

# Stolen

## Prologue

He hated the forest. Hated its eternal pockets of damp and darkness. Hated its endless tangle of trees and bushes. Hated its smell of decay—dead vegetation, dead animals, everything dying, even the living creatures incessantly pursuing their next meal, one failure away from the slow descent into death. Soon his body would be one more stink fouling the air, maybe buried, maybe left for the carrion feeders, his death postponing theirs for another day. He would die. He knew that, not with the single-minded intent of the suicidal or the hopeless despair of the doomed, but with the simple acceptance of a man who knows he is only hours from passing out of this world into the next. Here in this stinking, dark, damp hell of a place, he would die.

He didn't seek death. If he could, he'd avoid it. But he couldn't. He'd tried, planning his breakout for days, conserving his energy, forcing himself to eat, to sleep. Then he'd escaped, surprising himself really. He'd never truly believed it would work. Of course, it hadn't actually worked, just appeared so, like a mirage shimmering in the desert, only the oasis hadn't turned to sand and sun, but damp and dark. He'd escaped the compound to find himself in the forest. Still hopeful, he'd run. And run. And gone nowhere. They were coming now. Hunting him.

He could hear the hound baying, fast on his trail. There must be ways to trick it, but he had no idea how. Born and raised in the city, he knew how to avoid detection there, how to become invisible in plain sight, to effect an appearance so mediocre that people could stare right at him and see no one. He knew how to greet neighbors in his apartment building, eyes lowered, a brief nod, no words, so if anyone asked about the occupants of 412, no one really knew who lived there, was that the elderly couple? the young family? the blind girl? Never rude or friendly enough to attract attention, disappearing in a sea of people too intent on their own lives to notice his. There he was a master of invisibility. But here, in the forest? He hadn't set foot in one since he was ten, when his parents finally despaired of ever making an outdoorsman out of him and let him stay

with his grandmother while his siblings went hiking and camping. He was lost here. Completely lost. The hound would find him and the hunters would kill him.

'You won't help me, will you?' he said, speaking the words in his mind.

For a long moment, Qiona didn't reply. He could sense her, the spirit who guided him, in the back corner of his mind, the farthest she ever went from him since she'd first made herself known when he was a child too young to speak.

'Do you want me to?' she asked finally.

'You won't. Even if I want it. This is what you want. For me to join you. You won't stop that.'

The hound started to sing, joy infusing its voice with melody as it closed in on its target. Someone shouted.

Qiona sighed, the sound fluttering like a breeze through his mind. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Which way is out?' he asked.

More silence. More shouts.

'That way,' she said.

He knew which way she meant, though he couldn't see her. An ayami had presence and substance but no form, an idea impossible to explain to anyone who wasn't a shaman and as easy for a shaman to understand as the concept of water or sky.

Turning left, he ran. Branches whipped his face and bare chest and arms, raising welts like the marks of a flagellant. And equally self-inflicted, he thought. Part of him wanted to stop. Give up. Accept. But he couldn't. He wasn't ready to surrender this life yet. Simple human pleasures still held too much allure: English muffins with butter and strawberry jam at the Talbot Cafe, the second story balcony, farthest table on the left, the sun on his forearms, tattered mystery novel in one hand, coffee mug in the other, people yelling, laughing on the busy street below. Silly things, Qiona would sniff. She was jealous of course, as she was of anything she couldn't share, anything that kept him bound to his body. He did want to join her, but not yet. Not just yet. So he ran.

'Stop running,' Qiona said.

He ignored her.

'Slow down,' she said. 'Pace yourself.'

He ignored her.

She withdrew, her anger a flash fire in his brain, bright and hot, then smoldering, waiting to flare again. He'd stopped hearing the hound, but only because his blood pounded too loudly. His lungs blazed. Each breath scorched through him, like swallowing fire. He ignored it. That was easy. He ignored most of his body's commands, from hunger to sex to pain. His body was only a vehicle, a medium for transmitting things like strawberry jam, laughter and sunlight to his soul. Now after a lifetime of ignoring his body, he asked it to save him and it didn't know how. From behind him came the bay of the hound. Was it louder now? Closer?

'Climb a tree', Qiona said.

'It's not the dogs I'm afraid of. It's the men.'

'Slow down then. Turn. Confuse them. You're making a straight trail. Slow down.'

He couldn't. The end of the forest was near. It had to be. His only chance was to get there before the dogs did. Ignoring the pain, he summoned every remaining vestige of strength and shot forward.

