

THESE
STOLEN
LIVES

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GETTING YOU OUT

When the night and its cold are their deepest, we go. Tonight's our only chance.

The black iron gates of the Portcaye Glassworks bar our way, railheads stabbing at the stars. This place has owned me since before the fall of the leaf, and it's winter now, harsh as any.

I drive the Glassworks' draught kine – hulking beasts, bigger than our horses ever were – on deliveries and collections. But tonight I'm here for another reason. Kit and I are on a rescue mission.

The street lamps have burned down, leaving thick darkness, but Kit doesn't waver. He even said I should wait behind while he went after Zako on his own.

Arrogant to think he can work this without me. Zako and Kit haven't even seen each other since they met in detention, right after the Cull. I know where Venor's

country estate is, where they'll be keeping Zako. I lived on the farm opposite for years, when I was first bought. Plus the Glassworks' kine trust me.

Zako and me, we're Crozoni savages. Survivors of the Cull. When the Skøl invaded six years ago, they killed nine in ten of us. Those of us who were left became *repayers*. One of the pretty Skøl words they brought with them.

"*Life Is Golden*" – that's their motto, adorning the uniforms of their law enforcement and carved into their precious Life Registry. All citizens, including the Skøl, must pay for their right to live; work hard to be a part of society. Most manage it. Some don't.

But we repayers lived life without paying – for me, my first eleven years. I owe the Skøl that debt. My life is no longer my own. I belong to the Glassworks now, just like Zako belongs to Valour Venor, the Magistrate of County Portcaye Life Registry, and soon-to-be Governor of the New Western Counties.

So my scruffy, curly-haired and card-mad friend, twelve-year-old Zako, who I've known since he kicked my hand through his mama's womb, tried to kill his owner last night. The price for that will be steep.

I have a key to this side gate, but before I can fumble it out, the lock yields to Kit's small slivers of metal – lock picks.

"Since when could you do that?"

"Since I was about your age. Thought I should learn."

I'm seventeen. Kit's three years older. "Why?"

"I like to be prepared."

We're at the stables now. Kit stares up at the woolly face that greets him with its big, wet eyes that stare back.

"Clomper – meet Kit."

Kit's eyes, fixed on Clomper now, are extraordinary, purple as an early orchid. I don't know if all native Makaianians have eyes like his. I haven't met many. His people, the Xan, were here first, before the Crozoni – we invaded their land a hundred years ago. Now we've both been invaded.

"This creature's a ridiculous size."

I'm secretly satisfied there's another thing I can add to the short list of things Kit's afraid of: spiders, sea kraits, draught kine. His owners, the Scarlets, are tavern-keepers and don't own kine, just rent them if they need their carriage pulled.

The Skøl got rid of our horses like they got rid of most of us.

Before they came, we thought there was nothing else in the world worth knowing. To the north, only ice plains; to the west, the Crozon Isles, the islands of my forebears. Beyond them, more ocean before the Shallow Sea.

To the east of us, beyond the mountains, is a desert. We thought it endless. But there is something on the other side: Skøland. And kine, the only creatures tough enough to cross, carried its pink-skinned, pale-eyed people here.

Clomper is almost half as tall again as a horse, and

broad, with four horns tapering to dull points. Her two long ones curve back in an impressive crown. The shorter two curve down, framing the sides of her face like ancient armour, giving her a wicked look.

Kit tries to coax her out of her stall, but she's a ton and a half of having none of it.

"Let me do it. You probably smell like Caruq," I say.

"The cheek – I smell like Caruq," he grumbles, but he gives way. Caruq's the hound at the tavern house.

We've brought squares of cloth torn from old tavern aprons to cover Clomper's iron shoes. I tap her leg so she lifts it. Kit props her hoof on a thigh, bundles it, and I wrap it up like a parcel with twine.

Kit's dark hair hangs in his eyes as he works. He used to wear it past his shoulders, years ago, but I prefer it like this – fuzz-short on the sides and back, longer on top.

My Crozoni skin is deep bronze in the summer, fading in winters like this to a lighter brown that shows red in my cheeks, but Kit's skin is darker, his features sharper.

He's half smiling, probably at how daft we look. How he can smile at a time like this, I don't know.

