

Prologue

Running through the jungle had never been a problem. Usually though, when she nimbly and quickly darted through the foliage, it was to escape a predator. Most of the time, the predator was also standing on two legs.

This time, however, if her heart was hammering against her ribs, if her breath was ragged, if her bare feet were pounding the damp moss of the forest, it wasn't because she feared for her life, but because she feared for someone else's.

Four days. He should've been back for four days. It wasn't unusual for a Reaper to disappear for a while. It wasn't as if they could predict when they were going to slaughter their game and thus predict when, exactly, they'd be back, safely, under the Dome. But Mehdi's mother had turned forty-eight five days earlier. Her son had sworn that, game or not in his bag, he would be there to watch her blow her candles.

But he never came back.

She knew him better than anyone, maybe even, in some ways, better than his parents. He was her best friend, her one and only friend, in fact, if she was being honest. He was one of the few reasons she had to smile, one of the only people who called her by her real name.

And if she was to be even more honest, she had to admit that her feelings went beyond friendship. He had implied that it was the same for him.

"I have something to ask you."

She shook off her fear. She had to stay focused. Mehdi could be late for any number of reasons that were beyond his control, but not necessarily dramatic. There were four other Reapers combing the jungle, in a wide line to cover as much ground as possible. They knew he had gone hunting in this area. Before leaving the Dome, each Reaper would inform the other ones of his departure and tell them where he was going, to avoid occupying the same territory. They also would know where to look in case of a problem. Their job made them solitary beings, unable to share the dangers of their hunting ground with anyone else. Like her, though, Mehdi loved this aspect of their livelihood. He was not as solitary as she was, not as withdrawn, but she often thought that they had more in common than one might guess at first.

She quickened her stride again, unable to regulate neither her heartbeat nor her anxiety, and gave up entirely. This mission was trying for her nerves; indeed, for once she was involved. It was rare enough to have to go looking for a missing Reaper. Her pears were trained to be

cautious, to escape death as efficiently as water flows through your fingers. They had all mastered the subtle art of surviving when everything, absolutely *everything* around them was trying to kill them. So, embarking on a rescue mission was stressful enough in itself because of its unusualness and it was - she didn't like to think about it - rather desperate. The fact that the missing Reaper was her one and only friend, the man she secretly loved made the task even more agonizing.

The silent around her was deafening. The jungle seemed to hold its breath. Was it afraid that she would find Mehdi alive? That she would save one of nature's most hated beings from a trap it had thrust upon him? Or did she feel pity for once, dreading her reaction when she'd come upon...

No !

She shook her head, determined. No. The jungle was merciless. It had to be afraid that Mehdi would be rescued. Which could only mean one thing: he *was* alive. She would find him.

She wished she could whistle, to let him know she was in the huge, wet forest, that she was on her way to rescue him... but it was too risky. An ekomer might already be lurking around. Putting in danger the other members of the rescue party was definitely not a good idea. There were already so few of them...

She suddenly froze. Something in the atmosphere had changed. Like when a cloud passed in front of the sun and deprived the Earth of its warm rays. She knew the feeling. Her sixth sense had never deceived her.

She took one step forward, then two. Her mind was screaming at her to turn around, to call another Reaper, to ask him to come and see the evidence for himself, but her legs refused to obey. Eyes wide with horror and despair, she saw the bloody flap of cloth appear behind a grove. A shirt sleeve. Shredded.

Not as much, however, as the body it normally covered.

She brought a hand to her mouth to hold back the sob that escaped her, without being able to detach her eyes from the macabre scene that she had just discovered. One by one, her hopes were dashed.

~~*Mehdi's alive, he just had an impediment.*~~

~~*Mehdi's strong and clever, he would not be fooled so easily.*~~

~~*Mehdi will come back to the Dome and hug me.*~~

~~*Mehdi is going to confess his love to me.*~~

She collapsed to her knees, hiccupping, unable to stem the torrent of violent emotions that flowed through her. She looked away from the corpse. The sentence, that horrible sentence she had forbidden herself to think about, viciously made its way into her rational mind. Her heart withered, her sobs redoubled.

Mehdi's dead.

I slip silently between the large leaves of the bomber trees. The trees of this stifling jungle are of no help to cool me down. They drip with all this suffocating humidity and keep the thick mist under their foliage, like a greenhouse. We call them bomber trees because their fruits, round and as big as two fists, grow at their top and then tend to fall without warning. They explode like a bomb when they hit the spongy ground. Although I am not familiar with the concept of a "bomb", the Elders have often described the damage caused by this evil invention. Well, our bomber trees aren't very dangerous, but having once been covered in the foul-smelling juices of one of them, I can assure you that the name fits them like a glove.

I stop for a moment, my back leaning against one of these mastodons. It protests slightly by rustling its foliage, but calms down eventually. The leaves of the bomber trees, as big and wide as me, almost touch the ground and go up to fifty feet high. Lianas, particularly aggressive today, cover their soft trunks. They all spread out of my way, hissing, and one of them even tries to whip me. I barely dodge and swear through my gritted teeth. They usually just brush my shoulder or hair with curiosity. I wouldn't be surprised if a sulphurous storm was brewing: lightning tends to put everyone on edge.

I listen intently, my muscles tight, on the lookout. My breath is even, as calm as the beating of my heart. The jungle, usually vibrant with life, is now surprisingly silent. The bomber trees particularly worry me. Normally, their branches and trunks creak nastily when I pass by them. Occasionally they even bombard me in unison, hoping to hit me with one of their fruits. Unfortunately for them, it has been a long time since anything or anyone has managed to hit me. Plus, bomber trees are really dangerous when one of their ekomers is around and orders them to attack. In these cases, I better be dexterous. One day when I was running away, a tree fell on me. I only survived because of a hole in the ground where I could take refuge. I promised myself that I would never be caught off-guard again. However, since I left the pile of rocks on which I slept, three hours earlier, they keep calm and silent. I don't know what is the meaning of this odd behavior, but I think caution is still in order.

Yet, no matter how much I scan the inhospitable jungle, using my sharpened hearing to detect danger, nothing seems out of the ordinary. I've been tracking this deerowl for two days now. I'm getting tired of chasing it, especially since I don't know this forest. It's beyond the Authorized Zone, outside the limits set by the Elders. I'm not allowed to go there, even to hunt. I'll be permanently expelled from the Dome if anyone finds out. Besides, since it's the first time

I've crossed this boundary, I'm likely to face an ekomer, but also new dangers. Once I've shot my game, the journey back to the dome will take me at least one day. I think an ekomer hunter is already on his way to flush me out and kill me. They always stalk their prey alone, but they are no less deadly. The moss must have sounded the alarm the instant my bare feet landed on it. It's the worst kind of tattletale: it passes on messages. Each of my strides betrays me, but I have no choice. I can't fly. It's probably because I'm being stalked that the forest is silent. The trees don't want me to run away. They are waiting for their time to go on the offensive. Or maybe these bomber trees are just curious. They have probably never seen men, and they observe me with fascination. Yesterday, they were agitated, disturbed by my presence, but not really aggressive. Today, I feel them rather attentive. On the other hand, the lianas do not seem to want to get used to me. And yet, they are the least mean-spirited plants I know. Usually, once they get used to my presence, they leave me alone, or tease me by poking my side playfully when I brush against them. Until an ekomer comes along and orders them to strangle me, of course.

In any case, I'd better be careful if I don't want to end up nailed to the ground by one of these predators' spears. Or eaten alive by one of the bloodthirsty creatures that roam around here.

I set off again, on the alert. I know that each of the ekomers they send to hunt me down dreams of being the Chosen One, the one who will succeed in putting my head on a spike. I am the biggest thorn in their side. I'm proud of that, by the way. I have walked every surface of the Authorized Zone, always successfully. I've already seriously injured one of them and I've only been flushed out three times in my life. All three times, I got away with scratches at worst, and without a single injury at best. I am the only Reaper who has ever managed to wound an ekomer.

This time, I feel that something is wrong. I even hesitate to return empty-handed, which has never happened to me. The villagers need me to eat. A deerowl could feed my kind for weeks. And I don't know if the other Reapers will return from their expedition with enough meat to sustain our community. I am the most talented of them and we are fewer and fewer to dare to leave the Dome.

