroken by wind or birdsong. "Kani curse it," Tihune whispered, his eyes going wide. "That's what we have to face?"

Gwendith stared down at the Devourer, at the far-off shapes moving within it. The ghost eater was one of them. She turned away quickly, not wanting to see which was him.

"Let's just get it over with," Stands-in-Smoke said.

Tihune nodded. He prodded his nervous horse a few steps closer, so that he could look down into the valley and get a clear line of sight to the Devourer. Clearing his

throat nervously, he sang a chant, summoning the Devourer to him. He called on the things that touched ghost eaters: coal, fire, the mountains themselves.

At first, it seemed as if the chant had no effect, and despair bit into Gwendith's heart. But then, slowly, the Devourer began to turn towards the ridge.

"It's working," Sihun hissed, sounding half-elated and half-horrified.

"Come on," Tihune whispered. His eyes were wide, and sweat stood out on his forehead. "Come to me, you abomination. Come!"

The Devourer surged up the slope, trees browning before it. No Tongue took a sudden, nervous step back. It took Gwendith another moment to see what had disturbed him. "Hell. It's speeding up."

And indeed, the Devourer had left behind its slow, grinding march. First it moved at a brisk walk. Then at a jog.

Then at a run.

"Curse it!" Tihune shouted. He spun his mount, waving wildly at them all. "Ride, now, as hard as you can!"

"But what about you?" Gwendith demanded.

"I'll bring it, don't worry! I only need to stay a little way ahead of it!"

But the Devourer needed no rest. And Tihune's horse—and Tihune—did.

"Come on!" snapped Stands-in-Smoke, grabbing Gwendith's reins and hauling her after. Within moments, they were moving at an all-out gallop back along their trail. "We have to get to Where They Call as far ahead of that thing as we can, let the others know it will be there sooner than expected."

"But what if Tihune can't stay ahead of it?"

"He has to! And he knows it."

They rode hard, taking wild risks with the necks of humans and horses alike. When the shadows began to grow longer, they could see the glow of the Devourer's *bhargha* against the horizon, dangerously near. They charted their progress by it throughout the night, watching as it first faded into the distance, then drew ominously closer as their exhausted animals slowed. By dawn their own minds were clotted with fatigue, and the horses shivered in their steps, lathered flanks glistening in the first light.

"There," said Sihun, weariness turning her voice into a hollowed-out shell.

Gwendith blinked blearily in the direction Sihun pointed. Ahead of them rose a sharp peak, its height burnished gold in the dawn. Ravens called and glided over its tree-mantled flanks. The first blush of laurel blooms showed amidst the tangled greenery, giving the mountain an ethereal appearance.

They started wearily up the slopes. Gray rock showed through the thin layer of earth, and dense thickets of laurel and rhododendron made the going nearly impossible. The horses struggled for every step, hooves slipping on the jagged rocks. At last Sihun dismounted and took her bow and quiver from the saddle. The rest followed suit, flinging the saddles and reins down and letting the exhausted horses have their freedom. Gwendith wondered if the animals would be able to escape the Devourer and make their way back to Bird Creek Town.

The climb was bone-jarringly difficult. They scrambled over rough areas of stone laced with twisted roots, which seemed to clutch at their feet. The peak came into view through occasional breaks in the canopy, and Gwendith saw that its granite face had been riven in two by some long-ago cataclysm. After about an hour of climbing, she became aware of a faint sound, as of a far-off scream.

"What's that?" she gasped, suddenly terrified that the Devourer was on their very heels.

"The wind," panted Sihun. She took a swallow of water from her canteen, which had been looted from the body of a dead soldier after the battle. Her feet never paused in the climb. "On some days, the winds come to the peak, dance among the rocks. It's their song that this place is named for."

The wild shrieking grew louder and louder as they ascended. For a long time, the air around them remained still, blocked by the bulk of the mountain. At length they broke out of the thick forest, stumbled around a boulder bigger than a house, and stared out at the vista that opened up before them.

The cloven peak snatched at the sky, the wind screaming through it. The ravine formed by the split sloped sharply, until it abruptly fell away hundreds of feet below the jagged rocks of the peak. Most of the gray rock around them had been scoured clean of soil by the wind, but pockets choked with blueberries and rhododendron broke up the

monochrome landscape. Spruce trees grew on the windward side, stunted to a height no greater than that of a man.

