

Chapter 1

I wish it would rain.

On rainy days, we don't have to work in the woods, gathering water until our backs ache and our fingers tremble around our spoons. The Overseers would still find a reason to prod us—maybe the kitchen needs to be scrubbed, or their dock wants fixing. But there would be no quotas, and no woods.

If it rained, there would be water, dripping from every leaf and stem. Our cups would be full to the brim, work finished early, even. Darwin West would be so happy he'd give us dinner.

But it hasn't rained all summer, or most of the spring. For all of these two hundred years, none of us has seen a drought like

this. We suffer more every day, each day worse than the last, all of them endured in the dry woods.

I am very tired of the woods. I have been collecting water from them for exactly two hundred years—we all have, slaves to Darwin West and his Overseers.

“We’ll be lucky to find five drops today, Ruby,” Mother grumbles.

There was no breakfast this morning, not even a mouthful of oatmeal. Darwin said we hadn’t worked hard enough for it the day before. Mother will be grumbling all day.

“Otto will provide.” My answer is an automatic one, the same answer she gives me when I worry. But she is right. It is already hot, though it’s barely past sunrise. Road dust swirls around our skirts with every step. I wonder if there’s even five drops of water waiting in all the woods.

Nothing in our lives has been easy this summer.

“Half our strong ones gone,” Mother says.

“Not gone. They’re just . . . digging,” I remind her. “Like Darwin told them to.”

“What good are all those holes? Now we’re not all harvesting,” she says.

I can’t answer her. None of us know why some of the Congregants have been digging for nearly two weeks. The holes dot the edges of the woods where we harvest and line the road that connects our cabins and the cisterns. They don’t do anything but catch a foot, twist an ankle.

Nobody asks why—asking why means a licking. Darwin gives our men dull shovels each morning and assigns the meanest Overseers to watch them. They dig until they are told to stop.

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“Maybe he seeks water,” I say.

“A hundred shallow wells? No,” she answers.

Soon we reach the clearing where the cisterns sit: five long tanks, raised on rusted metal legs, with spigots near the bottom of each. Our harvests always start and end here. It is on the edge of miles and miles of woods; they all belong to Darwin West—he owns every rock, stick, and person on the entire mountain.

Mother says there are cities farther south in New York. “They must be grown enormous by now,” she’s told me. “My father said they were beyond imagination, even when I was small.”

But I have never seen cities. My entire life has been trees, and leaves, and the tiny lake that our cabins cluster around. It is so tiny that it does not even have a name. It’s just the Lake.

I’ve dreamed of cities—hazy half-imagined worlds that likely don’t resemble any true place. When I was small, I built them: streets and buildings made of twigs and mud, jammed with tiny pinecone people. They always had enough to eat, I liked to imagine. Nobody ever beat them.

We join the long line of Congregants waiting to get their pewter cups and spoons.

“On days like today, I dream of chopping this off,” Mother says. She twists her thick hair up on top of her head and easily secures it with a single pin. The knot of hair looks heavy enough to tip over her short, slight frame. But Mother is far too strong for that. She is made of boldness and sinew.

“Will you do mine?” I ask. Our hair is the same color—like oak leaves in November—but mine curls in a thousand different directions. It squirms away every time I try to capture it.

“Two hundred years and you still can’t tie up your hair,” Mother says, but she sounds a little pleased. She does not have to reach up to do my hair; we are the same kind of small, though I am soft where she is hard. I feel a few gentle tugs, a light scrape against my scalp, and then the relief of air on the back of my neck. The sun won’t barely touch it; our skin is browner than burned bread from all the days in the woods.

Birds sing from the trees and swoop over our heads, darting from one tree to another. Their song and screeches follow us all day, the only witnesses to our secret existence.

The line is moving now. Once each Congregant gets a cup and a spoon, they stand to the side, waiting for Darwin to decide on the day’s quota.

The water can be gathered only from living leaves—scraped from ferns, or the bottom of flower petals—and it can touch only pewter. As for the people who can do that work? Only those blessed by Otto.

Or at least that’s what Darwin—and most of the Congregation—thinks. Mother and the Congregation’s Elders know different. They protect my secret.

All know that I am Otto’s daughter, and that makes me holy. But only the Elders and Mother know all of it. They know I bring my own gift to the Congregation, a gift that must stay hidden.

Darwin is eating something that smells sweet and full of luscious fat. I can almost taste it, even though I stand twenty people away. Congregants can live a long time without food—once, they starved us for two weeks—but I think that only makes me love it more.

