

Sacrifice

The canyons were death-dry, crevasses splitting the desert's chapped lips, ancient, cracked and bleached. The path wound between enormous fins of rock, reaching resolutely into the sky. In the shade of the bluffs, the morning chill still lingered.

Jarek's fingers ached. The wooden cage in his hands was heavy, and he'd been carrying it for what felt like hours. He glanced through the meshed hole in the top. One of the fat temple cats sat inside, glowering, paws splayed out for balance as the cage jostled.

The path was only an armspan wide. The cliffs on either side were rough and striated, layers of red and grey and tan pressed thin and stacked tall. In front of him walked another one of the temple slaves, carrying a larger cage, carefully picking through rubble on the path. The cloth wrappings of his robe, a dark maroon, looked cleaner than Jarek's own, and the thick iron collar around his neck gleamed.

Jarek's foot slammed into a bit of rubble on the path, and he stumbled and fell, dropping the cage. The cat yowled. He caught his fall on his hands, scraping them painfully.

Behind him, there was a hissed imprecation. A thin metal rod whistled through the air, and a line of pain burned across his shoulders. He cringed and pushed himself up, grabbed the cage, and jogged forward to catch up the line.

The space was claustrophobic. The robe shuffling in front of him, the threatening presence of the priest behind him. Perfectly vertical faces on either side, stretching up to the tiny crack of sky above. He looked into the cage. The cat glared up at him. He frowned back.

The path widened, and climbed steeply, up to a rough, lopsided stone arch. The procession filed through it. As Jarek walked through, he paused for a breath, looking around.

The arch opened into a natural amphitheatre. It was enormous, a huge bowl full of desert scrub, cradled by rock formations hundreds of feet high. They jutted into the air, their spires like huge fingers, or phalluses, striped and bulbous and wind-scoured. The procession filed to the right, following the path, which curved around the edge of the basin, clinging to the feet of the cliff wall.

Jarek turned and walked. The sun beat down here, with nothing to block it, and he was grateful for the cloth wrappings around his head.

After fifteen minutes, they came to a flat area, fifty strides across, cleared of brush, sitting at the base of a curve of cliff. Harsh, slashing carvings, cut deep into the rock, stretched across the cliff, from its base to its distant apex. There were shapes like giant

interlocking spiders, an image of a bird's skull, strange geometric patterns taller than ten men. They seemed to ripple as Jarek looked at them.

The slaves in front of him were filing up to a stone structure in the middle of the clearing. He followed. It was a raised stone dais, a step above the ground, with a greying wooden arch in the middle. Many ropes were tied to the arch, and hung limply to the ground. The other slaves were placing their cages in a line across the edge of the dais closest to the cliff face. He followed suit, placing his cage at the end of the line. The cat inside stared at him balefully.

He followed the line into the crowd that was gathering in front of the structure. Forty or fifty people, most of them with the iron collars of slaves, a few with the more intricate robes of the priests and acolytes of the temple. Some stood and talked quietly in small groups. Others simply gazed up at the dais and the carvings on the cliff behind it. Jarek spotted Adhan standing at the edge of the crowd and walked over.

Adhan was much taller than him, and her skin was a deep brown, almost black. Intricate patterns of raised dots - scar tissue - danced across her face. The collar around her neck was rusty. She stared impassively at him as he approached, then pulled a waterskin from her robe and handed it to him. He drank gratefully.

In the days after the temple had bought him from the slaving band, a few weeks ago, the temple acolytes had hit him often. They would spit commands at him, in their guttural, clicking language, and then hit him when he didn't understand. Adhan had attempted to teach him some of the words, exasperated, and he had followed her like a puppy ever since.

He spoke a word, a sloshing sound and a tick from the tip of his tongue. He was fairly sure it meant "chore". He made it a question.

She said something, quickly. He stared at her. She stared back, and then spoke a single syllable, which he understood. "No."

"No chore?"

"No. Rest."

He nodded, and peered around. The last of the line was filing into the clearing, priests and acolytes. A few soldiers, with their spears and odd, ever-present masks in the shape of hooked metal beaks, were escorting a man with bound hands, wearing only a loincloth, and a bag over his head. His skin was an angry red, burnt by the sun. He stumbled at the base of the stone dais. He stepped up, and the soldiers led him to the wooden arch. They pulled his bound hands over his head, and began tying the hanging ropes to him, facing away from the crowd, towards the empty half of the clearing and the carved cliff face.

He muttered something. One of the soldiers prodded him with the butt of a spear. He spoke again, louder. A susurrations ran through the crowd at whatever he said. A soldier hit him from behind. He fell forward, hanging limp on the ropes, and began shouting, raving, screaming. Three soldiers wrestled him still and tied more ropes around his hands and feet and neck, fastening them with knots. One of them pulled the bag from his head.

Acolytes were wandering the crowd, barking instructions. Slaves listening were turning away from the dais and going into supplicating poses on the ground, bowing, their

faces pressed to the earth, facing the scrubland in the basin. Adhan looked around, then grabbed his hair, and forced him to the ground, into a pose matching the crowd. He made a noise of pain. She hissed back, "Quiet. Stay."

