



WORLDS OF  
PROTHEIKA

# MONSTER'S TOY

ANNE HALE  
CELESTE KING

# **MONSTER'S TOY**

---

ANNE HALE  
CELESTE KING

Copyright © 2023 by Celeste King

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Sign up for my [newsletter](#)

Join my Facebook group [here!](#)

## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to Kaylee, Emily, Taylor, Jordon, Melanie, Jamie, Jennifer, Hannah, Donna and the whole “Project Protheke” family. Thanks for believing in the world.

# CONTENTS

## Books in The World of Protheke

### The World of Protheke

1. Tania
2. Kiath
3. Tania
4. Kiath
5. Tania
6. Kiath
7. Tania
8. Tania
9. Kiath
10. Tania
11. Kiath
12. Tania
13. Kiath
14. Tania
15. Tania
16. Kiath
17. Tania
18. Kiath
19. Tania
20. Kiath
21. Tania
22. Kiath
23. Tania
24. Kiath
25. Tania
26. Kiath
27. Tania
28. Kiath
29. Tania
30. Kiath

### Preview of Monter's Mate

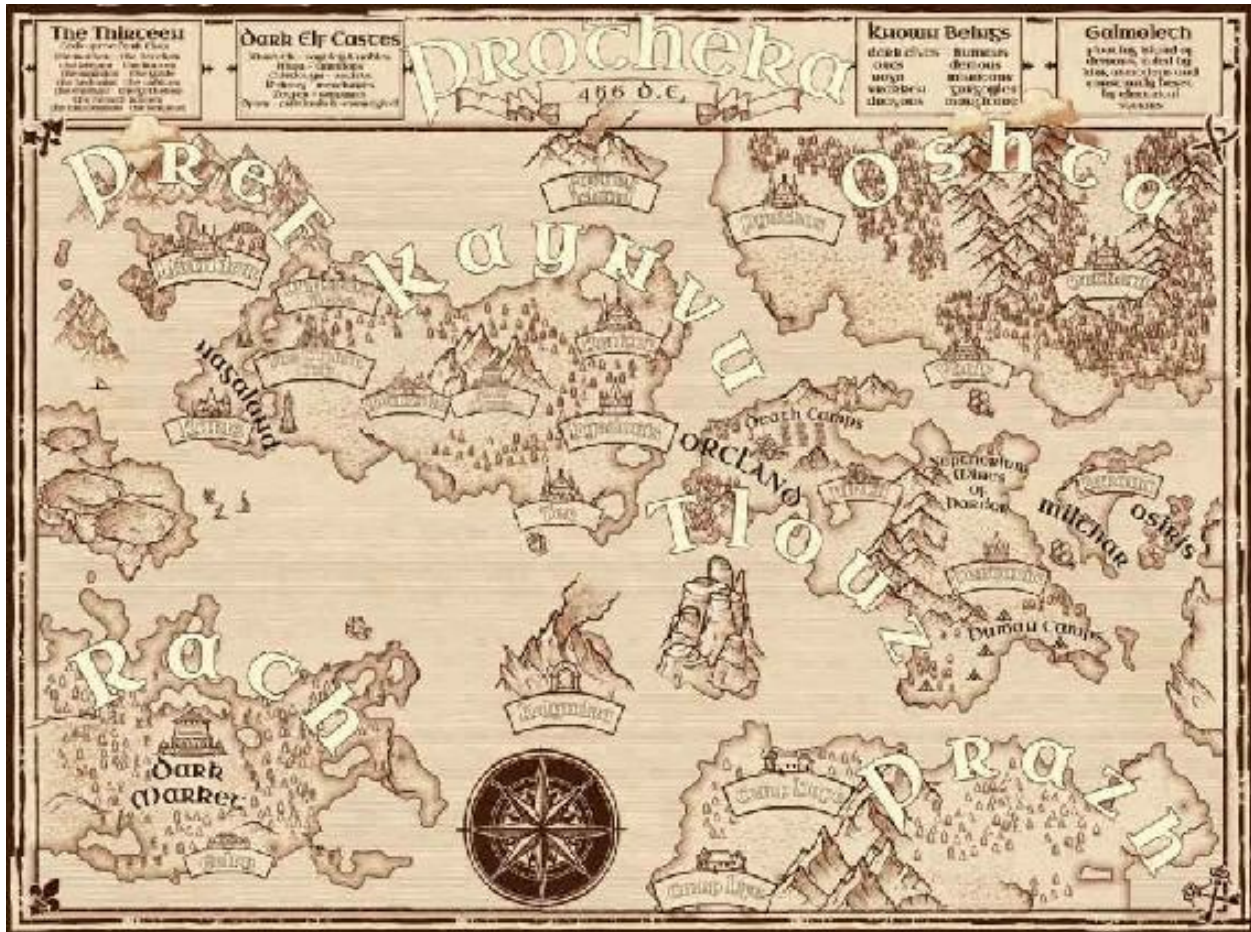
Tanem

Moira

# **BOOKS IN THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA**

Orc Warriors of Protheke Series  
Mates of the Burning Sun Clan Series  
Dark Elves of Protheke Series  
Thoruk's Prize: A Monster Romance  
Naga's of Protheke Series  
Minotaur's of Protheke Series  
Demon's of Protheke Series  
Vampires of Protheke  
Gargoyles of Protheke

# THE WORLD OF PROTHEKA





---

## TANIA

I lost sight of the continent three hours ago.

I squint for any signs of visibility, my way forward only illuminated by cloud-to-sea lightning strikes plaguing the dark skyline.

The continuous swaying and bucking of the ship's hull fills me with dread, an endless gale screaming in my ears and rocking the deck beneath me. Freezing rain won't stop pelting my skin, and the ocean's droplets are thrown back by the violent waves.

"I'm never going to make it."

An urge to shiver overtakes me, but I can't let go of the wheel. I am not truly lost as long as I am not in the water with the serpents whose long-necked silhouettes stick out over the horizon. In the brief flashes that clear up the distant fog, I think I see the monsters approaching me, getting larger.

I should have set sail at a more opportune time when the tides were softer and the skies clearer. This boat has veered off-course more times than I can count, and I still don't know where I'm going to end up if I even survive.

The wind grows harsher still, thunder booming all around me. I prepare to be thrown from this boat, or struck by lightning, or swallowed by sea beasts. The air grows much colder, and I can see the rain freezing into ice before it hits the deck, bouncing upward and damaging the wood.

Peering out, I see the outline of a large landmass and feel immediate relief. I didn't think I was going to make it to land. I look back at the empty chest that used to contain stolen food, but whose contents have been depleted for a day. My stomach grumbles.

But the landmass is rapidly expanding in my vision, almost too quickly

for reaction.

I am approaching far too quickly, and I'm faced with two options.

Either I can steer away from the landmass and risk encountering the sea serpents, who loom larger in my view. Or I can keep going forward, brace myself for immediate impact, and risk running into a different continent entirely.

At this rate, I'm so off-course that I might even be back home somewhere.

I shiver at the thought.

Jerking the ship's wheel from side to side to slow the wind's approach, I rush my way to the helm, sprinting down to the main deck.

But before I can get to the sail, my right foot slips. I hurtle backward through the air, crashing my head onto a step. The pain in the back of my head is sudden and immense.

I feel my vision going black, frigid air cresting over me.

*It's been so long since you've really slept. What's the harm in closing your eyes for a bit?*

Rain coats the deck around me, producing a once foreboding sound that has now become white noise to me.

A loud, grating sound churns beneath me, growing in volume and intensity, but it's better for me to sleep than worry about it...



FRIGID AIR WAKES ME UP. My teeth chatter and my eyes water. Forcing myself up with numb fingers, I behold a glimmer of warm colors around me... hues of red, orange, yellow, and brown. Upon forcing my eyes open and rubbing them wearily, I realize that I am surrounded on all sides by trees. The rain has stopped temporarily and given way to a bright blue sky filled with graying clouds.

This doesn't look anything like home. I feel my constant pessimism turn into a moment of glee.

*I made it!*

I'm tempted to scream it aloud, but I don't know who or what might be around, and the revelation that I must be on Prazh is bittersweet.

I step up and walk to the front of my boat, looking down. The hull is

badly damaged, having collided with a layer of rocks and scraped ashore. Despite my best efforts, the boat isn't even touching the water now. It just speaks to the strength of the wind that carried me here.

What's worse is that as I step off the boat momentarily, moving carefully and peeling my eyes for signs of smoke or settlements, I find nothing.

I shuffle along the tops of rocks, avoiding stray, scuttling grancu. If there is anything to behold, it's all obstructed by the sheer height of mountains in my way. I could very well even be on the opposite side of the continent.

Climbing back aboard, I move below deck, easing down the narrow stairwell. Bodies that I should have thrown overboard fill the cabin, a reminder of where I started this journey.

I have no means of keeping myself alive in this boat, though the beds in the small closet rooms do beckon me with their softness.

"Not yet," I tell myself. "Maybe after you've found food."

I reach the captain's quarters and begin digging through the supply chest. I pull out an old, shattered spyglass, several commendations belonging to people I've never met, a canteen with a small portion of water remaining, and a solid metal paperweight shaped like an aquila, with chunks of its right wing lost to time.

I do not, however, find the map I swore I remembered being in here. Nor do I find a single ration.

I struggle to bring the canteen to my mouth, nearly spilling it out onto the floor with my shaking hands. It eases my painful throat, but I need to preserve its contents. If I can get a fire started, I might be able to purify some nearby water, but it would take considerable effort, and my focus is scattered.

Should I stay in this boat, I'm sure to die. Should I leave and get lost in the forest and manage not to starve, I'll be subject to the whims of whatever creatures I encounter.

I shake my head.

"Maybe I celebrated a bit prematurely," I mutter.

I don't know if my odds are better here or on the water. There's always a chance that human settlements might be just around the corner, but if I want to get a proper scope of the terrain, I'm going to need to scale one of these mountains.

The deck is covered in a thin sheet of ice, and this time, I ease my way forward, careful not to lose my balance again. I can see the ice melting very slowly, slush forming in some corners on the wooden surface. I stifle a chill,

crossing my arms and huddling forward into the swath of trees.

*Just take it one step at a time.*

The grass beneath my feet is brittle and white, making it difficult to move forward unnoticed. I have no idea what sorts of creatures I might encounter in this dense forest, but if I want to scale the mountain and get a better view, the beginning of the pass is still ahead of me, and I'd do well not to draw too much attention.

I can hear the sound of a rushing river ahead. Though it's a bit out of the way, movement is growing harder by the hour, and my energy is well past depleted. I can tell through the color-coated canopy that nightfall is fast approaching. If I can just find some fish and fill my canteen, my journey forward will be so much easier.

How did I get to this point?

I'm staking my life on the idea that I can create a better future for myself. My living conditions might have been miserable where I was, but at least my basic needs were somewhat provided for. Now I don't know if I'm going to die before I reach one of the human settlements.

The trees have grown thicker and harder to navigate, and the sky is dark. While I attempt to step over the hard branches on the ground, they cut into my skin, adding to my growing array of bloody scars and gashes.

But as I part the branches, I can see that the slope leads downward, light reflecting off of the rushing river below. I don't know if I'll be able to climb back up this ridge, but I can see the faint outlines of creatures below drinking from the river, so it must be safe. I just need to wait for them to leave.

I squat down, keeping a branch lifted to allow myself a small view. My eyes count the fish jumping out of the water, swimming upstream. While I watch and wait, I formulate a plan, eventually seeing where the river hugs the mountain pass to the left.

From behind me, a great roar reaches my ears, and I can see two brown ursain proceeding forward through the brush.

This wasn't part of the plan.

I pull my eyes from the river bank below to my more immediate threat.

My heart races.

If I stay here, they might find me, and I will almost certainly lose that fight. The distance between us is quickly diminishing. I know that they'll smell me soon.

I'm surprised they haven't already rushed me by now.

With their tails facing me, I limber up, bracing my body for quick movement. I can see the mountain pass ahead of me.

The larger ursain jerks its head suddenly, looking right at me and signaling to the other.

*Change of plans.*

I throw myself over the edge of the ridge, tumbling sideways down the slope. The creatures drinking from the stream don't notice me, but the ursain, charging down to follow me, certainly do. Their eyes are cold and wild, their teeth exposed.

I look ahead toward the mountain pass. I can see my path forward clearly, but my survival is unlikely.

---

## KIATH

**G**olden eyes meet mine in the darkness. In the shattered mirrors that line the walls of my cavern, I can see the white sheen of the likar's bared teeth. The saliva that drips from its maw onto the floor of my home is almost deafening.

My senses since awakening are ill-adapted and exaggerated.

The likar wants to project ferocity, but it knows that it shouldn't be here.

"You've come a long way from home, little likin," I growl.

Even as he stares me down, eyes lowered into a sneer by a deep brow ridge, he doesn't dare approach.

The beast has grown muscular and fat off of the spoils of this cavern network, wandering into my territory out of sheer misfortune. To most predators, even to the hulking ursain of the waters below, this beast might stand a chance.

To me, he'll be a nice little snack.

Before the beast can react, I swoop forward, screeching into the air. I pry my jaws open, the waves of my voice cresting over my beak with satisfaction. Rocks fall from the low ceiling of the cavern in response.

The likar lowers its spine, disoriented by the pitch of my cry. Its legs shrink to the ground and it becomes momentarily small in my sight.

I land against an opposing wall, the chilly blue light from outside hitting my feathers, the whirling wind beckoning me into the open world.

*Not yet. Soon.*

My roaming of the open wintry sky will begin when my prey's life leaves its eyes. I do not waste my food.

I want him to think there's hope... to think that I'm allowing his escape... before I deny him his peace.

He roams the narrow cavern entrance, seeking me out for a moment, as I huddle around the corner, retreating from his view.

His snarls grow slightly louder in approach, and I drill into the ceiling above him with my talons clenched, staring down at him from above. His every pressure point and artery radiates through his flesh, demanding to be pierced. He sniffs the air around him.

I know that he can detect me. He knows that I'm nearby.

I also know that he's terrified of me.

He looks up, and even before his neck can adjust, I'm already scurrying along the ceiling, clinging to the walls of the mountain outside, waiting for his exit. The frigid air hits my skin and feathers, my eyes burning in the cold breeze.

My hunger is immense. I know that even after I'm done gorging on this creature, I'll need a much larger beast to satisfy me.

"But you'll do for now," I say to myself, my stomach growling. My appetite has grown so much lately, but the thrill is dissipating.

I dive back into the cavern entrance, creeping along the walls. The shattered mirrors shine light back at me, but also my reflection. The bloody coins that cover the floor glow blue like the sky outside, but their material meaning is a mystery to me.

My humble abode plunges into an expansive series of deeper caves, and picking him out is not difficult. I could track his smell from several slopes away if I wanted to.

I charge through the air at the unsuspecting beast whose head is turned toward a massive open space, a rock bridge overlooking miles of unventured caverns below. The wind roars around me, cheering for my assault.

*The flesh is good and succulent, and the blood is delicious, but I will need to find a better use for the fur and the fangs.*

It roars back at me, startled. My talons claw into its eyes, pulling outward. I feel the creature's skull fighting my grip.

*I bet the fur and the teeth would make a lovely rattle.*

Its savagery gives way to pleading, growls becoming yelps in an instant, as the stalks fall to the ground, eyes delicately grasped in my claws.

I toss the eyes aside, hearing them splatter somewhere far below me in one of the distant cavern recesses.

Unable to see, the likar is reduced to panic. Its emotional state in its final moments should greatly accentuate the quality of the meat, ultimately tenderizing it and making it more succulent.

Or so I'm led to believe.

I reach forward with my taloned fingers, prying open its mandible until the bone gives and cracks in my clutches. It produces one final, squealing yelp before its struggling ends and life leaves it.

Uncharacteristically, I feel remorse for my kill.

Our game should have carried on longer. This beast hardly put up a fight, and I didn't get to savor its fear. It was not 'fun' for me like it usually is.

Rather than prolonging its struggle and teasing its demise over hours, I decided to rip into it with little procedure. There's an urgency in me that betrays my love of the hunt.

I drag the likar forward through the cavern with my pedal talons, setting it near my nest before tearing into it, freeing the fur from the flesh through meticulous rending and plucking. Fur falls haphazardly into an adjacent pile, followed by fangs and claws.

I devour the flesh, savoring the organs and sipping the blood. But I don't draw the same love from the sensations. The smells don't entice me as they used to, and though likar is a rare delicacy, its taste has grown stale and predictable.

Feeling splatters of blood running across my mouth drives me to preen and clean myself, and I can't help but leave the corpse half unfinished on the floor. I will return to delight in it later if I can find delight in a meal that feels unearned.

I kick aside several skulls that litter my dwelling as I step to enter the greater space beyond my cavern home. The skulls are at once a familiar comfort and a bad habit. I like to keep my place tidy, but I also enjoy remembering my hard-earned kills.

The light grows and my view expands beyond the cavern entrance. I stand on the precipice.

My feet stray from the edge, and I fall briefly before kicking into the air with my talons.

The world spirals in my view, a single large tiphe tree well in my focus as my wings unfurl before me. Their gray and blue coloration melds well with the cool wintry sky, and I wonder if I adapted to this environment or if I was born here.



I kick back one more time, straightening myself out before letting my wings take rhythm. The tiphe tree grows until it nearly encompasses my vision, and I swerve to evade it, lifting myself skyward.

My ears fill with the wind's subtle voice and the beating of my own wings. The emotions and scents of the creatures below me radiate outward, reaching me through the air. At times, the sensations are overwhelming and take acclimation. I can identify the moment creatures below me witness my flight through their sudden and exaggerated apprehension.

I just need a beast capable of filling my hunger. I will take the first creature that crosses my senses.

I glide over tiny suru and capra, far too small to be satisfying and too weak to be rewarding. They are not worth my time, though there may come a point where I need to gorge myself on small creatures just to find sustenance, should the population of larger creatures dwindle enough.

Hearing the cries of pavo that dot the trees and mynah that fly above the seas, I feel a kinship. I do not have true *kin*, but I'm far more pavo than ursain, and I like to imagine myself among their ranks.

Their deaths at my hands always trouble me more than I would like.

The roar of an ursain bellows, filling the winds, and I plummet downward, crashing into the base of the mountain.

It rears around, smelling the air before meeting my gaze. I can sense its reluctance.

I fling myself forward, leg extended.

My pedal talon collides with the ursain, knocking it into the wall of the mountain. Rock debris crashes outward, pebbles and dust filling the space between us.

"Fight me!"

At first, it tries to stumble away. But before it can escape me, I force it back into the wall, clearly establishing its role. A wicked smile crosses my mouth.

Anger radiates from the ursain, and I sidestep its claw, parrying with my own talons.

Blood drips onto me, produced from the increasingly large gashes I carve into its flesh. I flick my tongue out, licking my claws while diving out of the way.

The ursain might be large and hardy, but it's also staggered from fear and injury.

We exchange blows until I've neutralized it. I target tendons and veins above all else and revel in the beast's increasing helplessness. There's something so visually stunning about how blood dyes snow. This is art.

Ducking under it, I rip into its stomach, pulling aside flesh and muscle with claw and talon to reach its liver. Glancing once more upon the ursain's terrified face before its consciousness leaves its form, I swing my neck forward, gnawing into the organ before the less appealing intestines fall from the chasm.

My mouth fills with nutrients, my teeth pulling the liver free from the corpse. Protein and raw energy course through me, the tender, gamey feel of the organ filling me with joy.

I survey the creature, pondering which parts of it to devour first, now that the liver is out of the way.

I toss its eyes aside. I don't care for their texture, but I've seen stray creatures gnawing on them. If I can offer a gift to the forest that might yield better resources for me later, I will gladly do so.

The brain is tender but firm, offering a great initial taste. I drive my teeth into it with satisfaction, feeling its ooze rub against my beak. The only downside is the rush of bitterness that immediately follows and the strange, milky quality of the taste profile.

I leave the intestines but savor the kidneys and the heart.

What little blood I can retrieve, both from the snow and flowing freely from the body, I drink with appreciation.