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Long ago, before Otto, Mother fancied Darwin, and he fancied her. What drew her affection? Was it his height and muscles? Or perhaps the ice-blue eyes that are shaded, always, by a battered leather hat with a broad brim? None would be enough to turn my head. Perhaps whatever she loved left this brute long ago.

Still, his love for her, however twisted, hasn't left him.

Four other Overseers stand around the clearing, their long guns ready, eyes always watching. If one of us tries to escape, they will shoot—and if those bullets miss us, more Overseers wait in the woods.

One last Overseer hands out cups. He is new and younger than the rest of them. Darwin has hired more Overseers this summer, as he works us harder and longer and deals out more beatings. I eye the coppery bristle on the new one's head, so easy and cool. Perhaps Mother is right, and we should crop our hair—though it would be difficult without knives or scissors. Those are forbidden.

The new Overseer holds out the cup, but I fumble, and it falls to the ground. I bend, quickly, to pick it up—but he is there first.

“Sorry about that,” he says, looking right at me. I look away fast, but not before I see his lips twitch with the smallest of smiles.

Overseers don't apologize. Overseers don't smile. Perhaps they haven't told him that yet.

We straighten up at the same time, our heads nearly colliding. His fingers brush mine when I take the cup. A burning dances down my fingers, my hand, my arm . . . like the curling designs inked on his skin have crept down his arms to bite me.

But it doesn't feel like pain.

I shake my hand to get the feeling out of it. The drought has twisted my mind—all of our minds.

I go to find one of our elders, Ellie. She is standing at the edge of the clearing, in the shade. Ellie is stooped, and her face is drained of color. Her hair is only half braided, the rest of the yellow-white strands straggling down her back. Even her blue eyes seem cloudy, faded.

I stand next to her and squeeze her pinky finger with mine. It's our old way of saying hello. Ellie is the closest thing to family that Mother and I have.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"I am better today," she answers.

She lifts her lips in a shaky smile: a lie that she is fine. Her body shows me something different. I fear she is withering. The Water doesn't make us last forever. Already nearly a dozen Congregants have withered—their bodies giving up, piece by piece, until they finally die.

"Only a few months until the Visitor comes," she says.

"The cisterns *will* be full," I say. "We'll find a way."

The Visitor comes just once a year, when the leaves start to turn. He dresses all in white, driving an enormous beast of a truck. He takes away all the Water we've suffered to harvest.

And Darwin will do anything to make sure we've filled the cisterns in time.

"Boone knocked on the last cistern before you got here," Ellie says. "He says it's not nearly as full as it should be."

Boone is another Elder, once a blacksmith, still one of our

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strongest men.

He's right about the cistern. I check it too, at night, when I make my secret visits.

"Your quota today . . .," Darwin announces in a loud voice. He takes another bite of his food, and every Congregant's eyes trace the path of his sandwich to his lips. We wait while he chews.

"Otto save us," another Congregant mutters next to us.

Yesterday's quota was a half cup and I barely met it. The plants are guarding their water in the drought, sucking it deep into their stems and pulp.

Darwin finally finishes chewing. His lips are shiny with grease. "Today will be one full cup."

Ellie lets out a soft gasp. My eyes stray to the new Overseer. He is frowning at the ground. I wonder what he must think of Darwin . . . and of our following his whims.

"That's too much." Mother steps to the front of the group so that she's only a foot away from Darwin. The Overseer next to him levels his gun at her, but she does not seem to notice.

Mother is our Reverend. She leads us in worship while we wait for Otto to return. Otto, our savior, gave us his blood so that we could live longer. He passed that blood to my veins too, for he is my father.

But almost nobody knows about his blood.

"I could make it two cups," Darwin muses.

"There's a drought, and we swelter already." Mother holds out her long skirts.

The Congregants wear simple, modest clothes, as if it is still 1812, the year Darwin West imprisoned us. Ellie says ladies used

to change bits of their fashions all the time, and likely they still do. I wonder how different we look from modern women now.

Mother says our boots are as modern as any, though—thick, tall, yellow, made to keep us standing for long hours in the woods. The Overseers give us those, one pair every fall, before the first snow.

“Make it a half cup, like yesterday,” Mother orders. I marvel at her boldness, even though I have seen it for so long. She is never afraid of Darwin West.

“One cup, full to the brim. Now go.” Darwin pulls a heavy chain out of his pocket and coils it in his palm. “Unless you want whippings instead of supper.”

