

Chapter 5

Eliacie

This morning she stood with her mouth open again, eyes on the beams above, inside Brother Valenine's large room, the one that scraped her nose raw with the sting of vinegar and alcohol. Everything in the room was scrubbed with it. Each one of his tiny craftsman's tools, neat rows of metal things that sliced or pricked or clamped.

The temple-made golems were like her, except that they were not. Because 'temple-made' meant allowed. And pit golems weren't allowed.

'Those molars are for grinding.' It was Brother Daedalus speaking. She could see the florid tinge of his forehead, two inches in front of her, as he peered into her mouth. Her jaw ached from holding it as open as she could. A pitfighter she knew once could open his jaw so far he could swallow a whole fish, a big one, wider than her head. They used to throw him one if he won a fight, because the crowd would cheer to see his jaw separate, gaping, the scales and fins disappearing whole. His throat contracted in waves to push it down.

It wasn't always fresh fish. She had woken up many nights to the sound of his retching.

His name was inked below her left ear, behind the heel of her lower jaw.

'But look at the canines.' That was Brother Valenine, hovering somewhere to her left, his voice a little pitchy, a little breathless, the way it was whenever he was around her.

'Omnivorous. That's my opinion.'

‘I would err on the side of the carnivore, Daedalus. Just because it can digest starch does not make it biologically appropriate. We have made that mistake before.’

The brothers were, mostly, small men, with no real muscle and mournful, serious expressions beneath their cowls that Eli had seen before on dogs with too much skin. Brother Valenine had a set of glass coins balanced over his eyes by a wire frame hooked over his ears. They made his eyes look like two boiled eggs popping out at her. She hissed when she saw it the first time. She didn’t mean to. Felix had held her still. *These are the masters they came for*, Felix said. These were the masters that could care for her. The reason they escaped Lucandria.

Felix and the others had left soon after they arrived.

You’ll be safe here.

This is where you need to be.

We need to find work. We need coin. They can’t keep adults here. Not for long.

They had waited as long as they could. Then Felix said they got a job. But he didn’t say what kind of job. Just a small one. It would only be a few days. No, she couldn’t go with. She had to stay here where it was safe for her. Yes, it was safe for him to go. No, that didn’t mean she could go too. She needed to stay here. These masters were different. The reason for leaving Lucandria, for escaping the pit, was for her to come here. She’d have a chance here. That’s what Felix said before he left.

‘Omnivore,’ Brother Daedalus said – a man with skin like a lemon peel, waxy and pin-cushioned – withdrawing his finger from the back row of her teeth. ‘She can probably do well with any staple food.’

‘We don’t know that.’ Valenine pressed one finger under her chin, closing her mouth, angling her head to the side. ‘If we get it wrong, the heart might fail. She may need taurine or carnitine, if there’s felid in there, and her body can’t synthesise it from plants.’

She didn’t understand any of what they said. But she never tried to make sense of what masters – brothers – said.

Valenine turned her head, toad-eyes bubbled in the glass rings, fingers pinching her ears.

‘Can you move these? Go on, move them for me.’

This she understood. Plenty of pit fighters could move their ears in all kinds of ways. She tried.

‘See?’ Daedalus said. ‘That’s a normal auricular muscle twitch. Whatever they blended her with, she’s mostly human. An ordinary diet should do.’

‘Phenotype doesn’t tell us much, you know that. And the canines are fairly developed.’ He lifted her hands, pinching her fingertips. ‘So are these nails. I think they can retract.’

‘I don’t know why you insist on taking these mutts in. We’re hardly running a sanctuary.’

‘We have an oath.’

‘We have an oath to the emperor too. He’s a great one for oaths, our fearless leader. And most of these are just terrible craftsmanship. Diet won’t stop the deterioration when it starts. The policy may be harsh, but it’s the best thing in the end. Euthanasia is the humane option.’

‘The policy doesn’t exist to be humane.’

Valenine patted the chair for her to climb up. On the first day, he tried to lift her. He didn’t try again. Not after the popping noise in his back. Eli did as he bid her to and climbed on. There were no restraints on the chair. She could leave. But she stayed, watching Valenine retreat to open a closet, digging around and emerging with string, tiny, even marks on its length. ‘You

aren't even a little curious?' he said to Daedalus. 'Sometimes the craftsmen in the pits are quite ingenious with their creations. You never know what kind of improbable codes they've stitched together. Remember the chameleon one?'

'I remember the foot rot and the skin fungus. It was impressive until his skin peeled off. We stick with our codes for a reason. At least we can ensure some vigor and longevity that way. We have an ethical responsibility.'

Valenine drew the string along her limbs, pausing to make notes. 'Permanent plantarflexion. Altered patellar track: patellar in a deeper femoral groove.'

He held her arm, laying the string from the wrist to forearm. 'Radius to femur gap is closer than it should be.'

'A bit of feline in there is hardly the novelty you're looking for.'

'Give it a chance. We haven't sequenced half its code yet. There must be some reason they risked so much to bring it here.'

'I am giving it a chance. I just don't want you or the others growing attached. We don't know what it is. And if it can survive, what are we to do with it? Train it with our own? Send it into the palace?'

'Would that be so bad? It would be nice. To actually save one. Give it a home.'

'And how would we explain all this to Gracchii?' Daedalus flicked the etching on her skin. 'It's already ruined.'

'I can remove the markings. I can make her good as new. They won't even notice.'

Eli snapped her arm back, leaping to the top of his cupboard. Daedalus ducked for cover, robed body diving for the door. Two golems, the temple-made 'sacreds', spilled into the room,

arms and nose twitching, eyes locked on her, where she squatted on her heels, five yards from the long-chair.