---

## TANIA

**S** *top looking back at them!*  
*You need to pick yourself up and run!*

The fish leap from the river, unconcerned for their own survival, or perhaps still ignorant of the approaching ursain. Light from the moons peels and scatters over the rushing river.

Beside me, clearer given the diminished distance, are two dae, quenching their thirst beside the river bank. Their large eyes shine with the moonlight, their coats matching the yellow-green of the grass beside the river.

I have two seconds to think.

I know that I can't outrun the two ursain who chase me, tumbling clumsily down the ridge, clouds of dirt billowing after them. Their movement seems oddly staggered, given how quickly I've seen ursain move.

"Which way do I go?" I mutter the question to myself, since I'm my only company, and hope they're not my last words.

If I bolt for the hills, I will surely die. I can see the trees in the distance marking my destination, and remember that ursain are profoundly skilled climbers.

One scratch from them is enough to incapacitate me.

I might beat them to the foothills, but beyond that, I'm at a loss.

Tears flow freely from my eyes, and I can't bring myself to understand why. I know that if I don't act soon, I'm going to die, but I'm operating on survival. I don't have the luxury of indulging my emotions.

The ursain crawls before me now, sniffing the air and roaring. I know that my window has closed. Oddly, upon sniffing the air, they seem to recoil, or

perhaps hesitate, a bit.

It's too late to run.

In my peripheral view, the dae have noticed the ursain, and dash away toward the trees in a frenzy, not wanting to be their meal.

One of the ursain approaches me on its hind legs, its hideous face contorted in primal rage. Its right eye is scarred and bloody from a past encounter, and compared to the other, it is much larger.

*Why am I crying?*

Its claws rear back, and I notice, out of the corner of my eye, a flash of red.

A bright red crop lies beside me, at the edge of the river bank. It has been trampled afoot, under several stalks of weeds that sprout similar fruit.

I smell the air and feel my throat closing up.

Thinking quickly, I roll into the weeds, ducking down. I can already feel the minuta, gathered in the weeds and feeding on these crops, crawling on my skin. But those are a minor inconvenience by comparison.

I can deal with them later if I'm still alive.

When the ursain hesitates, I reach up, plucking one of the fruits from a stalk.

At this point, the scent of the fruit is irritating my eyes tremendously. I have to suppress my senses as I hold the plucked fruit overhead, holding my breath and closing my nose. With no dexterity, I lob the fruit overhead, aiming for the space between the ursain.

*This is going to fail spectacularly.*

The crop flies through the air, and before I can even see what happens, I pluck another crop and throw it in quick succession.

As the first fruit lands true, thudding on the ground with a soft squish, the ursain increase their distance from me, before fleeing entirely with the second.

"Thank the gods," I utter under my breath, perhaps a bit prematurely.

I can feel the suckers of a minuta growing on my skin, and attempt to pry it free from me. But even as I pull, it resists, my skin heating up and expanding around its mouth.

Seeing how averse wild animals, or at least ursain, are to this crop, I decide to pluck a quantity of them and put them in my supply bag.

Somehow, I feel like they'll come in handy.

The leather of the supply bag is still unfamiliar to me, its buckles

exhausted from overuse.

No sooner have I picked the crops, still fixated on picking the engorged minuta from my skin, than I hear stamping and huffing behind me – the sounds of hooves powerfully trampling the grass.

I hunch over, my feet entrenched in the soil, ready to fight.

It seems there's no true safety in the wilderness of Prazh. I'm still catching my breath, ready to collapse from exhaustion.

*How long am I going to run?*

Turning quickly, I see a draek behind me. His three horns are all larger than my arm, and even on all fours, he stands two feet taller than me.

Perhaps defending his young, he pounds into the ground, huffing angrily as he glares at me.

I don't know how I'm going to make it.

There's no time to reason now.

I bound forward, my empty stomach causing me tremendous pain with every exertion. My legs push into the ground beneath me with all of their effort.

I don't dare look back to witness my death. His tremendous horns could gore through me in an instant, perhaps mauling me even worse than the ursain.

I just wait for the moment when everything ends, unconcerned with how badly I'm wearing through my body.

I'm almost to the base of the mountain now. I start to wonder if I might survive after all before catching a glimpse of something in the underbrush.

The familiar ursain growls at me in fury, its eye still scarred over and now leaking badly. I duck and roll when he charges forward, tumbling over before picking myself up and stumbling to my feet. I cannot look back even for a second.

I avoid the temptation to climb the tiphe tree, feeling the immense pain as I carry myself up the mountain pass.

The ursain's roar grows distant behind me, and I'm surprised to see that not only is he not following me, but his attention has also been completely subverted.

Far below me, he mauls into the draek, ripping chunks of skin free. The draek grunts and screams in its final moments, perhaps knowing that he failed to protect his young.

Even with how terrified I was only moments ago, I still wish I were in a

position to save him.

My skin tingles. I can feel my arms and legs numbing up in places where the insects, now as large as my hand, continue to latch onto me. I stagger upward, fighting the urge to collapse on the ground, and my skin swells and reddens noticeably. Upon finishing his meal, the ursain, curiously, does not seem inclined to follow me.

I would rather not question my good luck. Instead, I trod forward, past cavern entrances and gored animals.

The higher I climb, the darker the clouds become, ice falling slowly from the sky at first, then giving way to snow. I try to push hard into the ground beneath me, for fear of slipping and falling down the mountain into the forests hundreds of feet below me.

On one forceful stomp, I notice that the grotesque minuta, now swollen with blood, fall off of my body, frozen from the brutal cold.

I don't know how much longer I can climb. I have not seen any living animals since the creatures by the river, who nearly ended my life. I do not know how I'm going to survive at this point. My rations are utterly exhausted, and from this height looking down, I cannot see below the thick layer of fog that now billows above the forests.

"What in the maws?"

Before me, on the cool, narrow ledge leading upward, is a drawn tent, with an active campfire roaring.

I'm immediately inclined to turn back, for fear that I might encounter somebody familiar here. But against my better judgment, I creep forward, gazing into the tent.

A number of heavy blankets are thrown carelessly on the floor, a chest beside the tent filled with about three days of rations.

I stand around, deliberating on what to do, for several minutes, before realizing that I might actually freeze to death if I don't take immediate action.

I stuff the rations into my face and move all the blankets together over my body. The dried suru is almost frozen, but my stomach doesn't complain. Just the smell of the meat, held against my nose, is intoxicating to me.

I'm sure that if they find their campsite inhabited, they'll understand my situation.

*It's not like they've already caught up to me.*

My eyes close. Under the weight of so many blankets, even this unbearable cold is almost unrecognizable to me.

Many hours later, I feel suppressed sunlight glimmering down upon my face through the fabric of the tent. I yawn and stretch out, before remembering how bitterly cold it is up here when my arms leave their warm cocoon.

In the night, nobody came.

The campfire died, buried under mounds of ice.

I begin to debate with myself. Is whoever set up this campsite still alive? Do I stay up here, or continue my search for human settlements?

I know that wildlife is sparse up here. Despite having food rations out in the open, I still haven't seen a single wild animal up on the mountain pass.

I should take it as a cool comfort, or rationalize away that maybe nothing is equipped to this unbearable cold. But it just unsettles me.

With two days of supplies, this campsite cannot be a home. At best, it would be a tomb.

I look down on the ridges and valleys below me, and the forests that look immensely small to me. I can hardly make out the details, but I'm fairly certain that nowhere, in the span of trees, do I see a single settlement.

There are still many valleys to crawl through, and many mountains to climb. I can see a great amount from up here, but I'm still far from being able to see everything.

"I'll find my home soon," I say to myself, looking out over the unknown landscapes. "I just have to keep moving."

My knee twinges with pain, my skin still swollen from where I was bitten and sucked by the mites.

I almost cannot walk, but I need to, if I'm going to ever find anything better than the life I've known. Trodding carefully forward, avoiding ledges and slopes where ice has collected, I brave the icy pass, hoping to find the answers I'm seeking.

---

## KIATH

**B**lood flecks my face and feathers as I revel in the kill beneath me.

The body of the ursain is little more than a hollowed carcass after my meal, and the creatures of the mountains have fled at the sight of me taking my breakfast. I rise, my belly full and my bloody fingers still flexed. I look at the treacherous climb and spread my wings wide, catching an icy gale that whips up the mountainside.

*Higher, comes the jubilant thought. Higher.*

And higher I go, angling and twirling in the wind with ease. This mountain is my home, my paradise, and I won't let *anything* disturb it. But right now, I crave the frigid bite of the waters below and their cleansing properties. I pull my wings close to my back as I bolt towards the lake shore at the bottom of the mountain. A solid layer of rime has already formed in time for winter, and I have to aim true.

The ice shatters, but I am deafened by the heavy rush of water all around me. The blood dissolves from my feathers as I dive down, using my wings to navigate the hidden oasis beneath the surface. The sunlight glistens through, casting rays of light to the lake's depths, which seem to know no end. I push through the water to the other bank, breaking through at the last moment when the air in my lungs runs out, taking a renewed breath and landing lightly on snow-crested rocks.

I feel eyes on me.

Curious and fearful, creatures that wouldn't dare interrupt my preening. They did not see me take my meal above and aren't showing the proper reverence for my presence. I take note of them, those beasts I am forced to



tolerate.

*No, I correct. They are forced to tolerate me.*

When my wings snap open, a winter suru loses its nerve and bolts from the underbrush, bounding on its strong hind legs in a zigzag pattern out of sight. If I were hungrier, maybe I would have pursued it. As it is, I couldn't be bothered, pulling the stray water droplets from my feathers one at a time. Preening is imperative in this high place. Without taking the proper precautions, the bitter cold could get the better of me.

And it makes my feathers shine silver against the endless white.

When my feathers are dry and gleaming, I take to the sky again, drifting on a high current. The mountain and all its facets seem small from up here, manageable. There is only the wind howling, a backdrop to the ever-present silence that is my only companion.

My ears prick for the sound of intruders in my territory.

The creatures have learned to avoid my brutal claws and merciless teeth, so even as I catch sight of a herd of mountain capra, they are already clearing out. I swoop low, taking stock of their ranks and they pick up speed, bleating with urgency. Their young ones fall behind and I'm tempted to sweep one up and break its neck, just to warn the rest of their infringement.

But as I'm about to do so, I catch a scent.

It is like nothing I've ever smelled before, and it sets me off-kilter, the young capra spared from my warning. I lift up again, soaring higher than ever to catch a glimpse of whatever is making that smell.

I move in slow circles, homing in on the source.

Whatever it is smells of smoke and blood and... something sweet and tender. It is only fleetingly that I consider my stomach because something else dances in that redolent scent. I can't even name it, but a strange warmth comes over me, despite the chill.

*I must have it, I think. There is no other recourse.*

I coast above the treetops until they break at the mountain's base. It's closer here, almost within reach. Impatience becomes overwhelming, and I cut up higher, hoping the distance will serve to find the creature.

Whatever it is has encroached on my territory, and in turn, belongs to me.

That's when I catch sight of it. *Her.*

I'm almost confused.

She stands on two legs, dressed in threadbare cloth not made for this weather. I know her kind, I think, but they never come up the mountain. Only

once did I have the misfortune of seeing them, but they wielded crude weapons and didn't let me close before retreating into the sparse forest, taking advantage of my curiosity.

Nut brown hair shrouds her face from my vantage point, making her stand out against the merciless gray of the mountain. Any other predator would have descended on her by now, but curiosity has gotten the better of me.

I circle high above, taking my time. Considering my options.

She doesn't move quickly. In fact, her wingless body seems heavy with exhaustion. She must have come a long way because she does not smell quite like the two-legged creatures I'd discovered before. *Humans*. The word comes to mind of its own volition. I find a strange pleasure in watching the human struggle.

She is not made for the mountain. That is clear.

If she is a threat like the last humans, then her presence here will be easy to correct. But I don't crave to dispatch her quite the way I should. She is intruding on my home, my peace, and my silence. And still, my keen eyes follow her every move with rapt intent.

The shape of her excites me.

It takes all my strength not to swoop down and pluck her from the rocks. I want to watch her a little longer, gauge her reason for being in my territory, oblivious to the warnings all around her. Of the bones she steps over, buried beneath the snow.

My teeth flash in excitement as I circle higher.

I won't lose her, now that I've found her. Even from this distance, I can sense the strength of her heart pounding in her ribs. She moves to sit on a rock, her breath coming in little white puffs of air. *She's tired*, I realize, *and she's hardly made any progress*.

I pity her, even as I tilt my wings to coast in a long arc.

She doesn't know what it is to fly. To watch the world shrink below her talons and revel in the beauty of the endless blue above. My shadow is but a pinpoint as it passes over her. I want her to look up and see me, to be amazed and terrified by my presence.

But her senses are not as keen as creatures of the mountains.

She doesn't even notice when I drop lower.

Shouldn't she hear the ruffle of my feathers, or the deadly sweep as I cut through the air? I had taken in an orphaned suru once. Over the course of the winter, it came to trust me, to eat grass from my hand. It did not shudder

when I opened my wings or stroked its thick fur. It lasted all of a season before I grew hungry enough to tear into it.

Even then, it looked up at me in surprise and disbelief.

This human reminds me of that suru.

Fearless, but in a way that is detrimental to her longevity. She doesn't sense a hunter in her midst, even when death is poised to descend on her. I sweep up the mountain and find a perch where I can watch her without my feral instincts kicking in.

Her presence here troubles me.

It's what she does to me that makes my feathers ruffle. I shake off the sensation, not taking my eyes off her. I have never been so conflicted about such a breach of my territory. My instincts usually tell me to destroy the intruder. And I would, but there's something else more powerful than instinct that stops my claws.

It's a drive to possess her.

My mouth opens, and I let out a trilling whistle that echoes over the mountains. If she hears it, she doesn't make it known. When I stalk my prey, I am a silent, silver bolt, descending from on high. But I *want* her to hear me, for her ears to prick and her sight to fall on me.

I want to taste her tawny flesh and feel the heavy beat of her heart under my palm. I want to discover what lies in her gaze. Will it be curiosity and trust?

Or will it be fear?

---

## TANIA

**E**ach step becomes more difficult.

I thought I might find shelter, tucked away in the mountain, but now I'm starting to realize it was a hopeless endeavor. The path back down looks impossible from this height, and I nearly weep with grief.

I push down the tears because I have to.

I've come this far, and I refuse to give up now. But it would be easy to lie down on the rocky slope and let my eyes close. "Just for a minute," I tell myself, sitting on a stone shelf to catch my breath. The sun has only been up for a few hours, and I'm already too weak to go much further. A bird calls out into the whistling wind, which brings another chill to rattle my bones.

This place is hostile.

There aren't any creatures this high up that I can see. And even though it's cold, I thought I'd find a few mountain capra by now. Or a wild dripir... *something* to show this place is habitable. Even the birds have gone, save for a lone crier.

I shield my eyes from the sun and look for the source of the sound.

If there's even one creature that has survived here, at least I know I stand a chance. But everything is too bright, and I can't pinpoint the call. My extremities are burning from the chill, and I bundle up again.

A dull alarm sounds in the back of my mind.

*I'm being watched.*

If it were just a suru hiding in the snow, I might have overlooked the sensation. But this is different. My limbs are telling me to *run* and I don't have any energy left to do so. Instead, I press on. Maybe shelter will protect

me from those unseen eyes.

A shadow passes overhead.

I ignore it. I'm not accustomed to this empty continent. It's too harsh for the dark elves to even consider inhabiting. If I wanted to find a place they'd never set foot in, this *would* be it.

"You got what you wanted," I murmur, slapping my ice-cold cheeks to warm them. "For however long it lasts."

The looming sensation is only getting worse, and I realize it's time to get moving again. If it's an animal, maybe I can lose it, or let it get bored of following me. I can't show fear, or it'll pick up on it. If it's something *else*, well, I don't have much in the way of protection. I'll fight. I will. But I never expected to die on a mountain in Prazh.

I pick my way up the mountain.

There are several places that might have a shallow crevice I can hide in. A shadow passes overhead again, but when I try to spot it, it's already gone. It's hard to know if the bird is the hunter, or if it's something below and the bird is just waiting to pick my bones clean.

In any case, it doesn't utter another call.

A wave of frisson grips me, and I look around more intently. The sun is glancing off the snow, but I think I see a shape way up above me. I can't be certain, but I get a bad feeling. I stare long and hard at the thing, holding my breath in the presence of it.

I can't make out any features from this distance.

But I'm certain about it now.

My pulse picks up speed, and I find my breath coming shorter. With a predator at my back, I can't risk moving too slowly. I drop my remaining supplies and press up the mountain. The rocks and boulders are merciless, offering no shelter against my unseen enemy. I'm struggling to breathe at this height as I clamber onto a boulder. Something flits past me within a hand's span before I can get a good look at it.

It steals my breath with how close it came.

*So, it is the bird.*

Terrible things have happened to me in the past, but civilized cruelty is expected and tolerable compared to this barren wasteland that offers no reprieve when my life is on the line. I wish I could be invisible again, another face among countless other slaves. All at once, I'm reviled by the thought, but in the face of certain death, it's easy to crave the familiar.

“Thirteen protect me,” I whisper without a sound, putting my back to the rock.

If I am to die, I will face it head-on.

My breath billows out in white clouds from my nostrils. Fear grips me when I hear the flutter of massive wings and look up just in time to see the creature in its entirety. My scream gets stuck in my throat.

Dusty white wings close around me, and I’m airborne.

Feathery hands grip me, and a strange face looks back, silvery eyes intent. Its face, I can’t quite piece together. It looks like it could have been a person once, but its mouth and nose protrude to form a sharp extension of its face, like a bird’s beak. Razor-sharp teeth flash, and I find my voice again.

The ground falls away beneath us as it rises with me in tow.

I’m screaming as I struggle, preferring to risk the benevolent embrace of gravity than whatever this thing has planned for me. Claws drag against my skin as it tries to keep hold of me. *At least I’ll make it work for its next meal*, I think, shoving at its hard chest, terrified of what those teeth can do.

Its mouth opens, and I swear it’s going to take a chunk out of me.

“No!”

I shove hard, jarring us both. Its strong arms wrap tightly around me, forcing me taut against its powerful body as it remains aloft. I struggle, but it’s useless. Tears form, streaming silently down my face before freezing.

It seems to be going somewhere.

As terrifying as this is, I’m almost relieved by the warmth his body is producing. And after everything I’ve been through, I wonder if it might be worth it to live my last moments sheltered from the bitter cold.

I go limp.

It’s not even out of survival, at this rate. I’m just tired. The world of Protheka has it out for me, and I guess I’ve gotten away too many times. Now, finally, there is a creature I can’t reason with, and if it is to be the end, I don’t have to be afraid.

The creature circles several times, loosening its grip on me. One arm is still wrapped around me, but the other is gone. Like a parcel, he’s carrying me back to whatever serves as his nest. He swoops low between two half peaks so that the ground is only a dozen hand spans below us. I don’t know what possesses me, but I realize there’s a possibility I could still get free. I maintain a limp posture, waiting until the very last second to vault forward.

He’s not ready for it, and I find myself freed.

But I'm not falling down. Instead, I'm careening into open space towards a vast emptiness and a lake that has been frozen over. I start flailing, my scream whipping by me faster than my ears can pick it up as I hurl to the ground, tumbling over and over again.

I see the lake, then the sky, then the lake again.

When I see the sky next, something dark blots out the blue, and pain lances up my arm. My skin shreds as I feel his talons cut through my flesh. But I'm no longer falling. Instead, I'm being suspended in the air, drifting along with this creature again with his talons deep inside of me. I bawl at the agony, wishing it would end already.

"Stop! Please, stop this," I hear myself say.

Will my appeals for mercy mean anything to this creature? Blood trickles down my arm and into my clothes, worsening the frigid bite of the air. My head spins, and my sight blurs.

I've felt pain before, great and terrible agony at the hands of my owners. But they didn't tear me open from elbow to wrist and dangle me at a great height. When my sight darkens, I let it take over without a fight.

It's just too much.

