

Seconds

The iron shackles grated my wrists like razor sharp teeth. Each bump of a wagon wheel jolted the cart and made me wince from needle-like stabs. I wasn't the only one. The girls around me wept from where they sat in the crowded back seat of the wagon. They were blocked off by the black sack clinging to my face, but I couldn't help but hear their whimpers. The moment we were ripped from the safety of our homes, we became dead -they knew as much. And while the slave owner said we were to be auctioned off, I was on the way to my burial.

"Out, get out!" A familiar voice screamed. It made my heart catch in my throat, and as the cart barrier slammed open, I pulled back trying to hear the voice again.

"Hurry up, get her out. Yes, that one," the voice said again, this time, I knew he was talking about me.

Coarse hands closed around my neck and waist. "Irrad!" I shouted, using whatever will I had left. I couldn't see where he was standing, but I heard his gasp. The arms around my waist shifted and began carrying me away.

"Wait!" Irrad shouted. "Stop there, let me see that girl."

The men paused. "She's already been paid for, lad. Find a whore in the next cart. There'll be plenty to go around when they arrive."

There was a clicking noise and then a moment of silence. The hands around my neck relaxed. "Now," Irrad said, "you listen to me. I want to see her face, be quick about it!"

Someone behind grumbled an order. My knees thudded against the dirt and the black sack was pulled from my head. Sure enough, standing across from me was

the man I'd expected to see. My brother looked more a man than a boy now, his black hair was longer, but his light brown skin still resembled my own. Irrad's eyes lit up in excitement and he lowered the gun in his hand. It had been three years since I'd last seen him.

"Clara," he said, "but it can't be. Untie her bonds. That's my sister."

"Do it yourself, pal. It could be your damn mother for all I care. I'll play no part in this," the man behind replied.

Irrad jabbed the gun at the man's face. "I'm not asking you, idiot. Take her bonds off and then get out of here."

I looked up in time to catch a second man sneaking around the side of the wagon. "Irrad!" I screamed.

He met my eyes, but turned too late. The man smashed a wooden beam against the side of my brother's face and I watched as he crumpled to the floor in an unconscious heap. I yelled, running straight for the man. He backhanded me to the floor. Where I stayed, next to Irrad's groaning form. Staring at the mess I had caused.

I gripped for Irrad's shirt and shook. "Brother, Irrad, please. . ."

The men laughed. "Stupid Madethi scum."

A fire inside urged for revenge, and I decided then that one day I would satisfy that feeling. I closed my eyes and leaned into my brother's chest. The tears threatened to spill from me, but I held on.

There would be time to mourn later.

Minutes

Sometimes the world looks better with your eyes closed. A lesson that had proved true thus far.

Two women stood in the line before me, waiting to be auctioned for by wealthy perverts. We were an array of dolls with varying price tags. Less human than the auctioneer man who did nothing other than bargain the price of souls.

These girls had the chance to do it with some semblance of dignity, though. Dignity which would be stripped the moment a man from the crowd claimed ownership of them. I didn't even have that much left. Mine had been whisked away a few minutes before with my brother's blood on the soles of my feet. Blood which flaked off of my toes and became one with the dirt soil around us.

When I had knelt over his dying body, some of the blood had smeared into my hair. The metallic zing stunk through each nostril now, a cruel punishment. And while I laid over Irrad and howled my heart out, wailing to the skies like a sick pup. The slave owner had mistaken that moment for grief.

He didn't notice when I cupped a jagged stone into my palm, nor did he notice me slip it into my mouth. When he put the black sack back over my head, I used the cover to maneuver said stone between teeth and cheek.

No one expected me to fall flat against the wood when it was my turn to be ushered on stage.

You should have heard their screams when they pulled the bag off of my head.

The left side of my face was pulsing blood where the stone had cut through the skin.

It worked, however, as none of the masters bought me. I suspected few would return for the next sale either. In my village, we called that: knocking two birds with one stone.