The wind hit them like a solid thing. Gwendith staggered back, feeling invisible hands seize her long duster. Her hat whipped away, sailing off into the trees somewhere. Although she had been sweating profusely from the climb, the wind chilled her instantly, as if this was the home of winter.

A few shapes stood atop the nearest side of the cloven peak, pointing into the distance. Talys was one of them. He was dressed in strange white robes, the fabric painted with dozens of bizarre sigils. His golden hair whipped madly about his face, and he quickly pushed it out of his eyes. The ghost eaters stood closest to him, surrounded by an outer circle of worried-looking warriors.

"It's coming!" Sihun shouted above the cry of the wind.

"Where's Tihune?" someone called back.

"Coming behind us, I hope."

"All right, then," Talys said, trying vainly to straighten the flapping sleeves of his robe. "I will begin the spell now, so that all will be ready by the time the Devourer arrives. The rest of you must get down from here. You may watch, but don't come too close."

They obeyed him, quickly moving to wait near the enormous boulder, where the wind was less strong. Talys stood still and silent for what seemed like several minutes. Then he raised both arms and made mystic passes in the air with his hands. His voice boomed out, somehow amplified over the scream of the wind. The words he spoke were in some guttural, throat-twisting tongue, which Gwendith knew had never been spoken on this world. He paused, reached into a pouch, and cast a handful of reddish powder onto the wind. It was snatched up immediately, swirled into the air, and dispersed in every direction. Talys began a second chant, the tones taking on a strange, persuasive air that made Gwendith's skin crawl. He was using his Way, she guessed, to infuse the words with power and command. Then, suddenly, the chant rose to a crescendo, and he pointed a single finger towards the heavens.

And, to her amazement, a swirl of storm clouds began to form.

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“Well, if it isn’t the hero of the hour,” Rabbit sneered.

Shock hit the ghost eater like cold water. He had been wandering in a Rhyllachan hell, for how long he did not know. Time had become meaningless. There had been no thought, no feeling, no comprehension, everything smothered beneath an avalanche of fear and hunger.

He tried to look at Rabbit, but his body remained unresponsive. He staggered along, surrounded by the undead miners who were his companions. One foot caught on a stone; he fell, bled, healed, and climbed back to his feet without volition. It was as if Rabbit had somehow shielded his mind from the chaos around him, even while the melded *bhargha* held his body prisoner.

“You’re a fool,” Rabbit said. “Twice a fool. Three times a fool. You had everything you needed. Everything! But did you use what had been given into your hands? Oh, no, that would be too easy. You had to go it alone; you had to play the hero. Did you want to impress your wife? Or did you want to make your clan and your town feel bad for not accepting you as Tamaugua? ‘See, look at me, you treated me badly, but I’m going to save you all anyway. That’ll show you.’ Is that it?”

*No! It wasn’t that way at all!*

“Don’t tell *me* that, fool. If you want to do things the hard way, that’s fine with me.” Rabbit appeared in the range of his vision, big as a deer. He reared up on his hind legs, dark animal eyes flashing with mysterious fire. Paws impacted with the ghost eater’s chest, shoving him hard. “Here!” Rabbit shouted, pushing again. “Go on! Go!”

The ghost eater fell with a startled cry. But his outflung hand didn’t hit rock or root. Instead, a soft puff of fine dust rose up, coating his fingers.

Startled, he looked around. The Devourer was gone, as were the mountains and the dawn light. The sky above him was black with night. A flat, featureless plain stretched out to all sides, seemingly infinite. Ahead of him burned a vast host of bonfires, ringed by dancing figures. The sounds of laughter and song floated from them.

He recognized the place from the vision given him by Little Deer. He had gone to the Darkening Land.

He was dead.



“Don’t be so hasty,” said a friendly voice. “Our body is still back there, where you left it.”

He scrambled to his feet, spinning around to face the speaker. And found himself staring into his own eyes.

“What—what sort of trick?” he gasped, stepping hastily back. The other man was himself, almost down to the last detail. But he lacked the skull tattoos on his face and the vulture on his chest. “Who are you?”