---

## KIATH

**P**atience. Control. Anticipation.

The amount of energy that I now have to commit to ensuring I wait rather than rip into this meal right away is surprising to me. I've never wanted to feast so badly before, not on other humans who climb these mountains, not on the furry creatures that sometimes crawl amongst the icy paths.

The woman is limp in my arms and has been since I've picked her up from her rather stupid plan of escape. She has no wings to land or fly away from me, nor does she have any armor to shield her on the off chance she hit the ground before I caught her. She surely would've died, but that resourcefulness, that desperation...

It's intriguing. It's divine. With the wind whipping by us, I can only catch the tail end of her scent but even that is enough to capture my focus.

Regardless, she is also dead weight. Delicious, mouth-watering dead weight.

She's heavier than I expected her to be as well, with a nice layer of fat and muscle around her body that makes her comfortable to grip and hold. It's vastly different from a lot of the other kills on this mountain who usually are nothing but skin and bones by the time I find them. She's soft and fragile like I know humans are, but the tenacity she has is admirable. It's tantalizing at the very least.

From her wound, I can smell blood as it oozes down her arm and falls toward the ground below in teardrops. I wonder if they will be frozen into crimson stones by the time they hit the ground. I have to stop myself from



turning around and picking each and every one of them up to hoard.

The creatures down below are lucky to have even those small morsels and will never be able to forget the taste as they feast on the much less appetizing meals in the future.

I hear a soft groan from the woman in my arms and turn to look at her. Her face is scrunched up in pain and fear, most likely having thoughts about her capture. I can tell her sleep isn't deep, and that she will soon wake up and once again be filled with fear.

Excitement fills my body at the thought, and I push myself to go faster.

When I see my cave, I dive down towards it at a speed that betrays the level of control I've been trying to hold on to since I caught this prize. Landing on the small outcropping is easy and well-practiced, even with my arms holding onto something else. The woman is still silent, even as I cross the length of the cave and drop her onto the bed of straw.

She wakes up the moment she hits my nest and screams.

"Wh – Get away from me!" she yells, grabbing a fist full of dry leaves and sticks and throwing it towards me. They all fall rather uselessly towards the ground, and she takes the moment to back up away from me.

When her eyes meet mine and she trembles, all I can smell is delicious fear.

"You're a monster! You – You need to get away from me! Please, I don't want to die!"

She's hysterical, of course, but I don't care. My body tenses up with need, and I'm surprised at how much I find myself wanting to absolutely devour her. Tears begin to well up in her eyes in her panic, and she's helpless. The smell in the air is *intoxicating*.

"I haven't done anything to you, p-please..." she says, voice wavering like she's holding back a sob. "Let me free and everything will be okay!"

Okay? Missing out on a delicacy like this is okay?

The woman is still bleeding on my nest, and I fantasize in this moment as she begs for her life about how I could lick up every drop of blood that she's spilling onto my ground. I can taste her desperation in the air, and I know that when I get to taste her from the source, I will never be able to look back.

Whether I taste her through her blood or otherwise.

"You're just a stupid bird monster!" A scream interrupts my thoughts. "You weren't part of the plan. I was supposed to be free!"

She makes another pitiful attempt at throwing my own nest at me, and the

thought of having to rearrange it again fills me with annoyance. I caw at her, which makes her jump and hit her back against the wall.

She wails as she realizes she can't back up anymore, pulling her knees up to her chest to protect her soft middle. Not that it would do her any good at the end of the day. The wound on her arm has slowed even more, now only shining with crimson blood.

I can tell that this pitiful and helpless attempt at protecting herself is only making it more difficult for her to breathe. Her chest rises and falls unsteadily, and she's heaving in large gasps of air. I can hear her heart hammering against her chest and her face is a mess, covered in tears and spare bits of blood from her escape attempt.

Every whimper that leaves her throat has my body aching for more. I can feel my muscles tense, ready to pounce, and my mouth feels dry. Without the wind blowing, the aroma that comes off of her stays and lingers. It gets stronger by the second, and when I run my eyes down her body, I see her shivering.

She's mine, all mine, and she's helpless.

"I was supposed to be free," she sobs. "I'm free."

Her breathing is getting faster and faster, but through her sobs, I can tell she's still not getting enough air. She coughs and sobs even as she shakes her hands out toward me, ready to do whatever it takes to try and stop me from advancing on her.

I want her, and her fear is delicious, but I can hear her heart hammering. I fear that the thing I am enjoying about her most is going to take her away from me too early.

I lower myself to the ground in a crouch so our eyes are level and force the feathers along my body to lay flat. She cannot die of fear like some kind of frightened suru. I want to savor her for a while, take my time while I take her, feast on her, and do everything that I've been thinking about since I laid eyes on her.

She snuffles and coughs, staring at me with wide eyes.

"Please," she says, her voice already scratchy and tired from her screaming. "Please let me go."

I tilt my head at her in understanding, trying to get her to calm down even more, and she blinks her big eyes. Her tears fall in cascades down her soft cheeks, and she is mesmerizing.

"Can you understand me?" she asks quietly, her voice filled with a

tentative hope. “Do you know what I’m saying?”

Has she not realized that I’ve been able to hear her this entire time? Curious. I retract my talons and fold up my wings so I appear smaller, wondering if she’ll let me get close to her.

“Please. If you can understand me...” She pushes herself off the wall, still shivering, and crawls towards me. “Please let me go. I’ll leave you alone!”

“You’re not going anywhere,” I tell her. “You’re mine.”

When she hears me talk, her eyes widen. Before she can even react to the shock, I pull her into my arms so she doesn’t try to fight or run back into the wall. She screams and thrashes in my grip, and with the salty tang in the air, I can tell she’s started to cry in earnest once more. Her wails are nonsensical, repeating to let her go and that she’s sorry. I can hear her heart beat faster than before, and it’s... It’s overwhelming.

In my arms, I crush her to my chest, pinning her arms to her sides so she can’t cause me any more damage. Her scent fills my lungs, and I feel her soft, featherless body along mine. I press my face against her neck where her scent is the strongest. I take a deep breath and almost shake from the ecstasy.

She cries and doesn’t stop, even when I pull her to sit in my lap. She still tries to fight with what little energy she has, and I fantasize about what it would be like to take her now. What she would taste like if I ran my tongue down her neck and picked up the sweat, blood, and tears off her skin.

But I don’t.

It would kill her, I think. The shock of it all. Either it wouldn’t last, or I wouldn’t get the satisfaction of drinking her blood while it’s warm and pumping as she works herself up into a shock.

I want this to last as long as possible.

I am not like the useless little pavos that sing their songs for no reason, but I wonder if I were, would she calm down?

Deep within my chest, I let out a soft coo, and I know she feels it from how she startles against me. I try it again, and I hear her sob catch in her throat.

This singing is beneath me, but it’s calming her down, so I sit on the floor of my nest and coo at this temptation in my arms until I am sure she won’t give in to the fright.

Until I am ready to take her.

---

## TANIA

**W**hat is happening?

Is he singing to me? After everything, he's – he's *cooing*. The same creature – or bird, or monster – that is the reason I'm trapped in a mountain cave, exhausted and with a gash on my arm, is holding me to his chest and cooing.

The song isn't necessarily pretty or melodic. It's not the same as the chirps of the pavos I heard back in camp, or the delicate little trills of the fancy birds that the rich buyers would bring to flaunt their excessive wealth. Instead of sweet, it's much cruder and monotone, but the rumble is... comforting, somehow. It's similar to a purr, but much louder, especially with how my face is pressed up against his chest. I feel the vibrations along my face and body, and I wonder if this is what it's like to sleep with likars all around.

*His feathers are actually... soft, I think to myself, stunned. Much softer than anything else I've ever touched.*

The death grip he has on my arms loosens, and I realize with a deep sense of dread that I've actually stopped trying to fight my way out of his grip. His arms move to hold me much more gently, and I wonder if he's happy that I've stopped fighting back, if he wants me to relax. When I feel the tenseness of his muscles fade away the longer I stay still, the more I think I'm right.

The thought of it all still makes no sense, even with the mountain of evidence to the contrary. This man-bird thing has been nothing but predatory since I was picked up from the ground, even snatching me in the middle of the air and cornering me in its cave. If this thing wanted to eat me, it would

have done so already with a ferocity that I'm not sure I would be able to fight against.

I'm weak, I'm tired, and I'm cold, and though I feel despair, I know that I am an easy meal. Why would he waste time comforting me and singing to me if I'm already in his clutches? All he had to do was strike and be done with it.

He has to have some kind of ulterior motive. He's clearly intelligent, considering he talked to me, so that means the entire time I was begging and pleading with him to not kill me and to let me go, he could hear me. If I'm lucky, he just wants me to shut up so he can kill and eat me alive in peace. If I'm unlucky...

*If I'm unlucky, it means he wants to keep me here forever, like some kind of pet, the scared, darker part of my mind supplies. And I will have just replaced one captor for another.*

I squirm in his arms in discomfort, and to my horror, he wraps them tighter around me again. I can't do much except just lean my body forward into his plumage since he has my arms pinned at my sides. He seems to want me to stay still and calm, the cooing getting louder when he hears my breath hitch in my throat from a held-back sob.

I should probably do as he wants if I want to survive as long as possible, even if the idea of relaxing in his arms is crazy with how much power he has over me. But I want to live, I want to be free, so I just...

Relax.

I press my face against his chest and take a deep breath in and out until I stop feeling the urge to cry and scream and beg. He doesn't smell bad, which is a shock, though I should have expected it with how his feathers are soft and mostly neat even as a predatory bird. I try to focus on the cooing, making up words in my mind and counting the strange trilling noises he makes.

He doesn't let me go, not at all. But his grip softens again and pulls me closer in a way that isn't violent but... caring? He presses his face against my neck.

I freeze momentarily, waiting for him to rip into my throat and drink my blood. He doesn't, just takes a deep breath and sighs, nuzzling my neck as if he wants to crawl into my skin and stay there.

It feels... nice.

I've never had such a gentle touch before, not to this extent. Even if this feeling is being caused by the same thing that attacked me, I can't help but think about how nice it is to be held, how his strong arms are a comforting

weight around me, and how his soft feathers make me think of the fancy pillows that royalty brag about in stories.

I like being here in its arms. It's better than anything else I've experienced, and my heart beats faster at the implication that this could be... attraction? Affection? This bird creature tried to kill me, but it's still somehow the nicest thing that's happened to me.

I should be planning my escape, but all I can think of is this creature being kind.

"What's your name?" he asks, though I feel the rumble more than I hear the words. "Tell me."

My voice catches in my throat. Why does he want to know? I've heard of monsters who can do things to you if they find out your name. I should stay quiet and maybe he won't ask again, maybe –

"Stop squirming," he mutters against my ear, tightening his grip around me once more. "I can't think with you smelling like that."

"Like what?" I ask against my better judgment.

"Delicious," he whispers in my ear. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I subconsciously press my body closer to his. Our bodies are completely connected, and I feel how he coos at my reaction.

My entire body trembles at his ministrations. I want to get away from him and away from this cave. I swallow down a sob and almost squeak when I feel his talons digging into my arms.

"Stop," he says again in a commanding voice. "I can't control myself. I won't."

I want to cry. Stop what? I don't dare open my mouth again for clarification.

He keeps holding me tighter and tighter, smelling me and nuzzling my neck as I shake. It is at that moment that I realize what he means.

He's attracted to my fear.

I try to get a hold of my emotions immediately. I count my breaths and focus on anything else apart from the terror that tries to take hold of my body. I know that if I don't, this monster is going to do whatever he wants with me. In the back of my mind, I wonder why he's even warning me, but at this point, I don't care. I want to live, so instead I focus on what he asked before I got scared.

"My name is Tania," I whisper. "What's yours?"

"Kiath," he murmurs back. "I am called Kiath."

I open my mouth to tell him he has a nice name. It's not technically a lie, it sounds almost pretty in his voice. But just then, he runs his tongue over my pulse. A small moan escapes me, and I chastise myself.

His tongue feels different both in its shape and texture. It's rough and thick, and I can tell it's stronger and more flexible than my own. I picture what it looks like in my mind's eye, and I swallow, forcing myself to stay still.

"That's a nice name," I tell him, desperately trying to control the warmth pooling in my stomach. The desire mixes in with the fear, and I wonder if my body even knows what it wants.

"Tania is also a nice name."

I hum, determined to get a lock on my emotions. The way he says my name is also kind. He speaks softly but with authority, perhaps to stop me from freaking out even further. Whatever his reason, the effect is the same. I bury my face once more in his chest to get a handle on myself.

A moment passes. Then he pulls away from me, pushing me off towards the pile of furs and straw, and leaves his... nest, maybe? He sits me right in the center, and I make sure not to fight him so he doesn't get angry at me. Once I let myself sit in the center, he stands up at his full height and looks down at me.

"I'm going to get you supplies to tend to your arm," he says. "You're going to stay here and wait for me until I return."

I nod, unable to say anything else. He runs his eyes down my face and body in a way that makes me feel exposed.

"I'll be back soon. Do not do something you'll regret," Kiath says finally and turns around to exit the cave. In one graceful move, he leaps off the entrance and flies off, and I don't dare move until I can't hear anything except my breathing and the wind.

When I'm confident that I am alone, I scramble to my feet. I can feel exhaustion weighing me down, but I force myself to go further.

"I'm getting out of here," I mutter to myself. "I'm free now, and I'm staying free."

I know that I might die if I go out there, but it'll be better than the alternative. Sure, Kiath was nice for a moment. But it's getting clearer to me that if I stay here, I'll either be a meal or a pet, and I can't stand to be either.

I'm free now, and I'm not going back.

---

## TANIA

I don't hear the flap of his wings any longer.

My breath is quiet as I listen, expecting him to return at any moment.

My arm is still throbbing, blood oozing from the deep wounds. So I shred a section of my sleeve and wrap it tightly around the injury. I nearly weep from the process, it hurts so badly. The rough cloth bites, but the compression stems the bleeding enough for me to focus.

Pain grips me as I rise.

The blood that did escape is cold in the frigid air, though the cave shelters me from the bitter wind outside. But everywhere I look is dark. I can't recall in which direction he brought me here, just the agony and fear.

I move to a darkened wall, feeling for any sign of an exit. The dimness is heavy, and I can only make things out in shades of gray, squinting as if it'll help in my predicament. Every step I take there's a risk I'll step on a rock and twist my ankle.

I kick something, and it clatters forward.

It's much lighter than a rock, but I can tell it's round and pale. I slide forward and shove the object, which rolls onto its side to reveal empty sockets looking back at me. My gasp echoes through the tunnel. *A skull.*

"Oh, gods!" comes my breathless exclamation. "I'm going to die here."

I have to get out.

My steps are less cautious as I take a tunnel that seems to slope downwards slightly. *Out*, is all I can think, my heart dropping as more bones clatter and shift. At least the ground is polished flat with use, and I manage to catch a glimmer of light in my peripherals.



A cold wind tells me I'm going the right way.

I press on, hardly daring to breathe the thin air for fear the creature will hear me. His senses are sharp. Even in our brief acquaintance, I can tell that much. "Tania," I mutter under my breath as I trek towards the source of the cold. "What in the Thirteen Maws did you get yourself into?"

Finally, around a corner, light blinds me. I limp to the entrance, looking out across the vast whiteness. From this height, it's almost beautiful.

Almost.

If I want any hope of escaping this creature, I have to seize the opportunity now. Who knows when I'll get another chance?

I'm ill-prepared, but I force myself into the frigid mountain air. Though the mountainside is powdery and soft to the eye, the rocks underneath are sharp and unsteady. I hardly take three steps out before one gives beneath me, sending me sliding ten feet down the mountain. I land hard on my ass as more snow comes tumbling after, dusting me in a fine powder.

I look to the apathetic sky, eyes welling with tears.

Why is the cost of freedom so high?

Will there be anything left of me to enjoy it, at the end of my journey? I'm already in so much pain, and the snow melting against my skin isn't making it any easier. My teeth chatter as I clutch myself, keeping a stringent eye out for the pavo man in case he returns. I'm gripped with fear at the notion, which spurs me into action.

My breath is billowing clouds as I huff and puff, making my way down the treacherous mountainside with more care this time. From here, I can't see the lake we flew over, or remember which direction the woods were.

"Damn it all," I whisper through chattering teeth.

It would be easy to give up now. To admit defeat and let the snow catch me at the bottom of the steep cliff. I've always been a fighter, a survivor, but this continent is intent on killing me, and I'm almost ready to let it.

The cold seeps in deeper.

Every move is painful, and I have to brace myself against another breath of wind, the wetness against my skin hardening to ice. The warmth in my core is dissipating, like a candle being snuffed out. Even the tears freeze on my burning cheeks, and I realize I won't make it much further before frostbite overtakes me.

I don't even have the words to speak any longer, not sure my frozen lips will obey me anymore. If that creature doesn't come, I may very well fall

prey to the elements. And no one will ever know what happened to me. I'll be another skeleton buried beneath the snow. I don't want to *need* him, but I... I think I do.

I'm not going to make it on my own.

But when I round a heavy rock face, I get a glimpse of the trees and the forest beyond. My legs nearly buckle underneath me in my relief, but I find renewed strength and push forward. I only have a little while before the cold takes over, and I have to find shelter before then.

I nearly pass it on my way down.

It's another cave, this one facing the forest. A sound of relief escapes me, almost a sob as I duck into the entrance and bundle up against the cave's wall. It almost feels warm compared to my body's low temperature. I press my back up against it with a long sigh and close my eyes. I needed this reprieve, and as I begin to warm up, I realize I might make it after all.

It's not until I hear a growl that fear grips me again.

I don't dare turn quickly, taking a slow glance over my shoulder and into the yawning mouth of the cave. Five sets of keen yellow eyes look back at me. I can feel the tension mounting as I stare at them and they stare back. Slowly, I move to back away. It's still a long way down the side of the mountain if I fall, but turning my back on these worgs will mean certain death.

I entered *their* home, and now I just might be their dinner.

The biggest one bares its sharp teeth as it comes into the light, three more behind it. They don't have the sense of men or elves. They will not be reasoned with, unlike Kiath, who at least made an effort to communicate.

His name is on my frozen lips.

But before I can let out a scream, something whooshes past me by a hair's breadth and collides with the biggest worg. Snarling fills the air, quickly replaced with yipping and an inhuman screeching from the monstrous worgs. Even as the others join in, fur and limbs go flying as Kiath tears into them, a silver bolt among their ranks, soaked in their blood.

One of them is thrown down the mountain, while another tries to limp away.

The sudden violence has me frozen to the spot. I can't utter a word of protest as Kiath bathes in their gore, tearing a worg's head off before slamming into another and ripping it open neck to groin. The others back away, realizing they cannot win against this monstrous being. But it's a

different sort of fear that grips me.

My pulse rises.

The sheer violence of Kiath, the way he destroys without hesitation, makes me realize just how perilous his company is. The fight has settled, but Kiath isn't done, chasing into the cave where I can hear the yips of the worg pups.

I can only imagine how he manages to silence them in a few sweeps of his claws, emerging with a headless pup in one hand. His silver eyes are clouded with a strange sort of glee, and I watch in horror as he tears the little pup's heart out before consuming the still-beating organ whole.

My breath comes fast, and the cold is forgotten.

I taste bile at the back of my throat, and I could throw up if I *had* anything to throw up. Kiath is beyond reason as he hunkers over one of his kills and draws the coil of their organs out to gnaw on it.

He doesn't see me anymore.

I take another step backward, finding only air. I can't help when an errant cry escapes me and I go tumbling down the mountain again. I don't know if he notices, but I right myself, my mind swirling with the terrible possibilities.

Flight kicks in, and my thoughts shut down completely.

*I need to get away*, is the only sentiment that remains as I book it towards the safety of the woods. I'll take a hundred worgs over whatever Kiath is, retching and sobbing as I flee. If he's following me, I can't tell.

I don't have the sense to check.

It's all I can do not to fall apart completely. The motion brings the warmth back to my frigid limbs, and I chase my freedom, hoping that the monster has forgotten me completely.

---

## KIATH

I *need more*, I think, tearing flesh from bone.