Days

The desert auctions were the worst. The heat beat down on your skin until it was as dry as leather. With lips so parched that running my tongue over the cracks burned worse than the sun. And I had long forgotten the names of any God in particular, I was sure none would be as cruel as this, if they existed.

“You keep causing trouble and they’ll kill you instead,” Parsha, a dark skinned girl, had said.

“If they cannot sell me, then they’ll give me just what I want,” I said, “and I’d like for nothing more than to die.”

It was a lie, but it had its intended effect. For the remainder of the day, she didn’t speak a word to me. I couldn’t handle losing another person I knew, let alone a slave that I could relate to.

Among the auctioneers, I’d even made a name for myself - Widow. Like a protective veil, the men assumed I was cursed. They believed that the deaths of the previous three slave auctioneers were linked to me in some way. However, this was just coincidence, a chance of luck after they had insulted me.

In Madethi culture, we never killed, even against those who had individually wronged us. The misfortunate and misunderstood who had been corrupted by their own nature.

We believe that life is as precious as a glimmer of light in a dark room. Something I had forgotten when taken by these men. Beneath this value, I still clung to the belief that I would do what was necessary to survive. While I remember, I am my culture.

“You’re up, Widow,” the auctioneer mumbled, gesturing to the stage.

As I stepped forth many eyes lit up with excitement. But when their gazes traveled to my face and they saw my chin raised high and the black scar across my cheek, excitement turned to fear. And despite the price being less than a slice of bread, no man raised his hand.

They decided that whoring was not part of my pedigree. As a proud Madethi woman, nothing made me happier. In response, however, they shipped me to the wooden towers unit - a unit for laborers. And thus, began the most difficult period of my life.

Weeks

The sound of the whip is not that different to a man’s back breaking.

“You, step forward!” The man in the dark green uniform said. He held a whip coiled around his right hand.

I flicked my hair, lifted my chin, and held his stare. He seemed shocked for a half second, taking a momentary step backward. But when the whip cracked against my ribcage, I collapsed faster than I could gasp. And his eyes were once again balls of fury.

“The next time you look at me like that, I’ll take off a few of those fingers, you pig. This ain’t no beauty pageant, and you don’t need all of those body parts to cut wood. Now stand up!”

I shook like a wet dog as I rose. “Your name?” He asked.

“W-Widow,” I said, hoping that the name was enough to stir fear in his cold heart as it once did to those men at the auction. The master chuckled instead. “Hey, Rob, get over here, you need to hear this.”

The second man in a green master’s uniform ran over, also armed with a whip. I looked back at the line of slaves for support. However, the weak and frail men and women stood in a perfect line with their eyes to the dirt. Many of them had probably felt the lashing of a black tongue before.

“Say your name again, girl. I missed it the first time.”

I hesitated but then said it anyway. “Widow.”

The second man howled with laughter and ended up wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. “Now come on, that’s harder to believe than news about motivated slaves. I think that’s the worst name I’ve ever heard. What do you reckon, Broall?”

The first man, Broall, shook his head in amusement. “What’s your real name, love? Don’t lie or you’ll get more of this.” He held the whip up.

“My name is C-Clara,” I whispered.

“Good girl, you’re starting to understand how things work. You keep that up and I’ll give you something that you might like.” He winked and I knew straight away that I wouldn’t like what he spoke about.

These men sent shivers down my spine. Which was saying something, because at the auction they had been cruel ravenous mutts and murderers.

He gestured for me to step back. Which I obliged without further hesitation, the red line along my ribs served as a heated reminder. The longer I looked at the man the angrier I became, but my fear of the weapon in his hand outweighed the hate.

“Welcome to the wood towers,” the man said, “my name is Broall, and I’ll be your camp leader and friend.”

He was easily the tallest man in the camp, and had the broad frame of a soldier. Broall’s face was covered in thick beard and he had a headful of dark hair. But in his eyes and smile, there was no sign of happiness, only malice, and greed.

Broall continued, “The men in green uniforms will watch the perimeter as you work each day. Their job is to make sure you’re doing your work. You’ll be carving out branches into fully functioning spears, which the army will then use for their barricades. If you slack, you will pay for it, dearly.”