The man smiled mildly. “You should know that already, ghost eater. I’m Tamaugua.”

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The growing storm blotted out the sky, reducing the new day back to night. Rain scented the air, and heavy drops began splashing on the ground all around. After a few moments, it became a downpour, soaking through clothing and stinging skin. Hail pelted down in spurts, and the wind gusted fitfully, strong one instant and almost gone the next.

“He did it,” gasped Sihun, her eyes nearly round with amazement. “Talys did it!”

Gwendith stared at the slight figure on the peak and felt the same awe fill her. Surely, this was what the Wizards had looked like in all their glory. No wonder they had convinced people that they were gods.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, coming closer.

“Look,” Stands-in-Smoke said. The faint glow of the Devourer had appeared through the trees, moving in the direction of the cleft in the peak. The sickly light reflected oddly off the rain, making it look as though the Devourer was surrounded by a storm of sparks.

Tihune burst out of the trees below, stumbling into the shallow end of the cleft. Blood covered his hands and knees, and left red footprints wherever he stepped. He raised a haggard face to the peak above, his short hair plastered to his face by the rain. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but the heaving gasp of his breath prevented any words from emerging.

Then the Devourer burst out of the trees behind him.

“Tihune, *run!*” Gwendith shouted.

But Tihune had no running left in him. He staggered once, almost falling, but managed to turn to face the monstrosity bearing down on him. He raised his arms above his head in a defiant gesture, never closing his eyes.

The leading edge of the *bhargha* touched him. His lifeless body crumpled instantly. For a moment, he was lost in the press, the boots of the undead miners marching over him, as though he was nothing more to them than the rocks. Then the Devourer passed over, and Gwendith saw his sprawled body, eyes still staring fiercely at death.

“Oh, Wizards, no,” she whispered.

“He did it for us,” Sihun said. “He knew in his heart that he couldn’t stay ahead of the Devourer forever. In the end, he had honor.” She fastened her eyes on Talys’ lone form. “Now it’s up to the Enemy to make Tihune’s sacrifice worthwhile.”

Talys lifted his arms, poised and waiting as the Devourer moved into the cleft. As soon as it was below him, he called out a word in the strange tongue he had used earlier. Thunder boomed and crashed, and lightning flickered nearby. A second time Talys cried out, his voice lifted in command. Lightning split a tree farther down the slope, and the accompanying boom shook Gwendith’s bones. Then Talys shouted his spell a third time, bringing his hands together above his head with a clap.

And the lightning sheared down.

It struck Talys directly, all its titanic power channeled into him. His body convulsed, golden hair standing out on end. Then he collapsed.

Gwendith ran to him with the rest on her heels. He lay rigidly on his back, thin streamers of smoke coming from his mouth and robes. She didn’t have to check for a pulse to know that he was dead.

Below, the Devourer churned its way through the cleft, untouched.

Stands-in-Smoke’s expression hardened before she had to turn away. One of the other warriors put his face in his hands. Sihun stood very still, staring down at Talys’ charred remains. The rain slackened, and the winds fell away, until everything was silent.

“That’s it, then,” Sihun said softly. “We’ve lost.”

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“You aren’t Tamaugua,” the ghost eater said. “I am.”

“Are you?” Tamaugua smiled sympathetically. “Why would you want to be?”

“Because it’s who I am! I am Tamaugua of the Owl Clan, brother to Tihune, friend of Sihun, sister’s-son of Jilhe.”

“No. You’re the Child of the Mountain. You’re the *bhargha*.”

“That isn’t true.” The ghost eater took a shaky step back. “It’s a lie, just like it was a lie when the old one told me that I couldn’t be intimate with a woman. Or that we have to kill to survive.”

Tamaugua sighed and scuffed at the dust with his foot. “Just because the first ghost eater got some things wrong doesn’t mean he got *everything* wrong.”

“No. This is a trick. You’re probably just Rabbit in disguise.”

