

Under A Midnight Sun

An Unspoken Chapter

Ballet of the Blades

“Their names whispered in hushed tones, the fear of their coming far greater than their actual passing. The Muk’Sari Blade Dancers are rightly feared across the lands as the greatest assassins that ever lived.” - Gareth Goldic – Master Archiver

Prologue – The Whetting

It was a terrible tempest with whipping winds and lightning lashing out at any who dared brave its wrath that night. In the great grasslands of the Fealthas Valley, this was often seen as both a blessing and a warning of vengeance to come and the nomadic peoples who lived on it huddled in their tents and teepees for warmth and comfort, respectful of the true power of nature that far outstripped their individual beings.

A burning lamp in the darkness of the damp twilight a large tent sat, oblivious to the elements raging about it, or perhaps the elements themselves saw the tent as one of their own and left it to its own devices. A birthing was due at this moment, an auspicious or ominous omen this moonless midnight none could tell.

A cry in the dark. A choked mewling, not-human, but human enough.

“It is a fine cub you have borne, great warrior.” Purred the ancient and withered Caregiver, a seasoned matron of well over a hundred winter cycles, as she bore forth a tiny, blood and mucus soaked lump of flesh that was the child. It was female, not by any obvious anatomical differences but that of its features, which was strongly humanoid and thus hinted at its gender. It was a child of the Muk’Sar, a race of beings not quite like any others of this world, but vaguely familiar for all that they were best described as chimeras on two legs.

To describe one, putting the front half of a lion with the rear half of a dinosaur and then tuning their physical traits until it was vaguely human was a good way to start. They were huge, powerfully muscled predators who were heavily furred from the head to the waist, where the fur steadily gave way to reptilian hindlegs and a massively long tail all of which were covered in sand-coloured scales. Their most striking features were their faces. Males typically resembled the great hunting cats of the plains, feline with their huge manes and quite inhuman. Their females, for reasons known only to their Creators,

looked extremely human if you discounted their eyes and great sharp canines and, properly concealed, most could pass for one in human society.

That, combined with their natural gifts and abilities, is what gave them their legendary reputation as stalkers of the night. And that was exactly what this one was destined for. The ancient Caretaker smiled as she tickled the youngling's chest until it coughed up the birth liquids and began mewling its strange, half-mew, unaware of the fate that awaited it.

“She shall walk the Path of a Blade Dancer.” The Caretaker announced as she handed it back to the anxious parents, who began to lick their newborn clean. “And her life shall begin in twelve winters. Savour them well.”

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Part One – The Die is Cast

Yomasi had never felt bones break before. Especially not her own, and especially not so many at a time. She fought back the tears that came to her eyes as her instructor mercilessly broke the small bones in her foot (remembering that this foot looks like a dinosaur's reverse-jointed leg), just enough to punish her for her mistake but not crippling her beyond usefulness when she healed, and then she landed face first on the ground, silently thankful it was over. Her fellow trainees stared on, either horrified or smug (depending on whose side you belonged to) and then she heard her instructor speak. He was just a male, but by experience and appointment he was their superior by far.

“If and when you are disabled,” he spoke as he shifted his training staff in his hands, “Your first and only concern is to complete the Pact and finish the target, or die trying. Here we have a situation where one of us has lost the use of her legs, and the target is only a few paces from her reach.”

Yomasi's world exploded into a dazzling white field of sparks and stars as the instructor rapped the training staff against her broken legs. She bit back as much as she could, drawing blood as her razor-sharp teeth ripped jagged lines in her lips, but a small whimper still escaped from her lips.

“Trainee Yomasi, what will you do? The target is just before you. You have a human who is about to finish you off, and your world is in agony.” He spoke. He was an ancient grizzled warrior, marked by a thousand nicks and cuts, with only one prominent wound that ran from his brow to just before his throat, the only reminder anyone needed to learn from their mistakes if they wanted to live another day. He was also an expert at anatomy and killing techniques, which was why he taught this batch of trainee Blade Dancers how to deal with injuries to themselves, and how to deal it to others.

Yomasi gritted her teeth and planted one hand on the grassy floor, while clutching a fan of knives procured from her innumerable pouches and pockets in the other. She

launched herself with an unnatural upper body strength into the air, flicking the deadly flickering cascade at the ‘target’, a woven training dummy, before crashing into the ground and passing out from the pain as her broken legs flailed bonelessly, tearing ragged new holes in her perception of pain.

<So this is what death feels like.> Yomasi thought, blissfully giving herself over to the rapidly approaching darkness. *<What a relief.>*

* * *

A voice in darkness, calling.

Breath. A breeze like a breath.

Silken, her movements slick and smooth, with no waste in posture or pose.

She strikes like silver at a target unseen. No, not unseen, but inconsequential.

Thoughts strike her like hot sparks, sizzling lines searing white hot across her self-recriminations and inadequacies.

There is no doubt, no hesitation, simply deliberation on a course of action decided upon.

She is free at last, to pursue her true being. She is an unstoppable being of pure purpose. The voice that calls her beckons her on.

“Dancer of the Blades, Bringer of the eternal Crimson Night. Come forth, as bidden by those who have gone before you.”

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A whisper, and a tickle of life. Darting in and out of consciousness, Yomasi slowly begins her long, painful climb out of unconsciousness and into the dim interior of the Healer’s hut. Groaning, she sits up and found herself on a straw pallet, her legs bound and set with splints. Watching her by the side is Narissha, a wonderfully gifted trainee from the same batch and, thankfully, her good friend. Yomasi is secretly jealous of Narissha, she herself not being particularly gifted in any one Aspect of their training, but somehow she’d been given a position in this most honoured Cadre of their people. She wasn’t sure it suited her, but everyone else seemed to think it did so she hadn’t argued. Her world clicks into focus once again.

“Welcome back to the living world, Yomasi.” Narissha said, as she got a bowl of something from the firepit besides her. “Instructor Mormon wasn’t too pleased with that stunt you pulled back there.”

Yomasi accepted the bowl of bitter medicine gingerly, and grimaced when she took one sip of it. The worst part of this medicine was that it tasted mildly sweet at first, but quickly devolved into a cloying, sticky bitterness that stayed with you all day. Half-gagging between sips, Yomasi asked Narissha.