Supper will likely be oatmeal tanged by mold, or maybe some greenish bread and cheese. But we will work all day in hopes for it. If Mother speaks again, he might decide we won’t get dinner, no matter how much water we find.

“Mother,” I say.

She lifts her chin for a moment . . . and drops it. Then she turns away from Darwin.

“You heard him.” The Overseer near Ellie and me pokes my back with his gun. I straighten my shoulders and follow Ellie into the trees, close enough to catch her if she stumbles.

“You hole diggers, come get shovels!” Darwin shouts.

Mother comes behind us, and for a moment, I think we will get to walk into the woods together. But Darwin stops her. “You go somewhere else, Mother Toad.”

He doesn’t like family members working together. I make a small signal with my hand, waving her away. Go. Ellie will be

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fine. I will take care of her.

Mother pauses, still staring at Ellie, then finally takes slow, heavy steps away. She pushes aside branches as she goes. They swish together as soon as she passes, and soon I can't see her faded red dress.

Darwin stays close to us. I wait to make sure Ellie can kneel, then I crouch by a clump of goldenrod and pull out my spoon. There is no water on the plant, but Darwin is watching, so I run my spoon along every stem, holding my cup underneath. Nothing drips into it. I move to the next plant, a berry bush. The animals have left a few morsels buried in the thickest thorns. My mouth pricks.

I pull my eyes away fast, not wanting Darwin to notice the berries. As soon as he's gone, I'll return to them. Half will be for me. Half will be for Ellie.

Ellie is on her knees, ten paces from me. Her arm shakes as she runs her spoon along some ferns. Water spills off the tip of the leaves, but it doesn't look like it all lands in her cup.

Darwin is watching her, his fingers opening and closing around his dread chain. Ellie nearly drops her cup and he takes a step closer.

No. I will not let him hurt her.

I stand and bring my foot down on the ground, hard. Sticks break under my boot.

It works. He is watching me now.

Pretending not to feel his eyes on me, I take a berry and toss it into my mouth. The sweetness explodes and I can't help savoring it, even as I know pain is coming.

The chain whips against my stomach. The blow knocks me to my knees, but I clamp my lips shut, crushing the berry against the roof of my mouth. I will at least win this taste.

“No stealing food,” he roars.

If I were Mother, I would answer him with strong words. I would say it’s not his food—it belongs to the forest. But I just stare at his feet. The chain dangles over the toe of his boot, swaying a little as if it is a living thing.

Darwin breathes in deeply, like he’s trying to take all the air before I steal that too.

“Do it again and I’ll beat you until you bleed,” he says.

I pick up my spoon and my cup and start working. Water *plink-plops* into my cup.

I’m not afraid, at least for now. He wouldn’t hurt me badly in the middle of the day. There is still work to be done.

Darwin saves the real beatings for sunset, after we’ve put the water in the cisterns. Sometimes he hurts us, and sometimes he doesn’t—the worst part is never knowing what will happen. Darwin might shrug if we don’t give him what he wants. Or he might lift the chain.

When he does hurt us, we have all night to heal. That’s enough time to get us ready for the next day’s harvest, unless he breaks bones. Those take two or three days to knit back together, if we’ve had Communion each week.

There’s enough water in my cup now that I can imagine it’s a mite heavier. I can feel Darwin’s eyes on my neck. I draw in deep breaths as I work, trying to ease away the feeling of his stare.

Darwin leans over me and peers into my cup. “Should have

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made you Toads collect two cups,” he says. I brace for a slap, but he reaches past me into the bush and plucks every last berry. He crams them into his mouth. “Harvest well, Toad.”

That is what they call us—toads. I guess that’s because we can survive their beatings and starvings, like the toads that sleep in the mud all winter here. Or maybe we are that ugly to them.

He shuffles away, down the hill. I imagine he’ll sit in the shade with his favorite Overseers, playing cards and eating the lunch we never get.

As soon as he’s gone, Ellie stops working. She sits on the leaves, the cup in both her hands. I check to make sure we’re alone, then hurry over to her.

The bottom of her cup is barely wet.

“Hard for an old woman to keep up,” she says.

“You don’t have to apologize.” I hold my cup over hers and pour. Everything I’ve collected is hers now.

Ellie puts her hand out to stop me, but she’s too late. There wasn’t much to pour. “I won’t have you beat,” she whispers.

“There’s enough water out here for both of us,” I tell her, even though I’m not sure.

She grips my hand, fingers quaking. Her skin feels soft. “Don’t you give your life up for anybody, girl. You’ve barely begun.”