“It’s no trick.” Tamaugua spread his hands wistfully. “I wish it was. But it’s true. The old one killed me the accepted way, through violence rather than by eating my ghost, because a ghost eater isn’t allowed to devour the spirit of any Ahkan’i. I died the moment he split my heart with that spear. And you began the moment the *bhargha* entered what had been my body. The coal is made of the bodies of things that lived a long time ago. The mountains took them all, made them into one thing. One thing, with one ghost inside it. That ghost is what came into my body. *You*—the *bhargha*—are that ghost.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Then why don’t you tell me why you think that you’re me?”

“I *know* that I am Tamaugua. I have all his...my...memories. All his likes and dislikes. I felt love for Siska-init when I first saw her, and betrayal when I learned she had lain with Tihune. I felt respect for Jilhe, and I grieved when he died.”

“Of course you did. You have all of my memories. It isn’t much of a surprise that you’d have the appropriate emotional responses for those memories.”

“I saw the Saw-Whet Owl. He came with Little Deer and the other animal spirits whenever they would speak to me. He is the symbol of my clan—he wouldn’t come otherwise!”

“Your body is of the Owl Clan. Being dead doesn’t change the fact that it originally issued from my mother.”

“No!” The ghost eater covered his ears. This was a terrible trick, a cruel lie. He was Tamaugua. He had come to realize that, to accept it. It had been that acceptance which had given him the strength to defy tradition and find a new path for himself. He couldn’t have been wrong. “I know in my heart that I am Tamaugua. I *feel* it.”

Tamaugua smiled gently. “Of course you do.”

“What do you mean?”

“From my point of view, you’re definitely not me. But from your point of view, you are. Like you said, you had all my memories, all my life experiences. They were continuous with your own. You even have the same body. So through my eyes, I stopped living when the old one killed me. But through your eyes, there was no interruption.”

A horrible suspicion had been gradually settling over the ghost eater. He tried desperately to fight it, but it was hard. How could you prove your own identity? He would feel the same way inside, whichever version was true. If he wasn’t the same spirit which had been born into the body, Tamaugua’s memories would still have shaped him into a copy of the one who had died—a ghost eater who felt the same, thought the same, but in the end was nothing but an imitation.

“Not quite,” Tamaugua said, as if he had heard the ghost eater’s thoughts. “You aren’t an imitation. You’re *you*. I would never have been able to do the things you’ve done. Too lazy and self-absorbed, I guess. You possess a strength that I never had.”

The ghost eater looked around him, at the bonfires and the dancing figures. There was no reason for Rabbit to trick him. This was truly the Darkening Land, just as he had seen it before, when Little Deer had brought him to speak to Gwendith’s daughter. And if that was true, then the rest was as well. The spirit talking to him was Tamaugua, whether he wanted to deny it or not. Despair filled him, and he sank slowly to his knees, cradling his head in his hands. “Then I am nothing.”

“But does it really matter who you are?” Tamaugua asked softly from somewhere above him. “As I said, from your point of view, you are me. You still have a brother’s

love for Tihune and Sihun. You still care for family and friends. Those emotions aren't any less real than mine were."

"But I'm not you. I'm not the one they loved."

"As far as they're concerned, you might as well be."

"But I'm not. I'm *not*. I'm the *bhargha*. I have no kin. No friends."

Tamaugua sighed impatiently. "Listen to what I'm telling you. It doesn't matter! *You feel everything I felt; you remember everything I remembered.* It doesn't matter if I think you're not me. It only matters that you think you are."

"I don't understand."

"You carry all of my feelings, my needs, my regrets. *All* ghost eaters remember and feel their former lives the way you do. They all *feel* like the person whose body they ended up with. They all *are* that person, so far as they're concerned."

The ghost eater closed his eyes in despair. "Everything I believed, everything I thought I knew...was a lie. This is horrible."

"Look beyond that, ghost eater. I'm trying to tell you something here. Feel with your heart, and don't invalidate what you feel. Reach out with love, and let those you love reach back."

The ghost eater shook his head. "You aren't making any sense."

A soft breeze touched his hand. He looked up wearily and saw the young girl from his previous vision standing by him. She laid her fingers lightly on his hair. "Mama loves you," she said, as if reminding him.

Grief devoured him. "No, Caitlin. What your mother loves is nothing more than a shadow."

"That's not true. Mama loves *you*."