Valenine peered up at her, eyes ballooning.

‘Stand down. It just got frightened. Out with you.’ He shooed the golems. ‘Out or you’ll frighten it more.’

‘You can’t trust them,’ Daedalus's voice quivered from outside the room now. ‘They can turn, you know. They’re made to fight. It’s built into them. Into the code.’

‘Nonsense. It’s how you raise them. Nurture over nature, I always say,’ Valenine’s held his hand out to her. ‘Eli. *Pssst— Pssst— Psst*. Come down here. I won’t remove anything.’

That was an order. Brother was not a master. Not like Master Pugnacious. She could disobey. She could run. This was no place to stay forever.

‘Eli. I have a treat for you.’ Valenine produced an almond cake from his pocket, cupping it in his palm. ‘Come down and you can have it.’

Saliva filled her mouth. *Run*, she thought. Run and find the others. But she didn’t know where to run. She didn’t have a plan.

‘Come now. *Psstpsstpsst*.’

‘You can’t take these off.’ She forced her tongue around the sounds of the master’s talk, shaving off her pit-talk accent, her hand gesturing the cross hatches and curlicues across her skin.

‘Send our sacreds in,’ Daedalus called. ‘Let them neutralise the pit mutt before it wrecks something.’

Valenine held up his hands. ‘Very well. Very well. I won’t remove them. Just come down and sit, won’t you? Be a good girl.’

She dropped from the cupboard, inching towards the chair.

‘There you go. Take a seat again. Don’t worry. I’ll leave all those... markings. No need to remove them now.’ He raised his voice as Daedalus had still not re-entered the room. ‘Don’t you think it’s fascinating? They have developed a culture and art?’

‘Not as fascinating as when they rip your throat out.’

Valenine held her chin between thumb and forefinger, studying her. ‘So human of them. How a culture can develop in the harshest of conditions. Language, customs, even art. All of it in those unspeakable pits.’ He traced the patterns on her skin, some of them ink black, some long faded to gray. ‘I don’t think these are arbitrary. I think they’re symbols, Daedalus. That’s very advanced, don’t you think? That they have symbols?’

‘If I’ve warned you once, I’ve warned you a thousand times of anthropomorphising them. They do all kinds of aberrant behaviours, especially with no outlet. More likely a stress behaviour because of the conditions.’

‘Yet they are naming themselves. That is advanced.’

‘You’re reading too much into mimicked behaviours.’

Valenine traced the markings on her arm. ‘Eli.’

‘Stop using its name.’ Daedalus hovered in the doorway. ‘It doesn’t help them to treat them like humans.’

Valenine made no sign he heard. ‘Can you tell me what these markings mean?’

She shook her head. No. She couldn’t. Wouldn’t. And that was the honest truth. The soot markings pierced into her skin belonged to her and the others from the pits. She could no more explain it to him than she could rip her own liver out for him to measure with his string.

Valenine handed her the almond cake. ‘Do you miss your friends?’

She slipped the cake into her pocket. To eat it now would be to admit she wanted it. And she didn't want them to know what she wanted. Masters could use that kind of thing too easily.

'They don't have friends! For the Gods' sakes, Valenine. They're made to fight each other. You're ignoring their code!'

'You know.' Valenine turned, fingers tracing over his rows of instruments. 'It can be difficult to adjust to a new place, but I told them, I told them, if they were careful not to be seen, they could come see you. That vulpine one... Felix? Was that his name? He seemed particularly attached to you.'

Eli raised her hand to her collarbone, touching a tender spot under her tunic. Her tongue had that leaden feeling. She had woken the previous night, slick with sweat, fingers digging into the little mattress she had, the little cot Valenine had given her. She had seen Felix, felt him, felt his back slam into cobbles. Smelled smoke. Felt a rip, like tearing wet leather from her belly to the base of her throat.

'I know all this is new and overwhelming. But you're one of the lucky ones, Eli. Still young. We can train you. You can go into the imperial household if you're trained.'

'We can't train a pit mutt for the emperor!' Daedalus screeched, still safely outside the room.

Valenine kept speaking, reaching for a shiny metal contraption, the length of his palm, with a needle at that end. 'Good golems live good lives there. In the emperor's estate. They have wonderful gardens. With frangipani trees. Have you ever seen those? Very pretty flowers.'

Eli didn't respond. She looked away when he took her arm, fingers pressing for a vein. She thought about frangipani. Frangipani sounded like marzipan; a special treat on the day they were sometimes given on the holy day of Saturnalia, when slaves were treated like masters so

even golems like her were allowed a few niceties. So, she imagined a tree full of flowers made from marzipan. These were definitely on her island.

Oh yes. She had an island. She had made one up long ago. One she could go to whenever she wanted, like now as the needle burrowed into her skin, sucking, leech-like, on her blood. An island where every precious treasure she had lost or given up lay scattered on the shores. All she would have to do is run along the beach and gather them up again, one by one. The earring with the glittering red jewel stolen from a rich lady at the pits that Master Pugnacius had found and taken – along with a beating for trying to hide any of her stolen haul from him. The smooth oval blue seaglass she picked up on the beaches of the Burnt Sea, the one and only time she had seen it, would be there too. She had hidden it behind a loose brick in the safe-house and when it came time to flee there had been no time to retrieve it. She had left it behind.

Her mother was there. She liked to imagine she had a mother. Tiro was there.

Her thumb pressed on the tender spot on her collarbone. She had used a needle, stolen from Brother Valenine and the soot from the fire in the kitchens to make the new mark. For Felix, who wasn't coming back for her.

He was on her island, too. All she had to was find a way to get there.