'Slow down!' Qiona shouted. 'Watch—'

His left foot hit a small rise but adjusted, throwing his right foot out for balance. Yet his right foot came down on empty air. As he pitched forward, he saw the stream-bed below, at the bottom of a small gully eroded by decades of water-flow. He flipped over the edge of it, convulsed in midair, trying to think of how to land without injury, but again he didn't know how. As he hit the gravel below, he heard the hound. Heard its song of triumph so loud his eardrums threatened to split. Twisting to get up, he saw three canine heads come over the gully edge, one hound, two massive guard dogs. The hound lifted its head and bayed. The other two paused only a second, then leapt.

'Get out!' Qiona screamed. 'Get out now!'

No! He wasn't ready to leave. He resisted the urge to throw his soul free of his body, clenching himself into a ball as if that would keep it in. He saw the undersides of the dogs as they flew off the cliff. One landed atop him, knocking out his last bit of breath. Teeth dug into his forearm. He felt a tremendous wrenching. Then he soared upward. Qiona was dragging him from his body, away from the pain of dying.

'Don't look back,' she said.

Of course he did. He had to know. As he looked down, he saw the dogs. The hound was still at the top of the gully, howling and waiting for the men. The two other dogs didn't wait. They tore his body apart in a shower of blood and flesh.

'No,' he moaned. 'No.'

Qiona comforted him with whispers and kisses, pleaded with him to look away. She'd tried to save him from the pain, but she couldn't. He felt it as he looked down at the dogs destroying his body, felt not the pain of their teeth, but the agony of unbelievable loss and grief. It was over. All over.

'If I hadn't tripped,' he said. 'If I'd run faster . . .'

Qiona turned him then, so he could look out across the forest. The expanse of trees went on and on, ending in a road so far away the cars looked like bugs crawling across the earth. He glanced back at his body, a mangled mess of blood and bone. The men stepped from the forest. He ignored them. They didn't matter anymore. Nothing did. He turned to Qiona and let her take him away.

"Dead," Tucker said to Matasumi as he walked into the cell-block guard station. He scraped the mud of the forest off his boots. "Dogs got him before we did."

"I told you I wanted him alive."

"And I told you we need more hounds. Rottweilers are for guarding, not hunting. A hound will wait for the hunter. A Rottie kills. Doesn't know how to do anything else." Tucker removed his boots and laid them on the mat, perfectly aligned with the wall, laces tucked in. Then he took an identical but clean pair and pulled them on. "Can't see how it matters much. Guy was half-dead anyway. Weak. Useless."

"He was a shaman," Matasumi said. "Shamans don't need to be Olympic athletes. All their power is in their mind."

Tucker snorted. "And it did him a whole lotta good against those dogs, let me tell you. They didn't leave a piece of him bigger than my fist."

As Matasumi turned, someone swung open the door and clipped him in the chin.

"Whoops," Winsloe said with a grin. "Sorry, old man. Damn things need windows."

Bauer brushed past him. "Where's the shaman?"

"He didn't . . . survive," Matasumi said.

"Dogs," Tucker added.

Bauer shook her head and kept walking. A guard grabbed the interior door, held it open as she walked through. Winsloe and the guard trailed after her. Matasumi brought up the rear. Tucker stayed at the guard station, presumably to discipline whoever had let the shaman escape, though the others didn't bother to ask. Such details were beneath them. That's why they'd hired Tucker.

The next door was thick steel with an elongated handle. Bauer paused in front of a small camera. A beam scanned her retina. One of the two lights above the door flashed green. The other stayed red until she grasped the door handle and the sensor checked her hand-print. When the second light turned green, she opened the door and strode through. The guard followed. As Winsloe stepped forward, Matasumi reached for his arm, but missed. Alarms shrieked. Lights flashed. The sound of a half-dozen steel-toed boots clomped in synchronized quickstep down a distant corridor. Matasumi snatched the two-way radio from the table.

"Please call them back," Matasumi said. "It was only Mr. Winsloe. Again."

"Yes, sir," Tucker's voice crackled through the radio. "Would you remind Mr. Winsloe that each retinal and hand scan combination will authorize the passage of only one staff member and a second party."

They both knew Winsloe didn't need to be reminded of any such thing, since he'd designed the system. Matasumi stabbed the radio's disconnect button. Winsloe only grinned.

"Sorry, old man," Winsloe said. "Just testing the sensors."