Tamaugua nodded. "If you can't believe in your memories from before the time you were made, then at least try to believe in the ones that came after. You made those memories yourself. They are yours, and nothing can take that from you. Trust in that, if all else fails."

The light of the bonfires faded. The faces of the two ghosts lingered a moment, then disappeared into darkness. The ghost eater stood alone, in a featureless blackness that seemed to belong to neither the land of the dead, nor of the living. He

could feel his body pulling at him. In another moment, he would be back in it, marching along in the company of the Rhyllachan ghost eaters. His fellow shadows.

*My fellow shadows.* If nothing else, the memories he had inherited from Tamaugua had prepared him somewhat for becoming a ghost eater. The others had not even gotten that from those whose bodies they had awakened in. They had received only confusion and fear.

No, that wasn't quite right. They must have gotten something else as well. They must have loves and feelings, just as he did. Somewhere under all that churning terror, there were still echoes of lovers, of friends, of kin. If they had been released into the world under more normal circumstances, surely they would have returned to homes and families, to the embrace of those they cared for. Cared for, even if they weren't precisely the same people they had been.

The edge of an idea stirred in his mind.

His body grew heavier and heavier. Darkness lifted, and he found himself marching through a narrow defile, the miners all around him. In another instant, the chaos of their thoughts slammed into him, like a burst of white water overturning a canoe. Desperately he tried to cling to his idea, felt it slipping from him, fading beneath the raw power of terror and hunger.

*"Mama loves you."*

*"If you can't believe in your memories from before the time you were made, then at least try to believe in the ones that came after.... Trust in that, if all else fails."*

*Gwendith!* he thought desperately, clinging to the memory of her laugh, her hair, her face. *GWENDITH!*

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It was over. They had taken a desperate gamble, and they had lost. Nothing else remained.

Tears of frustration blurred Gwendith's eyes. She stumbled to the edge of the cleft, staring down at the Devourer. The figures were clear, if small with distance, and her eyes automatically picked out the ghost eater from their midst. Her heart clenched

painfully. Talys' death meant that he would survive...but what sort of survival would it be? He would never have wanted this.

Sihun stepped to the edge beside her. "We have to go back to Bird Creek Town. Send out runners to the other towns and tell them to flee."

"Flee where?" Stands-in-Smoke asked bitterly.

Sihun bowed her head. "I don't know. I don't know."

"There's another way," said an unfamiliar voice, hoarse and grating as the hinge on an unused door.

Gwendith looked about in bewilderment. No unexpected faces met her gaze. Everyone else seemed equally confused.

No Tongue cleared his throat. "I said, there might be another way."

"N-No Tongue?" Stands-in-Smoke gasped. "You spoke?"

No Tongue swallowed, as if words scraped his throat raw. "I can hear...the Devourer. It hurts. There's something different now, another note." He shook his head, frustrated by the inadequacy of what he was trying to explain. "Let me show you."

He took Gwendith's hand, fixing his dark eyes on her face. For an instant, nothing happened. Then she heard a faint sound, like the murmur of a crowd. Louder and louder it grew, until she could distinguish individual shouts and screams, the crying of the damned in hell. Images came with the sounds—visions of falling rock, physical sensations of pain. She swayed at the shock of it, felt No Tongue grab her shoulder to steady her. "Is that the Devourer?"

"Yes. Listen."

She listened, straining to pick out anything other than pain and terror. Something faint and fragile ran along beneath it, at first nothing more than a desperate sensation of need, of love. Then she heard her own name being called.

"It's him!" she grabbed No Tongue in excitement. "The ghost eater! He's still in there somewhere!"

No Tongue closed his eyes, as if to concentrate harder. The thread of the ghost eater's thoughts became clearer to Gwendith. They were all memories of love, of warmth: herself, Tihune, Sihun, Johann, Stands-in-Smoke, and No Tongue. Friends, family, lover. Faint ripples spread out through the torrent of the Devourer's madness

where the ghost eater's thoughts touched, sparking alien memories: *Carolyn? Alyssa? Gwidyon?* The echoes were weak, almost lost beneath the hunger and fear, but they were there.

"They hear him," Gwendith murmured, thinking hard. "He's turned some of their thoughts to something other than the horror of what's happened to them. Do you think if we could somehow remind them of what they were, it might calm them down? Get the Devourer to stop, at least for a little while?"