A soft laugh escapes me; we both look down the hill. But there’s no sign of an Overseer. “I’ve already lived enough life for four girls, every day the same,” I whisper. And there’s no change in sight.

The Water slows our aging—or growth, for me. It’s taken this

long to grow from a baby to this.

“You’re a woman now,” Ellie says. “We all see it.”

She sounds so proud—but of what? “And what new wonder does womanhood bring me?” I ask.

“The Elders . . . we want to talk to you about just that,” she says.

Curiosity flickers in me, like a leaf trembling in the wind. “What?” I ask. “What do the Elders want?”

Ellie wags one finger gently. “Wait for the next council meeting.”

Irritation washes over me—and then I feel terrible, small. What has Ellie earned from me but love, and gratitude?

“Sit and rest a bit,” I tell her. “There’s enough water for me to find and share.”

I help her ease against a tree trunk, but then there’s the crackle of sticks underfoot; someone is coming. Ellie grips her cup tight and I spring away from her, my heart pounding. I scramble to a patch of wildflowers and run my spoon under their petals, praying some dew still dangles there.

A shadow hovers over me.

“Your cup is empty,” Mother says.

“I gave it to Ellie.”

“As will I.” Mother takes light steps to Ellie and pours everything she’s collected into Ellie’s cup.

She fishes a cloth from her pocket and wipes it over Ellie’s forehead. The older woman’s eyes are fluttering shut.

“You should go,” I tell Mother. “I’ll take care of Ellie.”

“We are all helping Ellie today,” she says, nodding her head

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toward the cup. It's more than half full. There's no way Mother could have collected so much. I am not the only Congregant who risked a gift to Ellie today.

"Who?" I ask.

"Hope. Asa. And others," Mother says.

That is when I see Darwin peering at her through the leaves. I purse my lips and make an imitation of a robin's call. It's our signal, one we've used for a very long time.

She does not look; that is a waste of time. He has seen us do something we shouldn't have, and it will not be ignored. The only question is what the punishment will be.

"No matter what," Mother whispers, so quiet I can barely hear her, "protect yourself."

Rebellion burns my guts. She doesn't know I took a lashing for Ellie this morning, already. I don't have to sit by anymore and let her take all the pain. I am strong too—stronger than her now that I'm grown, I think.

But I nod, because we have argued about this since I was as tall as her shoulder. She says it's her job to protect me, and my job to sustain the Congregation. But I say it's my turn to help her.

And then Darwin is standing by us, grinning, like he's happy to have caught us doing something wrong. When he looks at the cup, and then Ellie, his head nods.

"Knew you were up to no good. You helped her." He aims a thick finger at me.

We are never supposed to help one another. I start to nod my head yes, but Mother lays a heavy hand on the top of my head: a reminder.

“I did it all.” Mother stands up and gives him a smile that dares him.

He takes the bait and deals her a hard slap. Mother’s head jerks to the side, but she does not cry out.

I bite the inside of my lip to stop from screaming.

His hand hovers near her head, ready to strike again.

“You Toads don’t have to suffer,” he says.

“Then release us,” Mother snaps.

Darwin’s hand sinks back to his side. He drops to his knees and grabs Mother’s hand.

She tries to pull her hand back, as if his skin burns hers. But his grip is too tight.

“I’d still have you, Sula Prosser,” Darwin says.

A groan escapes me, but neither seems to notice. He has asked her, again and again, and I feel sickening shame for his desperation. I hate it more than his brutality.

Once, before Otto followed my grandfather out of the woods, before we were slaves, Darwin asked my mother the same question. That time she said yes.

But Otto changed everything. Darwin West did not win my mother, after all—but he did win the Water, and all of our lives.

Bile rises in my throat as I imagine the life we’d have under his roof. Cruelty does not change; he would only find new ways to hurt us.

But at least the Congregation would be free.

“I wait for Otto,” Mother replies.

It is what she always says.

Darwin hitches up his pants and pulls out his chain.

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“There is still work to be done,” I murmur. “It’s not near sunset.”

His hand falls slowly, the weight of the chain pulling it down, maybe. Darwin looks up at the sky. “That savior of yours is never coming.”

“You’ll see,” Mother says quietly.

I press my lips together and say a secret, silent prayer to Otto in my mind.

Please stop him. I pray. Don’t let him hurt her.

Otto must be listening, for Darwin slides the chain back in his pocket. “You’d better get your lazy Toads working.”