A small part of me realizes that I'm covered in worg gore, with their bodies scattered all around me at the mouth of their cave, but I'm overwhelmed with the deep red spreading in the snow at my feet. I can see nothing but the next bite and hear nothing but the wet ripping sounds when my claws shred through fur and muscle.

But then...

Movement.

My gaze flits past the carnage, and my teeth gnash in anticipation. *More prey*, comes the welcome thought. It is not about hunger any longer, but total domination. Don't the creatures of the mountains know better than to run from *me*?

It is futile.

I tear forward, chasing the shrinking figure around a rock face and towards the sparse woods beyond. They've got the lead, but it's nothing my wings and powerful limbs can't make up for. My feathered front is stained with the blood of my kills, and I am that terrifying beast that sends even the indomitable ursain fleeing.

It is with that confidence that I catch the wind beneath my wings and take flight, letting the ground shrink beneath me. From up here, my prey moves slower. Two legs carry it until it stumbles and falls on four. My tongue darts out to sweep the blood from my lips as I give my prey time to recover.

"Run," I snarl under my breath. *Give me a chase worthy of a hunter.*

My wings flap hard to keep me suspended, but they are made for this sort

of effort and could keep me in the air nearly indefinitely. I wait for my prey to disappear into the forest before letting myself drop a dozen hand spans, then twist like a bolt in the air, aimed directly at an opening between two trees.

I catch a branch and hunker down, using my keen sight to search for any movement. The forest is still, unnaturally so. The creatures here know to hide from my presence. All but one who bursts through the undergrowth, wild-eyed and breathing hard.

It's on two legs again, and it's bleeding.

In the back of my mind, I recognize it as more than just prey. There's something about the shape of this one that almost causes me to falter. But the bloodlust has darkened my vision and lengthened my claws. *Kill*, is the only directive echoing in my skull, and how can I deny it?

My talons sink into the snow as I land lightly, silently, behind my prey.

For as much as I crave the taste of fear, I'm not keen on ending this chase just yet, and I let it dash another hundred hand spans forward before pursuing. It's slower than even the bounding surus that burrow underfoot.

It looks back.

A flash of auburn hair and terrified eyes greets me. I have tasted her scent before, but the anticipation forbids me from recalling where. I shoot it a deadly grin and break from my stance to pursue, claws out.

It spurs them forward with a cry.

I close the distance, assured of the kill when a heavy branch sweeps back and strikes me across the face, sending me reeling backward into the snow. I stare up at the cloudless sky for a brief moment, wondering what just happened before rising again.

I feel my cheek, which has been cut, and taste the blood that wells there.

Another grin finds me. *This one is crafty.*

I have had my fill of stupid animals, of worgs and ursain and suru that are oblivious to my fatal nature until it's too late. But this one – she may not be quick, but she makes up for it with her resourcefulness.

By the time my claws come out again, she's gone.

There's no point in chasing in the wrong direction, so I remain still, listening hard and tasting the air. The woods grow thicker here, so the sounds won't echo. But even the most cunning prey has to make noise eventually. My head pivots left, then right, taking in the silence, listening for the shift of snow or the crack of a branch.

All is quiet.

My wings flare out as if I mean to take to the sky, and a growl finds me. Have I lost my prey already? Perhaps I am not the hunter I thought I was if a creature like that could get away so easily. But no, it couldn't move that quickly.

Bloodlust grips me again, and my senses heighten with the hot pounding of my pulse. I tear forward again, chasing the scent of fear. It's already being swept away by a chill breeze that ruffles my feathers, but I think I can trace it to its source.

I hear her heavy breathing before I see her. Using my wings to augment my speed, I reach out to grab her. A yelp escapes her as we go tumbling together, my wings folding around her struggling form when I land on top of her.

My bloodied hands tighten around her wrists, pinning them above her head. I nearly let the violence overtake me again, but it's the look in her eye that gives me pause. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly, like a frightened karasu caught in a trap. Her cheeks are florid from the cold, almost as red as my hands and face.

She turns her face away, exposing her elegant neck. "Spare me. Please. I won't run away again."

It's the words that let a little sense trickle back in. She goes still beneath me, no longer struggling, which allows me to see her less as prey and more as... something else. I become intimately aware of how my body is pressed against hers, our heat mingling.

Blood smears where I touch her, and I can imagine painting her whole body in the color of beautiful murder. I lean in to taste her flesh again, just to remind myself why I swept her up in the first place. I expect to taste pure fear, but there's something else beneath that sets my plume to ruffle. Desire.

When my quick tongue chases the line of her jaw, she bites back a guilty croon.

More sense trickles in, and I fully recall how she was surrounded by worgs before my sight went red and I killed the creatures that threatened my new plaything. But I had lost myself back there and chased her, too.

"Please," she whispers again.

Her eyes are closed as if she's resigned to her fate, her brow knitted in wait for my killing blow. But there is so much more I want to do to her before she meets her end. My instincts war with this newfound sensation, and

a deep craving of a different kind rises.

This human makes me reconsider my nature.

I want to explore it more, but I am still covered in worg blood. I am in no state to attract a mate, reeking of death. Another dip in the lake would be beneficial to us both. And yet, she is so cold already.

I sweep her up against my chest without a word, kicking off the ground and taking to the air. It will be easier to assess these strange feelings in a place I can control. She shivers against me, fear rolling off of her in waves.

But I'm in control of myself this time.

My cave comes into sight, and I drop down lightly, carrying her inside like a precious parcel. I won't leave her to her own devices. I can't take my eyes off her, even as I lower her into my nest. I take several steps back and hunker in front of the exit, moving to preen my bloodied feathers.

It takes some time before she dares to open her eyes.

The blood stains on her hands and face add color to her cold skin. I can imagine I'm only a looming shadow from her view, and so it takes her a while longer to speak. "I'm sorry."

My feathers are finally clean, so I stand to my full height to regard her.

She shrinks into the nest.

I like how, even as she's afraid, there's a spark of uncertainty in her eyes. As if she can't tell if I mean to venerate her or punish her. I cock my head to one side, not entirely sure myself. I want to hear her cry out her apology. I want to hear her sobs echo through the caves. And I have her all to myself now.

"There will be punishment for your disobedience, *ma khari*."

Tania swallows down her next words, her full lips parted. She pulls back suddenly, her fear and arousal spiking so high that I can taste their redolence on my tongue. My teeth click together at the thought of drawing red, red lines over her tawny flesh.

I take a step forward, intending to make good on that promise.





## TANIA

The familiar caverns are dark and foreboding. The loose drip of the icicles, occupying the vague space between the freezing realm outside and the slightly warmer cavern in which I now reside, fills my ears.

In the near absence of light, the clearest thing I can see, aside from the red-dyed form of Kiath, is the faint glimmer of coins stacked high against the cave walls. They shine with every metal, dyed dull brown by blood-soaked hands...

Or claws?

The wind roars and blows outside, and its chill grazes my skin even from deeper within the cavern.

“There will be punishment for your disobedience, *ma khari*,” he growls.

An unnatural trill resonates from the length of his massive tongue vibrating wildly against the inside of his throat. His voice in this moment is almost alien in cadence.

But even for the fear now spreading throughout my body, my muscles trembling uncontrollably in his touch, a comfort reaches me through the vocal noises he utters. His words are menacing, but the melodic harmony in it still allures me. It hypnotizes me.

“That’s it. Succumb to my song.”

*No!*

Although my mind attempts to fight him, and I try to stand resolutely against his approach, my mind and my body exist in perilous opposition.

My body longs for this foreign stranger, desiring only to understand him, wanting to know all the things I don’t understand about my anatomy.

And my mind, growing quieter by the minute, needs to realize that it surrendered hours ago. I gave up when I realized that my escape was impossible and that I was safest in his cavern.

His beak-like mouth lingers, running over my shoulders and breathing in. His claws grip me, touching me gently as he inhales.

“You smell like nimon-bean and fire,” he tells me before piercing my skin gently with his sharp claws.

He offers no further elaboration. I’d like to question him, but for my safety, and perhaps for the sake of preserving the moment, I don’t dare.

His hypnotizing song becomes a dull and constant hum. I can feel him pressing down on my flesh, urging me forward.

“This is your fault, you know,” he says, the melody still carrying on his voice as he speaks.

I cock my eyebrow, my heart nearly incapacitated from its incessant throbbing.

“What do you mean?”

“If you didn’t smell so good, perhaps I wouldn’t have swooped down and taken you for myself,” he elaborates.

His bestial, savage nature betrays a deep thoughtfulness that comes only through observation. I can tell that he doesn’t know much about the inner workings of humans from the fragile dance of his claws on my flesh. But he carries a wisdom that crosses barriers.

I gasp as he brings his tongue to my neck and licks it gently, the roughness of the muscle bringing the hairs on my nape to full attention. I expect him to bite me, and I prepare for the pain of it. But he moves away, lifting his head up to my mouth.

Then he runs his tongue into mine. It feels painful and unnatural at first, the texture of it so much more coarse and intricate.

I expect his mouth to smell odorous, given that parts of him are still covered in worg blood. But unexpectedly, there’s something pleasant and savory about his breath as it moves into mine.

As I smell it, I feel my mind being further carried to another realm, whisked beyond the thresholds that deem this alliance damnable.

*What is he doing to me?*

He brings his claws in deeper, and his grip tightens.

I feel both trapped and comforted, suspended in his caress like a vice that wraps me like a blanket. His gentle feathers rubbing against my skin feel

smooth but irritating, his claws threatening but delicate.

I bring my pelvis backward, rubbing into him. I think I can feel something buried underneath his groin, but I'm still uncertain.

"Undress," he says. "I want to see all of you."

I shake my head. It's too cold and too embarrassing.

He steps forward, cooing still, and drags his claws against my breasts, ripping into the fabric that conceals me. Blood slowly trickles where he scrapes, my right breast swaying free.

I want to yell at him. I want to scream into him and pound his chest.

Using his wing, he grips my form rhythmically and rolls me toward him. I stand, my back rubbing against his torso, as strand by strand he rips my clothing from my body. With every strip removed from me, I am more naked and exposed, the cool air affecting me more.

Eventually, the attire that once guarded me from his vigilant eyes is a pile at my feet, among the other furs, straw, and soft objects on the floor.

"See what happens when you disobey me?"

A heat gathers deep in my core. It doesn't safeguard me from the chilling cold, but it does warm me up slightly.

I feel a rush of wind unexpectedly reach my exposed back. The chill sends shivers down my spine. Kiath distances himself from me.

Then I feel a blunt pain resonate across my ass, accompanied by a grunt. His clawed hand palms me, whipping my flesh.

I whimper in response. "Why?"

He chuckles. "To teach you a lesson." He attempts to bend me over, guiding my spine by positioning my torso.

I fight his instructions, keeping my skeleton firm in his grip. His claws draw back, and he swings them forward with a very pointed impact. A lone tear wells up in my eye, the pain stinging like a cool knife.

"The sooner you obey," he growls. "The sooner we can move on." He attempts to conduct my body into position, and this time, I see no reason to fight.

I oblige him, bending my shoulders forward and dipping my spine.

His groin presses against me again. *Does he want me to back into him?*

I move back into him, and he swats me in response.

"Control yourself!"

I don't know what's wrong with me... I wonder if it's an effect of his domination or his enchanting song. But the more he swats me, bringing his

claws into my flesh, the more aroused I become.

“Good,” he growls, rubbing my ass with his feathered claws.

As his caress trails over my flesh, it lingers on the warmth of my silken entrance, and I’m overtaken by shame.

“Now stay.”

I lean forward and brace myself, preparing for the immense pain that follows.

But with the next swat, I’m taken away, out of the cavern. My mind blanks as the pain transports me to a new frontier. Every impact numbs me more to the pain, until all I register is the extreme arousal collecting between my legs, dripping down into the nest.

By the fifth swat, I can feel myself bucking back into his hand, twisting my hips wildly.

*Look at how far you’ve fallen.*

I silence the voice inside my head, the last remnant of the girl who fought against this monster’s cruel touch.

His claw stops short on impact, landing hard on my ass and resting before moving downward, cupping me.

He grips the lower curvature of my cheek, holding me firmly. He can feel me undulating in harmony with his touch, shaking and swaying against him. My pace is frantic and urgent.

With both hands now, he cups and squeezes both of my cheeks, moving closer to the inside of my thighs. His clawed talon penetrates my entrance. My juices drip onto his claws. He can feel my warmth.

I grip him tightly as he enters me with his digits, vibrating wildly inside of me. I feel something fall loose, hitting my leg. But before I get a chance to look back, his pace accelerates, penetrating me more wildly.

I can hear myself moaning, so much more lost than the woman who stood in opposition to him moments ago. I buck back in a frenzy against him, grinding into his hand. His feathers rub up against my clitoris, stimulating me with every forward motion.

With his clawed finger still inside of me, he leans down, squatting before me.

Looking down, I see a vague glance of a long, spiraling organ before my senses are carried away again. His face approaches my warmth, and his tongue bursts into me, accompanying his claw.

I’m surprised by its immensity as it penetrates me. If his claw is the scout,

figuring out my inner cavern, his tongue is the invading party, battering into the walls and exposing their treasures.

I move back into him, unable to contain myself for one more moment. My screams guide him to retreat, focusing all his energy on my clit.

His tongue spirals around it, his claw gently rubbing against me. The textural sensations, so unfamiliar to me, send me over the edge.

My knees weak and wobbly, I collapse forward into the rock wall, trusting him to catch me in spite of his cruel nature.

He seizes me suddenly, gripping my body in his winged clutches.

I can see the way he gazes at me, as though I am an object he wishes to possess completely.

I wish he would.

The cold doesn't hit me the same way as I fall into his nest, covering myself with the furs. My mind is too overwhelmed to process much more.

I don't want to question what this means or what I'm doing anymore. I don't want to think about the human settlement or my allegiances or why I'm on this new continent, if not to retrieve my freedom.

I just want to revel in the sensations that still linger in my core. I want to be consumed and used by him entirely. I want him to punish me harder... to show me what in my life has been missing.

What spell has he cast on me?

His song hits my ears gently, lulling me to sleep. It drowns out the dripping icicles and the roaring wind, silencing my doubts and lurking dread.

As my vision blanks and my imagination is carried to distant lands, I think I see him watching me while he holds me tightly.



## KIATH

“So this is how you track the approach of winter?”

The mountain peak is high above us.

We have cut through roaring blizzards to reach this lowly point at the mountain basin where the river still trickles. I see ursain roaming through the woods, even monitoring the river.

But they don't dare approach her with me present. The smarter ones have learned from their fallen brethren, whose blood I can still taste somewhere in my memory.

That memory is tempting, but nowhere near as enticing as the blood that courses through her, pulsing warmly and wildly against winter's first breaths.

I have learned to suppress these urges for her safety. There are not many creatures on this mountain who would share a den with me.

Tania gestures toward a tangled vine bush, whose branches still safeguard seven leaves. Our footprints show prominently in the snow behind us. Her awkward, stubbly ovals follow my pointed, triangular impressions.

“They fall off, one a day, if you don't take them,” I say, reaching forward before carefully snapping a leaf off from its stalk.

She watches me with intent focus. Her gaze is nearly enough to make me falter and drop the leaf.

The wind picks up, but it fails to lift the leaf from my grasp.

She shivers slightly.

The dark brown, wilting leaf clings to my hand as I show it to her, its sticky sap oozing freely. It is about the size of her head and feels heavy balanced on my palm, dripping brown like amber into the snow.

“And you... eat it?”

She seems reluctant, even put off by the premise. It's true that the smell is repellant to most creatures. These plants produce a scent that runs counter to the flavor of their leaves, rather like swamp gas.

Extending my hand, I gesture to her to try it. Her initial reaction is still hesitant, and she recoils slightly.

I fight the urge to yell at her, uncharacteristically suppressing my anger. I welcomed her into my home, and she still thinks I might try to poison her.

But I don't dare ruin the moment. This is the closest we've been since she collapsed in my nest after she allowed me to penetrate her sanctum with my claws.

Eyeing it carefully, she moves her finger forward to touch it and feels the sap gripping her. She plays with the strand of sap that collects between it and her fingertip, pulling away from the leaf and touching it at regular intervals.

“Just tear off a piece,” I urge her, nearly losing patience with her curiosity.

She takes two fingers and pulls with some struggle, retrieving a chunk of the leaf, with sap still dripping from its edges and veins.

Shoving it into her face, she thinks she'll swallow it immediately and hate it, even trying not to taste it as it enters her mouth. But as it crosses her tongue, and I have to avoid laughing as it paints her cheeks with sap, she finds herself savoring it instead.

She moves it around in her mouth, eyes widening to express her delight not only for the taste but also for the texture.

“What is that?” She's surprised as she swallows it.

“Acerubus plant,” I tell her simply. She's still processing the strong contrast between its unpleasant smell and its excessively sweet flavor and chewy texture.

I laugh. Ever the messy eater, she doesn't realize that her face is covered with the leaf's fluids.

“Would you like the rest of it?”

She thinks for a second, almost daring to reject my hospitality, before nodding.

Deciding that she might be better equipped to carry the leaf, I hand it to her, and she places it in her satchel gently.

I try to appreciate the moment. I can't recall smiling like this before, and it feels unfamiliar on my face.



My mood sours when I realize the implications of what I've shown her. "Don't ever come down here on your own."

She glances at me, surveying my sudden emotional turn. I lift her into my arms and kick my legs up from the ground, beginning to fly.

"I probably wouldn't even make the trip," she confesses.

I flutter through the air, beating upward above the trees. Her shivering calms in the warmth of my grasp.

She leans into me and clutches onto my arms desperately as we whip through the sky. If I ever let go, she knows that she would tumble, dying somewhere in the snow below.

I hold her tighter.

"Wait," she shouts, trying to speak over the rushing air current that envelops us. "If you're suddenly dictating where I can't go on my own... does this mean that you'll allow me to leave the cave?"

I don't reply to her question, watching the mountain ridges enter my view as we fly forward.

The answer to her question is an emphatic no. But I don't wish to sour her mood.

The only idea worse to me than her leaving my nest is her seeking out the acerubus through her own devices.

If she ever looks closely at the snow around the bush, she will recognize several more sets of nearly buried oval footprints... the tracks of creatures like her from neighboring settlements, who I have to trap and compete with.

They're the reason I have to protect these plants, which only produce for a limited window once a year, and which cannot be cultivated in any other environment. Her kin drove these plants to near extinction from their desire to harvest its flavor.

I worry about what else they might take from me if I allow it.

We travel to the plant daily. She doesn't realize that we're racing our rivals, trying to harvest them when they're ripest before other humans can take them.

I'm grateful that on our second visit, she still doesn't notice the tracks in the snow. If she ever followed them, they would lead her right back to a nearby human settlement.

We pluck the sixth leaf, and she tells me how much she misses regular baths, her mouth still full of the plant. She compares its texture to bread but complains that she might prefer to eat the acerubus leaf away from the brush,

where the smell is less noticeable.

I huddle over in the cave, legs springing forward. One of the tools left over by a forgotten traveler shines in my hand, clanking with every swing into the rock wall. I can see the steam rising up from the hot spring, barely visible through a small hole.

The labor is exhausting, but her excitement when we connect to it is well worth it.

We carry the third leaf back to our den, only four remaining on the branches, as she explains that what she'd really like is a pit of fire outside the cave. I might be imagining it, but I swear that her eyes have started to follow the tracks though she doesn't say anything.

I carry up several logs from the forests below, grateful for the immense strength and hardiness that makes these tasks achievable. Rubbing two stones together once the snow has died down and the air is less damp, I catch the first glimmer of a spark, which accelerates with the rushing winds. Fire collects in the small trench.

In my mind, I can see the towering, raging flames that burn bright into the night below us. I remember the plain wooden structures that encircle the fire, filled by stupid, greedy humans, and my claws tighten.

Three leaves remain. She questions whether the leaves might be better cooked.

"Cooked?"

She casts an incredulous glance, concluding that I must have misheard her. But the more she proposes we 'cook' the leaves, the more I try to clarify.

"We built a fire pit," she says slowly, clearly not understanding my confusion. "Now we can cook food in it."

