

When he hit the ground, his legs buckled and his knee slammed into his chin. He found himself in a dark hollow, like a large snake burrow. Ignoring his sore jaw, he shuffled on his haunches, scraping through the dust, moving around the foot. Seeing it closer now in the slant of light, it looked bloated, scratched, caked with dust, the flesh wrinkled where it twisted unnaturally to the side. The bone was broken.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, the silhouette of a body appeared, leaned back against the wall, head tilted to the side as if resting. He reached out toward it, found its shoulder, shook it as if trying to rouse someone from sleep. He ran his hand over the chest, felt the curve of a breast there and pulled his hand away.

The smell of shit was strong. She must have just died.

*What was she doing here? Did she run away from the city? Fall into this hole at night? How long has she been here? Was she alone?*

He reached out again, this time gently running his hands across her body, checking for food, water, a knife, anything of use. The cloth of her dress was rough – a sort of burlap material – and he thought he found a pocket, but when he stuck his hand in he found only the flesh of her leg.

He pulled at the dress and brushed his hand along the inside of her thighs – a place women were known to hide knives. But there was nothing.

A wave of heat and nausea roiled through his body. Sweat broke out on his head. He'd scavenged dead bodies before. Many of them. But this felt different.

He felt around in the sand until he found her hand. He stroked each finger, ran his index over the wrist, then up the arm. He found the bottom of her chin, traced a finger down her neck until it caught the top of her dress. She wore no jewelry, no bits of string with shiny stones or totems.

Grabbing her shoulder, he shimmied a hand between her lower back and the wall, leaned her forward and traced up her spine. Then stroked the ribs from armpits to the hips.

He leaned her back against the wall, gently patted her head, then ran his fingers carefully through the hair searching for sharpened bits of metal or bone. At the base of the skull, in the back, his fingers slid over a sticky patch.

Suddenly something grabbed his wrist.

He yelped, leaped backwards and smashed his head against the wall.

Shivers of terror ran down his spine. He swiped at his wrist as if the boney hand that had clutched him was still holding on.

*“Jorsch... Jorsch...”* a voice called out, raspy and hallow. “I knew you would come for me.”

He froze, held his breath, hoping he was submerged in shadow, hoping she couldn't see him.

“Where is your father?”

Her head turned. He couldn't see her eyes, but knew she was looking right at him.

“Where is your father?”

Halvist couldn't speak. His mouth went dry, his body shaking. He could see, in his mind, the last image of his father.

“Does your father know where we are?” Her voice was suddenly tinged with despair.

Her silhouette leaned forward but collapsed against the wall again. She whimpered in pain, her breathing suddenly loud and labored. “He's dead... isn't he?”

He still didn't move.

After a moment, she began to cry.

Halvist closed his eyes.

The cries turned to sobs. The sobs grew louder and louder. More agonizing. The sound echoing through the cave.

He closed his eyes tighter. Put his hands over his ears. But the cries of agony were just as loud inside his head. He was there again, a boy, sitting on a log, fires all around, his parents on tables in front of him.

He clawed at his cheeks trying to make the memories go away.

Finally, when he couldn't take it any longer, he stood.

He walked into the light.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered. "We never should have run."

He shielded his eyes, looking up through the hole. On his tip-toes he could almost reach the grips he'd need to get out.

"Jorsch," the woman called. "Jorsch...don't leave me."

Halvist looked down on her. With the light in his eyes she'd all but disappeared.

"Please..." her voice sounded more resolute now. "Don't leave me."

Above him, a circle of blue sky. He longed to breath the fresh air.

The cave was silent now. Her cries quieted, he couldn't even hear her breathing. Beneath him, in the dust, the woman's twisted foot lay motionless. He wondered if she'd suddenly died.

But a hand, thin and boney, reached into the light. "Come to your mother. Come and let me hold you one last time."

Halvist wanted nothing more than to escape this cave. Instead, he found himself sitting against the wall beside the woman. He found her hand and took it in his own. He thought of his mother. That look on her face. He could see her now, staring back at him through the darkness, pleading with him.

He squeezed the woman's hand and pressed it to his lips. "I'm here, mother. I won't leave you." And for the first time since he was eight-years-old, he cried.