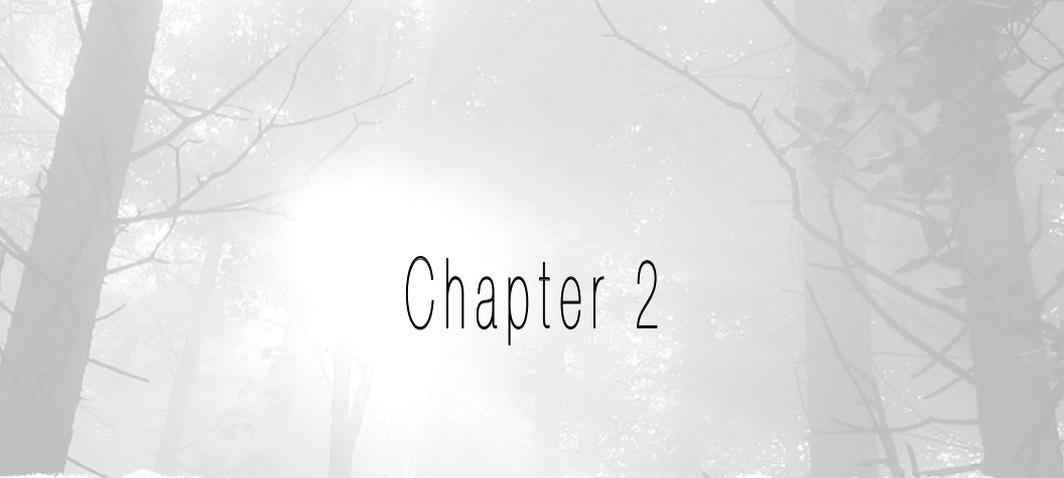
“There’s no way they’ll fill a cup today,” Mother snarls.

“Then maybe you’ll feel my kiss at sunset . . . if you’re lucky.” He pats the chain in his pocket. A shiver down my back turns the day as cold as January.

Darwin’s eyes turn to me. “You, little Toad. Find some other place, away from Mama Toad.”

I can’t help looking back at Ellie. He wraps a beefy hand around my arm and yanks me to my feet. “Go now, or there’s no mercy for your mother.”

There’s no use arguing. I find a patch of woods shaded by brown-edged leaves and spend the day doing the same as always. Gathering water . . . and praying there will be enough for Mother to escape a sunset beating.



Chapter 2

When the sun slips below the trees, I creep back to Ellie. She is so still that I race the last few steps to her. A few drops splash from my cup onto my hand, but I do not slow.

“Ellie? Ellie. Ellie!” I call. “Harvest is done for the day.”

But she does not stir. Is her chest moving? I cannot tell.

I set down my cup, nestling it by a branch so it doesn't tip. Then I put both hands on her shoulders and shake, gently. Her braids swing against her thin shirtwaist. She is as limp as the doll she fashioned for me, long ago, out of scraps and scavenged buttons.

“Wake!” I tell her, loud enough to make the birds scatter from the tree overhead.

Ellie's eyelids flutter. Cool relief steadies my breath.

It's even darker now. I'll need to get her down the hill to the cisterns quickly. We need both our cups to be counted, if we want dinner tonight.

The cup tucked beside her is full to the brim. How many

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visited her today? How many would bring half-empty cups because of what they did for her?

“You are a good girl,” Ellie says. She struggles to her feet and reaches for the cup.

“I’ll carry both,” I say, offering her an elbow to grasp.

Even though the color has fled from her lips and she hunches to one side, Ellie’s grip is strong. “We’d best hurry,” she says.

When we reach the cisterns, the clearing is crowded with exhausted Congregants and Overseers inspecting the day’s harvest. We step to the back of the line, behind the second-to-last cistern. By now we should have four cisterns full, filling the last. But the drought has made that impossible.

The cisterns sit directly across the road from the Common House, where we gather for food—when we get it—and Sunday Services. Trees edge the clearing around the cisterns, always growing a little closer, it seems, wanting the Water for themselves.

Nothing can come out from the cisterns unless Darwin unlocks the spigots at the bottom. All that’s open are the valves on top. We can only add, never steal.

My first memory is coming here at night, with Mother.

“Quiet,” she warned every night. “He must never find us here.” She meant Darwin, of course.

I pulled out handfuls of the lush grass that grows under the cisterns, even in winter, while Mother climbed to the top of a cistern and muttered a fast prayer to Otto. She counted out loud: “One, two, three drops,” then hurried down.