I shake my head. Why would you ruin perfectly good food by subjecting it to fire? She tries to explain that it enhances the flavor, but I tell her that everything I've ever tasted that was burnt was unpleasant on my tongue. I want to argue with her about it for weeks, but I know that I need to treasure every moment I have with her.

At her behest, I kindle another fire, and we cuddle around its cruel, swirling ascent. Finding a branch that will support the weight of the acerubus leaf is challenging, and she explains that she doesn't want it to fall into the fire, but to dangle precariously above it.

I imagine myself, spiraling above the flames while impaled by a stake, and I can't help but shudder. I am grateful not to be the leaf.

She falls asleep in my arms, next to the dancing flames, and I can feel my eyes burning with their yellow glow late into the night.

Only two leaves remain, and I feel remorse. I will miss carrying her down to them, listening to her quiet, tonally disparate humming next to the roaring river.

We hover above the valleys and mountain ridges. She feels safer in my arms, not clutching so tightly to me as we soar through the skies. I am afraid that her comfort will become complacency, and that I might lose her somewhere on the rocks below us.

She explains that humans owned her at one point and that they forced her to labor for days at a time in unlivable conditions. A roaring wind grows within me, and my talons clutch tightly. I am tempted to lay waste to all of their settlements so that they can never harm her.

I feel my anger overshadowed by relief, glad that she wants nothing to do with her kind. I have always known them to be cruel and single-minded, always building things that detract from nature's beauty and selfishly hoarding resources.

She doesn't understand my reaction.

We pluck the final leaf. Our travels have become quieter, and I miss her awkward, stumbling melodies beside the river.

She has grown comfortable in my company, no longer feeling the need to punctuate the air with her words.

I clutch her tightly that night, just grateful that the world has brought her to me.



## TANIA

**H**e is a cruel monster of a creature, too savage to genuinely care for me. Any feelings he's expressed or even hinted at cannot be real. It's unnatural.

Or that's what I tell myself, to avoid getting too close.

I look out at everything he's built for me, in this strange, foreboding cavern. A firepit to cook my food, a hot spring to bathe in and unwind from the woes of the day.

It's all incredibly generous. Even though he doesn't understand the appeal of these comforts, he would still impose them into his own home simply because I asked for them.

*It doesn't exactly paint the image of a savage monster, I think.*

The snow has died down somewhat today, falling to a slow trickle outside the cavern entrance as the fire whips and waves, burning orange in the cracked mirrors around me. In the distance, I can see him fluttering upward, carrying the torn carcasses of two ursain upward to my level.

I look away. He knows that I prefer not to see my food dissected and has taken to chopping it into bits.

Approaching the hot spring, I listen to the steady trickle of the dripping water from the cavern ceiling above. I stick my hand out and turn it over in the air, feeling the steam comfort and slightly sear it.

I have explained the need for clothing to him. He has rows and rows of feathers to keep him warm. I have clothing to protect me from the elements.

But he still isn't willing to find me clothing to wear, now that my former attire is ripped and shredded on the cavern floor in his nest.

I dip my toe into the hot spring, debating stepping in.

“It’s dinner time,” Kiath growls, looking over at me.

I look at the circular, hollowed-out space, the steam rising out of the pure water. It really is majestic to behold. From how natural it looks now, it’s hard to believe this was once a separate chamber.

“I said it’s time to eat.”

I turn my shoulders, looking back at him, and feel a tinge of affection enter me. He was once so strange and frightening to me, but against my wishes, I’ve come to find comfort in him. He’s a reliable presence in my life, which feels strange, coming from a realm of torment.

*My greatest companion is a monstrous bird creature,* I think, remembering all the ways the people on Tlouz had slighted me.

Even my greatest allies in our shared struggle felt it ideal to betray me the moment it benefited them. It’s why, when I came to this island on a stolen vessel, I came alone.

*But they weren’t all bad.*

I grimace, crossing the threshold to the roaring fire.

“You made quick work of that,” I tell Kiath, sitting down on the rock floor beside him.

Before us is an indeterminate pile of pink flesh, accompanied by a stack of slender tree branches. If I weren’t otherwise aware, I could easily think this meat was dripir or taura.

Carefully, I take a branch and stick it into several pieces of pink flesh on the ground, bringing it up to the roaring flame.

I can feel his unwavering gaze on me. As he watches me with incredible persistence, I question my every movement, pondering whether I’m holding the branch right, and whether I’m straining my hips too much seated on my knees.

I wonder if he’s monitoring my intentions... if he knows that I don’t plan on staying here with him.

From the moment I set sail on the vessel, hijacking it from its murdered crew of slavers and bringing it across the twisting ocean, I had one single solitary goal. I was going to find a camp of my own kind and live out my days in safety and community.

I can’t let this strange creature stand in the way of that, even if I’ve never felt more alive than I have these past several days I’ve spent with him.

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

I hold my stick out, realizing that the meat is charred beyond recognition and that I've let myself get distracted by my thoughts. As I speak to him, I fail to look him in the eye, instead fixating on the snow-covered realm beyond this safe haven.

"I gave some thought to your proposition," Kiath says.

Cocking my head slightly while subtly jerking my food out of the flame, I catch Kiath's eye.

"And what proposition would that be?"

"I think it would be good if we could find you some clothing," he says, giving a longing look to my exposed form. I feel a surge of excitement as his eyes fall to my crotch and behold my nethers.

"You don't like the view?"

*You're just keeping him content so you can sneak away,* I think to myself. *Don't let yourself think any differently.*

"I've seen how cold you get on our trips outside," he says. "You're not *built* for this weather."

I think about how he emphasizes the word "built," reminding me of the tremendous differences between us.

*It's unnatural.*

"And would you happen to know where I might find clothing of my own?"

I look once more upon the tattered remnants of the clothes that carried me up here. In the heat of the moment, it might have felt like a terrific idea for him to shred it from me, but it might have been a bit selfish on his part.

"I was hoping you knew," he replies.

I look at him, trying to determine if he's being honest with me. I know that there are at least two human settlements nearby... I've even seen footprints leading in that direction. But so far, he has confessed nothing to me about any nearby settlements.

His expression is alien to me. There's still so much I don't understand about him. Determining his intentions is difficult when I don't even know whether or not he's going to devour me whole on a whim.

I nod.

"The boat I crashed in on," I say. "There should be some clothing on the lower deck, in some of the drawers."

"And you couldn't just carry it with you?"

I shake my head.

“I had to travel light.”

He nods in response, understanding, or perhaps taking pity on me.

“There was also some clothing in a tent, near one of the caverns in the mountains,” I say, deep in consideration. “You didn’t happen to see the owner?”

He gives me no response. Standing up and turning his back to me, he walks off into the snow.

“What’s wrong? You don’t want to eat?”

“Already ate,” he grumbles before taking flight and disappearing on the horizon.

He probably understands that if I accompanied him, I would surely freeze. But the fact that he didn’t offer is a little hurtful.

The ursain is meaty and stringy, even when fully cooked. If I just had some seasonings, maybe I could make it something special.

“Just try explaining seasonings to Kiath, though,” I say to myself, chuckling, before realizing that even in the small amount of time since he’s been gone, I do miss him.

I finish a good chunk of the meat, trying to express my gratitude to Kiath by eating it, but it’s very dry and filling. It could almost make a good quality jerky.

I think back on the jerky I had on my first night here. Something about it tastes so much better in hindsight.

I wonder who left their tent and hiked somewhere up the mountain. I wonder if they’re alive, and if not, whether Kiath might have killed them.

I dip myself into the hot spring, submerging myself up to my ears as I look up at the cavern ceiling.

*He’s been gone a while.*

Could I really be feeling something for this creature... could it be real?

I’ve heard tall tales of monsters who capture maidens and bring them to their dens, only to hypnotize them into loving them by emitting chemicals and gasses.

There’s still so much I don’t understand about Kiath. His song is vaguely hypnotic, if not a little terrifying. His feathers are rugged, and his face is horrifying, but there’s something about him that’s just *handsome* the more you learn to appreciate him.

I shake my head right as I feel the water shake around me and see him joining me in the hot spring, a tall pile of clothing standing next to him.



*I can't let myself be tricked again, I think.*

I smile at him, and he stares emotionlessly back at me.

“You were right,” he growls at me. “I did manage to find some *intact* clothing in some of the drawers.”

I think back to the bloody corpses on the ship, and the red-stained clothing that I left on their bodies.

*You did what you had to do.*

I can see him sizing me up. I want him to shame me, but there's something about him that actually looks *proud* somehow.

“Thank you,” I say, looking at the pile of clothing and formulating a plan.

When he's asleep in his nest, I'll pick up the clothing and stalk out into the night. He's brought some warm-weather clothing and cold-weather clothing, so I'll definitely be able to weather whatever storm I need to.

I'll move back to the acerubus bush and follow the footprints back to one of the camps.

Then I'll be able to leave this episode well beyond me. I'll be able to forget this bestial creature, rejoining my own kind.

He snores contentedly and melodically, a rhythmic whistle whose pitch rises and lowers whimsically. Despite the monstrous creature lying before me, I can't help but think he looks a bit cute. Guilt torments me slightly for leaving him here alone, knowing how sad his life probably was without any company.

But I must keep moving. I sought out this island with a singular goal in mind, staking my safety on the idea that I might be able to build a better life here with my own kind and away from the daily oppression of servitude.

Walking out into the snow, I dare not look back.

I don't want to talk myself out of this.



## KIATH

Sleep dissipates slowly from my mind.

I recall the warmth of Tania beside me from our long evening together and reach for her among the furs. But the nest is empty. My eyes fly open, and I find the soft depression where she ought to be. At first, I think she might have been stolen from me, and it spurs me to action.

I leap out of the nest and sniff the air.

There is no scent I don't recognize, just mine and hers. There are no sounds, either, nothing to indicate she's still in the cave. Panic fades, and the heat of betrayal rises. *She's gone again.* I grit my teeth at no one, the truth of it finally settling in.

My claws come out.

I'm pacing like a caged animal. She's run away from me once, but that was before we spent time together. I grit my teeth at the thought of her out there in the wilds, alone and cold.

I *thought* she had finally learned her place.

"She's *mine*," I snarl at no one, the sound bouncing back at me from the deep cave.

Something shatters inside of me, and the whole world narrows to a pinpoint of focus. Nothing exists but the scent of her, already fading from this space.

I search for any sign of Tania, tearing through the cavern in a flurry of activity and looking for anything that could indicate she had intended to come *home* again. I rip up the furs and race through the caverns, finding them empty. If she had just wandered off, maybe...

She's gotten herself into trouble before.

But this is different.

I reach the lip of the cave to find fresh snow blanketing the mountainside. It conceals any tracks she might have left on the way down. And from this vantage, I can't see her anywhere.

My sight goes red.

I throw my face to the gray sky and let out a roar that echoes over the mountainside. I hope she hears it, and I hope she knows I'm coming for her. Murderous rage clouds my vision as I tear my claws through the sheer stone, the shrieking doing little to cool my boiling blood. I want to tear this mountain apart in pursuit of her.

I want to start an avalanche.

My wings spread wide, hoisting me into the sky as an afterthought. The heavy snow doesn't stop me, but it does blind me to the path leading towards the human settlement. I twirl in the air and bolt towards where I know the tree line sits.

How long does she think she can pretend her place isn't with me?

I nip at the air cutting across my face, the heavy snow making my wings work harder to navigate, and I find myself in the thick of a blizzard. I am forced to drop down and land on a boulder, even with the heat of fury flowing through me.

The endless white threatens to bury everything, even me.

I brood on the rock. No scents. No sights. Nothing to determine which direction I need to go. I huddle close, conserving my warmth for the journey ahead when the path clears. The snow sticks after a while, accumulating on my shiny wings and back and head, so that I might as well be part of the mountain.

It gives me time to think.

I pore over the last few days in my mind, looking for any evidence that she may have been planning this. Tania yielded to my passions easily, but in the small moments, she pulled away too quickly. She trailed off as she spoke. There were times when I asked her questions, and she wouldn't answer them, opting instead for a leaden silence.

Those moments that seemed innocuous become obvious now. How did I not realize? She may not have planned it intentionally, but was she always looking for a way out? My claws clench the stone beneath me, threatening to crush it.

I should have known.

That rage boils over again. She may be willing to throw away everything that has grown between us over the last few days, but I'm not.

I shake myself off, finding the sky a little more forgiving this time.

The snow is coming lighter, and I can finally see the path ahead. It is good because I don't know how else to exorcise these vicious feelings in my core. Young trees are felled in my wake, crashing down behind me. They only serve to sharpen my claws in anticipation of our reunion. I'm eager to hear her excuses and to taste her passion and terror.

With her, I am at peace.

Without her, I cannot contain myself.

A pair of dripir scramble out of my warpath. And I know something is terribly wrong when I don't pursue them. They are not my Tania, but when I find her...

Monstrous thoughts come to the surface, ones that even in my enraged state, I would never inflict upon her. She alone is spared from the cruelty of my animal nature, but it does not prevent it from bristling in the absence of her.

"I will punish her for her disobedience," I tell myself.

It soothes the worst of my venom to imagine her beneath me, breathing hard and fast. The little hitch in her throat when she thinks I mean to hurt her. Her wail when I smack her rump. I have not had enough of Tania's sweet crooning and begging. It is all that drives me, now, to know that she is safe in my nest.

The thick branches above prevent me from taking to the air.

I don't know how far she's gotten, but she is resourceful. And when I finally find evidence of her passage, protected by the snow-covered branches, renewed excitement finds me. The thrill of the hunter chasing its prey. It doesn't matter where she's gone, I'll find her.

Her scent has faded from here.

Which means I spent a good amount of time without her in the cave. But I would recognize those footsteps anywhere. My senses heighten, and I taste the cold winter air. Though I may not be able to find her scent, there are plenty of others in the wind.

Many of them are human, and some are animal. My ears prick at the distant sound of habitation, not too far off from the woods. It all comes into focus now. She ran back to the human settlement. *She doesn't know any*

*better*, I reason, confident that is the answer. She is only doing what is natural to her.

Does a worg not return to its cave?

I might find it in my heart to forgive her, but she will have to be broken of the habit. I thought our time together was enough for her to forget them. *I* am enough for her.

I am all she needs.

It's only in her folly that she doesn't see it yet. A grin finds me. *Yes, that's it.* Humans are creatures of habit, and I'm not sure why I didn't realize it before. It is not her fault, but she must be held accountable.

I will steal her back, and this time, I won't take my eyes off her.

The human settlement is just ahead. Before I reach it, I will take to the sky to find her. Each moment she remains with her own kind will only steel her heart against me, and I cannot have that. She is mine, and mine alone.

And she'll learn that lesson soon enough.



## TANIA

**T**he settlement springs up over the last hill, and I let out a cold breath of relief. The sky is already heavy with snow threatening to fall here, too.

I could barely navigate out of the cave, with the flurry that was beginning to fall.

But it was all worth it.

I approach cautiously, noticing several plumes of smoke rising from the adorable little log cabins that speckle the landscape. Most are huddled together to form a tight-knit circle, with a few strays. There's no gate or guards to stop me from walking into town.

Several people stare at me as they pass.

I must look a fright, after everything I've been through. Luckily the blood on my clothes has turned brown to match the rest of the fabric. But wouldn't it be nice to get some new ones? I'm sure someone here makes clothes.

A feminine voice interrupts my thoughts. "I haven't seen you around here before." She comes up to me as if we're already close, her smile authentic and welcoming. "You look cold. Come, sit by the fire with me."

"Thank you," I say, not questioning her hospitality as she leads me to a small bonfire a few men are stoking. "My name is Tania."

"Jennifer. A pleasure to meet you," she says, watching me with a measure of interest. She's beautiful in a willowy sort of way, with long black hair that she has pinned back and intense green eyes. Her skin is almost as white as the snow she wipes off my seat. "We don't get a lot of new people here. Did you come from the other side of the mountain?"

I laugh softly. "No, it's a... a long story." The heat is wonderful, radiating



despite the cold trying to contain it. I put my hands up to the fire, letting the warmth trickle in again.

“I don’t mind. But first, let’s get you settled in.”

Someone passes food around. It’s just bread that’s been buttered and cut, with a little salted meat. I take only what I absolutely need and send the tray to Jennifer.

“This settlement is a little different than others you’re probably familiar with. There’s no crime in needing help, but it would be expected that you also pitch in to the best of your abilities. There are lots of jobs to be done, even in winter. We don’t move around like other settlements, so we’re stuck here at the bottom of the mountain. It doesn’t usually cause problems, but sometimes we get worgs and other creatures wandering in from the woods.”

I shudder, recalling the snarling worgs I stumbled on. “Is the settlement safe?”

“We have a few fighters. They take care of them when the need arises. But yeah, I guess you could say you’re safe here. We don’t lock our doors.”

“Hm,” is all I say, glancing around the small settlement. It looks cozy enough, and people seem to be minding their own business, which is a good thing.

Jennifer pipes in. “Do you need a place to stay?”

I nod, taking a bite of the bread and meat. It’s the first bit of substance I’ve had that has a human touch to it, and I almost melt. “This is so good.”

“Laura bakes the best bread,” she says with a smile. “You should stay with me while you’re in town. I have an extra room since my last roomie got married. It’s not much, but I can get us some warm water.”

It sounds so enticing after being cold for so long. “How?”

“My brother made a little contraption that catches the snow and boils it before dispensing it into a tub. It’s better than taking a dip in the lake.”

“You had me at warm water,” I say with a laugh.

Jennifer laughs with me. “That contraption is the envy of my neighbors, certainly. Do you need new clothes as well?”

“You just read my mind,” I say, taking a last bite of the bread as she leads me to one of the smaller cabins.

“Who’s this?” a man says, stopping in our path with a load of wood in his arms. He’s tall and lean, with a scrunched nose and eyes that sit a little too close together. He’s not ugly, by any stretch, but he doesn’t look like he’d survive a day on his own.

I think I recognize him from the bonfire, but I can't be certain. Jennifer speaks before I have a chance. "It's my new friend, Tania. Tania, this is Thomas."

"It's nice to meet you, Thomas."

"Same to you," he says with a smile, one of his bottom teeth leaning into the other. I can't help but be distracted by it. He seems too friendly, in a way that sets me off kilter. I've only just met the man, but I don't like the way his gray gaze roves over me.

Jennifer doesn't seem to notice. "He takes care of the foraging some days."

"And the smithing," he intercedes, adjusting the load of wood in his arms. "I'm stronger than I look, I'll have you know." Even as he's talking to Jennifer, it seems like he's talking only to me. My wariness solidifies, and I glance at Jennifer.

She doesn't miss a beat. "Don't you have work to do, Thomas?"

"Right, right," he concedes with a guilty smile, then passes by too close for comfort. "I'll be seeing you ladies around, yeah?"

When he's out of earshot, she scoffs. "Ignore him. He's just a hopeless flirt."

I nod, trying my best to ignore the creeping sensation of being ogled, then follow her up to a small cabin that sits a little distance from the others. On the side of the building, I notice the contraption she mentioned. It has a basin that catches the snow and a little fire pit built beneath it. Pipes run through the wall and into the home. "Is that it?"

"Yeah. It works most days." She welcomes me in, and it's almost hot inside compared to the bitter cold. "I'll get you some fresh clothes. Why don't you use the bathroom to wash up? There's a pitcher with water already in there. I can show you how to get the hot water started in a bit."

"Thank you," I say, wandering to the bathroom. It's simple, without any real bathroom effects, but the pitcher is where she said it'd be, with some hand cloths for washing. Even though the water is cool, it's refreshing to get the old blood and dirt off of me. I strip down to get every inch before Jennifer knocks softly on the door.

"Clothes?"

I open the door a crack and accept the fresh clothes. They're soft, clean, and feel wonderful against my raw skin. I revel in the feeling briefly before coming out again, toweling my hair off. "I really can't thank you enough."

“Don’t mention it. We’ve got to look out for each other. Now, you said you had a long story for me.”

The heat crawls into my face, and I realize I have to navigate the details of my story, after all. We sit on a fur in front of the fire together, where I can almost forget about the cold. “I don’t really know where to begin,” I admit, chasing my fingers through the fur beneath me. “I’m not from Prazh, originally. I came here by boat.”