“Did I hit the target?”

Narissha nodded. Yomasi felt her spirits soar.

“But it wasn’t a total success, Yomasi.” Narissha noted, which caused Yomasi to hit the metaphorical rock-hard ground face first.

“What did I-?” Yomasi started.

“Sefilur was commenting on how you should’ve used a fan of blades in each hand for a more confirmed kill, and Mormon was quite upset at how you passed out instead of enduring the pain and ‘escaping’.” Narissha explained, obviously nonplussed at the mention of their biggest rival. Sefilur came from a richer tribe, had the benefit of Blade Dancer training even before she’d arrived, and made sure to let everyone she deemed ‘beneath’ her know this at any and every opportunity. Yomasi, Narissha and a few others had banded together due to their combined dislike of her and her cronies and were now as close as sisters.

“But you did great!” Narissha said, brightening up again. “You performed as well as any of us could have under the same circumstances.” She said, encouragingly. Yomasi smiled weakly as she drank the medicine. Already her bones were knitting, a beneficial trait in their kind, and when set would be even harder than they originally were.

“I’ll let them know you’re up.” Narissha said, getting up. Yomasi nodded and forced herself to finish the bowl as Narissha left the tent.

Yomasi let her smile drop as soon as Narissha had left the tent.

<I wish I were back home raising the Nen’hoor cattle. I’m really not meant for all this.>

A dark cloud of depression settled over her as she slowly picked herself up off the floor with a crutch and hobbled out of the tent to meet the rest. It would be a long year indeed.

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“So, how does the runt of the litter fare?” drawled that irritably smug voice as Yomasi sat by the edge of the flattened patch of grass that passed as a training ring,

watching the daily training routine as her legs healed. She pointedly tried to ignore that voice, but it buzzed by her feline ears, refusing to be brushed off like a mosquito.

“Maybe one should be a... little more humble when asked to perform a demonstration?” the voice droned on. It circled Yomasi like a bad asteroid, as it came back for another pass. “*I* could provide some advice... if you’d acknowledge me as your superior.”

Yomasi hoped that if she ignored whatever it was that was speaking to her, it’d go away. No such luck. Sefilur popped into view again for the fifth time, stalking around her like she was already an Instructor herself, head up, chin high, looking down at Yomasi.

“Still stinging from that little training session?” Selifur purred, almost sexually. She enjoyed this tormenting of others almost as much as she enjoyed hurting them in training. It wasn’t a trait that earned her many friends, but friendship and respect were different currencies and it was hard to say she wasn’t competent at the very least. Still, Yomasi preferred to say nothing. It was always better to have something good to say, or say nothing at all.

“Hmph.” Huffed Selifur as Yomasi continued to stare intently at the participants in the training ring. “You’ll regret it someday.” She said, before moving off to join the rest in their ‘training’. Yomasi resisted the urge to heave a sigh of relief and smile. Their culture might be blood-bound to their families and life-bound to their Paths, but that didn’t mean she had to actually *like* those whose life she placed her hands in sometimes.

Selifur was as much a bully as one would find anywhere else, in any other society, with any other race of people and, life being cruel as it was, Yomasi bore the brunt of her attacks as she was the least capable (thus to her mind) and therefore the most easily picked on. But she grinned and bore it as any of her people would, as their Paths were not theirs to choose and everyone gave their all to whatever destinies their Caretakers had decreed for them.

That was another thing. Yomasi had never known who her Caretaker was, her first and only impression of her that of an ancient being of venerable stature who only came in infrequently to check on her growth. Yomasi had heard that in many of her peers’ childhoods, they were taken care of by several Caretakers in large crèches when their parents went out to hunt or to guard their sites. Certainly there would be wet nurses (another quirk of *Muk’sari* biology was their sometimes random upper-body anatomy) and nannies, who taught them everything from songs and games to survival skills, all before they even had their first taste of flesh. Yomasi had had none of those, instead she had been brought up by her own family-group, and although she wasn’t prohibited from playing with those in her crèche, she certainly was not part of it. She only had vague memories of the ancient Caretaker talking to her from time to time, and she never did remember anything said to her.

And then, all too soon, she had come of age and was sent to join the Path of the Blade Dancers, a secretive and clandestine group made up almost exclusively of females that came around but once a year to all the scattered Peoples of the Plains and scooped up those who had been chosen for this Path. Yomasi wasn't proud to say that her first conscious memory was that of clinging tightly to her mother when the scary Instructor Mormon came to claim her, and she had grown up very quickly since. Judging by her fellow trainees' talk, Yomasi thought that not only was she physically inept, she was deemed 'slow' by some of the rest of the cadre, primarily those in Selifur's camp. She had come to terms with the fact that she might not have been everything a Blade Dancer should have been cut out to be, but it didn't help when they came around almost daily to grind that fact into her face. Sometimes literally.

"Perhaps you think your life would be... better on another Path?" creaked a voice out of the blue, quite possibly from behind her.

It was so old and parched Yomasi might've felt bits of it crumbling on her if she hadn't first jumped five feet into the air. The pain of her broken foot was forgotten in the moment of shock as she came back down again, confronting the source of the voice. As it turned out, the sight struck a chord of memory in Yomasi, a reverberating cascade of harmonics that cumulated in one very final and definite image.

"...Caretaker?" Yomasi croaked, as she recalled the ancient visage from her foggiest memories.

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"Some say that the Muk'Sari are savage, brutal beasts with no more intelligence than animals, gifted only with savage cunning and predatory wiles. That they can speak our tongue is an aberration of nature, that they interact with human society an affront to civilized thinking. But therein lies the nature of the beast: Are they really so different from us, or is the argument that they bear so much physical similarity with us simply proof of a cruel joke by our Creator? Are we, as humans, the joke instead? Ladies and Gentlemen of the council, pray heed my words: Their choice of life is far more complex than any of us can hope to understand." – Dhoridan Blakedown, Philosopher, before the Council of the Citadel

Part Two – Forged and Beaten

Yomasi watched as an ancient relic from her fuzzy childhood past stood before her, smiling that strange smile of hers. It seemed caring but in that contemplative way that bespoke the thoughts of 'Only so long as she's worth something to me', but it wasn't entirely selfish or malicious either. It must have come from a lifetime of raising cubs through birth and into an untimely death. It was a strange feeling, to see a face that wasn't entirely familiar, yet not a total stranger before you. The anticipation was unsettling, and it spread. Behind her the sounds of the sparring sessions died down as everyone turned to watch the series of events transpiring.