She always carried that vial of Otto’s blood so carefully, even as we hurried back to our cabin. All the vials are empty now, but

she saves them in a wooden box beneath her bed, still careful to keep them whole.

Now it's my blood that drips into the water inside the cisterns. But since this year's drought—since Darwin found a new depth to his cruelty—I've had to come to the cisterns alone while Mother heals. She takes other people's share of the beatings, as much as Darwin will allow.

We are near the front of the line now. The new Overseer is standing by the cistern, his long gun set against his shoulder, only loosely holding it. His sweaty shirt clings to his body, hinting at the muscles underneath.

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, his eyes flitting from person to person. For only a second we stare at each other. He looks away first.

I draw in a deep breath and crane my neck to see whether the others have filled their cups. Boone stands a few feet ahead of us, hands empty—he spent the day shoveling. He is talking to Hope, once my playmate, now a grown woman and Elder. She holds her cup carefully with both hands. I pray that means it holds enough, after giving to Ellie.

But Jonah Pelling, directly in front of us, has a cup so empty that I see its pewter sides. He tilts it to the side a bit, careless, and looks about him with far too much energy.

Anger flashes over me, hot and merciless. I do not care how dry the woods are. He should have found a way, somehow, like the rest of us. Those Pellings always find a way to rest their feet and make the rest of us pay for it.

I nudge Ellie with my hip and nod my head toward Jonah.

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She lets out a small *tsk*, but then lays her hand on my arm. “It’s been a hard season,” she whispers.

“Not so hard for some,” I answer.

“Jonah is a smart boy,” Ellie says.

Why does she defend him? “Smart and shiftless,” I tell her.

Jonah looks back at me, then, and I feel a flash of guilt. Did he hear me? But then he raises his eyebrows and grins before whipping his head back round to the front.

Once, there were four of us young enough to be considered children. Jonah was eight when he came here, and his brother Zeke was twelve. Hope was the oldest—fifteen—fleeing a forced marriage as much as she was following Otto.

Nobody has borne a child since the Congregation came to the woods—save Mother. Some say Otto doesn’t want another child born into slavery. Others think the Water does it. Only Otto knows.

Being the only children meant the Congregation spoiled us some. They helped us steal time to romp in the woods—I, the baby, struggled to follow the other three everywhere. But with time came more duties, and less indulgence. I haven’t chased Jonah through the woods for dozens of years.

Now, he lounges and lets others do his work.

One by one, the Congregants in front of us show their cups to an Overseer. They check it, and make a note on their clipboards if someone has not met the quota. Then each person goes to the ladder.

The Overseer who checks my cup does not meet my eyes. He finds lower parts of my body to examine. They never touch us that

way—but it does not stop some of them from looking. I turn away too fast, and a drop slips from the cup.

“Do that again and you’ll feel the chain,” he warns me in a loud voice.

Someone draws in a sharp breath. I look back and see the new Overseer staring at the man who threatened me. He is gripping the gun so hard now that his knuckles are white.

“Go patrol the perimeter, newbie,” the man tells him. The new Overseer turns away without looking at me.

I slow my walk on the way to the cistern, trying to hide that my legs are shaking.

“Steady.” Mother’s voice, behind me. She presses her hand against my back as I climb the ladder.

“Have all met their quota?” I ask her.

“Enough, maybe,” she answers. “Now pour, and carefully.”

I tip my cup into the open valve at the top of the cistern. Then I see the new Overseer making a slow path around the clearing. He looks up at me and stops walking.

My hand falters and water escapes onto the side of the cistern. But I correct myself quickly and soon the pouring is done. I hope that an Overseer didn’t see my sloppiness. There would be punishment, and Mother would bear it on her shoulders.

When I reach the bottom, Mother holds up a wet fingertip. “You are distracted,” she says.

Shame burns in me, and I cannot meet her eyes. “It was just a slip.”

She raises her eyebrows, then climbs the ladder with her cup.

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Nobody can leave until all the water has been poured into the cistern. Then Darwin decides if we get supper—or his fist.

Soon as Mother has climbed off the ladder, Darwin pulls the chain from his pocket. “Five of you Toads failed today,” he shouts.

“Five people,” Mother breathes.

Yesterday was three. How can she possibly bear it for five?

“Get up here, Toads!” Darwin cries.

The Overseer with a clipboard calls five names; five failed Congregants shuffle forward. All but one is a Pelling, including Jonah, not looking so merry now. They dart their eyes toward Mother, waiting for escape. The last one is Meg Newman. She’s a hard worker, and strong, with a body young enough to show barely any gray hair. But even hard workers don’t get lucky, sometimes. She stands tall and does not look our way.