I think of Mehdi and his corpse, which rest in the jungle. All I could bring back to his parents were his bloody clothes. I preferred to bury the rest; I don't think his mother would have been able to bear the sight of her son's body, especially in the state in which I discovered it. I doubt I'll ever recover.

Mehdi...

"I have something to ask you."

I shake my head to get him out of my thoughts. It hurts too much, way too much, and I can't let myself cry. I must stay focused.

What is certain is that his death has not helped the younger generation to take up the high-risk profession of Reaper... Today, there are only a handful of us who dare to cross the Dome barrier, and only two of the hunters have an apprentice. I'm afraid that in the end, no one will want to take over. You don't just become a Reaper, the training takes years. None of the villagers know what's going on in the wet jungle around our haven. They wouldn't survive two hours if they were left in the wild. And they all rely on us for food.

I don't have a choice: I must continue my hunt until I get what I want.

My stomach grumbles loudly as I walk deeper into unknown territory, taking extra care. No ekomer has ever used traps to catch us. They prefer to hunt down their prey themselves. I have to constantly remind myself that I have no choice to keep me from turning back, but I soon find the trail of my prey and am delighted to see that its footprints are fresh.

Suddenly, I perceive a slender form through the foliage in front of me.

Without a moment's hesitation, I notch an arrow and band my bow carved from a rabadger shin. My eyesight is quite poor, but I have learned not to rely only on the information my eyes give me. A kind of sixth sense has developed over the years and allows me to perceive with a formidable acuity all my surroundings. That's why my arrows never miss their target. I aim at its chest and release the string while exhaling. The line flies at full speed towards its target and a roar is heard immediately. The figure leaps, tries to flee, but collapses with a groan.

I pull a dagger from my belt and approach the wounded creature. When I can clearly see its shape, I can't help but smile. It's a deerowl, and a big one at that!

The deerowl often has three long branch-like antlers on its skull, on which grow innumerable red, delicious fruits. Jedda Elkaissa assures me that they taste like cherries, but I could neither confirm nor deny. She also says that the first Reapers named the genetically modified creatures after the animals that lived on earth before the aliens arrived. I am only familiar with said creatures and have never had the pleasure of meeting a deer or an owl.

The first time I saw a deerowl, I immediately thought of a deer, the huge animal that lived on Earth before the ekomers modified it to their liking. Of course, I had never seen one in real life, but I had already studied the sketches of the Elders, in the notebooks illustrating life before the Invasion. Perhaps the deerowl is a distant descendant of a deer, although it has lost most of its characteristics. The ekomers genetically altered the endemic species long ago, and our world will never return to the way it was in our ancestors' time.

The body of the male deer is covered with wet grass and you can often find edible mushrooms growing in its fur: I spot many on this one. Its antlers are bursting at the seams with fruit. Sometimes even small bushes of pink berries grow there. Its flesh is very tasty and nourishing: I am sure to harvest several tens of kilos. Its bone structure will allow me to renew my stock of arrows and to make a new bow. No doubt that my victim will offer me the best material. The bones of the deerowl are as flexible as they are strong, much more so than the rabbadger's bones I used for my current bow.

In any case, I'll have to finish it off as soon as possible, before its whining attracts too much attention. It struggles and splits the air with its hooves as it tries to get up. My arrow hit it in the abdomen, certainly in the liver. But the wound won't kill it quickly enough. The bomber trees, quiet until then, begin to shake and squeak. I think they've just realized that I'm not just here to hang out. The vines hiss more and more.

"We told you so! She's the enemy" they seem to spit as they try to hit me. One of them gets a little too close. I grab it quickly and slice it in half. I throw the piece that is still wriggling on the ground and glare at the others. This should serve as an example. They will stay at a respectable distance from now on.

I feel the moss quiver with horror under my bare feet. All the epiphytic flowers that adorn the trunks of the trees, until then open and spreading a greedy perfume, close in rustling fear. The colorful birds of the canopy fly away screaming.

I approach the deerowl and firmly grasp one of its antlers. I moisten my lips and get ready to perform my ritual. It's a habit I've never dared to admit to anyone, but one I don't break. I lower myself to its level and put a hand on its shoulder. It stands still and turns its eyes on me, eyes that look older than the world itself.

- I'm sorry, deerowl.

I cut its throat with a sharp movement. It collapses on the ground, lifeless.

I don't know if it's normal, but I always feel sad when I kill an animal. Even though I've been taught that it is inferior, that I'm not doing it for fun, that it will help us stay alive. Yet the guilt often takes several hours to evaporate.

I chase away my discomfort and start to collect what I'll need from the deerowl's body. I'll put the berries, mushrooms and fruits in my bag and carry the animal's meat in its fur, hoping to have time to take as much as possible.

A thud makes me jump, dagger in hand. I let out a cry of frustration. If it's an ekomer, I'll have no choice but to run. But it's not a hunter.

I'm not sure the new comer is better news though.

I'm facing a ferocious animal. A huge four-legged mammal, with turquoise fur mottled with dark blue, and a big, round head, topped by two pointed ears and a powerful jaw. Its mustachioed lips are raised on a row of small sparkling teeth. Two sharp incisors protrude from each side of its muzzle, like daggers. Its six eyes glint and stare at me with such intensity that I feel as if they will pierce me.

We named it Blue Tiger, after an ancient land animal. It is one of the most ferocious and dangerous predators of my time, especially the most aggressive. And it is lightning fast. If it tries to grab the carcass, I don't have much of a chance to fight it off.

The three tips of its long tabby tail wag gently and I see its enormous clawed paws kneading the ground. Its fluffy fur, dotted with little indigo flowers, is bristling on his back, forming a ridge of hair as long as my hand. Slime flows from its powerful jaws.

I remain in a defensive position, as intimidating as possible. Even standing, I don't overtake the animal. I show my teeth.

- Easy, Bonnie. It's me.

The beast gathers on itself, so I stamp my foot and project myself forward. I swing the dagger under its nose and the blue tigress leaps back, feinting. I know I have the upper hand, for now.

- Back off! Remember what happened to you the first time! Don't make me finish the job.

It stares at me for a few seconds, panting, its lips curling up at regular intervals. Then it lies down eight feet away from me and starts to lick a paw.

Urgh, felines...

The first time I met Bonnie, I thought I would faint from fear. I only survived because of my acute instinct. I later realized that she had been following me for a while, probably wondering what kind of bug I was and especially what I might taste like. She came sneakily from behind, as silent as death itself. I had just shot a rabbladger and she probably figured this hunt would be a bonus one: no effort required and two prey for the price of one. The perfect plan.

Except that I turned around just as she jumped on me. I stabbed her in the shoulder and she ran away, screaming. Since then, she has developed a certain fear of humans, or at least of me, and until she realizes that it was just a freakish stroke of luck, I will have the upper hand. I had

almost hoped that her wound would be fatal, but I had left some meat on the rabadger anyway, just in case. I think that was my mistake. Now, it is not uncommon for me to see her appear at the end of a hunt. At least she doesn't attack from behind anymore. I felt compelled to give her a name. Bonnie, as in Bonnie and Clyde. According to the legend, the woman was a ruthless criminal. I think it suits her quite well.

I position myself in front of her and start to pick up everything I can. I watch her from the corner of my eye. She doesn't give me a single glance, too busy grooming herself.

Nasty beast.

It takes me forever to collect the meat and fruit, but once I have filled the deerowl's fur and hoisted it onto my shoulder, I understand that the journey home is going to be very long. There must be at least one hundred pounds of meat in my improvised bag and I only took the best pieces. It makes me sick to give up so much fresh meat on my prey, but I am not a donkey. I can't use a sled either, too cumbersome in this uneven jungle.

I look up at Bonnie. She's still lying down, but this time she's staring at me while licking her lips. I can't help but smile.

- Enjoy your meal, my friend. Don't stain your pretty fur.

I move backwards and she stalks at the same time towards the carcass. She savagely attacks it with appetite and it's only when I know that she's too busy stuffing herself to pursue me that I allow myself to turn my back.

The journey back seems interminable. When I manage to leave the jungle and reach the pile of stones on which I slept the night before, I feel like I might collapse from exhaustion. My shelter is situated in the middle of a huge swampy clearing, full of crickediles holes. I better be extra careful not to fall into one of them or else I'll be eaten alive.