Jennifer’s emerald eyes widen. “Really? That’s a long way, I hear.”

“It was.” I remember the stormy nights and the huge waves that tried to drag me back into slavery, or worse. “I was a slave in Tlouz. The dark elves were terrible to us. They used us for our bodies, and when we broke, we were thrown into the sea. My resentment was too great, so I stole a boat.”

Jennifer watches me with rapt attention. “I can only imagine how hard that was for you.” She rubs my arm reassuringly. “Where did you land?”

“North of here. I’m not exactly sure where.”

She nods, encouraging me to continue.

So, I do, picking my words carefully in fear of ousting Kiath to them. “I found my way to the mountains, but I wasn’t alone. There was a man with me, and I thought I was in love, but I realized once we were on our own that he was monstrous...”

My heart aches, remembering Kiath.

This story is doing his character no favors, but it is the only way I can talk about him without them calling for a hunt for the monster in the mountains. “I thought I could tame his nature, but things were so intense. I had to break away from him, or I’d have lost myself.”

“Did he hurt you?”

I say nothing, realizing the scars on my arm are still fresh.

She glances down at them, and worry creases her brow. “Oh, sweetie...”

I pull the sleeves of my shirt down to cover them. “Please, don’t make a fuss over it,” I say, trying to do my best impression of a grin. “It’s all behind me now.”

But is it really?

It wasn’t but a few hours ago that I was lying sleepless in his nest, waiting for him to wake up. Wondering what he had planned for me today. I can only imagine how he reacted to me being gone, and I’m beginning to regret running away.

I thought this was for the best.

What I told Jennifer wasn't wrong, exactly. It *was* intense, so much so that I could hardly find myself between us. Now, she seems to think I was with a man who tortured me for the fun of it. *How wrong you are*, I want to say, but it's better for her to think of him as a human monster and not a real one.

"If he's still out there, you'll tell us, won't you?"

I nod, opting for silence on that front.

"Good," she says as if the matter is closed. "Just say the word, and there'll be a dozen fighters at the ready. You're one of us now."

We share a tentative smile.

"It sounds like you've been through a lot. I still have a spare room if you're interested in staying."

"Yes, please," I say, wiping at my stinging eyes. I will not cry over what was never meant to be. Kiath and I are just too different.

Maybe a little rest will do me some good.

"You will always have a place here, Tania."

Her words are what I've wanted to hear my whole life, but it hits wrong. She is kind, giving, and so, so generous, but even as she shows me to my room, I can't help but regret how I left it with Kiath. No doubt he'll be pulling his feathers out in my absence.

And even the creature he is deserves more than that.



## TANIA

I awaken to the sounds of birds chirping the next morning. My first thought is of Kiath as I roll over to gaze out the translucent window. The sound of those birds made me think maybe... but no. If he was here, I would know.

Besides, I left Kiath. That was my choice. He wasn't taken from me. I always wanted to make my own choices, and now I'll have to live with them.

I rise from my straw mattress, gathering my clothes and dressing for the day. I do my best to ignore the gaping hole that's grown in my heart since I arrived here. I've always wanted to belong somewhere, and now I have that chance, but that damnable hole seems to continue growing nonetheless.

After dressing, I walk to the window and gaze out for a few minutes attempting to collect my thoughts. I need to win these people over if I'm going to find a place for myself here. Most of them seemed a tad disdainful of having an outsider sharing their food and water, but at least Jennifer has been kind.

Coincidentally, just as I think of Jennifer, a knock comes at the stout wooden door. I walk over and open the door to find her smiling in at me. Her sparkling green eyes contrast starkly with her pale skin and straight black hair. I feel like her eyes can see right through me, yet strangely, it's comforting.

Jennifer seems to radiate warmth and kindness so that her penetrating gaze feels more like a comforting reassurance than a harsh evaluation.

"Good morning," she says cheerfully. "How did you sleep? I know how lumpy and irritating the mattress can be."

“I slept great,” I respond, smiling back at her as best I can. “It may not be a feather bed, but it beats sleeping on a rock buried by snow.” Jennifer laughs warmly at that, burgeoning my confidence.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it,” she says. “Was it warm enough in here?”

“Oh yeah. Yeah, it was plenty warm,” I respond. “Thanks for asking.”

“Good, good,” Jennifer continues. “Well, if you’re ready, I’ll take you to get a bite to eat then I can show you where you can help out around camp. We run a pretty tight ship around here. We wouldn’t survive otherwise, but I think you’ll find things are done fairly for the most part.”

I agree and we depart, heading for the community cookfire at the middle of the settlement. Jennifer explains that this is where anyone in the camp can come for meals. Everyone pitches in here, and though people often cook for themselves, everyone eats at least half their meals here. More than half when food is scarce, like now.

Jennifer explains that people often eat together in the long hall, a simple wooden structure with a hearth on either side and long tables in between. Others grab their food and take it back to their homes. Most of the food consists of game found in the surrounding woods, though some of the last harvest’s vegetables are kept frozen in a deep, freezing-cold cave on the side of the mountain.

There is also a fair amount of grain stored in two small silos and plenty of fresh water from the stream, so Camp Hope eats pretty well, especially considering its extreme seclusion in these mountains.

I endure more challenging glances and awkward comments as the day goes on, especially while Jennifer and I eat in the long hall. Food security is a delicate topic in the winter, and people are clearly less than happy about adding another mouth to feed. *I’ll just have to show them I’m worth it then.*

After we eat, Jennifer gives me a thorough tour of the small camp, showing me where clothes are washed, where the sick tent is, and the other handful of notable buildings within Camp Hope.

“I’m thinking we’ll start you out washing clothes and rags,” she says as we conclude the tour. “I know it’s not the most glamorous job, but it’s the easiest to catch onto on your first day here.”

“I’m happy to contribute wherever I can,” I respond, meaning every word of it. Strangely though, the word happy does not feel right coming out of my mouth right now. Not with that gaping hole inside me growing more pronounced with every step. I find myself pushing thoughts of Kiath out of

my head again, hoping he'll go away if I stop thinking about him.

A light snow begins to fall as Jennifer and I make our way to the washing stations. It's the beautiful type of snow, pure, soft, and white, falling from the sky in a gentle swaying motion as the breeze lifts and swirls each flake. The snow seems to purify the landscape, covering it with a soft white blanket that hides all the imperfections of the ground.

The evergreens transform into ever-whites as the snow continues to fall, their branches and needles sagging under the weight of their heavy white cloaks. There is a similar effect on the quaint log cabins that dot the camp, their roofs topped with elegant white top hats.

We reach the washing stations a few minutes later, and Jennifer helps me get started. The station is a small roofed pavilion with several buckets inside, two for rinsing and two for soapy water. Between the buckets is a rack for scrubbing tough stains out of cloth.

Beside the pavilion is a small hut where clothes are kept. It's also used for indoor washing when the weather calls for it. Today isn't as cold as most, however, and the snow is falling steadily but lightly, so we decide to work outside.

"We used to have everyone do their own laundry," Jennifer explains as we scrub. "But we decided about a year ago that it would make more sense to have it all done at one station with people rotating responsibility for the washing. That way people have more time to go about more important tasks like hunting or hauling chunks of ice to be melted."

"That's how we get our drinking water in the winter," she continues. "We bring big chunks of ice from the stream and melt them in big pots over the cookfire."

"That's smart," I respond sheepishly. I haven't been paying the best attention to Jennifer. There's simply too much emotional turmoil in my brain for me to focus properly. I can't seem to stop thinking about Kiath, but I don't know why. And I still feel unwelcome here, despite Jennifer's kindness. I just feel like a burden, not like I really belong as I had hoped.

"Are you okay?" Jennifer asks suddenly. "You look like you've seen a ghost. I know it's overwhelming trying to fit in here, but you'll find your way, I promise. I did, after all. Just be patient. People will come to love you, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, no, I'm okay. Thank you for asking, but I'm fine," I respond, slightly startled by Jennifer's insightfulness. "Or I will be. With time."



“Whomever this guy is, Tania,” Jennifer responds after a slight pause. “He can’t hurt you here. We’ll protect you.”

*But what if I want him to hurt me? Kiath would tear these people to shreds. They can’t protect me if he comes. They wouldn’t need to protect me, either, only themselves.*

My only response is a shrug. Jennifer gives me a sympathetic look, and we continue washing in silence.

Afternoon arrives, seemingly from nowhere, with snow still falling steadily from the leaden sky. Jennifer tells me she’s going to see about getting us something to eat, but I offer to stay here and keep working. I could use a bit of time to myself.

I step into the hut and begin gathering the next round of cloth for washing. Then I step out of the hut and stride toward the washing station with the distinct feeling that I’m being watched. Moments later, a man’s voice calls out from behind me.

“Tania,” Thomas says, striding up to me purposefully. Thomas’ lanky frame is covered by a thick brown roughspun coat today, his greasy brown hair flecked with snow. “Glad to see you’re finding your way.”

“Hello, Thomas,” I say uninterestedly. *Will this guy ever leave me alone?* He creeped me out enough yesterday, but I get the feeling that it was just a taste. His close-set gray eyes seem to brim with arrogant malice, and his tightly pursed lips seem to almost quiver with desire.

“I was watching you earlier,” he says. “I must say you have a fine form for a stray. I very much enjoyed watching you bounce over that wash basin. Fine form indeed.”

“Is there anything I can help you with, Thomas?” I say, more than a little creeped out. *Did he really think admitting to stalking me would win me over? Fucking pig.*

“Is that any way to treat a friend?” he responds, stepping closer. I take an immediate step back to keep the distance between us. “You know,” Thomas says, his voice taking on an even more aggressively creepy tone. “It would really help you out to have someone in the camp to watch your back.”

“I could be that person. For a price,” he continues. “I desire you, Tania. I think you know that. Watching you today convinced me. We belong together. A woman of your... talent... is no less than I deserve as the best hunter in camp.”

“So,” he continues, extending his hand to grip my arm tightly. “To

answer your question, yes, there is something you can help me with. Marry me, Tania. You won't find a better match."

For a moment, all I can do is stand there with my mouth hanging open. "Marriage!" I guffaw. Then, unable to stop myself, I break out into laughter.

"Thomas, you barely know me. Do you really think I'd marry you? After you admit to stalking me and prove that you're only capable of conversing with my breasts? No, Thomas. The answer is no."

Thomas' face becomes a shroud of darkness, anger sketched across every feature. "Perhaps an ultimatum will help the lady make the right choice," he says in a horrifying tone. "Marry me, or I swear to the gods I will ruin you right here and now so no man will ever touch you again."

I turn to run, horror sprouting in my heart as I realize what he intends. Thomas grabs me from behind, ripping my dress. I cry out, but his hands are on me, groping painfully.

Then, like the sun splitting through the clouds, a mighty roar echoes across the valley. *He came for me.*



## KIATH

The frigid winter wind fills my wings as I make my furious flight toward the humans' territory. Above me, the sky is a patchwork of clouds as dark as my mood. The sun is weak today, blocked out by the steady snow falling from the sky in delicate white tufts.

Below me lies a bleak landscape. Gray stone and snow-covered evergreens seem to be the only features for miles in every direction. Here and there, stone outcrops jut from the mountainsides, their surfaces obscured by thick layers of snow and ice.

At this altitude, it's cold and bleak just about year-round, but in the dead of winter on days like today, nothing but cold seems to exist in the world. At least, that's how I imagine other creatures like humans would interpret it. To me, this is just another day.

I'm aware of the cold, but my thick layers of feathers keep me warm at all times. Even at the high altitudes I often fly at, I am impervious to the cold. The snow can be a nuisance, and the wind can hinder my efforts to fly at top speed, but the cold is of no consequence.

Luckily, the wind is with me today, blowing strongly out of the mountains toward the human settlements in the west. This makes my flight an effortless affair and allows me to focus on scanning the ground below. I know generally where the humans make their homes, but the spot itself will be easy to miss from this altitude.

At this point, I've passed the edge of my territory, so I'm slightly more wary than I otherwise might be. It's not that I *fear* an attack, but I don't want to be caught off-guard if something is stupid enough to try me. Nothing in my

territory would dare molest me, but this far west not every creature knows how dangerous I am.

As I continue flying west, scanning the terrain below me with a careful eye, I ponder my rage at Tania's flight. Anger permeates each sharp flap of my wings and drives me to my top speed. I would fly slower, the better to see the ground below me, but I'm so blind with rage that I find it impossible to slow down.

Eventually, as I soar over a snowy mountaintop, I spot a little cluster of log buildings nestled in the valley below. *That must be where she went. To be with her kind, I suppose. She belongs with me though, not these feeble land-bound creatures she calls kin.*

I tilt my wings downward, spiraling gently toward a stony outcrop about two-thirds of the way down the mountainside. As the outcrop approaches, I tilt my wings back up toward the sky, flapping twice with great force to slow myself down.

My taloned feet land on the outcrop with more force than I might have liked, but I have no trouble keeping my balance. A soft cloud of snow rises from the ground to greet me, coerced from its resting place by the flap of my powerful wings.

From my perch on the outcrop, I'm still at least a quarter of a mile from the humans' camp, but my eyes can see everything happening with relative ease. From here, I can make out individual faces, but any humans looking in my direction would have no chance of noticing my gray and white feathers against the snowy rock.

The camp is a cluster of mostly wooden buildings, though many have stone chimneys jutting up out of the roofs. Most of the houses have a healthy column of gray woodsmoke rising steadily from the chimneys.

The camp is alive with the hustle and bustle of daily life. Men, women, and a few children roam the camp, carrying out their daily chores for the settlement. Some carry firewood or tools, others sit tending to cook fires or mending pots and pans. Each of them is distinct to my eyes, but so far, I see no sign of Tania.

After a moment, I decide to gaze around the valley more broadly and see what I can learn about how these humans live. They chose a decent place for a camp. The little village is nestled snugly against the mountainside, protecting it from some of the harsher elements.

A stream tumbles from the mountainside right up to the edge of the

settlement, though it's frozen solid at the moment, its crystalline water sparkling in the limited sunshine. Losing interest in the surrounding area, I return my attention to the little village, scanning for any sign of Tania.

I stop suddenly as a familiar female shape emerges from within one of the log structures. With a large bundle of rags and dirty clothing clutched against her bosom, she makes her way toward the eastern side of the camp. I manage to catch a glimpse of her face as she exits the hut and my heart soars. It's Tania.

I prepare to leap from my stony perch and fly down to the valley to grab her, but I freeze as I notice a male appear behind Tania. He says something, and she turns to look at him. Despite the uncomfortable look on her face as she speaks to this male, a jealous rage explodes within me. All he's done is speak to her, but all I can think of is picking my teeth with this human's bones.

I'm frozen there for a long moment as they speak, watching intently. Suddenly, the man reaches out to grab her arm, and she turns, jerking her arm away violently. Tania turns as if to run, but the man grabs onto her, ripping her dress and grabbing her where only I should be allowed to.

My fury reaches its peak, and I release a terrible roar, opening my beak-like mouth and screaming my anger into the frigid afternoon air. The entire mountain range seems to shake with my furious bellow, the trees exploding with flocks of birds leaving their roosts in a startled frenzy.

I leap from the outcrop and bring my wings close to my body, spinning to gain speed as I free-fall for about a hundred feet. Then just before I crash into the mountain, I open my wings, catching the air and swooping out toward the village at an incredible speed. The landscape around me blurs with the speed of my flight, but all I can see is Tania ahead of me.

She and the male both turned toward me when they heard my roar, as did the rest of the village. They're all watching me now, most with their mouths hanging open in shock.

"Watch out!" one shouts.

"What is that?" another adds.

Voices bounce around but I'm not paying attention to them. I'm paying attention to her. Tania looks conflicted, but my brain registers relief in her expression as well, though I hardly notice through the haze of fury and bloodlust that fills my brain.

After a handful of seconds, I land hard, barely slowing my flight before

reaching the ground. I hit the ground running full speed just a few feet away from the male threatening my human. His face is a mask of shock and confusion, and he seems paralyzed by fear as I cover the ground between us in three quick strides.

The male seems to register his peril at the last moment, raising his hand as if to lunge at me, but it's far too late for him. I grab him by the throat and lift his feet off the ground before slamming his feeble body against the frozen ground with a sickening crunch.

I extend my talons as he hits the ground, forcing them into the soft flesh of his pale throat before ripping the windpipe straight out of his neck in a spray of dark red blood. My beak is in his neck before I can think, tearing out chunks of his flesh and swallowing them whole.

The rich, warm blood of the feeble man fills my mouth and spills down my chest as I gorge myself on the flesh of my enemy. The sound of metal clanging rips me from my reverie, and I lift my head to see what it is. The villagers are approaching, men and women both, most of them carrying pitchforks and hoes though a handful have crude swords or hunting bows.

Most of them appear too terrified to come near me, but a few continue cautiously in my direction.

“Let Thomas go, you monster!” one of them screams in a shrill voice. “We’ll kill you! We will! Go now, or we’ll kill you!” the voices continued.

*These simple creatures really seem to think they have a chance against me. I’ll eat them all, then I’ll take Tania back and make her my mate.*

They continue approaching, and I let it happen. They have no idea what they’re getting into. I tense, however, when I hear the sound of a bowstring being drawn.

In a blur, I leap for the nearest enemy, ripping the sword from his hand and tossing it into the crowd behind him. One of the men with a bow sends an arrow at me, but I dodge it nimbly. This seems to terrify the humans. *These fools, I think. Can’t they see I’m faster than their little brains can even conceive?*

The man whose sword I took is still standing there, looking at me with an expression of awe and fear. I grab him by the throat, tossing him effortlessly into the side of one of their cabins. The humans scream again, and I look up at them, smiling gruesomely as blood drips from my beak. *Now the fun begins.*





## TANIA

**T**here's blood everywhere, and corpses too, some still shuddering in their last moments. And in a gust of feathers, Kiath is at the center of it all, tearing one of the settlers' heads off. A strange sense of relief washes over me, but I know I need to stop this massacre before he kills them all because of Thomas' actions.

But before I can make a move, an arm comes around me and yanks me back. "We have to go!"

Jennifer.

She's got such a good heart, and I don't blame her for being terrified about this whole situation. If I hadn't seen what he was capable of on the mountain, I'd be more afraid too. But I *know* him, and I think I can quell his rage and save the rest of them.

I struggle in her grip before tearing away. "You don't understand!"

Someone's head flies past us, spurring Jennifer into action. She grabs my hand and drags me further away from the carnage Kiath is wreaking on the settlement.

"Stop!" I shout, freeing myself again.

Jennifer skids to a stop and looks at me with panic in her eyes. "That thing will kill you!"

"You don't understand," I repeat. I shake my head in a warning not to follow, then bolt in the opposite direction, towards the source of all this upset. These are good people who don't deserve what he is going to do to them.

"Kiath!" I call as I run to him.

He's hunkered over a corpse facing away so I can't see quite what he's doing to it. Blood is leaking from his latest victim, a woman who's choking on her last breath as he claws her open and samples her flesh.

He truly isn't himself right now, and he will continue to rampage until his energy is spent if given the opportunity. My heart aches for all of them. For Kiath. For me.

"Kiath, stop! Please!"

He doesn't hear me, lost to his bloodlust.

I approach with more caution, getting near enough to touch one of his outspread wings. I almost do, daring to take another step forward. And suddenly, he's up again, bolting forward to take out a man with a bow.

Everything seems to go in slow motion. The man's eyes widen, the bow is knocked from his hand, and Kiath rends him to pieces with his wicked claws. The man doesn't even have time to process that he's already dead, his breathless mouth opening into a silent scream.

I swallow hard, stepping over the dying body. "Kiath, please..."

Someone runs into one of the cabins and slams it shut behind them. This causes Kiath's predator's instinct to reflexively chase their movement. But the door is made well and gives him trouble. He roars at the obstinate thing, clawing at it feverishly with little to show for his efforts.

"Kiath."

Nothing. No sign he can hear me.

I stumble forward, knowing that I risk facing those claws on my own. But I can hear children screaming on the other side of that door. If I don't do something now, he will bathe this whole settlement in their blood.