He frowned into the ground. She didn't need to be so rough. He whispered back, "Yes. Stay."

The murmur of the crowd quieted. Eventually, the shouting of the condemned man was the only sound.

It was hot in Jarek's robe, and dark, with his face pressed to his hands on the ground. The scrapes on his palms burned. The dry dust of the desert ground he'd disturbed stung his eyes. He closed them, and waited.

Jarek's knees hurt. He imagined he could feel the heat of the sun slowly crawling across his back. He suspected he might have dozed, and hoped that the ceremony would be over soon. The condemned had quieted hours ago.

He heard something. A distant sound, barely audible over the wind.

whumph.

Like an enormous sheet being beaten against the ground, miles away.

whumph. whumph.

Or maybe the wingbeat of some enormous bird.

whumph. whumph.

He heard a quiet sobbing, coming from the wooden arch behind him. The distant noise slowly grew louder.

whumph. whumph. whumph. whumph.

Looking at the darkness of his closed eyes, Jarek felt almost alone. The crowd was silent. The only sounds were wind, the distant raving, and the nearing drumbeat. It was getting quite loud, now.

WHUMPH. WHUMPH.

Extremely loud, echoing in the canyons. There were accompanying noises, too. Creaks like un-oiled leather, rasps like a knife against a sharpening stone, all beating together in an enormous, patterned heartbeat. The dogs in some of the cages started barking.

Then there was a mighty crash, from behind him. Jarek felt the ground shake. A cacophony of metallic rasps, a grinding of stone against stone.

Silence. The man and the caged animals were quiet. There was only the whistling of the winds in the crags.

A sound like someone tuning a stringed instrument - stilted pings, deep, increasing in pitch - and leather creaking, slithering.

Silence.

The sound of stone shifting. A crash that shook the ground. More shifting. Another crash.

Mighty footsteps, approaching the dais from behind.

They stopped.

The condemned man seemed to find his voice. He screamed, a breathy, panicked sound. The dogs began barking frantically, the cats yowling and hissing. There was a rumble, and a sound like ripping cloth, except wetter. Again. One by one, the chorus of animals was silenced, with awful, biological sounds. The man hurled curses at whatever was standing there, working its way down the line, towards him.

Jarek found himself shaking. There was a strained, quivering silence.

Then a sharp crack rang out - like biting into a nut. More cracking sounds, wetter, like the snapping of rotten wood.

The noise grew quieter.

There were occasional rumbles. More cracks, sawing sounds. Sounds like meat being sliced.

The smell of blood drifted on the wind.

After a time - a quarter of an hour, perhaps - there was, again, silence. Then, rumbling sounds, rasping sounds, more pings and clicks. A mighty *WHUMPH*. Jarek felt a gust of air buffet him.

The wingbeat slowly receded, out of the amphitheatre, into the distance.

After a time, Jarek heard a shouted command from one of the priests. Adhan gripped his arm and pulled him up. The crowd was standing, turning to face the platform.

One of the priests, in his rich white robes, was standing at one corner of the dais, facing the cliffs, shouting some sort of prayer at the sky. The other priests and acolytes shouted along with him.

Beyond him, hanging from the wooden frame, the condemned man was changed.

The man looked dirty, emaciated. Jarek could see the man's ribs through the skin of his chest.

Jarek could see the man's ribs, emerging through the skin of his chest, bent like the legs of a scorpion around his sternum.

Bony shapes protruded all over his body. Ivory hooks as long as Jarek's forearm protruded from the man's knees, elbows, and shoulders. Blossoms of ivory thorns emerged from the man's temples. They were stained with crimson at the base. The tips of many of the protrusions were woven together with taut strands of crimson rope, maybe tendon. Sheets of blood dripped down his body. Parts of the man's body had stony, heavy-looking shells covering them. Many strands of tendon emerged from humps mounted on his hips. The humps looked like snail shells.

The man's nose and mouth had been replaced with a beak, white and crimson, with holes in the sides.

Jarek realized with a start that he could see the man's chest moving. He glanced at Adhan. She wore her usual, distant expression, staring at the ground at her feet.

He looked back at the stage. The priest had paced to the line of cages. He reached into the box that Jarek had carried from the temple, and pulled something out. It looked like a twisted slab of raw meat. The priest brought it to his lips and tore away a strip of flesh, chewed and swallowed. Blood stained the front of his white robe. A cheer rose from the priesthood.

Jarek grimaced, and looked down, staring at his feet. The sermon continued.

After a time, the priests barked orders, and the slaves lined back up to pick up the cages. Jarek glanced at the condemned man as they passed. He didn't seem to be breathing anymore.

When Jarek picked up his box, he glanced in. It was full of blood and entrails, and smelled awful, like blood and shit. He covered his mouth and wretched. One of the priests standing nearby, a huge man, bulging out of his robe, chuckled something unpleasant. His jowls jiggled. Then, he smacked Jarek with the back of his hand. Jarek swallowed, and picked the cage of gore up, then followed the line of slaves ahead of him, walking out of the valley.

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