I've walked for five hours with my load, two hours more than before. I was forced to stop many times to catch breathe. The meat I'm carrying is sucking up my energy at the speed of light. If I am attacked by an ekomer in my present state of exhaustion, I don't give much for my chances to survive it. However, I did not see any trace of the hunter. This is a very strange situation. I killed one of its protégés, broke into its forest, attacked one of its creepers... if it's around, it shouldn't hesitate to attack me. It's not that I mind the lack of immediate danger, far from it, but not having an enemy coming at me doesn't mean I'm safe. Well, I have to admit that I don't get flushed out very often: I've learned to mask my scent, and to never linger in the same place when I'm in the jungle. I know the language of plants. They always give themselves away when one of their masters is getting close: the forest begins to buzz with an excited, evil joy. Or, on the contrary, it holds its breath. When this happens, I don't ponder. I run at breaking-

neck speed. The three times I've had to face an ekomer in hand-to-hand, I've nearly lost my life. They are formidable warriors. Stronger, bigger, more trained than me, they have the jungle on their side. I can stand up to one of them for a few seconds, but the best thing to do is to flee as soon as I have the chance.

Coming back to the present moment, I am baffled. Not one of my hunts has been that easy. I've always had to face danger, no matter what it is. And more often than not, I have to abandon my loot to run away, which extends the date of my return to the Dome.

I don't come back empty-handed. I never do. As a result, in the village, they call me the Wanderer, because I am the Reaper who disappears the longest from the radar. Sometimes for several weeks. I wonder if they know that I'd rather risk my life out there than suffocate under the Dome.

When I reached the top of the mound of stones I use as shelter, I let go of the deerowl's fur and slump on the ground grumbling. I must rest for a few hours. I still have a good day's walk before I get home. Ekomers hunt by day as well as by night, but they especially favor dusk and darkness to stalk their prey. The sun will soon be setting. I think I'd better get some rest tonight. Our sworn enemies have such a bond with nature that they usually don't dare to venture into dead places like the one I've made my haven on. Stone does not breathe, stone is neutral. Stone does not obey anyone. And that's fine with me. The ekomers can't control it. I think they see it as an evil place.

What a bunch of idiots.

I take out the shin of my prey and start to clean it. I must remove all the meat before I start shaping it. I am so happy to be able to make me a new bow! It's been ages since I shot a deerowl and my rabadger bone bow is getting tired. I usually shoot smaller animals, those being easier to track. This hunt is really a blessing.

I am about to start carving it when I remember I have something more important to do first. I take out another bone and, after cleaning it, I gradually give it the shape of a musical instrument. Few of us still have them, and materials are scarce to make them. But Idir, my little brother, has always dreamed of a flute. At least, since his teacher had the misfortune to tell him about this long lost instrument. Every time I come back from a hunt, he asks me if I have found one. No matter how many times I explain to him that flutes don't grow in bomber trees, he'll never stop pestering me about it. Not until I bring him one, anyway.

I examine the model printed on the page I stole from a sketchbook in the library. It shows a man in a strange hat blowing a flute. Funny little brown animals with round ears flock to him, obviously fascinated. Next to it is a detailed diagram of the interior and exterior of the

instrument. I undertake the task to reproduce it with great care. I compensate for my poor eyesight with my sense of touch and the sixth sense; they guide me through my work more faithfully than my eyes could.

I hope it will work. I usually only carve useful objects: knives, bows, tools... But for Idir's smile, I am willing to try anything.

The stars are shining when I finally finish my work. I spent several hours on it. The night is quiet, I don't have to protect myself from the jungle or a predator, and I welcome the respite. From my perch, I have a great view on the swampy meadow, bathed in the rays of the moon. The crickediles sing loudly. If any creature ever sets foot on the swamp, they will all fall silent. It's their way of hunting, but for me it's the most effective alarm.

I bring the flute to my lips, plug one of the holes at random and blow into it. A dreamy sound echoes in the vast swamp and I smile. Idir is going to faint from happiness.

The deafening silence wakes me up more effectively than a thunderclap. It's the middle of the night. The stars and the moon have disappeared, hidden behind thick clouds. The clearing is plunged into darkness. The crickediles have fallen silent. I leap to my feet, sleep evaporating from my mind as quickly as it came. With my dagger in hand, I scan the swamp in all directions, trying to detect any shadow that would have ventured there. Unfortunately, my eyes can't see through the darkness. If dozens of ekomers were crawling towards me right now, I would only see them coming when it's too late.

A flash of yellow lightning streaks the sky in the distance and I relax a little. Crickediles always stop singing when a sulphurous storm is brewing. Well, a thunderstorm is not great news either. Perched on my mound of rocks, I'm a lightning rod of choice. But I still prefer lightning to an ekomer.

I have to get back to the jungle. As unappealing as the prospect of trudging in a pouring rain through a forest of bomber trees is, in the middle of the night and with a quarter of the weight of a deerowl on my back on top of that, it's still smarter than camping there, waiting to be toasted.

I slip the flute and the shinbone into my bag and load the meat on my shoulder. I slowly make my way down the rock pile; I hope the rain won't fall on me before I reach the forest. If it starts raining while I'm trying to avoid the crickediles holes, I'm in trouble big time. Water doesn't seep into this kind of swampy clearing. It collects until it forms a pond, sometimes even a lake. And if I'm there when the tub starts to fill up, the predators lurking below the surface will have a field day.

I move as fast as possible towards the jungle in front of me by circumventing the holes. You can recognize them by the grass that covers them, very short and light green. In the daytime, it is very easy to make out the difference. In the middle of the night, when clouds choke the glow of the stars and the moon, it is a challenge.

A waterdrop lands on the tip of my nose.

I close my eyes and curse under my breath.

Then I run. Rain starts to pour on me hard. I am soon wading through a mixture of mud, grass and water. I can no longer distinguish the crickediles holes from safer ground and I am forced to trust my instincts.

The jungle is still three hundred feet ahead of me. So close and so far at the same time. Yet I will never reach it alive if I keep running blindly, sixth sense or not.

There is only one way to get out of this alive. So, I stop moving forward and wait.

The first crickedile emerges from the damp ground just in front of me. Its huge scaly abdomen comes out first, followed by its insect-like legs. Its long head, topped with slimy antennae, appears last. It crawls out of its hole, hissing, its nasty little eyes immediately landing on me.

It is now or never.

It charges at me and I leap to the side, narrowly dodging its fangs-filled jaw. I don't linger and flee. The other crickediles unearth themselves. As soon as I see the muddy ground stirring in front of me, I accelerate and jump over it before the beast beneath emerges. The adrenaline gives me enough strength to run fast, despite the weight on my shoulder.

I cover almost all the distance separating me from my relative shelter in a flash. Fewer and fewer crickediles are blocking my way. They prefer, by far, to bury themselves in the center of the clearing, where the water accumulates rapidly. The ground under my feet is now wet, but no longer soggy.

I allow myself to slow down a bit and trot quietly to the edge of the wood.

I should never have let my guard down.

A huge crickedile explodes the ground in front of me and charges at me. I scream and jump to the side. I almost lose my balance, but I manage to stabilize myself.

I am about to run away again when an obstacle at my feet causes me to trip and fall on my back. The impact takes my breath away. My bag ends up on the ground and I hope the beast will take an interest in it, but crickediles have a strong killer instinct. It will eat the meat of the deerowl... once it has slaughtered me.

I recoil on my buttocks and the monster rushes after me, hissing with excitement. It catches up with me in the blink of an eye and I notice with horror that my dagger has fallen from my belt.

I'm so dead.

The creature throws itself forward, jaws open. I kick it with all my strength but it's not enough to destabilize it. So I roll to the side, looking for my weapon. This time, my sixth sense is not of much help. I guess that it is somewhere in front, but how can I be sure? I want to crawl in that direction, but the crickedile is blocking my way. It could almost seem like this nasty beast knows where my dagger is and does not intend to let me take it back.

The water level is seriously starting to rise. I can't run away, it would catch up on me in a heartbeat. I can't run to the supposed location of my weapon either, it would take the opportunity to grab and crush me between its jaws.

I'm stuck.

The animal charges again, so I act in the only way that makes sense to me: I dodge it and then throw myself at it. I wrap my arm around one of its legs and the other around its neck. I join them together and do the same with my legs.

