

The Taking

By C. Jade Wyton

Set in the early 8,000's on the continent of Lim'tar, a nameless alk watches as a criminal who wronged her as a child be punished for his crimes in a ceremony known as the "Taking."

Contains descriptions of violence, abuse, and torture.

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It had been a long, long time since the nameless one had been in the presence of Ashta Low Mountain.

When they had first met she had been too young to remember his face; just a babe, fresh-born from her mother, Ishkin Sky Watcher.

It had been far too easy for Ashta to steal her. Her mother was weak from the birthing and her father, Kamker the Stray, had been crippled from his fall off High Cliff. And from what the nameless one had heard the soother had been young and without a protector.

Ashta had killed the adults and taken the newborn before she'd been given her name; and with no remaining family there was no one to read her name in the stars after she'd been saved.

She was was glad she remembered none of her time with the man. The four months had left her skin too scarred to hold Sky Watcher ink, though soothers from Sunrise Beach had come to help with special pigment purchased from secas. They had travelled the entire territory to bring her the dye after her tribe's own didn't hold.

It had been a gift the Sky Watchers had never been able to repay; though the people of Sunrise Beach had never asked them to do so. It was a kindness without expectation of return. And now, thanks to that kindness, the nameless one's tattoos marked her as a maker; and though the ink had faded from black to grey over the thirty years she'd served her tribe it still held its pattern firm and strong.

She was grateful for that.

There was a shout, and the crowd looked up to watch as protectors strapped Ashta to Caller Ziat's judgement stake.

He had finally been caught while stealing poultry from the people of the Red Forest. A pathetic crime to end his reign of terror.

But at least it was ended.

Fearful gasps and mutters rippled through the gathering as Ashta slowly raised his head and the nameless one pushed her daughter, Inntin Sky Watcher, safely behind her back and away from the evil man's gaze. Luckily his glare didn't fall on the nameless one or her family. Instead it dug into Caller Ziat's own scowl.

'Ashta of the Low Mountain,' Caller Ziat spoke loudly, their voice projecting over the cliffs so that those standing lower would hear. 'You stand before the five hundred and eighty-three leaders of the Lim'tar tribes and their people, at the peak of Caller's Mountain where the Ancestor stars may pass their judgement.'

There is no tribe on Lim'tar that you have not wronged. Your crimes are many, and you have yet to deny a single one as your own. Do you wish to deny them, now?

Ashta responded with a snort and turned away from the Caller. The crowd flinched as he looked them over, and the mutters started again.

'You have left deep scars on my people,' Caller Ziat continued, their voice a hiss. 'Scars I can never forgive. You understand what is to happen to you?'

'I'm not scared of the Taking,' Ashta smiled, now. 'There is nothing you could Take from me that could kill me. Not truly. I shall live on, forever remembered. Forever feared. A whisper parents tell their children to keep them placid. I will have power. And I will have legacy. Strip me of my belongings, and strip me of my flesh. Strip me of my life. I will never die.'

Caller Ziat bowed their head and whispered a quiet prayer to the Ancestors. The nameless one didn't hear all the words, though she was sure she'd heard it before.

'Temela of the Deep Valley!' Caller Ziat raised their head, speaking loud enough to make the crowd jump. 'You may Take, first.'

The crowd parted down the middle, and Temela Deep Valley stepped forward. The nameless one recognised him, she realised; found on the edge of the Sky Watcher's territories years ago, bloody and bruised and terrified into silence. He'd been a child, then. Much like herself. It had taken over a year before he'd finally muttered his birth tribe's name to a soother and been taken home.

The nameless one had missed his company. They understood each other in a way not many others were able.... As she caught his eye they shared a solemn nod and she knew he was thinking the same of her.

He looked better, now, after near-forty years. He bore the marks of a protector and he no longer limped or flinched. Instead he stood strong over Ashta, and looked down at the man with a glare that did nothing to hide his anger.

'Aah, I remember you,' Ashta's grin grew all the more wicked. 'Your mother's name was Kitkin, wasn't it? Her and that familiar of hers put up quite a fight.... But they both tasted wonderful.'

'You're disgusting,' Temela responded, stepping forward and pointing an accusing finger when Ashta simply shrugged. 'You're a vile creature which is only pretending to be alk. And I want your wings, so you can never be mistaken for one of us again.'

Ashta laughed, then. And stretched his wings wide. 'Well, then. Come and Take them!'

Temela drew his knife, and as he did the nameless woman felt Inntin squeeze her hand. She turned and quickly ushered her daughter through the crowd and down the rocky incline. She felt her Chosen, Breen Sky Watcher, trail behind closely; and when they finally made it to the back of the crowd the nameless woman scooped her daughter up and pressed her into Breen's arms.