“C...Caretaker, what are you doing here?” Yomasi stammered. She did not know the Caretaker’s name, nor how she found what was nominally a secret location where much of their training that season took place.

That question raised many more questions in her mind, and those were not questions Yomasi looked forwards to seeing answered. The Caretaker nodded sagely and stepped forwards. Wrapped around her was a giant cloak, made of tanned leathers and woven fibers, and painted with various symbols of her family and status that made her look a little like a tent. She was by all regards ancient and withered, largely furless and gnarled like an aged willow, but for all intents her single step felt like that of an ancient redwood taking a single, ponderous step, uprooting all that it had held together thus far and simply *relocating* it all. In that one step, the world shifted for Yomasi and she knew things would never be the same again.

“I felt your Calling, young Yomasi.” The Caretake spoke, her voice gravelly. But even so, Yomasi could see a sparkle in her eyes. “I came to collect you.”

“My... calling?” Yomasi uttered, uncertain she wanted to know what it meant.

“Of those who have gone before you, of those who will come after you, there will always be one who bears a special burden, young Yomasi.” Came the reply, as the Caretaker continued to watch Yomasi with that unnerving look. “Come along, we shall explain this to you in time.”

“We?” Yomasi muttered, still rooted to the spot with surprise and confusion. Against the ancient redwood, she was but a struggling sapling, grasping for a place in the sun.

“The Council, child.” The Caretaker spoke, kindly, but now with a strange hint of urgency in her voice. “You... are needed.”

* * *

There was a hush and murmur as one, then another noticed the arrival of the stranger in their midst. Selifur was one of those most displeased by this disruption in their daily schedule as the hushed ripple of awed silence washed over the training field. Leaving her battered sparring partner to bleed to herself, Selifur stormed to the front of the crowd to better observe the disturbance. It was Yomasi, again causing or being the cause of this trouble, being spoken to by an aged crone more than ten times her age.

“...calling?” Yomasi uttered. Selifur bit back the urge to jibe her for her perceived ignorance, and ground her teeth instead. The crone spoke, something Selifur deigned not to listen to as it was but irrelevant jabber. What was she wasting her time here for? If Yomasi wanted to waste her time with some ancient grandmother, why was the rest of the

world going to bother? Selifur grabbed the shoulder of the nearest Trainee and pulled her harshly to the back of the crowd.

“What is going on here? Who are we stopping our training for?” she demanded. The smaller trainee looked at her with awestruck eyes.

“It... it’s an Elder!” the trainee gasped, before rushing back to the front line to watch the rest of the exchange. Selifur’s eyes glazed over as she thought about it.

<An Elder, here? To take someone away for a sacred task, perhaps?> she thought. And the thought struck her. *<I must be who she’s looking for!>*

Galvanized, Selifur pushed her way determinedly towards the front again, and this time emerged to see the Elder taking Yomasi’s unresisting hand.

“Hold it!” Selifur shouted, as everyone suddenly gave way to her... or perhaps stood away from a disaster just waiting to happen. Yomasi and the Elder turned to look at her, Yomasi with a pleading yet relieved look in her eyes, and the Elder with that infuriatingly placid look.

“Yes, Young One?” the Elder spoke, kindly. She wore a smile, the kind that grated on Selifur for being the ‘I-know-something-that-you-don’t’ type. She hated that the most, the not knowing what she ought to know.

“You’re taking... her... for the Calling?” Selifur spoke as she tilted her head towards Yomasi, almost spitting the reference to her like bad meat. The Elder grinned, revealing a mouth full of worn or missing teeth. The rest of the Trainees stepped back even further at this, for a predator showing its teeth meant nothing auspicious.

“She is Called. That is all.” The Elder replied. Selifur was vexed.

“There has been a mistake.” Selifur growled. There should be none, she told herself. *She* was the one to go. She intended to rectify that mistake. The Elder grinned again.

“No mistake, child. She is Called.” The Elder repeated, and Selifur snapped, her considerably thin patience buckling under the crass indifference she was being shown. Elder or not, Selifur’s family status in the Plains was nothing to be trifled with. Her hands slipped to something at her waist.

“I *will* go to be Called.” Selifur growled, as she unwound her *Rrek’Trea*, cunningly concealed on her person. It was the Blade Dancer’s true weapon, a long chain filament of a dozen blades or more linked along its length, and in the right hands it was the stuff of nightmares. It elicited a gasp from the Trainees, moreso because it was only given out to those who had successfully completed their training in the Path and to own one without proper status was akin to criminal behaviour in their rigid hierarchy. Selifur

had acquired it somehow, and now she approached the Elder with menace in every gesture.

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Yomasi's first thought was <*She'll be slaughtered!*>. Her second was to duck and cover as Selifur got within striking range.

The Elder for her part simply watched with bemused interest as Selifur snapped the *Rrek'Trea* in anticipation. It was a vicious weapon indeed, glimmering razors on a deceptively fine chain filament that was as beautiful to look at as it was in their dance of death.

“Do not deny me. You are an Elder but I am far better.” Selifur growled.

And struck.

The chain of blades flashed in the air, glittering silver and steel like a shiver in the air. It was fast, almost too fast to see.

The Elder raised an arm, and Yomasi's only expectation was to watch it fly into the air, lopped off at the joint. Instead, as the *Rrek'Trea* struck, it wrapped itself around her arm and wound tightly, the blades harmlessly coming level with her arm and the chain doing little to her heavily padded self. Selifur's only expression was of dismayed shock when the Elder shed her mantle.

Despite her age, she wore the midnight leathers of a Blade Dancer, and blackened weapons bristled at every conceivable point. It was the ones you didn't see that'd actually kill you.