The crickedile doesn't like to be ridden at all and rolls on itself, roaring. It almost crushes me or drowns me many times, but I hold on. Jaws clenched, I strengthen my grip on its scaled body, until I am far enough. Then I let it go and, without waiting for the beast to realize that I am not on its back anymore, I scramble towards my dagger, or where it should be.

The creature snarls and rushes after me, but I don't look back. Something hisses past my ear, but I'm too focused on my immediate survival to pay any attention to it. I can almost feel the fetid breath of the monster on my calves as I dive and desperately feel around, in search of my dagger. Finally, *finally* my hand falls on the handle. Immediately, I roll on myself, blade upwards.

The next second, the crickedile impaled itself on it, growling, and then stop moving.

I push it away with a groan and stumble to my feet, panting. I was really lucky to find my dagger in time. It seems strange though that the beast didn't manage to reach me before.

The thunder explodes for good and a phenomenal flash of lightning illuminates the scene as if in broad daylight. That's when I see it: a piece of tail, sticking out of the creature's eye. Shivering, heart pounding, I lean forward and nausea overwhelms me.

An arrow is stuck in its eye socket, and so deeply that only the feathery end sticks out. I look around, terrified. Only two species in this world use weapons to kill others. Humans and ekomers. This arrow is not human-made, I am sure of it. And if I am to believe the way my dagger is just embedded in its neck, I was not the one to kill the crickedile.

An ekomer shot it down.

I recoil; the rain streams down my face and blurs my vision. My pulse races when I realize that my kind's worst enemy is just an arrow's throw away and he can see clearly enough to kill a crickedile with a single shot. The only thought occupying my mind right now is: I am next.

My heart is in my throat. I stagger towards my bundle, and hurriedly gather the few pieces of meat scattered around. I swing it over my shoulder as if it contained nothing but feathers, and dash at full speed toward the edge of the forest, which is only about thirty feet away. If I reach it, I have a chance to make it. The ekomer may be faster than me, but I don't intend to die today and I'm far more agile than it. Even loaded like a donkey, I can still accomplish feats.

Especially when I know it's after me.

I don't dare to look back. I basically fly over the last few tufts of grass. The "crickedile" threat is forgotten now. All I can think about is the monster hunting me, more dangerous, more hideous than any creature buried in this clearing. I have no proof it *is* chasing me, since the thunder and the downpour cover all other sounds. But I have no doubt whatsoever: after all, it's here for me, not for the beast it just shot.

Only a few more steps before I reach the first bomber tree. I find myself praying aloud a god I never worshipped to allow me to escape. A litany of mindless pleas escapes my lips, mixed with hiccups that are too close to sobs for my taste. Never have I felt so vulnerable as I am now. Never have I been threatened by an archer. Never. Ekomers don't usually stalk their prey with bows and arrows. They much prefer to use daggers and spears.

I pass the first bomber tree with a sob of relief. I am not saved though. I don't know where my pursuer is, but it must still have a clear view of me. Until I'm deep enough in the woods, it'll have plenty of time to shoot his arrow right into my heart.

Five minutes later, I am far, far away from the clearing, surrounded by leafy bomber trees, safe from any sharp projectiles, and I still haven't been shot down. I don't let my guard down though. I made that mistake earlier, with the crickedile, and I have no intention of doing it again.

The ekomer did not touch me. Perhaps I was running too fast or zigzagging too much for it to reach me. Yet I am still in its territory, and therefore still at its mercy. The trees and vines creaking and snarling in my wake make this clear to me. The plants know that their master is around. They know its intentions and do everything they can to slow down my race. The trunks of the bomber trees creak menacingly and their huge leaves droop downwards to slow my progress. I am soon forced to elbow my way through them, feeling like I'm about to suffocate.

The lianas are the worst. The ones from the other jungle already didn't like me much, but now, even the ones that are used to me - since I am back in the Authorized Zone - are downright offensive. They whip me, wrap themselves around my wrists, my legs, and no matter how many times I slice each of the ties, there is always one to replace the one I managed to get rid of. But I won't give up. This is not the first time the jungle has attacked me like this and it certainly won't be the last. So I continue to slice my way through it, until my breath is no more than a succession of hoarse hiccups. My dagger cuts the obstacles in my way by pure instinct; the muscles in my thighs scream in agony. I flee for many hours, without ever being caught, nevertheless, the plants do not subside.

My foggy brain does not understand the situation: if the jungle is so aggressive, it is because the ekomer to whom it belongs is not far away. So why doesn't it come and finish me off? Where is it, exactly? When will it come upon me? Maybe it's waiting until the last moment, to make sure I'm too exhausted to defend myself properly.

This idea fills me with dread and gives me a welcome boost of energy. If I let go of the deerowl meat, I would be faster and would undoubtedly escape the predator chasing me.

No!

I did not put in so much effort and time to finally give up my loot! I will either reach the Dome with the meat to feed its inhabitants for a few weeks, or I won't reach it at all.

Suddenly, while I have been struggling for what seems like forever, the bomber trees straighten up, their leaves rising towards the sky again. The lianas relax and merely hiss in anger as I pass. Even the moss, freezing under my bare feet since I'm trying to escape, takes on a normal temperature.

This can only mean one thing: I have lost the ekomer or it has given up chasing me. These possibilities seem unlikely, but I can't interpret the sudden calm of the jungle any other way. I am so relieved that I almost break down into tears. However, if I stop now, I might not be able to get up again and my pursuer might catch me.

Instead of pausing, I slow down to calm my breathing and to soothe the muscles of my legs and back, which are in excruciating pain. I swing my bag on the other shoulder, grunting with relief. The one who had been carrying it since the beginning of my race screams in agony.

I don't know how long I can keep going like this, but I am also aware that I will have to stop at some point. Dawn is changing the thick, wet darkness into a grayish fog. That means I've been on the run for at least two hours. I won't be able to keep up the pace all day. The good news, however, is that it won't be long before I'm out of the jungle, and by the time I start to climb the slope of the volcano that leads to the Dome, I'll be almost safe. The Elders say that

we have taken up residence in the Ngorongoro, the largest volcano crater on Earth. I don't know if it's true, or if it's just a legend told to fill children with wonder. In any case, once the ascent is done, I will have only a few miles to go in the crater before reaching the Dome. This part will be almost safe. The valley is very poor in vegetation, so an ekomer will not risk to wander in it. Of course, I may run into other creatures as determined to kill me or to steal my cargo, but after escaping the most dangerous predator on Earth, I feel ready to face anything.

After a while, I finally get out of the jungle and emerge in the singing grassland. I have to cross it as soon as I come back from the southeast and south jungles. Fortunately, these plants are not as impressionable as the bomber trees or any other species growing in the woods. They are a bit temperamental, to be sure, but I've grown fond of their song as they wave in the wind, a kind of dreamy hum that always fills me with joy when I hear it, after returning from a hunt. It signals my imminent arrival. Once I cross the singing grassland, I have only four hours to walk before reaching the Dome.

It's raining hard, I can't see beyond twenty steps. I don't feel safe. The grass is not singing today. It's always a little sad and melancholic, in gloomy weather. True bohemian! It, who owes its survival to the ground in which it plunges its roots and to the rains watering it, is quite ungrateful. However, its little dreamy side is kind of cute. I believe that, in spite of my aversion for all plants, I have a little bit of a crush on that weirdo.

Anyway, this is as good a time as any to take a break. The singing grassland, despite its peaceful nature, has its mood swings. And what I reproach it the most, is its spite when it feels down, like today. It blooms then, and the nectar of its flowers attracts a myriad of small venomous and very aggressive insects. They will not fail to sting me if I have the misfortune to approach them a little too closely. The grass loves to make others suffer when it's not feeling well itself. When it's in a bad mood, I wait for the sun to come back so that it can be cheerful again and chase away these nasty bugs.

I don't feel like the rain is going to stop though, and I really need a break anyway.

I then drop my furry bundle on the ground with a groan of happiness and slump on a small pile of muddy earth. The grassland, a few dozen feet in front of me, is buzzing loudly. I don't want to go in there; I'm ready to wait until the rain subsides. Besides, the rain never lasts very long here. The climate is tropical, and while rainfall is frequent, it is always interspersed with sunshine. The good news is that the sulfuric storm faded away almost as quickly as it broke. At least I won't have to worry about being struck by lightning anymore.