He grinned as if sharing a private joke with himself.

The second guard, Rob, stepped forward, he was smaller than Broall, and wore a straw sunhat. Rob picked up a water skin from the floor. “All of you will be working for this. We believe in rewards and if you do enough, you’ll get half a skin each day.”

That was barely enough for half a person, let alone one.

He paused to take deep gulps of the liquid, making sure to spill some over his chin and onto the soil beneath his feet. Rob continued, "People in this camp have come and gone because they haven't earned their share. But we've changed that this time around. You get to share water with the horses, or work for some of this liquid gold here."

I knew the bastard was goading us. But I still found myself licking my lips, just like the other slaves in line. The guard turned the water skin upside down, letting the crystal liquid sink into the earth.

There were gasps from the slaves, and I found myself grinding my teeth. The security guards laughed, an evil gang of laughs that carried the length of the yard and beyond. Echoing to the hills that stretched into the distance behind.

Weeks pt.2

"Can you believe that man," Jede, an older slave, said to the group.

Twenty slaves sat gazed up at him. They murmured their agreement with Jede, and those that didn't speak, looked frustrated enough. They felt the same way I did about Broall and his team of guards. Though it surprised me how fast the group had shared their true feelings without the concern that word might get out. Also, how fast they had made friends with one another.

I kept to myself in a cool corner of the sleeping bay. And although it was called a sleeping bay, it was actually a concrete room without furniture -which was much nicer than the uncomfortable seat of a wagon. Luckily, there weren't many

of us. But Broall mentioned that new slaves may arrive in the next few weeks. I just hoped to still be alive by then.

“We have to find a way out of here,” Lesa said, a slave from down South, said. She had chosen to transfer up to this camp. “There have been stories about a group of slaves who ran away from here for good. It’s the reason they could take in so many of us at once,” she said.

There were more whispers amongst the group now.

“Nonsense,” a burly man in the opposite corner said, “those people were all murdered. Why do you think this room is clean? They hosed it down after splattering blood on the walls.”

The talk this time, was fast paced, fearful. I wanted to believe Lesa, but the man’s argument seemed much more plausible. The security in the place felt so relaxed. Although, even if we did try to run away, the camp was surrounded by forest and hills for miles. You’d more likely die from thirst, water being our greatest commodity. That and staying alive.

Maybe I was stuck here until the end. Irrad’s eyes came back to me. He had been in a rage that day, with his power behind the gun in his fist, the finger of God at the trigger. If there was salvation for me, it would have come then, for my fate had been stamped and sealed by destiny.

“God, you’re a real sour one,” a voice said.

I was up in a flash. “Who said that?”

The people of camp three shrunk back in horror. I heard someone whisper the word Widow and then crazy. I crumpled back into my corner. The mumbled conversations of the room picked up again, only the big man seemed interested in my outburst.

“Sheesh, that was abrupt. You scared the hell outta them. Although that’s probably not the right way to err. . . Put it.”

I kept my cool this time, got up and walked outside. If they wanted to mess with my head, they could do it out here where we could communicate face to face.

“You really shouldn’t be suspicious of them, they’re more scared of you,” the voice said.

Shivers ran down my neck. It was coming from me, from my head. “Now you’re onto something, but you aren’t there yet. Try again.”

I brushed at my body to remove whatever spirit or evil curse that was haunting me.

“You’re definitely not a bad omen, Clera. Those slave masters were buffoons. I wish I could get back at every last one of them.”

“Who are you?” I hissed.

“In your ear.”

I pushed a finger inside my ear and dug for whatever voice was inside. The spirit chuckled, a rich loving laugh that I hadn’t heard in forever.

“Not inside your ear, chicken head. In.”

My finger traced the small black wood earring. It circled from my ear lobe, around the back, and finished in a tribal spiral, my clans sign. It had been given to me for my name day by my older sister, Sela. But she had passed on a month after that. “Sela?” I asked in disbelief.