But it was the emblematic crest stitched into her gorget that stood out. It was simple enough: A crescent moon sickle blade. But only one person ever wore that, and it was the Dance-master.

“You shan't be needing that, young one.” The Elder said, almost too kindly, and tugged gently. Selifur, despite her death grip on the other end of the chain, lost it immediately and stumbled to the floor. The Elder turned to Yomasi, gathering the weapon into a harmless loop again.

But Yomasi had gone.

“Silly Child.” The Elder said, as she picked up her mantle and walked off, leaving a shamed and broken Selifur to wallow in her own misery.

* * *

Yomasi wasn't quite sure why she ran, but run she did. She had decided to do so after she saw what her Caretaker was wearing under her innocuous cloak. Was it out of fear, or awe, or envy, or just incoherent thought, she couldn't tell. Her thoughts were just a jumble of mixed feelings right now, and as she ran she felt them tumbling even more. Across the plains, she ran. Scaling a rock face, she climbed. Forging a stream, she fought. And, finally, into a copse of trees did she collapse from the pain of her injured foot, lying there, out of breath, panting into the warm summer air.

Unable to cope with her feelings of anxiety, Yomasi quickly found a large tree to curl up under, and tried to drown out the rest of the world as she covered her face with her tail. She wasn't weeping, exactly, but more of a dry heave as she struggled to understand what was happening to her and why. She wasn't succeeding.

Night fell.

Yomasi woke up with a start. Unable for the moment to recall where she was or what she was doing here, she scanned her immediate surroundings as her eyes adjusted to the night. As they did, her thoughts coalesced like mist in the cool night air.

<That's right. I ran away.>

Then panic gripped her.

<Why?>

All of a sudden Yomasi was overcome by an acute sense of self-recrimination as she berated herself for being so silly, and a sneaking sense of forlornness overcame her as she realized a fact.

<I ran from a simple thing... a scuffle, more like. I'll... I'll never make it back into the Blade Dancers... oh, oh Nark! I've disgraced everyone!>

And for the second time this day, Yomasi fell into a deep gloom as she curled up against the tree, contemplating her very limited future. A future quickly becoming more limited by the moment as she heard a voice call from the gloom.

"Ho there!" it spoke, in the more guttural voice of a male. Yomasi quickly gathered what little composure she had left and stood up to face him.

Although males performed many important functions in their culture, they were nominally given positions of low status as much of their abilities tended towards the physical and not much towards leadership or other more noble or subtle pursuits. It was generally explained to be a sort of trait in their species, and ultimately formed the basis of their Matriarchal system. It would not do to show weakness in the face of a male anywhere...

“What is it?” Yomasi challenged, as she tried to discern the male’s location. Another thing was losing your composure to an unknown person whom you couldn’t see.

<*Keep your calm, Yomasi. Composure, composure, composure!*> she kept repeating to herself.

“I... just saw you sleeping here earlier... I came back to check to see if you were all right.” The voice spoke, and Yomasi suddenly found herself blushing furiously. Thankfully their fur concealed it, so it wasn’t too obvious, but she was definitely embarrassed. She’d not even noticed when a male had come close to her, while she was asleep! It bespoke of a terrible laxness in her guard, and that often got their people killed.

<*I’m doomed.*> Yomasi thought to herself as she slumped against the tree and slid down, sighing. <*There’s no point in pretending to be anything anymore.*>

As soon as she sat, a rustle and some falling leaves were the only warnings she had before the male, larger than her by a hand, leapt from the tree she was sheltering under and landed before her. Yomasi resisted every nerve impulse in her body to scream, but the raised hackles caused him to chuckle.

“Scared you good, huh? Sorry.” He purred, his mirth apparent in his voice. He looked around for a bit, then at Yomasi again. She found herself curiously staring at him for some reason, into his eyes in particular.

He was apparently oblivious to it.

“Hey, listen. You hungry? I don’t know about you, but I could eat a cow right about now.”

Yomasi stared on, his words registering dimly in her ears. She nodded dumbly. He smiled ferociously and flicked his tail.

“Right. You sit tight. I got a stash somewhere here. Lemme go find it. Don’t move, your leg’s probably not all that good yet.” He said, and as Yomasi remembered to look at her injured leg he was gone in a flash. Looking around and not finding any traces of him, Yomasi settled in despondently and swatted at the fallen leaves with her tail.

<*Now what have I gotten myself into?*>

* * *

In dishonour, from grace, fallen. A figure stumbles, in rags and tatters, beholden. But a child, it has already tasted the sweetest triumphs and the bitterest defeats that life has to offer. It is broken.

Selifur, expelled from her Path and her Family for her infraction of the ironclad rules of her people, disgraced and reviled, trudged the lonely path of an outcast as she wandered aimlessly across the plains. She could not swear, could not curse, could not even bring herself to speak. No, her energy was saved for her single, burning hatred. She would not rest until that fire had been doused, her anger quenched by the blood of that hated Yomasi.

Yomasi!

That name rung blackened bells in her heart, charred by her crushing defeat and humiliation before the whole of their cadre. It wasn't enough the Elder had confiscated her treasured toy, and she'd been expelled by Instructor Mormon for her gross breach of protocol, the person who was responsible for this was little more than that whelp, Yomasi!

Oh, how she *hated* that name. She would have her price in Yomasi's blood to wash away her shame and sin. It was something the rain couldn't do.

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Yomasi felt the pitter patter of the first fat drops of rain scatter on the leaves of the tree above her. It had grown cold, and the chilly north-western winds from the mountains began to blow. That was unusual, thought Yomasi, as it wasn't very nearly the rainy season here in the plains yet. Maybe the mountains just had an unseasonably warm day.

Wrapping her tail about herself, Yomasi tried to keep herself warm while she waited for the strange male to return. She'd run away with little more than the leathers she'd worn that day and they were chafing and uncomfortable, but they were all she had.

"You cold?" spoke the bassy voice. It was the third time today a disembodied voice had spoken to her and she'd stopped jumping every time someone did that. She nodded to the empty air.

"You're interesting." The male spoke as he emerged from the gloom, carrying several large blankets and dragging a huge carcass behind him. It was a whole *Nen'Hoor* cow, largely uneaten, and Yomasi immediately salivated at the sight before realizing it was totally unbecoming of her, and she reigned herself in immediately.