It's a risk taking only Clomper. She'll have to carry two of us out there and three back – we hope, after a full day of work in the freezing cold. But she's well-muscled, covered in locks of warm wool. She can do this.

I'm the weak link, with my old injury – the slight drag on my right side, the pain that flares without warning. Venor is responsible for that. It's a memory I keep pushed down.

Outside the Glassworks, I guide Clomper with light tugs on her rope, a few crooning words. She's not bad in the dark, probably sees better than I do what lies down the cobbled alleys that yawn into blackness.

This quarter's always quiet come nightfall. The wraps on her shoes muffle their usual iron clatter, but the noise still rings overloud in my ears. I can't hear a squeak from Kit.

I urge Clomper to a stop with my shoulder when I see movement – four men, a few corners ahead.

“Are they branders?” I whisper. Branderers – firebrands, they call themselves – are Skøl law enforcement. Technically, there's no curfew, but they wouldn't look kindly on the likes of Kit and me abroad at this hour.

“Not branders. Dockworkers,” he says now, soft and calm. I find my mind drifting back to his fingers springing the lock to the Glassworks as easy as cracking an egg.

We wait in the shadows until the men have moved off.

The tension in my gut uncoils slightly when we reach the river path. No more icy cobbles, less noise, fewer houses and lights, and not a soul to be seen all the way to the Mermen Gates.

Portcaye's a walled town – walled by my great-grandparents' generation. Stone mermen, the symbol of one of the founding Crozoni families, flank the gates. They open to the north. They used to be closed at night, but not since the Skøl arrived. The Skøl don't share my people's insecurities. Why lock down when you've conquered the world entire?

The Mermen Gates' iron rails, topped with spikes, reach above Portcaye's stone walls, highest where they're designed to meet in the middle, like wings. Limestone blocks prop them wide. One of the spikes beside the easternmost merman is occupied by a shrivelled turnip-head. Black hollows for eyes, a wig of wavy seaweed, weathered white. A child's prank. A reminder.

The Skøl aren't stingy with the death penalty, but they usually avoid a display. There hasn't been a real criminal's head up there for years, but I imagine for the murder of Magistrate Venor, they'd make an exception.

I had the news from Venor's neighbour, my old owner, Mister Heane. He came to see me with a hide-bound parcel I later found contained drawings I'd done at *Heanehome*, pencils they had given me, and a book I'd left behind when they sold me to the Glassworks so suddenly, six months back. Mister Heane seemed to think Venor might pull through, even though Zako took a hammer to his head. I can't imagine Venor's skinny repayer, Ruzi's son, lifting a finger to anyone, let alone a weapon.

"I'm sorry... I know he was your friend," Mister Heane said, like Zako was already dead.

It'll be all over the paper tomorrow evening, but it was too late to make tonight's edition of the *Portcaye Post*.

They have him locked up at Venor's estate. They'll take him to jail in Portcaye tomorrow. Then they'll decide his sentence.

It will happen quickly.

Getting Zako out tonight is our only chance.

In the shadow of the mermen and the ghastly turnip, we unbind the cloth from Clomper's shoes. Kit boosts me like a sack of nothing on to one of the limestone blocks and scrabbles up beside me before lifting me again on to the big blanket we strapped on Clomper's back as a makeshift saddle. I grip her broad flanks with my knees.

"Sit closer and hold on to me," I tell Kit.

Tentatively, his hands find my waist. He holds on higher on the right side, my bad side, barely touching me.

Venor's estate lies to the northeast.

We make steady progress north along the deserted byway.

Clomper's hooves fall like anvil blows. I swear they never land so loudly during the day. She's not a racer but perhaps she's got some rider's blood. She goes like the clappers. An all-purpose beast.

The cold is shocking, but at least it means no snow. I pray to Thea it holds, to Thea the Bringer, Crozoni goddess of bounty. I even whisper a plea to Macotl, the mother serpent, one of the native Makaian gods. *Hold us in your coils*. Spreading our chances. I list the names of my loved ones, all ghosts, like a litany.

There aren't any clouds yet, and the Bone Moon marking the Secondmonth, with its bright, pocked face, is over half full.