The voice released a gracious sigh. *“I wanted to wait until you were at peace again. In case they separated us.”*

I struggled to find the right words, to find any words at all. If this really was my sister, Sela, there were so many questions to ask. Starting with, how? But at the same time, I didn’t want to know, didn’t need to know.

For a first time in a long time, I had something they couldn’t take away. Something I had to hold onto.

I ran my fingers over the earring. “Sister,” I whispered.

“I’m glad we can finally speak, my sister,” the voice whispered back.

And for the first time in months, I smiled.

Months

Over the next few months, Sela and I caught up on life. I filled her in on Irrad and our deceased parents. She had her moment and then tried to help by prompting me to make friends. I would have been satisfied talking to her all day long. Apparently, that would be far too boring. She wanted excitement, romance, friendship, things I couldn’t promise. But she also didn’t want the slave owners to think I was acting unusual, some had been whipped for less.

“Your trust grows for the other group members each day,” Sela said.

I chipped away at a thick wooden branch in my hand with the crude piece of metal provided. “They aren’t as foul as I thought,” I said back, in my head.

“And Jedan? He makes you smile, doesn’t he?”

She was referring to the burly man who had looked at me the first night. He was nice enough and we seemed to click.

A crimson flush crept over my cheeks and I shook it out of my face before I continued crafting the spear. The guard overseeing our area mistook the flush as some kind of sign and winked at me. I didn’t react, but instead looked back down at the spear as if I hadn’t noticed.

I collected branches from the forest floor behind and then sat on the edge of the brush and shaped them. The damp soil was especially soothing compared to the hot ground of our camp site. Surprisingly it was something to look forward to. By the time we would go back to camp the clay would be hardened with cracks through it, but cosy enough to sleep on overnight.

“Pick up your pace, Wallflower,” the guard said to me.

They always called me that now. Said I was as pretty as a flower that had been smashed against a wall. I’d heard worse comments and compliments.

“He’s paying an awful lot of attention to you today.”

“I know.”

I chipped away at the wood faster, hoping that his attention would shift to the slower workers. And whenever the guard would turn away to check on the other side of our unit, I had a hole in the soil underneath where I stowed away a blowpipe and wooden darts which I had fashioned from spare wood. We had been trained to hunt with them since we were young, and if it penetrated the thick neck of a goat, it would do the same to a human. Escape, my people, freedom was still very much on my mind, despite the fairer circumstances.

“I noticed Marya smiling at Broall earlier,” Sela said, “I think she’s giving him information.”

“About what? You’re being paranoid Sela.”

Many of the women tried to use their bodies to get extra attention from the guards or to earn a sip from a water skin. If it happened it was in private, the group had done nothing warranting punishment.

Sela, however, remained silent, which was her way of saying, there’s more to this.

Jedan returned from getting a drink, I didn’t know how he drank so much from the Horse water and didn’t feel sick. “Fresh as a summer stream,” he said as he sat down next to me.

Jedan knew about the blowpipe, but I could trust no one else.

“If a summer stream has bits of horse spit floating in it, sure,” I said.

He chuckled. “You know the Ramki people of the East eat horse manure. We frown at the practice, but it seems like you can survive on the diet.”

“Eurgh,” I said.

We shared a laugh at that. I even noticed Sela giggling along.

I glanced up to see Broall approaching with another guard at his heels. His face was red and he had a water skin squished between his hand.

“Shit. . .”

“What?” I thought at Sela. But she remained quiet.

Everyone stopped their wood chipping as Broall came to stand still at the center of our group. “So you think you can outsmart me, who was it?” Broall asked.

There was silence amongst us.

“Somebody better put their hand up real soon, because otherwise, you’re all getting lashings for this. And I’m talking twenty lashings each. Who the hell thinks I’m a fool!”

My heart was stuck in my throat. If he’d figured out I was using extra wood to carve a weapon, then he knew I wanted to fight back. He was going to kill me, in front of them. I looked up to meet his eyes and sure enough, Broall stared straight at me.

“No,” Sela hissed.

“You think I’m a fool, Wallflower?” Broall asked.

I shook my head, frozen with fear.