The Overseers form a tighter circle around us; we gather closer. The new one is standing behind Darwin. Another guard is telling him something, his voice too low to hear. When the new one nods, his lips pressed tight, the two men take a few steps from each other and turn their guns to point them at us.

Darwin folds his arms over his chest and looks at Mother.

“We want supper,” Mother says.

“And I want my Water,” he growls. “The truck’s coming soon, and what’ll happen when the cisterns stand half empty?”

Mother keeps her eyes steady on him. “We’ll work harder if we have food.”

“You think I’m a brute?” Darwin shakes his head. “You see what happens if we don’t have that Water.”

I don’t know much about the man who comes with the truck

every year, to pick up our Water. But I know it's the only time I see Darwin's hands shake.

Darwin nods to an Overseer, the one with the scar over one eye. He stands behind Meg and pushes her to her knees. Darwin lifts his chain.

"No. Not tonight," Mother says.

"It's your fault. If you loved me, none of these people would suffer," Darwin says.

"I'm not the one who hurts them," she snaps back.

Darwin's thick arm muscles bunch, and he slides the chain over his shoulder, ready to strike.

"Take me instead," Mother says—like she does every night when he's got a taste for hurting.

"Mother, no, please." I grab her hand and try to pull her back. It is selfish of me, I know. She has a secret way of healing from these beatings that nobody else has.

She has my blood to rely on.

"Trade accepted." Darwin smiles and nods.

The Pellings melt into the crowd without even a thank-you. I fix a hard look on them, but if they feel my stare they don't show any sign.

Still Meg will not stand up.

"Don't take it for me," she says behind gritted teeth. "I can bear it."

Most of the time, people step aside for Mother. She kneels beside Meg. "Let me carry this load for my Congregation."

"Why? It's not your fault that he beats us." Meg spits on the ground, dangerously close to Darwin's boot.

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I want to step forward. I want to take the lickings, for once. But I've promised Mother, and the Elders, not to put myself in danger. I'm the only one who can heal Mother . . . heal our leader. I'm the only one who can make the Water what it is.

Until Otto comes back, that is.

"So it'll be two of you tonight," Darwin roars.

Meg's husband John—third husband, since after a while even good people tire of each other—pushes to the front.

"Don't do it," he tells her. "Listen to Sula."

She shakes her head.

Then there is no more arguing or waiting. Darwin smashes the chain onto Meg's back, and she lets out a gasp. A small smile plays on Darwin's lips. He looks at Mother again.

"No more," Mother says. "Let me take it."

But Darwin hits Meg again.

"Meg!" John cries in a strangled voice.

Next to me, Ellie starts the prayer. It is a chant, really, the same simple thing over and over. We say it soft and low, but together we make enough noise to reach the top of the trees.

Otto will come.

Otto will come.

Nobody leaves during the beatings. We are a family. So even though we cannot stop the chain's blows, we can bear witness—and pray.

Meg is crying now. Mother reaches out, as if to pat her back, then stops herself. Then she slides her hand on top of Meg's and squeezes.

Otto will come.

Otto will come.

Why do we only watch? Why don't we stop him? Am I the only one tired of waiting for Otto—and of protecting me? Hate burns in me—hate for Darwin and hate for us, standing by while he hurts another Congregant.

I look up and see Jonah staring, fists clenched, eyes narrowed. He was too weak to offer to take the beating—but at least he wishes he could fight too. My anger fades a little.

One more strike, and Meg falls onto her stomach. Darwin lets the chain fall to his side.

The chant fades away.

Meg's dress is not ripped, but blood darkens it from underneath, a fast-spreading stain that shadows her whole back. John reaches for her, and Darwin doesn't stop him. He's looking at Mother.

"Are you sure?" Darwin asks softly, tender for just a moment, like he sometimes is with her. It doesn't stop him from using every bit of muscle when he swings the chain.

"Are *you* sure?" Mother doesn't bow her head.

I start the chant again, and so do all the other Congregants. It's louder this time, and the Overseers shoulder their guns. I look for the new one.

The chain speeds toward Mother's back. There's a horrible thump when it strikes—a sound that makes me cringe, no matter how many times I hear it. But she does not cry out.

"Eight more," Darwin says.

The new Overseer's gun is dangling in his hand now. His mouth hangs open. One of the other Overseers nudges him with

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the barrel of his gun, and he shakes his head. Then he slowly lifts his gun back into position.