He stepped back to the retina scanner. After the computer recognized him, the first light turned green. He grabbed the door-handle, the second light flashed green and the door opened. Matasumi could have followed without the scans, as the guard had, but he let the door close and followed the proper procedure. The admittance of a second party was intended to allow the passage of captives from one section of the compound to another, at a rate of only one captive per staff member. It was not supposed to allow two staff to pass together. Matasumi would remind Tucker to speak to his guards about this. They were all authorized to pass through these doors and should be doing so correctly, not taking shortcuts.

Past the security door, the interior hall looked like a hotel corridor, each side flanked by rooms furnished with a double bed, a small table, two chairs and a door leading to a bathroom. Not luxury accommodations by any means, but simple and clean, like the upper end of the spectrum for the budget conscious traveler, though the occupants of these rooms wouldn't be doing much traveling. These doors only opened from the outside.

The wall between the rooms and the corridor was a specially designed glass more durable than steel bars—and much nicer to look at. From the hallway, an observer could study the occupants like lab rats, which was the idea. The door to each room was also glass so the watcher's view wasn't obstructed. Even the facing wall of each bathroom was clear Plexiglas. The transparent bathroom walls were a recent renovation, not because the observers had decided they wanted to watch their subjects' elimination practices, but because they'd found that when all four walls of the bathrooms were opaque, some of the subjects spent entire days in there to escape the constant scrutiny.

The exterior glass wall was actually one-way glass. They'd debated that, one-way vs. two-way. Bauer had allowed Matasumi to make the final decision and he'd sent his research assistants scurrying after every psychology treatise on the effects of continual observation. After weighing the evidence, he'd decided one-way glass would be less intrusive. By hiding the observers from sight, it was less likely to agitate the subjects. He'd been wrong. At least with two-way glass the subjects knew when they were being watched. With one-way, they knew they were being

watched—none were naive enough to mistake the full-wall mirror for decoration—but they didn't know when, so they were on perpetual alert, which had a regrettably damning effect on their mental and physical health.

The group passed the four occupied cells. One subject had his chair turned toward the rear wall and sat motionless, ignoring the magazines, the books, the television, the radio, everything that had been provided for his diversion. He sat with his back to the one-way glass, and did nothing. That one had been at the compound nearly a month. Another occupant had arrived only this morning. She also sat in her chair, but facing the one-way glass, glaring at it. Defiant . . . for now. It wouldn't last.

Tess, the one research assistant Matasumi had brought to the project, stood by the defiant occupant's cell, ticking notations on her clipboard. She looked up and nodded as they passed.

"Anything?" Bauer asked.

Tess glanced at Matasumi, shunting her reply to him. "Not yet."

"Because she can't or won't?" Bauer asked.

Another glance at Matasumi. "It appears . . . I would say . . ."

"Well?"

Tess inhaled. "Her attitude suggests that if she could do more, she would."

"Can't, then," Winsloe said. "We need a Coven witch. Why we bothered with this one—"

Bauer interrupted, "We bothered because she's supposed to be extremely powerful."

"According to Katzen," Winsloe said. "If you believe him. I don't. Sorcerer or not, the guy's full of shit. He's supposed to be helping us catch these freaks. Instead, all he does is tell us where to look, then sits back while our guys take all the risks. For what? This?" He jabbed a finger at the captive. "Our second useless witch. If we keep listening to Katzen, we're going to miss out on some real finds."

"Such as vampires and werewolves?" Bauer's lips curved in a small smile. "You're still miffed because Katzen says they don't exist."

"Vampires and werewolves," Matasumi muttered. "We are in the middle of unlocking unimaginable mental power, true magic. We have potential access to sorcerers, necromancers, shamans, witches, every conceivable vessel of magic . . . and he wants creatures that suck blood and howl at the moon. We are conducting serious scientific research here, not chasing bogeymen."

Winsloe stepped in front of Matasumi, towering six inches over him. "No, old man, you're conducting serious scientific research here. Sondra is looking for her holy grail. And me, I'm in it for fun. But I'm also bankrolling this little project, so if I say I want to hunt a werewolf, you'd better find me one to hunt."

"If you want to hunt a werewolf, then I'd suggest you put one in those video games of yours, because we can't provide what doesn't exist."

"Oh, we'll find something for Ty to hunt," Bauer said. "If we can't find one of his monsters, we'll have Katzen summon something suitably demonic."

"A demon?" Winsloe said. "Now that'd be cool."

"I'm sure it would," Bauer murmured and pushed open the door into the shaman's former cell.