"I think we can do more than that." No Tongue glanced at Stands-in-Smoke and Johann. "We'll need the help of both of you."

They moved down the slope as quickly as they could, heading for the entrance to the cleft where the Devourer milled and churned. Since Tihune's death, its pace had slowed once again, and it was possible to get ahead of it. Once they were there, No Tongue took Gwendith's hand again. The screams and babble of the Devourer closed around her, underlain by the softer song of the ghost eater's thoughts.

She sensed No Tongue reach out with his mind, an unsettling movement for which she had no analogy. He found the thread of the ghost eater's thoughts, latched onto it hard. "Now," he whispered out loud. "Respond to him, Gwendith. Think about him."

"What should I think about?"

"Anything! Just make sure it's positive."

That wasn't difficult. She summoned up all her memories of him: talking together on the road, laughing at Rowe's house, making love under the moon. No Tongue was a bridge between them, feeding memories back and forth, amplifying them and turning them from a whisper to a shout.

The impact within the Devourer was greater than before. The shrieking madness faltered, and then began to give way to a terrible, aching loneliness. The Devourer itself stumbled and ground to a halt, its incessant hunger giving way to something else.

No Tongue whimpered faintly but held fast. She felt him sort through the voices like a weaver sorting threads. He picked the strongest, let it flow into them for a moment. Gwendith caught images of a young woman, her belly swollen with pregnancy,



sitting close to a hearth. A needle flashed in the light as she contentedly sewed clothing for their unborn child.

No Tongue took the images, flung them back at the mind they had come from, and strengthened them until they blotted out all else. Gwendith saw one of the dead miners turn his head, as if looking for someone.

“Now, Johann,” No tongue whispered.

Stands-in-Smoke’s form wavered and disappeared, covered over by an illusion that mimicked the form of the young woman in the miner’s memories.

*Your love is here*, No Tongue said to the man. *The baby’s with her. A healthy boy.*

“C-Carolyn?” the man called uncertainly. He staggered forwards suddenly, to the edge of the coruscating *bhargha*, then through it. Part of it came with him, dragged free until it formed the brilliant halo of a normal ghost eater. Under the guise of the dead man’s wife, Stands-in-Smoke lifted her arms as if in greeting. As he stumbled into her embrace, fire flared on her hands, a white-hot blaze Gwendith had never seen her use before. The man’s hair and clothes ignited, and he began to scream. Within moments, Stands-in-Smoke’s unnatural fire had reduced him to a soft pile of ashes.

“That’s one,” she said shakily.

Again and again they repeated their actions. Gwendith and the ghost eater served as anchors, keeping the Devourer still, diverting the rest of the miners away from hysteria. No Tongue isolated each man, listened to his thoughts, and told him the cruel lie, that the nightmare was over. Johann used the images No Tongue gave him to form the illusion that bolstered the lie, luring the men to Stands-in-Smoke, who then incinerated each miner as soon as he came within reach.

The Devourer shrank with each loss, from a holocaust of hunger to a blaze, to a banked campfire. Morning waxed to afternoon, which waned to evening. Gwendith could feel No Tongue’s growing exhaustion, could see the lines of strain scoring Stands-in-Smoke’s face, could see how Johann’s hands had begun to shake.

Then, suddenly, it was over. The last miner died writhing in flames, the name of his young son on his lips. Stands-in-Smoke crumpled, but a nearby warrior caught her. No Tongue groaned softly, leaning his head against a tree as if it hurt him. Johann sat

down hard, breath coming in painful gasps. Gwendith looked frantically for the ghost eater and saw him standing alone amidst the barren ruin of the Devourer's track. For an instant, his gaze met hers. Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed into a heap.

She ran to his side. He moaned softly when she touched him. "Ghost eater? Are you all right?"

He looked up at her, his eyes haunted. He came to his knees, wrapped his arms around her waist with sudden desperation, and hid his face against her belly. She brushed his hair back with her hands, making soft sounds of reassurance. "It's all right. It's over. You're safe." She raised her head, looking at the ring of tired faces. "We did it."