Broall walked toward me and crouched a few steps away. “Then tell me why you think it’s okay to do what you’re doing?”

“He’s testing you, sister, you’ve done nothing.”

I tensed my jaw and shook my head, it was the only reasonable thing I could think of.

The punch took me by surprise. Broall’s heavy fist smashed into my face. I was lifted off the ground and rolled across the floor in a heap. Broall didn’t stop there, he followed after me. He stomped the side of my stomach, the second

stomp split the skin under my chest. I vomited thick phlegm on the dirt, which was mixed with fresh blood. Pain seared all through my frame.

The slaves watched in silence.

“I’ve given you food, water, and you do this to me?” Broall said.

“Don’t answer him, sister. Just focus, ignore the pain and focus on my voice. I love you, stay alive.”

Broall boot thrashed into my leg. I moaned in pain. He smashed it again, harder this time. “Tell me why you do this to me, bitch.”

“No-Nothing, I did noth-”

He held my leg straight and smashed straight down on the knee. I felt the snap before I heard it, and my eyes rolled back into my head. Pain lanced up my thigh, a scream fought free from between my lips.

“Be strong sister. Search for me. You are strong.”

“Tell - me - why - you - lie to me!” He roared in my face, bits of spit fling from his mouth onto my cheek.

I cradled my arms around my chest and waited for the moment he killed me. He stood, panting, all of his fury unleashed, and yet his fists were still clenched tight. The first tear found its way down my cheek on its own accord, and then a second, and the rest kept running free. Broall reached down and squeezed my throat. “Oh no, you’re going to answer me before you die.”

“P-please, mercy,” I spluttered.

“It wasn’t her,” a voice said from behind.

Broall's head snapped toward the voice like a hound that had sniffed out its lead and then he smiled. "You took longer to break than I'd expected" he said to Jedan. He flung my face to the dirt and walked away.

"It's okay sister, you're safe now. Listen to my voice."

I closed my eyes and nodded, trying my best to suppress the whimpers. I couldn't help the odd few that escaped, as well as the tears which ran over my cuts and bruises with a stinging flare.

Broall continued. "I'm not going to kill you, Jedan. You'll be my example to the group. The rest of you take this as a message, this man thought he could steal water when I wasn't looking. Water from a supply for those who worked hard. In the end he was stealing from you.

"The next time someone does this, I will find out who you chat with, who you sleep next to, and I will remove them. If they're smarter than you, they will kill you before I have to act."

Broall turned to walk away. "Bring the idiot oaf for forty lashings," he said to the guard and then turned to spit on me. "Consider that payment for giving me a false name, girl. You have your friend to thank as much as yourself."

He stormed off to the other area, kicking up dust behind him.

The edge of my vision was becoming white, I could hear Sela's voice, but her words were unclear.

"Stay alive, C. . . Cle. . . Sist. . ."

I reached for the place I imagined Sela to be, deep in my chest, near to my heart. Ringing sounded through my ears, I heard the footsteps of the other slaves as they came to check on me. "Broken, dead, devastating," they said.

Someone pushed on my leg.

I screamed, so loud it scarred my throat.

They were right, I had a fracture below the knee. But Sela knew, as well as me, that there wasn't a fragment of my soul which had been left unbroken.

The world was bright white and then it was quiet.

Years. . .

A visit to a gravestone is a journey that most dread. With tears in your eyes and flowers in your hands, you know that you will come back empty of soul and hand.

The trick is to go with the people you love. Because a life with love can never be meaningless nor empty.

Back then it was Sela.

Now I chose my grandchildren, my daughter -Sirra, and son -Eli, and my husband Jedan. Those who know my story as well as they know their own hearts.

The day I killed Broall, was the day Sela had left me never to speak again. Maybe it was because I had broken the Madethi way. I still wore the traditional earring. But I knew the voice would not come again.

It seems unreal that a slave can find some semblance of happiness.

Sometimes I sit in my rocking chair and wonder if I really did survive that camp or if the world I'm in now is just a dream.

But then I look into the eyes of my children and doubt disappears.