The ones that tried to face him head-on knew the risks, but now he's going after the innocent. That, I can't abide.

I keep my voice low and reach out to touch him, barely grazing his feathers. "Kiath," I say again, trying to force a reaction from him that is not in pursuit of murder. Will he even recognize me through the haze when he sets his sight on me? "I am here now. Everything is okay."

His ear twitches and his movement slows.

I take it as a good sign and get closer still. "Do you remember when we spent all day in your nest together? When we did nothing but explore each other? We can have that again, but you have to stop this madness. It's time to go *home*."

At that, he does stop clawing at the door, leaving deep gouges as his

talons slide off the wood. His breath is still coming in hard and fast plumes of mist from the exertion, but his silver eyes brighten with clarity as they fall on me. He tries to form words with his blood-soaked mouth, but nothing comes.

I smile at him and open my arms wide. "See? I'm alright."

I can feel the others of the settlement crowding around their dead to watch our exchange. Jennifer is visible in my peripherals, looking stunned by my familiarity with Kiath.

Apparently, she ignored my advice and didn't run away after all. I'm not sure if that makes her brave or reckless. If our places were traded, I might not have stuck around long enough to watch our reunion. She is a good friend, even if we've only just gotten to know each other.

But my focus is on him.

Kiath reaches for me, his hands still bloodied but his claws retracted. I lean into his embrace as he gathers me up, stroking the downy feathers at his throat. "There's nothing to fear when we're together, Kiath. I'm not going anywhere."

"Tania," comes his first word as reason returns. "You left."

"I did, and I'm so sorry. It was a mistake."

I rest my head on his shoulder, noticing Jennifer still staring hard in our direction. I'm not sure if the look in her eyes is accusation or realization, but she's gaping at us.

Kiath pulls back, with eyes only for me. A shadow comes over him as he holds me at arm's length, and that rage returns just under the surface. He's in control now, though. "You left."

"I know."

He releases me all at once, leaving me to waver on my own two feet. And when he stands to his full height, his wings spread wide, he is menacing. "Am I not enough?"

I keep my chin held high.

It's all I can do not to cower in his presence. The others need me to be strong for them, and I have to be if I'm going to weather his ire. I hear the draw of bowstrings and see the flash of steel. My voice is a murmur, so only he can hear me. "You have every right to be angry at me, Kiath. But they will destroy you if you kill another person. We need to go."

His powerful form is tense as if he's about to lunge again, but he glances around at the massacre with new eyes and the crowd that lingers on the fringe. "They are weak."

“They still can hurt you.”

He scoffs at that, his maw still dripping with the blood of their kin.

“They know what you’re capable of, and they won’t hesitate to take you down. I can’t – I can’t let that happen. You have me now. And I won’t run away again.”

“You wanted *this*?”

I say nothing.

He spreads his arms out to indicate the settlement. “What is here that I cannot provide?”

To that, I say nothing, noting how Jennifer’s look of betrayal has changed to something akin to pity. Does she think I am a captive of Kiath? Maybe I am, and maybe she’s figured out that the story I told her has some merit, after all. “They will shoot you full of arrows, Kiath. We cannot linger here any longer.”

It looks as if he wants to say more, but instead, he scoops me up into his arms. I wrap my arms around his broad shoulders and lean in, trying to hide from the settlers’ scrutiny. It’s only Jennifer’s gaze I meet as his wide wings whip around us.

She takes half a step forward as if to stop our egress. But there’s something else – a charged plea for me to stay, perhaps – that glimmers in her green eyes. And I do feel as if I’m betraying her, leaving with him after all he’s done to them.

It’s a small regret in a lifetime of mistakes. Kiath will be furious at me, and he will not hold it back when we are alone again. Still, I’d rather be with him than anywhere else.

The bows, thankfully, do not discharge as we gain altitude.

Whatever small miracle has occurred, I have to be grateful that they did not kill him. I’d never forgive myself if he died because of me. I already have to bear the weight of the seven he did kill. Even Thomas’ death is mine to carry.

The settlement shrinks beneath our feet, and from the heat in Kiath’s form, I know that our conversation is far from over. I breached his trust by running away, and now, he’ll never let me out of his sight again.



## KIATH

**O**n the walls of the cavern, I observe her silhouette, hunched below mine with folded arms that speak to a deep discomfort. She has stoked a fire at the entrance, and it casts the space in an orange glow.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “How could you run away?”

She turns away from me slightly. Moments ago, we were holding each other, just glad to be in each others’ arms. Was it all an act to spare her human friends?

Do I really mean that little to her?

“When I came to this island,” she says, “I was looking for more of my kind.”

I chuckle in response. “So you’ve told me,” I say. “But then you told me everything they did to you, and I thought you’d finally come to your senses.”

She pauses, looking out at the falling white. “They weren’t all bad,” she says. “Some of them were awful, and I’ll always remember them for what they did to me. But just think about it... If you like me, and I’m a human, why would you think every other human besides me is terrible?”

Her petty logic attempts to twist its way into my mind. I know how other humans are. I saw them below, selfishly clinging to their lives while exploiting everybody around them.

“Because *you’re* different,” I growl.

I want to rip her clothing from her and take her against the cavern wall. She’s so small, I could *break* her.

Then I remember the man. The wretched fool of a human who attempted to take her for himself. I still recall his twisted grin, a mockery of villainy that

turned into cowardly fright once he met a real monster.

“Who was that man?”

I approach her in the cavern, and she recoils against me, huddling even closer to the wall.

“He was nobody, Kiath,” she replies smoothly but with a touch of delicious fear. “Honestly.”

“Were you sad to see him die?”

I can see the terror in her eyes at my indifferent recounting of events and feel the urge to rip into her. Then she surprises me when she stifles that fear, however briefly, and channels something so much more succulent.

“Honestly, I was glad when you killed him,” she says with a hint of venom.

She’s less afraid now and has opened her defensive stance slightly. A dark realization changes her posture.

She thinks she’s brave.

“Really?”

“He was just like the people back home,” she says simply. “The ones I was running away from.”

I stand tall over her, looking down on her from above.

“I intend to make you pay for what you did,” I growl, making sure my tongue reverberates against the back of my throat, putting emphasis on every word. “You know that I’m never going to let you leave my sight, don’t you?”

The roaring fire intensifies. Normally, I would hate its presence here, but I can feel its warmth intensifying my anger, whipped up by the wind from the blizzard outside.

I know that she knows she’s mine and that she’s never leaving me again. There’s no way that, upon allowing herself to fall back into my possession, I would ever surrender her again.

But the way she looks at me when I speak the realization aloud is delicious.

Gripping her ass and clutching it hard, I make sure her eyes meet mine. She cocks her neck upward to match my gaze as her hand wanders to my loins.

I want her to be too terrified to ever leave my sight again. I lift her up from her hips and place her closer to me, so close that our hips are almost touching.

I want to claim her for myself.

But first, I'm going to enjoy her. Before I can probe and resize her, I will first need to savor her nectar.

Pushing her down, I feel my member spring loose, falling downward in a spiral. As she falls to her knees before me, and it nearly collides with her face, her eyes fail to hide her surprise.

"What do you want to do to it?" I ask her.

Her hand strays closer to it.

She wants to ask permission but is afraid to.

I grow bored of her innocence. While ruining it is going to be fantastic, my organ longs to pierce her, and it will wait no longer.

Without any more preamble, I grip her head and shove myself into her reluctant, open mouth.

She gulps loudly as it fills her throat, resisting the urge to gag. Her tongue's sideways dance against me is surreal. In spite of her pretensions otherwise, she is a generous lover.

I can feel myself possessing her body, but I want to possess so much more than that. I want to own her, mind and soul.

"Give me everything," I growl, leering down at her.

She nods in return, her eyes wide with horror but oozing with her arousal.

As I cross over her tongue and forward beyond her uvula, my slender, swirling cock moves against the edges and into the crevices of her mouth. Her soft, human tongue accentuates every bulge and vein, adjusting with the contours and details of my organ.

I thrust forward. She beats back against my ass, urging me to relent. She needs air.

I pull out of her throat and bludgeon her face with my cock, dripping fluid all over her cheek and lips as I slap her. Her face is red with the force of my long, spiraling appendage.

She gasps for breath, trying to find wind's grace, and I shove myself immediately back into her mouth, thrusting with more force. I can feel her body pushing and pulling against my movements, tangled in a rhythm she can't comprehend. My assault on her throat only accelerates as I find my beat.

She needs to understand. I'm not only claiming her. I'm punishing her – ruining her.

What happened cannot happen again.

She struggles as I bury myself in her throat and hold myself there. I can



feel myself hardening and elongating, seeing her compromised by my darkness. I just want to bury myself inside her and burst, because I know that she can take it.

Or at least, she'll be able to when I'm done with her.

Picking her up with my cock still buried in her mouth, I twist her in the air, lifting her hips toward my face. My wings flutter with excitement, my mouth moving close to her and inhaling her scent, so sweet and pungent, racked by terror, guilt, and so much arousal.

My teeth press forward, and I begin shredding her outer layer, attempting to find her naked and vulnerable snatch. The cloth would normally be unpleasant, but her natural scent makes everything so much more delicious.

I'm eager to take her for myself.

But first, I need to ready her.

I rip through her underwear, leaving her entrance outlined by destroyed clothing. Her folds draw my mouth toward her prize, a gem highlighting her desire for me.

I take it into my mouth and begin to suck, my tongue dancing along its circumference. My wings lift us slightly in the air, flapping in the cavern breeze and beating the flames. With my cock still wedged in her mouth, I can feel her surprise as her throat widens.

Still ready to enter her with my tongue, I begin to nibble around her folds, licking at her door. Her juices drip onto my tongue, and my mind screeches with the intoxicating aroma. Her moans fill her stuffed throat, uncontained even by my invasion. As she gasps and groans, she breathes wind onto my glans, and I feel the cool approach of breath readying me for my final attack.

I am almost unable to contain myself.

I extend my tongue and begin to penetrate her with it, swirling around deep inside of her. I want to know her better so that I can dominate and conquer her. The combination of her taste and texture – her scent, coated by fear, to remind me of the difference between us... It's almost too much for me, and I can feel myself ready to burst over her tongue.

The last time we were here, when I thought I had forever claimed her, she denied me this release.

I gasp, my organ accelerating its pace as I inhale and produce oscillating tones that crescendo in waves.

She struggles as streams fill her mouth, and she nearly drowns in me.

Perhaps she expects that with my release, my member flopping out of her

mouth, I am done. She might be naive enough to think that I would finish without truly claiming her, repeating my earlier mistake.

I feel deep inside of her with my tongue, before twitching my member, letting it gently spiral and slap her cheek. I dive deeper, learning the currents of her tunnel, but maneuver her in my arms.

We have been unconsciously hovering through the cavern as I took her.

While I navigate her depths, preparing her for my spiraling invasion, I line her mouth back up with my cock, forcing her to clean me and reminding her that she isn't finished until I say she is. She licks around my tangled shaft, still mesmerized by my shape.

I fuck her mouth in earnest before realizing that we are no longer above the nest, but hovering in the air deeper inside the cavern. While I plunge myself deep within her oral cavity, making sure to stimulate every nerve on my turgid, coiling cock with the walls of her mouth, I can feel her peering down at the cavern below us. Whether in awe or fear, I can no longer tell.

These caverns are quiet, filled only with my growls and the noise of dripping icicles.

But as I lay her out on the cavern floor, her bare ass outlined by tattered, leftover cloth, her pussy swollen and damp with arousal, I like to pretend that I have an audience. I like to imagine that the creatures of the cavern will bear witness to my domination, watching us in envy.

She will be mine. And only I will hear her screams as I claim her humanity, bringing her with me to the skies.



## TANIA

**D**arkness fills my vision, accompanied by a pale shadow lurking over me. The cavern around me is quiet, but internally, I am screaming, my mind overwhelmed as I glimpse his shining blue eyes. His twisted pink organ substantially fills the space in front of my bare, exposed hips, curling up and down the threshold.

I can feel myself dripping onto the cavern floor. My nethers are heating up in spite of myself.

In my head, I can still picture the carnage at Camp Hope. I can see the beast standing in front of me, ripping through innocent people and sending the village into a flurried panic, painting the snow blood red. I hear myself crying out, urging him to disengage, but he won't stop tearing through flesh and sinew, his rhythmic cry haunting me as I watch their souls leave their eyes.

And now he's about to fuck me hard.

That monster, who murdered my new friends, is about to defile me, never once relenting as he plunges his twisting corkscrew cock into my hole and uses me for his own pleasure.

The thought is painful, but I lift my pelvis in spite of my inhibitions, his own member prodding me urgently. I don't know how I'll ever take him. But I know that if I don't, more innocent people are going to die.

And, it grieves me to admit it, but I want this really badly.

"Please go easy on me," I say gently, trying to meet his indifferent, chilly eyes.

He laughs. It's a roaring, melodic laugh that fills the cavern with

dissonant echoes, followed by a snort.

I become painfully aware that my face is covered in a mixture of my saliva and his cum. I can still feel my eyes watering from his merciless assault, fluids still dripping from my chin to my chest.

“You knew what you were doing when you left,” he growls. “Now you’re going to take your punishment, or I might have to go back down to the village and finish the job.”

He takes his member and grips it in his hand, poking at my entrance with it. He teases my clit before looking down at my face and surveying me.

“Or... would the better punishment be to leave you unsatisfied?”

A wicked grin crosses his face. He rubs his cock against my entrance, stopping short of penetrating me with it.

He really wants me to beg for it.

“I could just fly away from here and leave some other beast to defile you instead, if you like,” he says, chortling. “Maybe you’d just like it if I brought a worg, and made you some...”

“Please fuck me.”

Something resembling a sneer crosses his humanlike face, an undeniable cockiness apparent in his demeanor. “What was that?”

He heard me clearly. He just wants me to say it louder.

“I want you to fuck me!”

He moves his hips forward, bringing his legs closer to me. “Good,” he growls. “I didn’t want to have to share you.”

His head lowers to mine. An enormous presence attempts to force its way inside me, not giving easily in spite of how wet I am. His tongue extends out of his mouth, snaking its way into mine.

And I feel him enter me.

I can immediately tell that I wasn’t designed to take his member. It spirals into me, stimulating my walls with an appendage that swirls the further in it gets.

What’s more, I can feel his member stretching me out as it twists both forward and up and down. From the outside, it looked far too big to fit inside me, but I feel densely packed by its penetration. I wonder if I could see the intrusion if I looked down.

I’m too taken by the sensations ripping through my canal to check.

His tongue spirals into my mouth, dancing against my own as he prods forward, slowly but forcefully. In spite of how full I feel, he is nowhere near

fully inside me. I don't feel his hips hitting mine, or his orbs slapping into me.

I want all of him, but I'm not sure if it's possible.

His breath is sweet, his lips moving down to wrap against mine, his tongue spiraling down my throat.

I have been invaded from both ends.

The idea of being used as a mere object for his raw pleasure sends me over the edge. I'm nothing more than a slot for him to fill.

I cry out, and his pace accelerates.

He thrusts into me even more forcefully. I want him to carry me to the summit.

My walls convulse, and I'm immediately struck by how full I am, his densely coiled cock rubbing against my smooth interior tunnel with incredible speed and grace.

He twists and undulates his hips, and I feel my mind shattering, his member not only snaking into me now but shaking side to side.

He moves his mouth from mine, lowering his head to my neck before biting fiercely.

I don't know if I can endure so much pleasure.

His torso lifts, and he gazes down at me before ripping clean through my shirt with his claws. The cool cavern air hits my chest, and I realize that I am once again functionally bared before him, before feeling the light cuts on my swaying breasts.

"Are you ready for your punishment, *ma khari*?"

My senses return, and I look up at him with clarity.

Briefly, I consider the mistake I've made, letting my lust guide my motivation. Fucking a monster to try to spare bloodshed.

*But you wanted this.*

I shake my head in response to my own thoughts, still denying my true nature.

"Too bad," he growls, thinking my denial is intended for him and not for myself.

In one immediate movement, his entire cock twists into me, his balls resting against my ass.

The pain is immense. I want to scream, but I know that nobody can protect me from him. His entire length is inside me now, his glans resting against my cervix.

And he looks down at me with a wicked, contorted grin.

“In time, you will learn to bear it,” he says.

His claws grip my back deeply, his right hand lowering to my waist and gripping my ass.

His hips flex and his cock hits my womb even deeper.

His thighs tighten, his hands guiding me upward as he presses himself higher, my perspective immediately shifting.

In my shifting view, his legs now planted firmly on the ground, I am speared on his cock as he carries me.

I am at eye level with him now as he mashes his face into mine. I can feel his hands tighten his grip on my hip, his claws tearing my flesh and distracting me briefly from the painful insertion inside my tunnel.

He brings me up on his cock, then back down, gently at first, then more aggressively. As I rise and fall, my breasts bounce up and tumble downward. I wish I had some way of hiding or containing them so that they weren't moving freely, outside of my control.

*Give in.*

A voice urges me to stop denying the pleasure that courses through me.

He slides in and out of me, his eyes never leaving mine as I attempt to glimpse the caverns around me, seeking out anything in the darkness to distract me. But there is nothing more interesting to me than the creature ravaging my body.

In spite of myself, the pain inside of my body is slowly subsiding, replaced only with the immense sensations that run rampant through my core. With every upward thrust, my nerve endings are stimulated a thousand times over, his pace only quickening as his coiling cock condenses and fills me up, then retracts.

I could not pull myself free from his grasp if I wanted to. His swirling appendage, running deep through my body, entangles me, serving as both my liberation and my confinement.

And against my will, I start to moan.

I can see myself bouncing up and down on his cock, brought down vigorously by his claws. It doesn't feel like me, or at least not how I saw myself. His wings beat triumphantly, knowing that he has conquered me at last and that I belong only to him. I beg him to fuck me harder and faster, wanting only to be lost in the moment.

I feel a part of me fade away, my reluctance having been subdued.

With every violent motion, the wind courses through me, swirling around me from somewhere beyond the confines of this cavern. I feel my breath take him in, his tongue rushing through my mouth. I want to become him... to be a part of him.

His hips pound into me, and I can feel his orbs bouncing into me with every upward drive. His pace is frantic now, and even the undefeatable Kiath is panting, begging for me to take his seed.

My heart lifts and drops, his wings carrying us up into the air suddenly. I can see dense caverns below us, having left the rock bridge. If we fall from here, he would survive, but I would almost certainly not. I dread that he will let me go and that I will be thrust into the depths of the cavern below, with no means of returning myself to safety.

But my dread subsides as his pace becomes still more frantic, and his coiling cock spins and vibrates rapidly inside of me, having lost all rhythm and reason.

Suspended deep above the caverns below, still carried by the whims of this creature who has claimed me, his seed swirls deep inside of me, prodding and filling me now without any reason or rhythm.

He emits a loud, guttural song. It seems so familiar. Maybe I heard it long ago in a dream. But the way it resonates inside me is unparalleled. It seems to entangle with my soul, carrying me to another realm.

His wind-beating wings accelerate as he carries me back to solid ground, and I collapse on top of him, with no concern for any moment beyond this one.





## KIATH

Tania stands at the lip of the cave with a fur around her shoulders. “It’s snowing hard again today. Do you think it will let up anytime soon?”

I’m too busy tracing the shape of her with my gaze to answer, admiring the sumptuous cut of her silhouette against the white world outside. *She’s mine*, I think, reveling in the prospect of dragging her back to my nest again.

She glances back at me, one eyebrow cocked expectantly.

“No,” comes my answer, as cold and indifferent as the snow. “But I will hunt today.”

She comes to me, stepping into my reach fearlessly. I enjoy how she stands in my shadow. There’s no hesitation when she catches my cheek, gazing into my eyes and chewing on her lip as if considering her next words carefully. “You don’t have to always go out there alone. I’m pretty capable myself, and I can show you if you give me a chance.”

“It’s too cold.” I wrap a possessive arm around her and drag her close. I like the way her eyes widen slightly, and how she giggles when I lean in for a kiss. I scour her mouth with mine until I am satisfied that she’s rendered mute. My claws dig into the flesh of her hip, making her hiss in pain. I swallow up the sound, forcing her to yield to my insistence.