"You look hungry, yeah?" He observed as he started pitching a lean-to with the tarpaulins he'd brought. "It's goin' to be a heavy rain too. Not good."

Yomasi watched with fascination as he went about his work, humming to himself. As far as males went he wasn't bad looking, and this one had the added quirk of having braided his mane into a huge mass of dreadlocks with various decorations weaved in.

Glittering stones, bones and even some metallic accrouments that might've been bells, so faintly did they tinkle in the strong winds.

The bells were the winning touch, something so rare here on the plains they were prized as currency, but that also set off warning bells in her own head. What was he doing here, why was he being so nice to her, and most importantly, *who was he?* How did he manage to always sneak up on her without being detected, and why was he out here in the middle of nowhere?

If she *was* in the middle of nowhere?

Oh no.

<Have I wandered into some other Family's territory, or perhaps some single male's patch? Oh no, if that's the case then...>

But her train of thought stopped. Well, was it really important what happened now? She'd run away from her Path, her cadre, quite likely thrown her family into disgrace... well, she was better off dead or exiled then, right?

"You have something on your mind?" the voice of the male cut, into her stream of consciousness like a wedge. Yomasi returned to reality with a start, to see him staring intently at her. She shook her head.

"No. Nothing. It's not important. Not anymore."

The male's ears twitched once, then he nodded. It was their equivalent of an amused acknowledgement. He gestured towards the carcass, which by the looks was no more than a day old at best. Yomasi's rumbling stomach reminded her what her next course of action was supposed to be as she eyed the carcass ravenously. The male ruffed in laughter and hauled it over.

"No worries, eh?" he said, before hauling one end of the carcass to her side. "I'm Rougash. You?"

"Yomasi Nu..." Yomasi uttered, before remembering that after tonight she quite likely didn't have a Family. Hearing his name, she doubted he had one too. Probably one male too many in *that* side of his former Family.

"No, just Yomasi."

"That's good." He said simply, and started tearing into the front end of the carcass. Yomasi realized he'd saved the succulent rump for her, and felt her fur prick for some curious reason. She tucked in.

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“It has been a popular topic of debate, just why the Muk’sari physiology is what it is. A chimera-hybrid of mammal and reptile, it is their anthropomorphic qualities that intrigue us the most. Like us, they can think and feel; they can reason logic as well as any of us; they understand our language far better than us theirs; and most importantly, they are as susceptible to insanity as we are. Only those with the luxury of sentience are allowed some measure of sanity, or lack thereof. Thus I pose the question: Need we further proof of their equality?” – Councilor Archibald Eremes, at the Diplomatic Consul’s Meeting of the Plains

Part Three – Dousing the Flames

One’s perspective takes a huge leap over the precipice when one’s belly is sated with food and one’s mind has had a good night to mull things over. Yomasi woke up feeling infinitely better, the morning chill from the night before a crisp cleanliness that seemed to have washed away her guilt and doubts. Looking about, the haze in the air seemed to have gone... or was that the haze of her own doubt? Lines were sharper, colours brighter. Yomasi wondered why she felt so fearful the previous night as she looked to the snoring form besides her. Rougash.

Yomasi could see a new future opening up before her with him, entirely on their own, writing their own Family legacy. Well, damned be the Path she was picked for, she’d forge her own!

* * *

She woke up cold, wet, a miserable smelly clump of leather and fur. But despite her physical discomfiture, Selifur’s rage had yet to be quenched. Perched under a rocky overhang, she uncurled herself before setting off, carrying with her a small arsenal of weapons fashioned by her own two hands. She would make the one who had forced her off her destined Path pay for her interloping.

Oh, it was a beautiful day for a hunt.

Perhaps today, she’d hunt down a Yomasi.

* * *

“Hey, tent is packed up ok. You done?” asked Rougash from the opposite end of the camp as Yomasi busied herself with smoking the uneaten portions of the dinner they’d had before. The sweet smelling smoke from the aromatic wood of the tree they’d sheltered under lent its flavour to the curing meat, and Yomasi looked forwards to tasting the results that evening.

“Almost done.” She replied.

In an hour they were done and packed, practically everything they owned now carried on their backs. Yomasi was curious to find out more about this rather quirky male she found herself with and during their journey to find an unclaimed piece of the plains large enough to support their new future, they shared their life stories. Speaking in his simple but charming way, Rougash revealed that he was indeed the third male cub of a large Family group and as the eldest came of age and took alpha male position, he was exiled to live on his own. Lacking the privileges of education and wealth of any sort, he took to living on the land, 'foraging' from poorly guarded stocks when he could. Yomasi wasn't surprised to discover that last night's dinner was procured in such a manner (she had noticed its brand before she chomped down on it), but if they were to start their own future they'd need some way of buying some breeding stock. Rougash pointed out that he'd managed to save a little over the years, pointing at the bells in his mane, and Yomasi could only procure some basic hunting equipment she'd kept with her at all times. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

In time, they found a suitable plot of the plains which bore no territorial markings, and settled down. With Yomasi doing the hunting and Rougash the trading and daily affairs, they managed to attain some semblance of a successful Family, and this would continue for a year and a day...

* * *

It is true what some rumours say of the Muk'sar, that sometimes they revert to their feral states and it is these that are every bit as bestial as many ignorant humans make out all the Muk'sar to be. It is a justified fear, as this one case was about to prove.

She had been a year in the making, but not just one year. Many years of this year had passed in her mind, a scenario repeating itself over and over like a nightmare one cannot awaken from and so, like the worn mast of a beached and battered ship, it went everywhere and nowhere at the same time, pushed by external forces unrelenting and merciless yet held fast against the storms of time and tides of change by an anchoring bulwark formed from an unshakeable faith, a stubborn belief, an immutable hatred.

Selifur, who no longer even remembered her own name, was a wild thing, every bit as wild as the component creatures she resembled, uncaring to her own comfort or thoughts, simply to the basest instincts of food, shelter and sleep. And killing. In every creature she ate, she saw the hated face of her foe, in every dream she had came the nightmare countenance of the source of her misery. Thus trapped in her own cycle of hatred, Selifur's revenge would, one year and a day later, come to pass at last.