Sihun seemed shocked. "You're right. We did." She laughed suddenly, then let out a wild war whoop. Everyone who still had the strength joined in.

The ghost eater stumbled to his feet, leaning heavily on Gwendith. "I'll be all right," he said at her concerned look. "Just let me get my bearings. I—"

He stopped, the blood draining from his face. Gwendith turned to discover the other five ghost eaters making their way across the barren land towards them. They halted a short distance away. The slanting light of sunset sent their shadows reaching out before them, like the fingers of a giant hand.

"You did well," the eldest said, his eyes enigmatic.

The ghost eater bowed his head. "Thank you, eldest."

"If you had not broken with tradition, this would not have been possible."

"No. No, it wouldn't have."

"We know now why the animals showed you what they did. So that you could destroy the Devourer. But now that your purpose is finished, you must surrender yourself to the flames, as you agreed."

"What? Are you insane?" Gwendith tightened her grip on the ghost eater. "He just helped save the lives of everyone in these mountains, maybe everyone in this world! And you want to repay that by killing him?"

The eldest gave her a look of pity. "We are all very grateful. But the question was always whether or not your ghost eater had been chosen to change the traditions of all

our kind, or only to fulfill a specific purpose related to this war. That question has been answered.”

The ghost eater straightened, gently pulling free of Gwendith’s grasp. “Can’t I have just a little more time?” he asked wistfully. “To say good-bye?”

The eldest shook his head. “It’s better this way.”

Gwendith pulled her saber from its sheath and placed herself squarely between the ghost eater and the rest. “Just try it,” she hissed from between clenched teeth. “I’ll bet having your head lopped off will give even a ghost eater pause, don’t you?”

The eldest pursed his lips in annoyance. “You’re only making things more difficult for everyone, Gwendith. We are not acting out of malice. But this thing must be done. The decision has been made.”

“Look!” shouted Sihun, pointing towards the peak above them.

A white stag stood there, silhouetted against the rising moon. He leapt gracefully from his perch, hooves barely touching the earth, until he had reached the floor of the cleft. A moment later, a tiny owl glided down and landed on his antlers. Other animals came, from the air or the forest: Vulture, Rabbit, Cougar, Possum, Raccoon, Beaver, Wolf, Woodpecker, Humming Bird, and others too numerous to name. In eerie silence they drew close, forming a loose ring around Gwendith and the ghost eater.

The white deer fixed a black eye on the eldest. “When your kind first came to this world,” Little Deer said gravely, “we helped you. Showed you how to move in the world. We taught you hunt-chants, gave you fire, showed you everything you needed to know.”

The eldest nodded respectfully. “That is so, Granduncle.”

“So now we give you this great gift, and you spurn it?” Little Deer snorted, his breath puffing visibly even in the warm air. “Think twice before you do so, little ghost eater. It is dangerous to offend the spirits.”

And then they were gone, leaving the humans alone on the blasted rock. The eldest looked taken aback. But Gwendith smiled. No one, not even ghost eaters, could argue with spirits.

“It seems our decision was a poor one,” the eldest said at last. He turned to the other ghost eaters and beckoned to them. “We will speak on what this means for us all.”

He paused, then glanced back to where Gwendith and the ghost eater stood. "I would like your opinion, if you will give it."

The ghost eater nodded. "I will. You can find me at Bird Creek Town."

The other ghost eaters turned away and began the arduous climb back to the path that would take them elsewhere.

Gwendith looked uncertainly down at the ghost eater. "Um, does this mean we won?"

He grinned suddenly, pulling her close for a kiss. "Yes."

## ***CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR***

The ghost eater stood in the square ground of Bird Creek Town. The first birds sang in the trees, greeting the sun as she left her house in the Sun Land. Dew bowed the grasses and small flowers. Far below, the river gleamed gold in the first light.

“Must you go?” Sihun asked wistfully. “Can’t you stay at least a little while longer?”

The ghost eater shook his head regretfully. “I can’t, Sihun. Gwendith and Johann are determined to go. And I...I think I need to leave, for my own sake as well as theirs. I have to find out who I am.”