I lay there for a long time, my hand over my heart, my breathing coming in and out. The warm rain falls on me with alarming regularity, but all I can think about is that I am alive and

that I will most likely stay that way. All my muscles protest in unison at what I just put them through, but my heart sings with happiness that I survived it. Yes, I'm going to endure terrible aches and pains in the next few days, and most likely muscle contractures between my shoulder blades and in my shoulders that even our healer's massages will have trouble getting rid of. But I'm alive, and honestly, that's all that matters to me.

I finally stand up on my elbows to search my surroundings. I am alive, yet it is necessary that I stay alert. So I sit down again with a grimace and start to think more calmly about what has just happened.

The more I think about it, the more my good mood collapses, like a temple whose columns are knocked down one after the other. How could I have escaped what I have just experienced?

The archer could have shot me with great ease... Heck, it managed to stick its arrow in the eye of a rampaging crickedile, through mist, rain, distance and night! It didn't catch up with me, while its jungle was blocking my way with formidable efficiency and I was slowed down by one hundred pounds of meat... Well, one could think I was blessed with happy coincidences. But I learned a long time ago that coincidences don't exist. Except that, in this case, I have a hard time figuring out what they are hiding.

Something is wrong, of that I am sure.

Because either I am incredibly lucky and the ekomer who was chasing me is a first-class klutz, able to hit a target with ease and miss another one the next moment, or the predator let me go.

And that's more disturbing than any other explanation.

When I finally reach the top of the crater, I am no longer more than a mass of jelly-like muscles. My strength has long since deserted me, but I continue to drag my bundle, I have given up carrying.

My crossing of the grassland went smoothly, I can at least be happy about that. The rain stopped falling for a few minutes and I took advantage of the lull: the flowers wilted and the bugs left. I barely had time to reach the slopes of the volcano before the rain came back, stronger than ever. The grasses nosedived again, the flowers reopened and those pesky despotic bumblebees reappeared as if by magic. I was glad to be off the clearing at that point.

Then the climb was a real ordeal. I was at the end of my rope. So vulnerable that if some predator had fallen on me at that moment, I probably wouldn't have had enough energy to fight it off.

And there, on the crater's ridge, while I still have the whole interior slope to descend, I have the impression that the Dome has never been so far away. I can see it, in the center of the valley, a glittering and enticing dome, like those mirages in the desert of which the Elders speak. It seems so close and at the same time so far away... How am I going to reach it? I would like to give myself an hour or two of sleep before continuing, but fear prevents me from giving in to rest. If the ekomer let me go, it was for a reason. I don't want to give it the chance to come back at me while I'm defenseless, even though none of these beings would ever venture out here.

None of them had spared a human before either.

I don't know who this ekomer is, if it's one of those I've had the misfortune to meet, but I'm certain that it didn't let me live out of the goodness of its heart. And I don't intend to linger around to solve the mystery.

I stop for half an hour nonetheless, chew without conviction on some berries and fruits I took from my bag, then stand up on my wobbly legs. I load the bundle on my least painful shoulder.

I try not to think about the superhuman effort each step requires from my tired muscles. I only think about the sled waiting for me down below, hidden under a pile of branches and on which I will be able to load the meat. It will be so much easier to move on!

I begin the long and painful descent. I try to forget my exhausted body by humming in a weak voice the lullaby Idir sang before I left the Dome, a week ago: it is the story of a girl named Mary, who brought her lamb to school. My little brother's teacher taught the song to her

pupils and it's the stupidest rhyme I've ever heard. But Idir sang it with such enthusiasm and malice, almost shouting the lyrics all day long, that I ended up knowing it by heart. And singing it as I stumble like a lost soul down the sides of the crater is the best motivation.

I almost faint once, exhausted, but Idir's laughing face automatically appears in my mind, with his dimples, his little gap between his front teeth and his sparkling eyes; I recover at once. I am his one and only chance to eat his fill in the days to come. I have to live up to it and make it to the Dome.

I must.

I miraculously reach the valley floor without breaking my neck or dying of exhaustion. I find my sled on the first try and hold back a sob of happiness. I won't have to carry the wet meat anymore. I put my load on the wooden tray and take a few seconds to observe the surroundings, on the lookout.

The Ngorongoro Valley is huge. It is several dozen square miles and is not always green, as it is at this time of year. Unlike the jungle surrounding the volcano, its crater is subject to the variations of seasons. We are currently in full monsoon, so the plain is luxuriant, dotted with small lakes and fat meadows in which graze huge animals, panguffaloes. I cannot pass by them without feeling bitter.

Their meat is poisonous and, ironically, they are the most harmless creatures in the world. They are not afraid of man and never charge them, even when they feel threatened. If their flesh hadn't been deadly to us, I wouldn't have had to venture into the jungle to hunt. It would have been so easy.

Life has such a dark sense of humor sometimes.

I push these vain thoughts away from my mind, invigorated by the idea of reaching the Dome soon. I sling the sled's straps over my shoulders and begin to walk with heavy steps toward the shining dome lying some ten miles ahead.

I soon come across a herd of panguffaloes. They barely lift their scaly snouts from the ground they are grazing on to examine me. I glare at them, annoyed. If these creatures were not so devoid of self-preservation instinct and willing to charge when they meet a potential predator, such as me, I would not be so smart. But here, I don't hesitate to kick the thighs of the few creatures that block my way. The panguffaloes I hit lazily move forward a few steps, unfazed. They are three times my size in length and are at least twice as tall I am. Their backs and the top of their heads are covered with huge bony scales, while the thick, woolly hair on their sides provides effective protection against sharp objects.

I'm sure each of my kicks feels like a mosquito bite.

How they annoy me.

I finally pass the herd with relief - panguffaloes are quite smelly - and I continue on my way, telling myself over and over that I am almost there.

I'm almost there.

I'm almost there.

I am almost...

- Ghost!

I jump when the male voice echoes on my left. I let go of my straps and reach for my dagger, a reaction as stupid as it is useless since nobody knows this nickname, except the inhabitants of the Dome. They called me Ghost for as long as I can remember. Besides, I would recognize that voice in my sleep.

When my gaze falls on the slender figure trotting towards me in small, steady strides, I don't need to see it clearly to identify it. I can't help but let out an irritated growl. At this point, I would almost prefer to be attacked by a blue tiger.

Even though I am exhausted and would have accepted anyone's help, Yvann's is never welcome. And most importantly, never for free.

The young man reaches me in a few minutes, not out of breath in the least. He scans my appearance, which must be indescribable, with an amused air that put me even more on edge. Of course, unlike me, Yvann is handsome as ever, still clean and well-combed. His chocolate eyes crinkle with amusement and his perfect mouth curves into a mocking smile I really want to slap away. The bag he carries on one shoulder seems very heavy and that's the only reason I manage to keep my cool. Yvann is the best Reaper in the Dome after me. He and I, we will be able to feed its inhabitants for a long time, and that thought alone makes him more likeable.

I mean, until he opens his mouth.

- Wow! I hardly recognized you. At first, I thought you were a stray panguffalo.

I give him a murderous glance, not answering. I don't have the time nor the energy to argue with him. So, I put the sled's straps back on my shoulders and go on my way, ignoring him. This does not discourage the parasite. He adjusts his step on mine and we walk together for a few minutes, in a complete silence. I begin to believe that he is going to leave me alone when he addresses me, teasing:

- Looks like your hunt wasn't unsuccessful.

- Yours either, I say, but maybe you noticed I didn't waste my breath to point it out to you.

- Yes, but I, unlike you, didn't have to drag myself through the mud to kill my game. Tell me, what did you hunt this time? A rabadger? A crickedile?

- Shut up, you moron. I'm tired, so leave me alone.

Yvann bursts out laughing. My bad mood always makes him happy, but I don't let it get to me. I'm not naive enough to not know that he is jealous of being only second in the ranking of the best Reapers.

This thought *does* delight me.

- Come on, Ghost, tell me!

- No, if I tell you, your alpha male ego will be grievously wounded. I would hate to tell you that it was beaten by a woman.