In the distance, a small, lone fire flickered, and she smelled the sweet iron smell of fresh blood. Blood meant flesh. Flesh meant sustenance. Sustenance meant another day she lived to hunt Yomasi.

The predator slinked forwards on all fours, having forgotten it had ever walked on two, belly rumbling at the opportunity of fresh meat, having ever forgotten it once never went hungry for more than hours at a time.

The predator no longer remembered anything but death.

* * *

Yomasi was butchering the *Nen'Hoor* cattle that would be their dinner that night and the week to come by the small flickering fire, sparking and giving off the sweet incense-like smoke she would later use to cure the uneaten portions of the beast. She had, by this time, acquired a respectable supply of tools, and a small but respectable means of living. Rougash had been more than capable of the task of taking care of the trade and other Family matters while Yomasi busied herself with acquiring livestock by the very simple expedient of stalking and carrying it off live wild animals from the plains. And so this night as they prepared to retire, Yomasi was preparing dinner while Rougash planned their route for the following morning.

A rustle of grass.

The smell of old mould, musky and acrid. Yomasi smells it only moments before. The predator comes from downwind, masking its scent and carrying it away, but it is too strong, too overpowering. The wind cannot carry it all away.

And another smell, of wet fur and rotten leathers, of decaying meat and neglect.

The smell of death, coming.

Yomasi is on her feet, brandishing her carving knife, her senses acute, and every nerve tingling in anticipation for battle.

She also has another weapon; she is pregnant; the mother's instinct to protect her unborn child is strong and adds another tool to her arsenal.

Rougash smells it too, and is by Yomasi's side, all claws and fangs. He is armed with weapons not like the humanlike tools Yomasi uses, but handcrafted claws fastened to fists and feet, a spiked barb at his tail. He looks like a nightmare monster from the dark.

Nothing like the nightmare monster that emerges from the grass in its flurry of frenzied motion, howling like a midnight banshee. It looks like a shaggy carcass, leaf mould made animate, fur so long and unkempt it might have been a creature from some deep abyss.

No, instead it is simply Selifur's Vengeance, come calling.

* * *

Yomasi cannot believe for a moment what she is seeing. Amidst flying clumps of rotting fur and moss, clumped dirt and hard-packed faeces, blood sprays and gouged flesh, is Selifur. All this time, Selifur, her hated bully, rich, spoiled, all-knowing Selifur. See how far she's fallen, how she fights even now no better than a young male cub rough-and-tumbling with its siblings, broken claws and stained teeth, disease ridden and bristling unkemptness. Yomasi cannot believe what has happened, even as Rougash tackles the interloper.

And then:

"Selifur?" Yomasi asks, tentatively, quietly, cautiously, curiously. Fearfully, guiltily, incredulously, frightfully. There is no one single word to describe the entirety of the feeling Yomasi is putting into that one word.

And the predator stops, and Yomasi's groom stops, and they look at her, and there, at that moment, is that flicker, that sparkle, a gem of recognition.

"Y...y...o..." the predator stutters, trying to form sounds that have been unfamiliar to it for a long time, years and years in a head only a year older, sounds that might have carried meaning to it in another life. Neurons spark into life, pathways feebly trying to make contact with their long-lost siblings, tangled coils of thought uncoiling themselves.

It is a serpent's nest in the mind, and the venom sinks deep.

"*YOMASI!*" the predator screams, in despair and hatred, a screech that grinds along the conscious mind and sends barbs into one's hearing, tearing it all out in a single moment of pure hatred.

And Selifur is back, restored in mind, if not body, and her bestial features revert into something that might have been beatific, if time and mind had not ravaged it. It looked at her with an eye that once again held the flame of thought and intelligence, and spoke.

"All these years. I've searched for you. Hunted for you. You, you who drove me from my Path!" she growled. Her voice is hoarse, scratchy, coarse from lack of use. Yomasi steps back, while Rougash positions himself behind Selifur, ready to act.

"What happened, Selifur?" Yomasi asks, desperately trying to make sense of this. "What did I do?"

Selifur is on Yomasi in a flash, so fast not even the preternaturally fast reflexes of most Muk'sar could have caught it. She grabs Yomasi by the wrists, so tight Yomasi feels her tendons creak, and drops the knife.

“Do? You know what you did. You were Called. You! Who should be the whelp, you, who should be lying in the dirt, wallowing before me. You, who could do nothing but got everything!” hisses Selifur, her terrible breath clouding out Yomasi’s other senses. She can barely see beyond the green haze that is Selifur’s presence blotting out the rest of her existence.

“But I refused!” cries Yomasi. “I ran.” She says again, more softly. “I never wanted to be Called. I don’t even know what a Calling is!” she wails. “All I want is to live normally!”

A flash of steel in the night, one that might have caught the old Selifur off-guard, might have slain her where she stood, but adrenaline pumping in her veins, her senses heightened with the Hunt, new Selifur simply backed off and watched it sail harmlessly into the night.

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible any longer, Young One.” Spoke the gravelly voice from the night. It was a voice Yomasi had learned to fear over the years, which Selifur had grown to hate, and which neither wished to hear again.

Into the faint firelight steps the Elder, dressed unassumingly in her Caretaker’s robes, bristling with a deadliness that went unfelt until one fell over, dead. A relic of the ancient past, a moment of their history, indelibly etched into the same slate of their memories, a mark of pain and suffering.

“*You!*” shrieks Selifur as the Elder stands there, completing the pattern. Selifur, Yomasi and Rougash on either side, the Elder, on another side. Selifur was the axis now, unbalanced by the lack of a player on one side, the player that might have been her had she been of a different disposition. Ignoring the fallen one, the Elder turns to face Yomasi.

“You cannot escape your destiny, Young One. The Calling only sings to those who must respond. It is not something we choose to be, it is only something we choose *how* best to be.” Explains the Elder, in a kindly voice that Yomasi has heard so many times before. Too many times now, she thinks.

“Why can’t she take up my Calling?” Yomasi asks, trembling. Everyone knows to whom she is referring to. The Elder shakes her head.