The moon had showed them half of his faces since the destruction of the Devourer. Runners had gone out to the other towns, telling them the good news. Those who had fled Bird Creek Town returned, and most of the warriors who had come from other towns went home again. A great conclave of all the Ahkan’i ghost eaters had been called high on the peaks, far away from the living. Many of the old ones would go into the fire soon, unable or unwilling to accept the radical changes that would soon take place. Exactly what the limits of those changes would be remained undecided for now. It would be up to young ones like the Corn Grows Tall ghost eater to find the new path.

The ghost eater had told them all what he had seen before the last, in the Darkening Land. And he had told his friends among the living as well, unable to be less than honest with them. Some had suggested that the meeting with Tamaugua had been nothing more than a hallucination brought on by the Devourer’s madness. The explanation was tempting, but in his heart he knew that they were wrong.

“I know who you are,” Sihun said softly. He put his arms around the ghost eater in a strong hug, then lingered a moment with their foreheads pressed together. “You’re my friend, now and forever.”

“And you are mine.”

The ghost eater watched him stride away, feeling bereft. So many had been lost that even a temporary separation seemed almost unbearable. He looked up towards the

dead trees that marked the Crow House. Tihune lay there now, along with Une-ti and Jilhe and too many others. In the end, the brother he had always loved and admired had been restored, even if it was only to die with courage.

He sighed and turned back to see that Gwendith and the rest had almost finished securing their things to the saddles of their horses. Some of the animals had made their way back to Bird Creek Town after being released during the race against the Devourer. Others had come from surplus mounts at the soldiers' camp.

They had gone in force to the Rhylachan camp and informed the few remaining soldiers that Talys was dead, but the Devourer destroyed. The lieutenant in charge had looked deeply grieved, but had quickly set about gathering up her remaining force and preparing them for the long march home. Gwendith had seized possession of Talys' tent, taking all his books and notes lest someone else find them and fail to learn from the colonel's disastrous example. During her search, she had come across a small iron box, carefully locked. Once the lock had been pried off, she found inside a thick sheaf of papers. She'd read them aloud to the ghost eater, her voice shaking as she did so. Apparently, they were field reports sent to Talys from his followers who had remained behind in New Rhylach. They detailed an outbreak of Ways that gradually avalanched into general chaos. New Rhylach was in a state of complete collapse.

The news had made Johann frantic with fear for Rowe's safety, and it had been everything they could do to prevent him from rushing off immediately without a plan or provisions. So it was no surprise to the ghost eater when Gwendith had come to him the next day.

"I have to leave," she'd said. She had taken his hands in her own, staring at them as if afraid to meet his gaze. "I love you, and I don't want to be apart from you. But there are people—my people—who are in trouble. Some of them are probably not very good people. But there are more who are like Rowe. Like Caitlin. They need someone to teach them, the way that you taught me." Her mouth quirked slightly. "It's funny. Talys wanted natives and Rhylachans to become one people. But instead of you becoming like us, we're going to have to become more like you."

He'd kissed her softly. "I understand that you have to go. I'll come with you."

They weren't the only ones going. Johann could not have been prevented, of course, but Stands-in-Smoke had also volunteered to join them. She worried about her own people and hoped to find them once again. A man of the Moss Clan, who had lingered near her even after his friends went back to White Cat Town, immediately declared that he would make the trip as well. Ten other young warriors, all eager for a glimpse of the world outside the mountains, would also travel with them.

The ghost eater went to his own horse, the same one that had brought him to the mountains in the first place, and swung into the saddle with a barely-suppressed sigh of resignation. No Tongue, closely accompanied by A'na, came to stand by the animal.

"Good-bye," No Tongue said. His voice had not quite lost its disused character. But his eyes were clear and untroubled, as they had not been when the ghost eater had first met him. His hair was starting to grow out a little, but it would still be some years before it reached a respectable length for an Ahkan'i. From the way A'na talked with No Tongue until late into the night, the ghost eater suspected that their first child would be born by then.

"We'll be back," the ghost eater replied, reaching down to clasp No Tongue's arm.

"Good luck, my friend." No Tongue returned the gesture, then stepped away.

Gwendith reined her horse around so that her knee bumped the ghost eater's. She had found a new hat; it hung down her back for now, letting the early light spark gold out of her honey-colored hair. "Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

Together, they rode away down the mountainside.

**THE END**