This time, Yvann's smile freezes and his left eyelid twitch. As I am exhausted and thus in the mood to lash out at someone, I continue, in the same contemptuous tone:

- So, how does it feel to be outdone by the weaker sex? Are you okay? Do you think you'll get over it someday?

Yvann is so surprised by my spite that he is speechless for several seconds. A true miracle, that goes without saying. He recovers quickly though.

- Man! he exclaims in a cheerful tone, seems like you went through a lot during this hunt.

I stare at him warily. I'm not used to picking on him, I tend to ignore him when he's throwing his jabs at me. But he's not the type to take an insult lightly either.

Well, we are definitely not in our normal states, he and I.

- Yeah... it was nerve-wracking enough that I would be grateful for a *silence* walk back home.

- Let me drag your load then, you look exhausted.

I finally lose it. I stop abruptly and bark at him:

- For Dome's sake, Yvann, just leave me alone! I don't need you! Actually, what I need right now is your going away. So, get out of my face, get ahead of me and go enjoy your victory, okay?

Yvann considers me with what looks more and more like anger, then he readjusts the straps of his knapsack on his shoulders and runs with powerful strides towards the Dome, in full sight now.

I watch him moving away with increasing annoyance. I don't know what's going on in his head, but I can tell it's nothing good for me.

I can't help but curse myself in a low voice while I cross the distance still separating me from the Dome. Going after Yvann wasn't my brightest move. I should never have lost my temper. Now, he'll look for an opportunity to retaliate. But I'm exhausted, drained, and I don't think I could have stopped myself even if I had tried. This idiot already gets on my nerves when I'm in good spirits so there was little chance I could master my emotions now.

I'm realistic enough to expect some sort of trick on his part to humiliate or discredit me in front of the villagers. It doesn't take much for them to make fun of me, so Yvann won't have to be very creative, I guess.

For the inhabitants of the Dome, I am only known for two things: the first, for my extraordinary talent as a hunter. The second, for my looks. But these two characteristics were not always placed in that order. When I was a child, I didn't have the products of my hunting to spare me the teasing and the whispers. The nickname I've been called all my life is proof enough: Ghost, because of my skin and hair color and the almost total lack of pigmentation in my eyebrows and eyelashes. Very original, you may say, but I could never get rid of it. Anyway, I've been called that for so long that it has almost become my first name.

When I was little, I was told by Jedda Elkaissa that I was an albino. At the time, I didn't know for sure what it meant and today I know scarcely more. I would come back from school, sobbing because the other children rejected me and said I was ugly and repulsive. When Jedda Elkaissa caught me, she would slap me hard and would tell me that human beings were cruel, that I had better get used to it if I wanted to survive. The method was certainly not very educational, but it worked. I stopped feeling sorry for myself, focused on my extraordinary physical abilities, and became a Reaper, the best one.

I will always remember the look on Yvann's face, two years older than me, when the little ugly girl he used to persecute bested him in the ranking. It is a memory I cherish dearly.

Despite everything, I don't forget that I owe my success to her, to my will, but also to the Reaper who trained me and believed in me.

Now, no one makes fun of me anymore. But they still call me Ghost. I don't think that will ever change. Among the few people who use my real name and don't just see me as the ghostly being who regularly brings them food, are Idir and jedda Elkaissa. Idir because I'm his beloved big sister and he's the sweetest little boy in the world, jedda Elkaissa because... well, because

she's jedda Elkaissa and, while she's dismissive and crabby with everyone, she also hates wasting her time with that kind of "foolish nonsense," as she calls it.

I smile when her surly face appears in my mind; I am eager to see her again. She is a cantankerous old woman, always in a bad mood, kind to no one, but she raised me to overcome any obstacle that would come my way. She is not the sweetest of grandmothers, far from it, but she managed to mold the scared, sad little girl I used to be into the woman I am today and of whom I have nothing to be ashamed of.

I finally reach the force field protecting the Dome from external threats and cross it with great relief. Only humans can cross it without risking a deadly electric shock. Nobody has ever understood how this system works, and I don't really care. It does work and it is enough fact for me.

The village spreads out in front of me and I feel like melting with happiness.

I did it! Heck, I did it!

A crowd is gathered around Yvann. The idiot is boasting about his hunt and the countless dangers he had to face to come back unscathed. This agglutination prevents me from seeing the village with its clay huts and thatched roofs. But I notice the smoke coming from the chimneys and I hear the hubbub of the villagers rushing towards us. The news of Yvann's arrival must have spread like wildfire. The return of a hunter is always a joyful and exciting event, especially when the Reaper brings back food.

Suddenly, someone shouts my nickname and all heads turn towards me. Most of the villagers lose interest in Yvann and rush in my direction. They surround me and bury me under dozens of questions I have neither the strength nor the time to answer.

- Ghost! Ghost! Were you able to bring anything back?
- Stupid! Can't you see she has her sled with her?
- What did you kill this time?
- Ghost, can I have some fruit?
- Ghost...

I raise a hand and the questions dry up. People have long since realized I don't talk for nothing and when I am willing to open my mouth, they had better listen.

I shrug off the straps and point to the fur and dirty bits of meat sticking out of it.

- This is deerowl meat. It's from yesterday and it will spoil if you don't salt it soon. So, you should hurry. I suggest you wash and cook the most spoiled pieces and salt the others.

- A deerowl! Oh, Ghost, you really are the best!
- Well done!

I try to smile as the women rush to the sled to dig out the meat. Then, as no one pays me any attention anymore, I walk wearily through the crowd, not even noticing the disgusted glances I get on my way. It pains me to admit it, but Yvann is right: I have the appearance of a panguffalo, and even its smell. The advantage is that I don't have to elbow my way through the compact crowd. People naturally move aside as I pass.

As I begin to move away, a little boy emerges from between two huts and rushes in my direction. He joyfully jumps up and down and call me by my real name, a hint of laughter in his voice:

- Thiziri! Thiziri!!!!!!!

And, in spite of the filth that covers me completely, he throws himself into my arms, giggling all the while.

- Idir! I exclaim, half amused, half concerned that he would stick to me when I am so disgusting. Jedda will kill you if you get dirty!

- I don't care, my little brother mumbles, his face buried in my chest. I can take a beating for being dirty if it's because you're back!

He then looks up and gives me a smile so wide it splits his face in two. I immediately melt, as expected. Idir has just turned ten. He is nothing but joy and good humor, as if he had wanted to stick to the meaning of his name which, in a forgotten dialect of a forgotten people, the Kabyle, means "alive". Jedda Elkaissa is proud to say that we are the last representatives of this people. Idir and I pretend to agree with her, even though we know that there are no longer any "people" left. Humanity is now reduced to a few hundred men and women of different origins and cultures, who have learned to survive together in this small space.

Idir's complexion is light and he has brown, curly hair. We look alike despite my difference: we share the same face shape, the same nose and the same type of hair. Even if mine is white, and I style it in hundreds of fine braids.

- Did you bring me a flute? he suddenly asks, his eyes full of stars.

Despite my exhaustion, and the fact that I'm on the verge of collapsing, I can't help but burst out laughing. This kid never gives up. He's right to insist though...

I open my backpack with a mystery smile dancing on my lips and, after checking that nobody is watching us, I take out the musical instrument I carved last night. I was right, Idir almost faints with joy. He starts jumping up and down, squeaking excitedly until I hand him the flute. He grabs it with the reverence of someone who has unearthed a very precious and fragile treasure.

- Thank you, Thiziri, he murmurs, tears in his eyes. Can I try it on?

- Yes, but not until you get home and get cleaned up, okay?

Idir nods and is about to dash to our house when he stops abruptly and turns to me, concerned:

- Aren't you coming?

- I am but I'm going to need something more substantial than a pitcher of water and a basin to get rid of all this mud! I'm heading to the pond.

Idir chuckles and runs off, reassured to learn that I'm not already leaving. Anyway, even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I don't think I've ever felt so exhausted in my life.

Besides, once I have reached the small pond of fresh water, fed by two tea-colored streams crossing the Dome during the monsoon, I slip into it fully clothed and, snugly wedged between two groves of bushy reeds, I fall asleep like a stump.

When I come to, it is almost dark and I am freezing. I stand up on my elbows, disoriented, before I finally remember where I am. I am up to my navel in water and the gentle gurgling of the pond's tributaries has relaxed me to the point that I have fallen asleep in the waterhole.