“You have seen yourself. Vindictiveness will consume all that you are. Yomasi, you chose to forge your own Path. For that, you are to be respected. In adversity, you thrived. In hopelessness, you found a reason to live on. Those are traits that one lacks.”

Selifur feels a twinge of that old madness coming back. She is being disregarded again, referred to so flippantly as an object rather than someone who deserved respect. But now, alas, she has no honour or reputation, or family to come back to. That cold,

steely core of logic is the only anchor to her sanity now, and being battered every waking moment.

“They will not exist much longer.” Selifur speaks in that cold voice, like that of her cold-burning madness now. Yomasi has only a second to react to save her own life as Selifur leaps at her again, claws bared.

Selifur is a force of primal nature, unbridled, lacking restraint. She seeks to kill, to maim, without regard. It is a simple thing to kill someone, there is no need to think of their well-being or feelings. Lower races, like humans, often have trouble suppressing their bestial need for death and carnage and are always at war with each other, unable to comprehend the fact that understanding was key. The Muk’sar evolved beyond that, their very nature being that to kill to eat, to mate, to *survive*, instead evolving to beyond the need to kill, instead settling their differences intellectually, formally, understanding of their own brethren’s needs and wants.

Selifur is not such a Muk’sar, any longer. A beast, a cunning beast but a beast nonetheless, she strikes and flails, feints and slashes at Yomasi and Rougash, who has joined the fight. They tumble in a ball of fur and blood, scales and teeth. And then something breaks. A mistake, a failure, a *pause*, on Yomasi’s part, and she falters. Selifur sees the chance, takes it. She strikes, for the carotid artery, the fount of life. A flurry, and a large shadow looms over her. Yomasi is showered in blood, but it is not hers. Rougash has protected her. Torn from shoulder to waist, he is bleeding deeply and terribly. Flesh and skin hang in tatters, torn scales dangling by strips of tissue loosely held together by dying cells, wetly gleaming muscles glinting wetly in the dark bloodstained night. Selifur has struck hard, and it shows.

Yomasi wants to scream, but there is no time, no luxury, for her to do so. Rougash, seemingly oblivious to his grievous wounds, drives Selifur back with renewed vengeance, as if with every spray of his own sacred blood the demon made flesh is forced to retreat or be burned by it. Unable to stand, paralyzed by abject horror and worry, Yomasi watches as Rougash drives Selifur to the edge of the plateau upon which they camp. A deep ravine drops like a gash below them, like Rougash’s wound, a dark maw into which death lurks with promises of an eternal darkness, jagged teeth promising to draw blood like that which pours from his wounds.

The lip of the ravine kisses the two combatants now, as the ravine breathes upon them, a whipping fierce storm of wind-tossed pebbles and detritus. A hint of cold, like the Grim Reaper’s own breath, grips Yomasi. The Elder is besides her now, watching the contest to survive impassively.

“You can defeat Selifur, Yomasi. He cannot. I have seen it.”

Yomasi refuses to believe it as Rougash strikes yet another blow, staggering Selifur, tearing patches of fur and scales away, pushing her yet closer to the edge. Like a lover preparing for the kiss, the ravine puckers up, its lips rising dramatically as Rougash

pushes Selifur yet nearer to the endless depths of death's embrace, the Casanova wooing life into its own lightless world, darkness without end, deep beyond depth.

"He will prevail." Yomasi speaks confidently.

"He seeks only to buy time for you, Young One." The Elder speaks, and Yomasi knows this to be true. Rougash has taken a mortal wound for her, his lifeblood draining away with every movement he makes, as if he is trading years of his life for every contraction, every spasm of his muscles. All this to protect her, Yomasi. And she knows this, and Selifur is beginning to know this too. She has begun to pull away from death's final embrace, pushing Rougash back now, offering him as the substitute to her own loveless passion for death. He knows this, but still he fights, throwing his weight against her now as his strength fails. Death is not picky, it waits, patiently, eternally, at the edge of that ravine, its endless spires of rocks and pitfalls each a custom scythe blade, each a dimple in Death's faint, cold smile as that final culmination to Life approaches.

And all this, as Yomasi struggles with her own fight. She knows now that whatever happens, she will never carry on with Rougash. She is, after all, Muk'sari, and knows death when she sees it, brandishing its will upon all living beings. She sees him now, wings of darkness slowly wrapping around the two, irrespective of their beliefs, their strengths, their weaknesses, their very being and essence, as, after all, isn't everyone equal in death?

And so Yomasi finally gives in.

If this was her battle, let her fight the glorious fight, let her win or lose by her own strength. If she was destined to be Called for some obscure future, then let her do so on her own terms, with her own hands, by her own will.

"Take this." The Elder speaks, handing Yomasi something she never thought she might ever wield someday. The *Rrek'Trea*, an ancient relic from another life, once Selifur's, now hers. And despite having never used it before, despite having never passed through the rigors of the Blade Dancers' full Path, Yomasi has an altogether different Dance of Blades of her own now.

No longer the waffling, gawky, unsure youth a mere year ago, no longer clumsy and self-effacing, Yomasi has bloomed. Watered with care, fertilized by love, planted in the rich foundational soil of a responsibility to the life she now nurtures, Yomasi has burst the self-negating hubris of her youthful insecurities and has broken through the surface into a brave new world. And it is these measures of her being that her ancient ancestors saw fit in her, enough to Call her to a new destiny, to avert an End of Days that is to come. Renowned as the bringers of eternal darkness with their Dances to Death, Yomasi now brings to the Blade Dancers' Ballet of Blades; her Dance to Life.

Yomasi charges into the battle even as Selifur gains the upper hand and lands the final, debilitating blow to Rougash's failing physical shell. He falls, hard, and

squelches in the blood-soaked ground. He struggles to move, but his body no longer responds to him, its coals burnt, its fires going out, it no longer has the steam to move. The light in his eyes begin to waver and dim, as even the final fires of the soul begin to ebb.