Returning to Venor's estate for the first time in two

years has the dread coursing through my innards. I remind myself to look on the bright side. He might be dead.

Mora means *brave* in old Crozoni. I used to take pride in my name when I was a girl. Now I feel like a fraud.

“Good girl, Clomper, good girl,” I coo to her.

“It’s like I’m riding a boat,” Kit shouts over the hoof-fall.

He grips too tight – the harder his legs cling, the faster Clomper goes and the more precarious we are, perched six and a half feet above the ground.

“Hang on to me, not her. She knows you’re scared.”

“I’m not *scared*.” Kit’s thighs shuffle closer, and his arms tighten around me.

He’s a solid warmth at my back, smelling faintly of the sweet-onion stew he was cooking hours before – a Skøl specialty his owners keep on the menu. His chest hugs my shoulders, and when I lean back his cheek appears beside my hood, his voice reassuring in my ear.

“You’re a natural at kine rustling.”

I wonder what state Zako will be in.

The first time I found out Zako took a bad beating, I was fifteen. I marched on over from the Heanes’ farm to Venor’s property to confront him – like a complete idiot. Even then, before his promotion to ruler of the whole New West was in the offing, a Registry Magistrate is not a power to be messed with.

“What kind of man hits a boy of ten? No owner would treat an animal so poorly!”

“Come with me,” he ordered. Skøl’s a flowing

language, but Venor hacks it up like a butcher carving up a carcass.

I went with him. Out of the heat, into his cool dark plough shed.

A pile of bones stood on display, neatly stacked against one of the walls. Human remains. I counted four skulls, two big, two small. Probably from the Crozoni family who lived there before. Some were buried locally. My pa Lewis Dezil; my sisters Enca and Eben; our little brother Char – I think they went to the big grave near Portcaye.

Venor led me to a row of cages I thought empty, until I saw the eyes, shining – huge hounds, huddled as far back as possible. Not growling, cowed.

He picked up a claw hammer from one of the benches.

“My dogs know when to bark and when to keep their snouts shut. It’s a simple trick to teach.” He stroked the hammer like a pet.

I stared back at him.

“Don’t show your face on my land again. Don’t bark, you little makkie, or your friend will live here.” He swung the hammer, gesturing to the cages. “With the other rats.”

I didn’t argue – but I couldn’t control the look of disgust on my face before I turned to go.

Never turn your back on a Skøl with a hammer.

We’re about an hour into the journey and my hip’s working up to a dull ache. We make good time to Swallow Crossing and turn east down Drumlin Road. At the

big, silver-barked tree marking Wending Way we head northeast, leaving the proper roads behind. Quiet silver radiance lies over the stubbled fields. Clomper's hoofbeats don't belong. Her breath comes like fog.

I remember the way. I have always been able to draw from memory, tuck images away in my mind and pull them out vivid and perfect, like a map.

Often they rise unbidden.

"This is it," I say. I rein in beside a mottle-barked tree adjacent to the track leading down to Venor's estate.

Kit slides off, then reaches up to help me down.

My legs are uncooperative and I all but fall on top of him. My cheeks flare; I can see how clumsy I must look – my crop of black curls escaping from my woollen hat, my trousers held up with a bit of rope, my great dowdy coat and my boots eternally crusted in muck. My too-wide mouth is prone to saying the wrong things and my eyes are irredeemably Crozoni – amber as a warning.

We tether Clomper, sweating under her blanket. Maybe I can find her water.

Kit takes my hand and I feel a strange flutter pushing back the nervousness.

A wooden sign with the word *Venorhome* burned into it looms ahead.

Zako's hut is near the plough shed, back behind the hulk of the barn, well beyond the row of warm brickworkers' houses. We cling to shadows as we pass them.

It isn't really a hut as much as a small shed, flimsily

built, windowless. Easy to lock from the outside. He'll be there, I'm sure of it.

“*Zako.*” I release Kit's hand to tap lightly on the door. Venor's workers have outdone themselves. Not just an iron padlock – four strips of board are nailed across it.

“Mora?” His muffled voice is pitched high in disbelief.

“Yeah, it's me – and Kit. We're getting you out.”