I stand up with a grimace, in excruciating pain. Now that my muscles are cold, I feel like they will tear with every movement. I can hardly walk, but I'd rather suffer a thousand deaths than face Jemma Elkaissa with mud on my face. I take the time to clean myself thoroughly, taking forever to rinse my hair and remove all the dirt that has seeped everywhere. Luckily, the washerwomen always leave bars of soap at the water's edge after doing the day's laundry, so I snatch one to get rid of the last traces of dirt. Luckily, it's nighttime, no one is around, so I can undress and wash my clothes without fearing to be seen.

No matter how intrepidly I hunt in the forest, I have never been able to get rid of my sickly modesty, and Jemma Elkaissa has never considered it a handicap enough to merit any intervention on her part. And I'm not even talking about my period... when it comes, I always manage to leave the Dome and take refuge at the other end of the valley, in a cave no one knows about and where I can suffer in peace, without fearing any humiliation. Unfortunately for us, the periodical protections available nowadays are not as effective as those of the past. We have to learn menstrual continence, a technique I have never fully mastered. So, when the time of the month come, I take a vacation.

I have just pulled on my soaked clothes when I hear laughter and cheerful voices coming my way. I stifle a tired sigh when I realize the troop of Yvann worshippers is on its way to the pond. I quickly get out of the water and head towards the huts. I ignore the group of young admirers when I meet them.

Of course, the king of animals is not willing to leave me alone tonight.

- Ghooooost! he drawls, as if it were a real surprise to run into me there.

This moron is blocking my way.

- Hi, Yvann, I answer him with my most cordial tone, in a hurry to escape.

My soaked clothes stick a little too much to my body for my taste. Yvann is flanked by three Reapers: Salomon, Pran and Francesca. Three other girls stick to him, suitors desperate not to be the happy chosen one he will marry. Indeed, the Don Juan already has a fiancée and she apparently does not feel the need to follow him like a dog. She's a smart girl, no doubt.

I try to go around the group, but Yvann steps to the side to prevent me from escaping. This time, I fold my arms, all courtesy gone. I am exhausted, hungry, cold, and all I want is to sit by the fire with a hot meal. The idiot is wearing out my patience to a dangerous point.

- Come with us, Blanche. We'll drink some berry liqueur by the pond. Maybe go for a dip too...

His eyes roam up and down my body and I shudder, disgusted.

- But I see you didn't wait for us..., he simmers.

I'm spared an answer by Francesca, a young woman around my age with wavy black hair, a mat complexion and chocolate eyes. She steps in angrily, shouldering him.

- For Dome' sake, Yvann! Let her be!

Francesca is a *latina*, as jedda Elkaissa would say with a click of her tongue. She is not my friend, she's not even a mate, she hangs out with Yvann too much for me to give her the honor she deserves. But she's a girl who minds her own business and doesn't come poking around in other people's. She has a bad temper and she stands up to the great Yvann, which is enough to earn my esteem, however relative.

- Let's go, move, she mumbles. I am freezing, here, and I need a glass of liquor.

The two other Reapers snicker, but Yvann does not clear the way. He is particularly upset tonight. My rebuff on the way back, added to the attention and glory my arrival at the Dome stole away from him, seems a little too much to bear.

But, contrary to what my profession suggests, I can't stand conflict. The less I have to deal with it, the better off I am. When I snapped at him, I was dragging my damn load of meat, I was exhausted and my words escaped me. I don't think I'll be able to do it again, now that I'm slightly rested and safe. All I want to do is go home and spend the evening with Idir and jedda Elkaissa.

I try to pass him again, but this time he grabs my arm to stop me. My left hand flies out before I am even aware of it and hits his left temple in a stinging backhand. I don't like conflict, yet I have very, *very* sharp reflexes, making me someone you shouldn't mess with.

The sound of the slap echoes for a few seconds. Yvann's friends take a sharp intake of breath; then a heavy silence falls on us. I get rid of his grip in an angry gesture. Yvann shoots me a glare so dark I instantly understand he is not going to call it quits.

- Where did you find this deerowl? he asks me, catching me off guard. Not in the northern or northeastern jungle, since Paul and Sylvia have been there for the last few days. We didn't see a deerowl in the eastern jungle for a long time, so I guess it wasn't here either. It leaves the southern and western ones, but...

- I was in the southern one! I bark before he can pursue. Can't you read? It's written on the board. Don't try to blame your incompetence on me, Yvann. One day, you'll have to accept to be only second-best.

Provoking him was not my intention a few seconds earlier, but I desperately need to create a diversion. The reaction of my opponent is as fast as it is sadly predictable. He turns red with anger and his fist crashes on my left cheekbone with a thud.

I step back to ease the blow, but Yvann's strong and I have to shake my head to clear it. This jerk is bigger and stronger than me, but I've withstood worst. When you've fought an ekomer, you don't shy away from a few human punches.

I look up, my mouth twisted into a nasty snarl.

- Get out of my way.

- Not until...

I've had enough.

I walk towards him and push him with all my might; Yvann's thrown off balance and I run past him towards the village. I don't want to hurt one of my own. It's bad enough I have to survive when I'm in the jungle, I won't fight as well when I'm under the Dome! But this idiot doesn't know what's good for him. He grabs my shoulder to force me to face him.

Enough is enough! The brawl is unavoidable now.

I'm about to kick him in a way he'll remember for a long time when a hoarse, snarling voice rings out a few feet behind us.

- Thiziri, for Dome's sake, where are you?

I glance over my shoulder; a shriveled figure is standing in the light, surrounded by two thatched cottages. The group immediately moves away from me. Jedda Elkaissa is an Elder, an untouchable. Her word is law under the Dome and you better not make an enemy of her.

I turn to Yvann, one eyebrow raised. He looks at me with contempt:

- You're lucky your granny was here to rescue you. You won't be so next time.

I swallow the scathing retort I'm dying to send him and ignore him royally, walking towards my grandmother. She is standing at the edge of the first huts, hands on her hips, eyes crinkled with displeasure.

Instead of being hugged when I reach her, I am welcomed by a slap on the back of my head.

- Were you going to keep your jedda waiting all night? she exclaims, tugging at my ear.

I squeal in pain, even though a nervous laugh bubbles in the back of my throat. I really need to rest.

- I'm glad to see you too, jedda Elkaissa.

- Don't mess with me, you cheeky girl! The meal has been served for at least an hour! It's cold now! And look at you! You're soaked to the bone! Do you want to die of pneumonia? Wait... is that a black eye I see appearing around your eye? Do you want me dead?

Jedda Elkaissa goes on and on, listing all the sins I have committed during the day and I just smile. She'll never admit it, but it's her way of worrying about me. Unlike Idir and me, jedda Elkaissa is far from reflecting in any way the meaning of her name. It means "the paused one" and it is so far from who she is that I can't think of it without laughing.

She eventually runs out of adjectives and pushes me towards the center of the village, where the Circle is located, that is, the ten houses in which the Elders live. They are so called because they form a perfect circle, around which the whole village revolves.

A new smile stretches my lips when the houses come in sight, for from one of them comes a dreadful sound, not at all melodious. Jedda Elkaissa turns her wrinkled face upon me:

- What possessed you to make him this instrument of torture?

She mutters under her breath, but the little smile curving up one side of her mouth doesn't escape me. I love to witness this rare phenomenon. Usually, it's more towards her chin that the corners of her lips tend to fall.

Jedda Elkaissa has one heck of a temper, but she considers us her children, and she loves us more than anything. I just hope that no one will find out I have ventured beyond the Authorized Zone. That could get me in serious trouble, and when I say "serious" I include a potential permanent expulsion from the Dome. It would also put my grandmother in a very complicated situation and I am anxious to avoid that. I don't think the Elders would go to such extremes since I am their best Reaper, but you never know. I can only hope that Yvann will mind his own business and stop meddling with mine. Maybe no one will ever suspect a thing.

I don't even know why we limit our trips to the Authorized Zone. After all, we risk our lives just as much when we're inside, right? What could be different about the jungles beyond this limit?

I may end up finding out.

Because punishment or not, I plan to go back.

- Thiziri, can you bring me back some sheets music next time?

Idir looks at me with puppy eyes and I chuckle.