Yomasi pirouettes, trailing the deadly whiplashed tail of her *Rrek'Trea* in a flash of silver, aimed for Selifur's neck. A ring of steel, and Yomasi sees her weapon blocked. Selifur has procured something, a terrible thing, a mockery of all that she was and could have been. It is another *Rrek'Trea*, but of bone and sinew, a gross device representing the decomposition of one life into simple wants and needs, woven by warped thoughts into an imperfect whole, a visual description of Selifur's struggle for anything to complete the gaping emptiness inside her, grasping at any handhold, any lifeline, anything, no matter how crude or wrong.

"See?" Selifur croons, somehow fitting that hint of her old arrogant self back into her voice. "I have my own now. I walk my own Path now. All. My. Own."

Yomasi sees the motion before it even begins, in the intent of her words, the mad gleam of poisoned light in her eyes. She backflips, the grotesque *Rrek'Trea* slicing its diseased way through the air where her head used to be, whipping her own weapon across the ground, scything grass and insect alike, and the air is filled with the eerily silent but viciously fatal sounds of their Dance of Death. Floating like dry snowflakes, dirt and grass is kicked up as they continue their routine, flipping and slashing, slicing and kicking, settling on everything like a death shroud of the finest ethereal silk, almost giving Death itself a physical detail as air currents swish and the snow is disturbed, the only evidence of a *Rrek'Trea* having passed through a split second ago.

Like two well rehearsed actors, they play their parts, appearing in virtuosity to be interacting harmlessly, being in reality locked in the intricate dance that will end the part of one actor forever, and opening the doors to stardom the other. Around and around they go, like the ballerinas of old, two old friends that might have been, instead now separated by sheer animosity. And then, a flicker, a warble, a ringing of the bell that tolls for all and none, and Yomasi's *Rrek'Trea* is deflected, a lucky block or a calculated defense, it matters not. Selifur has won the fight, and Yomasi now kneels before her, the necrotic parody of the Blade Dancers' symbol held to her throat.

"Now, I am Called." Selifur says simply before slashing.

But Life is strange. It protects its own, futilely, hopelessly against all cause, against all reason. It propagates against the final eventuality of death, struggling against the endless tide that must someday come to claim it. And somehow, it prevails. Yomasi shut her eyes as she waited for the blow to close her curtains forever, the veil of Life to give way to the darkened stage of Death, but that blow never fully comes. A breath of air, and she feels her throat tickle, but that is all.

Perhaps the cut was clean, swift, precise. Perhaps Yomasi will never open her eyes again, the blissful darkness finally claiming her after being denied all these years. Perhaps she will wake up somewhere else, in some other womb, the blood of her death replaced by the blood of her new birth (as all Muk'sari were wont to believe in), or perhaps in some endless plains of their version of heaven, where the lands spread out into infinity and there are as many Paths as one wishes to take, with whomever they wished to take it with, and perhaps there, she would meet Rougash again.

Perhaps.

But Yomasi will never know, as she opens her eyes to the first drops of rain. Thunderclouds gather above the ever-open lips of the ravine, its breath eternally held as it waits for the expulsion that will never come, deathless in its lifelessness. Selifur has disappeared from her view, and suddenly she realizes that Rougash's body is gone too. She looks, smells, and tracks the bloodstained trail. She follows it up over the edge of the ravine, the smear of food that perhaps the ravine forgot to daub after its meal, one of many small appetizers to fill the palate of Death, and stares into the depths where the bloodstains end.

There, she sees like the fading twinkle of a dying star, in her faint nightvision, in clear black and white and nothing else, the receding forms of Rougash and Selifur. Forever locked in an embrace, Death their final lover, accepting of all and sundry, having never turned anyone away willingly before. And, Yomasi swears, as Rougash tumbles into her view one last time, his lips move.

"I love you, yeah?" she whispers as she purports to read his lips, or perhaps to let him read hers, she can never tell clearly that night.

And, like the heavens themselves cried for her, the skies opened up into a thunderous downpour the likes of which would live in Muk'sari legend for generations to come, the night of the Ballet of the Blades.

* * *

"It is my honour and pleasure to extend to the People of the Plains, or the Muk'sar by your own tongue, the hand of the Republic of Vashiel in all matters diplomatic and commercial, educational and cultural, that we may both prosper and grow from such an exchange of radical new ideas. Elders of the Muk'sari Council, we thank you for this opportunity." Lord Vashiel XII, of the Corlum Legacy, Head of the Republic of Vashiel, at the inaugural opening of diplomatic ties with the *Muk'sari* people.

Epilogue – The Sheathed Sword

Young Narissha, named after her mother's best friend, of the Nau'surr family played in the sun, scampering after a brilliant blue-green butterfly across the Family

campgrounds on all fours. Barely three, she was already mobile and learning to speak quickly, maturing faster than most *Muk'sar* her age. Cared for by other members of her Family group, she would grow up a Blade Dancer like her most famous mother, Yomasi Nau'surr, descendant of the Nur'mari Family. Although one of the smallest on the Plains, the Nau'surr Family was already one of the most respected around and rising in prominence daily. Almost daily, independent males flocked to join the Family, although growth was slow due to the Matron's regular absences, often weeks at a time.

It is said that Yomasi picked up her Blade Dancer's training where she'd left off, under the tutelage of none other than the Dance Master herself, and when the Elder finally passed on, the mantle of Dance Master went to none other than Yomasi herself. The position was cursory at best however, as Yomasi was said to have another destiny elsewhere, in the lands Far North and was seldom seen on the Plains anymore. The stories and items she brought back when she *did* return however, fascinated the rest of the People of the Plains and stories of her escapades spread like a wildfire, throwing up rumours like smoke, and finally settling into the bedrock of the plains as legends. Yomasi was a living myth, who moved like shadows but danced with the vigour of the sun, spreading light wherever she went and chasing darkness out of its hiding holes. Already her tales were told in countless Families, her name growing into the legends of the *Muk'sar*, joining the ranks of other Greats, forming its own part of their culture for ages to come.

None of that mattered to Narissha as she played in the sun. She knew her mother was out, would be back soon with new stories and toys for her, and the few most martially capable members of the family watched her as she tumbled over a large stone, rolled to a stop, blinked a few times, then stoically picked herself up and looked for something new to terrorize with her youthful enthusiasm.

~Fin~