'Papi,' Inntin muttered, burying her face into her father as Ashta let out a agonised shriek.

'*I know. I know,*' Breen kissed the girl's head. '*We can go home soon. I promise.*'

It didn't seem a promise likely to be fulfilled, the nameless one thought as she

turned towards the screaming. She could see Caller Ziat, standing on their platform, but Ashta was hidden behind the crowd. Just as well; the Taking was only just beginning, and Ashta had harmed many people. This was not going to be a pleasant thing to watch. The less Inntin saw of it the better.

The woman would have left her child behind if she'd been able. But until Ashta was dead she couldn't bare to let her daughter leave her sight.... A feeling that was shared by many, she realised, as she glanced around the crowd and saw others pull their youngsters close.

Ashta's death would ease the anxieties of parents from every tribe in the territory. And perhaps it would help those from the Low Mountain regain their footing in the tribe hierarchy. It wasn't their fault Ashta had become such a monster; they had tried as hard as the other tribes to stop the man, and had done more than anyone to help those he had hurt.

She sighed, bowing her head as Ashta let out another scream. She would be asked forward soon, when the Caller Ziat thought it was her time. And then she could Take retribution. Though, she didn't feel she needed it. She was old, almost retired, and she'd made peace with herself long ago. Whatever she took from Ashta wouldn't heal her. No piece of severed flesh could bring back her family or heal her scars.

*Though, she raised her head again, peering over the crowd. Perhaps there was something else she could Take....*

A whimper from her daughter, and the nameless one turned back to her family.

Inntin was more important than revenge.

'Come, love,' she sat on a nearby stone and beckoned her daughter to join her. When the girl crawled into her lap she pulled twine from her pocket. 'Let me show you another tassel knot.'

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It was long past sunset when Caller Ziat raised their hand and beckoned to the back of the crowd, where the nameless one sat in a circle of children.

'The maker without name, from the Sky Watchers in the far mountains,' they called, drawing the attention of the group. 'Step forward. It is your turn to Take from Ashta, and to seek healing from the Ancestors.'

A kiss to her daughter and her Chosen, and the nameless woman rose to her feet. The crowd parted to let her through as she walked and she made it to Ashta quickly; though she didn't rush. There was no need to. She knew what she wanted, now.

'You,' Ashta breathed, smiling through bloody lips. 'Do you still drink goat's milk? Or did they wean you?'

'They weaned me,' she responded, returning Ashta's smile with one of her own. 'Though, I do still indulge myself during spring, if there's left overs after milking.'

Ashta snorted, and glared up at her with his one remaining eye. 'I found your family just in time, don't you think? Another day and they may have named you.'

'Probably.'

She caught a twitch of Ashta's lip as he scowled, and she was satisfied to know he hated her indifference. 'Was it hard, growing up without a name?'

'Yes,' she responded honestly. When Ashta smiled again she crossed her arms and returned it. 'Don't think to mock me, old man. You don't know what I'm here to Take.'

'Oh? What is it, then? Tell me,' he laughed, and looked around the crowd. 'Tell them all! What do you wish to cut from my flesh? My ear? My foot? My heart?'

'Your name.'

The man's face fell. 'My... *what?*'

'I want your name,' she repeated, standing tall and addressing the alk around her. 'I Take Ashta's name as my own, and forbid it to be used in mention of his crimes. When our descendants remember Ashta, they will remember painted pottery and alpaca-fur tapestries. And when they speak of this nameless man's acts, they will forget they were that of one man. His horrors will be mistaken for the acts of many, and so will seem like simple crimes.... I Take his name.'

'You bitch!' the nameless man pulled against his post and let out a hideous hiss.

'So be it,' Caller Ziat announced. 'You have chosen to Take his name, and so it is yours. You may step back, Ashta Sky Watcher.'

'No! *I'm* Ashta!' the man on the post screamed. 'Ashta Low Mountain! Give me back my name!'

Ashta bowed her head low to the Caller, and stepped back into the crowd without another word.

'Give me back my legacy!'

'Leep of the Sunrise Beach?' Caller Ziat ignored the man below them. 'Come. Take justice from the nameless one, and seek healing from the Ancestors.'

Leep Sunrise Beach stepped forward, now, and Ashta recognised her as one of the soothers who had helped to tattoo her. And she remembered the man's crimes; two murdered sons. And as Leep glared down at the man, Ashta knew she would not be kind to him.

'Doesn't he ever shut up?' she growled, yanking out her knife and gripping the nameless man's face in a hand and forcing open his jaw. 'Let's see how well you scream without your tongue.'

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