I chant louder.

Otto will come.

And I stare at the new Overseer. His face looks wet; could he be crying? Overseers don't show emotion, unless you count anger, or lust.

Darwin strikes Mother again, and this time a groan escapes her. She presses her hands into the ground, no longer staring up at him.

I creep forward and kneel next to her. "Let me," I say.

"Get back, you useless girl!" she roars, and then the chain strikes again, just an inch from me. Somehow she finds the strength to kick me.

She's only protecting me. She wants me away from the chain, and from Darwin. She knows I'm not useless.

I tell myself these things like my own chant, and the Congregation continues theirs.

Otto will come.

The new Overseer steps into the circle they've formed around us. He's only a few steps from Darwin now.

The chain lands again.

Mother slumps to the forest floor. I want to hold her. I want to shield her. But I know what I am supposed to do—and that she would not forgive me for taking a blow. So I wait until I can help her.

"Four more," Darwin says. He runs his fingers along the chain and wipes the blood on his pants.

“You have to stop.” The new Overseer is right next to Darwin. His eyes flick fast from the chain, to Mother, to Darwin . . . and then to me.

Darwin blinks at him, draws a breath, then says nothing.

“Don’t they suffer enough?” the new one asks.

The Congregants’ chant falters, then dies. Are they all feeling hope flaring in them, like I do—and hating themselves for it? Perhaps this new one is softhearted, but Darwin will squeeze that out of him soon.

“You work for *me*.” Darwin says it low, and calm. But his hand grips the chain even harder. “No questions, no complaints, remember?”

“I—I know. But this is . . .” The Overseer swallows. “Nobody should stand for this.”

Fear thrills through me as if he is one of ours. Doesn’t he know he’s asking to be hurt? Doesn’t he know that defying Darwin will always, always bring pain?

“How is your mother feeling?” Darwin asks in a silky voice.

Now the bold, foolish Overseer stares at his feet. If he answers, I cannot hear it.

“Seems like she’d have a real hard time without that nice insurance that I pay for,” Darwin continues.

The Overseer nods. “I’m grateful.”

“Who do you care about? These Toads or your own mother?” Darwin arcs the chain up high, high, higher than any of the other hits, and lands it straight down on Mother’s spine. This is the worst I’ve seen him beat her in a long time.

Her body jerks from the impact. I know it means she’s

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fainted, gone to a place without pain . . . until I bring her back with Water.

Please, Otto, I pray. Let her be strong enough for three more of those.

“Got anything more to say?” Darwin asks.

The Overseer stares at Mother. Slowly, he shakes his head.

I hate him for it. It’s not fair, maybe. What’s he supposed to do? But his noticing the wrongness of Darwin made me hope, just for a second, that things will change. I wish he hadn’t said anything at all.

The Congregation begins to chant again, and the last three hits are hard and fast.

“All done,” Darwin sings. He coils the chain and slides it back in his pocket.

I rush to Mother. The ground around her body is wet with blood, and her sleeves have split where I’ve already mended them countless times. But her chest moves; her body is still fighting him, even though her mind has eased elsewhere. I smooth her hair. Darwin never touches her face, or head.

The new Overseer dares to speak again. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

Darwin’s answer is to grab the new one’s shoulders and spin him so he’s directly facing Mother. Then he strikes the back of his knees with the chain, so the new one falls to the ground beside Mother. Our eyes meet, and I see that his cheeks are truly stained from tears.

But I look away, and fast. There’s no good in feeling for this boy.

“Take a good look,” Darwin snarls. “And decide if you’re with me or not.”

The boy turns his head and vomits into the leaves. He heaves, and heaves, until all that’s left are the sobs ripping out of him.

There is no one to console him; Darwin slides away and the Overseers do too. The Congregants, most of them, begin the trudge home.

But not all go—as always, Boone stays, and Hope with her new husband, Gabe. Ellie is here too, of course.

“She’ll heal,” Ellie says. “We just need to get her home.”

Boone lifts her feet; Hope and Gabe lift her upper half while I support her middle. When Ellie makes a move to help, I shake my head. She frowns, but lets her hands drop.

The Overseer is still on the ground, but he is watching us now.

“I’d help if I could,” he whispers.

Gabe snorts and hawks a glob of spit on the leaves next to him. It’s a foolish thing to do, something he wouldn’t dare with any other Overseer.

“Her breath is going funny,” Boone says.

“Hurry,” I answer, turning my back on the new Overseer.