- Idir, how many times will I have to tell you this? When I go into the jungle, the only things I am able to find and bring back are plants and meat.

- Eat your stew, Idir, says jedda Elkaissa with a glance of warning.

I spread my hands helplessly, amused despite myself.

- I didn't pluck your flute out of a bomber tree, you know. I carved it out of a bone from the deerowl I shot.

Idir puts his cheek on his fist, pouting.

- Yes, but the teacher said that, to succeed in playing well, you have to learn the musical notes.

- The teacher should just teach you how to read and write, grumbles Jedda, angrily stirring her stew. What's the use of putting all these ideas in your head?

As Idir seems downcast, I smile at him with all the enthusiasm I can gather.

- What jedda Elkaissa means...

- ... I didn't know I needed your help to interpret my words, young girl, she interrupts me, threatening.

- You are capable of learning by yourself, I continue, unmoved. You are very, very talented and I am sure that, by the time you turn thirteen, you will know how to play it perfectly. Who knows? Maybe the Elders will even allow you to accompany the choir.

Jedda Elkaissa sniffs with contempt:

- I would like to see him try...

But Idir is no longer intimidated by the irascible character of our grandmother. He turns to her, his eyes shining with hope, his disarming smile revealing his lovely gap between his front teeth.

- Is it true, jedda Elkaissa?

- Finish your plate! she retorts dryly, but we know, my brother and I, that she's clouding the issue.

In general, the more aggressive and annoying she gets, the less likely she is to stand up to us. I already know that, if Idir can play the flute by the time he is thirteen, he will be the first to join the choir as an instrumentalist. Since the Great Invasion, more than thirty years ago, no one

plays music. I only know about the instruments because I liked to read the Elders' notes in the library when I was little and still had time to entertain myself. One of the notebooks speaks of a flautist who charmed small animals called rats with the sound his instrument made.

By the way, I better not forget to put back the page I tore out from it...

The rest of the meal is spent in silent. Idir has regained his appetite, if I am to believe the way he shovels the rest of his stew noisily. It takes me longer to swallow each bite. I deserve to enjoy the meat of the deerowl. It almost cost me my life, after all. When I think of the ease with which the ekomer killed the crickedile, of the fact that he must have been so close to me in the jungle, when I was trying to get out of it... I can't help but shiver. It was a close call! If I didn't know for sure that I will find more preys beyond the Authorized Zone, I don't think I would even dream about going back. But do I have a choice? The Reapers are getting fewer and fewer. You have to volunteer to become one, and few children seem to see it as a vocation, now. We are therefore an endangered species. Mehdi's death will not help matters.

My heart drops when my friend's smiling face suddenly pops into my mind. I blink rapidly, tears burning my eyes. When I let my thoughts wander to him, I feel like my ribcage is crashing onto itself. The wound his death created is so painful, I wonder if it will ever heal. Will I ever be able to think about him without the "what ifs" torturing me? Will I be able to think back to all the good memories, like the times we'd meet up in the valley after a hunt? Where we would walk home together and chat like two friends against the world? He was the only one who did not side with Yvann, who did not seek his approval. In fact, he was almost as lonely as I was. So, during banquets, village parties or ceremonies, we often found ourselves next to each other and we exchanged peacefully, without a care in the world about what the others thought. He had seen in me what no one else but Idir, Jedda and Paul had seen.

I miss him terribly.

I would have agreed to marry him, if he had asked me.

I gulp a mouthful of water to try and get rid of the huge knot settled in my throat. I instead think about how to deal with the hunger looming over us.

I can forget about retirement, that's for sure. I'll be a Reaper until my last breath. Which also means I'll never know old age. I don't think I'll be as nimble and fast as I am today when I'm in my seventies. So I will probably be eviscerated before I have time to grow very old. As unwelcoming as the idea is, the chances are that I will die alone in the jungle, by the sadistic blade of one of our sworn enemies, rather than in a warm bed after several decades of stalking in their territory... I only have to make sure that my death will come as late as possible. And I

also have to find a way to motivate competent men and women, not to mention children, to volunteer to be trained. We really need Reapers.

I scrape the bottom of my plate, remembering the day I discovered Mehdi's corpse. I really can't get him out of my head, tonight. It immediately ruins my appetite. I finish my stew nonetheless. I hate wasting. The images of his mutilated body obscure my field of vision and my stomach churns.

Jedda Elkaissa speaks suddenly, putting me out of my misery.

- Idir, go and practice your flute.

Ooh... if she's willing to let my little brother torture us all night with shrill, dissonant sounds, then what she has to tell me is pretty serious.

While Idir, all smiles, clears his plate and rushes upstairs, all too happy to obey for once, I go over the possibilities. Does she want to talk about the lack of Reapers? Or worse, does she know I defied the interdiction to venture outside the Authorized Zone? What will she do if she finds out?

The flautist starts to blow like a madman in his instrument and it is the moment she chooses to open her mouth:

- You should have made him a trumpet, she grumbles. If he continues to blow in this damn thing like that, he's going to explode the energy stone.

I don't ask her what a trumpet is. Her grumpy tone is a facade. She doesn't know how to tell me something, and I don't like it.

- Jedda Elkaissa, what's going on? I ask her in a soft voice.

My grandmother rests her chin on her fist and considers me intently.

- We need to talk about the twentieth Birthday Ceremony...

I roll my eyes, as relieved as I am annoyed. So that's her sensitive subject? If I had known, I wouldn't have been so careful!

- Don't roll your eyes on me, Thiziri.

Her stern, calm tone alarms me. She is rarely this serious.

- Well? What did you want to tell me? No, wait, don't say anything. I don't see why we're talking about this now. The twentieth Birthday Ceremony is in three years, for me. I've got time to think about it, right?

Yes and no, a small, pernicious voice whispers to me. I know that, as soon as I'll turn eighteen, in a few months, I will have to give my legal guardian, jedda, the name of a suitor. She then will meet the legal guardian of the young man I will have chosen, in order to talk with him about a potential alliance. And vice versa. If both of us agree and the Elders give their

blessing, we will be betrothed before them. The marriage will not take place until two years later, at the twentieth Birthday Ceremony.

And from the raised eyebrow of jedda, she knows I'm stalling for time. I brace myself against the back of my seat, arms crossed.

- Thiziri..., she pleads when she notices my stubborn look.

- No, jedda! I don't see why we're talking about this now. I don't want to be tied down and I can manage without a husband. Who would want me anyway?

Jedda Elkaissa squints in displeasure.

- That's not for you to decide, young lady. I want to remind you that marriage is mandatory for everyone. Whether you're a Reaper or not.

I lean forward, now desperate.

- But... but jedda, the problem is, even if I chose someone I liked, he would never agree to marry me. If Mehdi was still here... I wouldn't... but that's not the point! The Elders are going to force me to marry a boy no one wants, just like they have always done, right? I'm not going to agree to that!

- Thiziri...

- Besides, what's the point of forcing people to marry, when births are strictly controlled? When they are not allowed to have more than two children, and are despised when they don't manage to have any? And when a third one is planned, the mother is forced to take abortifacient plants! Do you think this is fair?

- Thiziri?

- No, jedda, I don't want to get married. There's got to be something you can do about that, right? Plead on my behalf that... don't I know, that I'm the best Reaper and that I'm entitled to special treatment? That I'm too useful to the village to waste my time raising children? Oh jedda... I... I don't want to be rejected like that. If I choose a young man, I'm sure he'll reject me and I'll be so humiliated...

- Thiziri! she suddenly booms.

Her eyes are thunderous and I close my mouth with a loud clack.

She takes a deep breath and all her anger magically vanishes. I recoil, downright distressed, now. If she's so controlled, it's because what she's about to tell me is worse than I could have imagined.

- You're not getting married, she says in a dull voice.

I freeze, speechless, conflicting feelings battling in me. I'm not getting married? Fine, I don't see how that's a problem... it's what I wanted, anyway. But what does she mean by “you're not getting married?” What kind of wording is that? Like I don't have a say in the matter!

- Okay..., I just reply in a drawl, on the alert.

I have the feeling that this is not the end of it. And jedda Elkaissa proves it to me by speaking again:

- The Elders decided that you were unfit to procreate and therefore to marry. They crossed you off the list of future reproducers.