She looks dazed when I break from the kiss.

I tuck a strand of her hair behind one ear, considering her thoughtfully. “When spring comes, you can join me. Until then, I will hunt for us.”

Tania issues a muted nod.

I don’t say that I do not want her to leave the cave. Maybe it’s my worry

that she will run away again that keeps her from coming with me. It was only a few days ago that she ran to the humans, and I nearly lost my mind in pursuit of her.

Her wariness is gone as she clings to me in an embrace. “I don’t want you to go.”

Hearing her say it makes my heart soar, and I let out an involuntary trill from my throat. Her fingers run through the feathers on my chest as she leans her head against me.

“I love it when you sing,” she murmurs. “Will you sing for me when you get back?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you.”

I want nothing more than to give her all of myself. It’s a strange feeling, after living in isolation for so long. I thought I owned her but, in a way, she owns me too. It is with muted excitement that I break from our embrace and hold her at arm’s length. “Stay here. I will be back soon.”

Her gaze is worried but trusting.

I offer a parting kiss before launching myself from the cave on my powerful wings. *I will not be gone long, I swear to myself. I have to sing to my mate.*



TANIA IS WAITING for me at the lip of the cave, where she’s stoking a small fire. Her eyes light up when she sees me. I took care not to bloody myself more than necessary, and it was fortunate that the stray thistle did not put up much of a fight before I broke its neck.

Its heavy wool will make a fine addition to the furs.

I set the kill in front of her and take a step back, folding my wings. The kill will last us a week if we’re careful. Tania has shown me how to cook and freeze it so it lasts longer. She talked about herbs and spices she had tried in her previous life, but few grow on the mountainsides of Prazh.

I wish I could bring her herbs to use.

“You were careful, this time.”

I nod with exuberance as she looks the thistle over from hoof to tail. I’m proud to be able to provide for her. “The light left its eyes before it saw me. It

did not suffer.”

Tania looks relieved. “I’m glad.”

Even as she divides the animal into manageable pieces, I consider her gentle nature, sitting beside her. I have always hunted with impunity, reveling in the slaughter. But she has taught me a better way, one with less suffering.

She told me that she was like the animals, once. She had suffered greatly. For her alone, I am merciful.

I lean in and catch a whiff of her sweet scent, nuzzling the crook of her shoulder. She laughs softly. “Careful! I don’t want to cut myself.”

“If you do, I will mend it.”

She stops her work and leans into me. “Will you?”

“Yes,” I murmur into her hair, grazing my teeth against her exposed shoulder. I run my claws up the small of her back, enjoying how she shivers at my touch.

But I promised I would sing.

I lean back against the cave wall to watch her work, beginning on a high whistle that echoes through the cave. It’s mournful but soft, swelling into something jubilant that sets my feathers on end. I can tell Tania is enjoying it too, a smile spreading across her face while she pitches a cut of meat up over the fire.

The redolent scent of cooking meat is mouth-watering.

I keep my focus on the task as she nestles against my side. Her hand comes over my chest as if she’s feeling the vibration of my song. I sing for a long while, forgetting the passage of time or the need for anything but my mate.

She nearly falls asleep, and when my song concludes, I rouse her gently.

Tania blinks away the exhaustion. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” I say. “It is good to know you are safe.”

Guilt casts a shadow over her expression. We haven’t spoken much of her time in the settlement since she returned. The last time we did, I was furious and not in my right mind. Now, time has given me the benefit of reflection.

The silence between us needs to be addressed. “Why did you leave?”

She doesn’t answer right away, turning her face away from me. “I wanted to belong somewhere,” she finally says, fiddling with the hem of her sleeve. “I thought I belonged there because it’s only natural to seek out the familiar, you know? But when I was finally there, everything felt out of place. *I* felt out of place, even among my own kind.

“I’m not like them.”

“You’re not like me, either, but that doesn’t change anything.” I stroke the crest of her cheek, watching hesitation and uncertainty dance across her expression. “Do you still want to go back?”

Her laugh is without humor. “I think it would be criminal for me to return, after everything that happened. But even if I could, I wouldn’t want to.” She looks up at me with clear eyes. “I belong here, with you. I know that now.”

She means every word.

A giddiness overcomes me, but I master it. Tania makes me feel so many things I’ve never felt before, and I bask in this new sensation. She *wants* to stay with me. Ever since I laid eyes on her, it’s all I’ve ever wanted. Although my mind is reeling with the possibility of our future together, I can only muster a single syllable. “Good.”

It sounds distant, compared to her confession but Tania does not seem to take offense. She observes me with a scrutinous eye, a smile finding her again. “That is to say, I’ll still miss the little comforts. Like a bed and a cozy little cabin in the snow.”

She seems resigned to give them up, but it’s my turn to smile. “I can build you one.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s no different from the cave, and the nest. I saw how the humans built up their structures from logs. How hard could it be?”

She bites back a grin. “Would you?”

“Anything for you,” I say, getting distracted by the lovely curve of her neck again. “Whatever you want.”

Tania accepts my caress with a soft croon, and she presses her cheek against mine. “You don’t know how happy that makes me, Kiath. Where should we –”

I bolt to sit upright, catching Tania against my side as I listen hard. It’s a faint sound, barely a whisper of an echo but not many creatures come this far up the mountain.

And it sounds like many.

I rise suddenly, my wings flitting irritably as the noises come nearer. Slowly, but certainly towards us.

“What’s wrong?”

I put a finger to my lips as an indication to be silent and listen hard. My

heart drops when I realize what it is. “Get to the nest,” I hiss, giving her no time to react as I throw myself at the entrance of the cave to spot our uninvited guests.

They don’t see me yet, but I see them through the heavy snowfall.  
And they will not get away with disturbing our peace.



## TANIA

“Get to the nest.”

Words of caution, spoken sternly, flow from Kiath’s mouth, and I trail away through the cavern, my hearing on high alert.

I’ve seen this mentality in Kiath once before when he sought me from Camp Hope and pulled me from the clutches of hysteric humans. I inch far enough away that I am near the nest, but I still need a window to witness the cavern entrance. My mind is reeling with expectations and worst-case scenarios.

Understanding how crafty people can be, I can’t simply leave Kiath to die, regardless of his wishes.

“Watch out!”

Kiath yells back at me as an arrow coasts through the air, jabbing into the rock wall beside me before clattering harmlessly to the cavern floor.

“Where did that come from?”

So many questions course through my mind, none of them constructive.

Kiath peels through the snow, before pointing directly ahead. “They’ve got archers on the ledge.”

With how fiercely the wind is blowing, the fact that somebody nearly hit me with an arrow frightens me considerably. Kiath might have underestimated them, but I certainly didn’t.

“There’s an attacking party approaching,” Kiath instructs. “I’ll disarm the archers. You stay hidden.”

My eyes dart over the cavern walls, realizing that the only weapons I can access, aside from the small, dull dagger in my haversack, are the broken



glass mirrors near the entrance.

With the speed and grace of an aquila, Kiath darts forward, finding one of the humans and throwing him carelessly into the chasm below, while unleashing his talons and clawing into another man on the ledge.

I don't think he expects strategy.

As he disables the archers, the party he spotted charges forward, rushing the entrance one after another. Seeing this, Kiath disengages from the bowmen, clawing into the invaders.

But they've already spotted me.

As quickly as I can muster, I retrieve a broken hand mirror from the entrance, wielding it above my head defensively while rushing deeper into the cavern network. There must be dozens of them approaching, and as I count carefully among their ranks, I'm grateful that Jennifer is not here to attack me.

Their immediate advance seems pensive and slow until Kiath begins to cut them down, whittling down their numbers. At that point, they resort to desperation, drawing blunt, faded swords and threatening me with them.

"You made your choice," says a man I don't recognize, who stands among five others. "Now lie in it!"

He rushes toward me, his sword whistling in the air. Instinctively, I duck and roll as well as I can with the mirror in my hand, but I'm too slow. The sword grazes my shoulder, and I cry out before breaking the glass mirror on the man's head.

He collapses to the ground, bleeding from his skull as the five accompanying him look on in horror.

"Kill the whore!"

As fast as my legs can carry me, I rush into the caverns, still afraid for Kiath but not willing to die here. Thankfully, the men are encumbered and have never seen the speed of a woman who escaped slavers. As I find an alcove and hide behind a pillar, I fruitlessly attempt to stifle my bated breath. Drawing my dagger loose and studying its shimmer, I can still see the brown and familiar blood on its blade.

*I can't leave Kiath alone in all this.*

My eyes peel through the area, searching the darkness while my ears attempt to separate the sound of dripping water from the footsteps that surround me.

I have no way of knowing how many men and women might have

overrun Kiath, or how many might still be sprinting through the caverns around me. But now that I don't hear any in my immediate area, I make a very stupid decision.

Rushing out from behind the pillar, dagger at the ready, I sprint back toward the cavern entrance. But as I dash, I immediately realize how foolish my actions are, and wonder if, in this confined space, I ever had a chance.

"There she is!"

In a cavern corridor to my left, a man in mail armor gestures toward me, likely drawn to the sheen of my white clothing.

I run.

But as I sprint forward, hoping that I'm not too late to help Kiath and wondering how I could help him at all, I realize that there are humans ahead of me too.

I am cornered. There are five men ahead of me and four men behind me. And as much as I like to believe in myself, a dagger does not make a fine weapon against nine men.

I could throw myself over the rock ledge bridge, almost certainly dying in the caverns below. It would be far less humiliating than facing my end here at the hands of barbarians.

I look behind me at the men brandishing their weapons and ahead of me at the chuckling savages whose eyes have been blinded by the loss of a comrade.

"I'm really sorry about Thomas," I say nervously, attempting to appeal to their reason now. "He might have been an asshole, but he was still your friend."

"Get his name out of your mouth," one of the men says. "You chose your alliances. Now deal with your death."

I close my eyes, but it doesn't hide the steady approach of their clanking armor, or the noise of their heavy footfalls.

I guess this is how it ends.

I'm glad I escaped Tlouz. I'm grateful I got to know a life free from shackles, regardless of how brief it was.

And I got to know love, strange and unpredictable. It wasn't what I asked for, but it was everything I could have hoped for and more.

I can almost hear his song now, somewhere in my imagination.

Their footsteps stop.

Then immediately, one of them rushes toward me. I can hear his clanking

armor, anticipating his sword piercing my heart. I wonder what they might do to me once I'm dead. If they'll respect my body, or if they'll desecrate it in disrespect.

I prepare myself for the sword slash.

But it never comes.

I open my eyes, and immediately, I see Kiath, coursing through the caverns. He plucks one of the men by the shoulders, ripping into the man's spaulders before sending him plummeting to the caverns below, no doubt leaving a bloody pulp beneath us.

"There are more of them approaching the entrance, *ma khari*," Kiath says. "Care to keep watch? I'll be right behind you.

"I just need to send a message."

I can see the men who wanted me dead now begging for their lives, groveling on the ground as bloody messes and shambling husks.

Reluctantly, I trod forward before questioning whether I should really leave him again and find myself defenseless at the entrance.

"Go!"

He urges me forward. I don't know if he hates showing me this side of himself, or if he really thinks it's safer for me elsewhere, but I retrieve a sword from the hand of a dying man to defend myself with. He grips it tightly against me, but his strength is fleeting.

As I handle it, I recognize the man who earlier called me a whore lying nearly dead before me and bring the sword down, dismembering his hand.

I despise unnecessary violence. But sometimes, there is a place for it.

Dashing forward, I feel the wieldiness of the sword in my hand. It balances well in my grip, and though I hate to admit it, there's something about holding a weapon that feels like home.

One straggler rushes forward and witnesses the death of his cohorts at Kiath's claws. He looks traumatized by it, and he collapses to the ground, incapacitated by grief. I really feel for him.

But as I slice through his midsection, keeping the viscera a safe distance away from me so that I don't have to handle it, I realize that now isn't the time to let up.

They've breached the cavern, and they're not looking for prisoners.

They've just come out here looking for blood. There's no reason for any of it.

Now is the time to fight.

I think I feel Kiath's proud gaze on me once more as I charge forward, sword at the ready. I slice through one man, whose shield shines with the light but is held a little too high, before hewing into another, using his own weight against him.

I am not a skilled fighter. But I guess given the proper tools and a good surge of adrenaline, anybody can be a warrior.

Finally reaching the nest, I look out at the expanse. The snow's falling has slowed.

I creep around the corner, taking care not to engage any approaching forces.

From behind me, I hear Kiath's approaching melody. It starts weak, but almost deafeningly it increases in volume as he dashes past me, and I see the backup forces marching up the mountain.

There are even more of them than the first wave of people we dispatched. Taking to the skies, Kiath bounds forward, breaking up the mob by dive-bombing into them from above. The forces swing their swords at him in retaliation, but he has the aerial advantage, and they're not quick enough to fire upon him.

"Can you fire upon them from the ledge?" He gestures toward the destroyed bodies, whose bows and quivers now rest unused on the snowy rock.

"I can try," I reply, trying to speak over the roaring wind. "Bit windy, though."

He gives me a puzzled look before flying back toward the approaching crowd. I run down to the ledge, trying to remember what little archery training I had.

We are able to slow their advance considerably, but they are persistent and prepared. A third group of humans appears in the distance, firing arrows into the air that careen and almost hit Kiath. I steady my bow, trying to find a stable angle. But as I fire my arrow in reciprocation, the wind sends it hurtling sideways, and it tumbles harmlessly to the ground below.

"Shit!"

I stabilize my arm, trying to fire upon them again. In front of me, dozens of humans traipse up the mountain, ready to ruin me for what happened to Thomas.



## KIATH

If I were to say one thing about humans, it would be that they are relentless.

Weak, sure, but the tenacity that they fight with, and die with, could be something to be admired if they weren't also so wretched. They all look the same with their angry, pudgy faces with venomous words. Despite their frail little bodies, they still fight with all they have. I can smell blood all over, dark, angry, spicy-smelling blood that stems from anger, but I can still taste their fear in the air.

I'm unsure if I should be impressed with or annoyed by their ability to fight through the fear, but I think back on Tania's stubborn courage when we first met, and I know that this is simply a trait that all humans share.

But these humans don't matter. They are scum for wanting to avenge a man who hurt Tania. They are less than scum for wanting to do so even though he was a stain on life.

I swoop down and pick up a man by his shoulders with my talons, digging into the meat of his back. I am grateful for his terrified screams as I fly back up towards the clouds. He tries to jab his spear upwards toward my body but the momentum of the two of us in flight is too great for him to get any proper leverage. I fly back down and throw him toward a group of humans, anger and determination fueling me. They all get knocked down into the cold snow.

"Leave us alone!" I yell, clawing open the chest of another villager. By now, most of the area around us is seeped with red blood. Against the snow, it's all so eye-catching, and the smell of it all is distracting in a way that

makes me furious rather than excited.

Tania is so different from them that it makes me wonder if she was ever meant to be human at all.

From the distance, I hear Tania yell to the humans to leave us alone. I watch as she rears back her arm to throw a sharpened branch at an incoming human, and it pins him to the ground. More humans rally toward her, and I get there first, picking her up in my arms and flying towards a higher spot where she can fight safely.

“Are you okay?” she asks. I can barely hear her worried murmur over the wind in my ears and the jeers from the other humans.

“I am,” I tell her, setting her on the ground. “Don’t worry about me.”

“I don’t believe you.” She squints at me, running her eyes all over my body where I’m sure my blood and the human’s blood have coated me.

“I will be okay as long as you’re safe.” I set her gently on the outcropping along with all of her makeshift weapons. “Please do not do anything to endanger yourself.”

“I’ll stay safe as long as you do as well,” she says defiantly. Tania takes my face into her hands, and for a moment, the roar of the mob becomes a quiet background noise. “You’re not allowed to die.”

“If I am not allowed to, then neither are you,” I say back, and the next words are both a command and a plea because I do not know what I would do if Tania got hurt or worse. “You will stay safe.”

Tania nods and steps away, and I can only spare one small moment to watch as she picks up another weapon and throws it down to the villagers. I flap my wings once and ascend to the air, ready to start fighting for us once more.

The rest of the battle is pure carnage from both ends.

For a while, it all seems endless. Humans pour out from every direction, spittle flying from their faces as they call out for my death. A few of them are smart enough to lure me into certain positions to get hits on me, and I would be even more hurt if it weren’t for Tania calling out villager positions. Viscera clings from my front and back talons and stains my feathers in a way that has me itching to preen them.

“Kiath,” Tania calls out just as I finish eviscerating a man. “Behind you!”

I turn and flare out my wings to fly upwards, knocking the approaching assailants to the ground. On the following descent, I look out toward the blood-stained ground and decide I’ve had enough. With anger and spite

fueling my actions, I pick up the nearest villagers and start throwing them toward the steep cliffs. I sink my talons into the chest of one particularly loud man, remove his head from his shoulders, and caw, loud and angry.

There are few villagers left with the strength to fight, and I am relieved as well as frustrated. I watch as they abandon their still-living companions and throw their weapons down to run away. It's only a few cowards who dare run, the rest of them bleeding out on the snow.

"You are monsters!" one of them shouts behind them. "You should be purged from this mountain!"

"You're a whore," another one screams. "A traitor to your own kind!"

Bold words from men who will soon bleed out from the wounds I'll delightfully give them.

I flare my wings out once more to give chase but arms wrapping around my torso stop me.

"No more," Tania murmurs. "No more violence."

I look over her blood-covered body and rumble from deep within my chest. The villagers' jeers are getting quieter as they run farther down the mountain, but I can sense that it doesn't make Tania hurt any less. She flinches at every insult and accusation, and I want to make them suffer like they deserve.

"They are disrespecting you," I tell her. "I will not allow that to stand."

"I don't want any more bloodshed. You've been hurt enough. We both have."

"They do not deserve mercy," I growl.

"This isn't mercy." She looks up at me with tears in her eyes, and I realize just how exhausted she is. There's a deep cut from the corner of her mouth to her ear that steadily oozes blood that I know must get treated soon or it'll scar. "This is me asking you to put us before revenge."

Tania holds onto me tighter, begging me with her eyes, and I know I cannot deny her this. Despite the anger roaring in my veins, exhaustion is starting to settle deep within me. The wounds that those rats have inflicted upon me have started to ache, and my feathers are beginning to stick together as the blood dries and freezes in the cold.

"I do not forgive them," I tell her, pulling her closer towards me. "I refuse to."

"I'm not asking you to. Just don't leave me behind to chase after them."

It takes a moment for me actually to agree, and it's solely because I do not



want to leave her. With the area covered in bodies and gore and our base damaged, I have to find someplace to keep her warm and treat her injuries.

“We’re going to have to move somewhere else,” I say, pressing my face against her hair. “We cannot stay here as much as it pains me to admit. You need shelter.”

A strong wind blows through the area, and Tania shivers, a wry chuckle escaping her. “Maybe now you can build me that cabin I asked for, huh?”

“Whatever you want,” I tell her. “Let me think for a moment about where to take you.”

I gather Tania in my arms and fold my wings around the both of us to shelter her from the harsh winds. If I can’t find a suitable place for her soon, she’ll freeze, and the thought causes me to fill up with dread. She’s not as strong as I am, at least not in terms of durability. She has no feathers to keep her warm, and the way she continues to shiver in my arms makes it clear that the clothes she has on are not a suitable substitute.

We are still in the dead of winter so it cannot be as simple as an outcropping, and I do not know of any other unoccupied caves nearby. The adrenaline has now left my body, and I do not have the strength to fight for a place to stay, and neither does Tania.

“I’m cold,” she whispers, trying to press herself closer to me.

“I know,” I say back with uncharacteristic gentleness. “Just hold on a bit longer.”

As I rock the two of us back and forth, it finally comes to me. There’s an abandoned shed not too far from her down the mountain. The owners have since died, and with it being closer to the forest, the winds should not be as strong as where we currently are.

“I’ve got it.” I shift Tania in my arms so I can stand. “Let’s get what we can and depart immediately.”

“What is it?” she asks, stepping away to hustle back toward the cave to pick out the few remaining possessions we have. She looks just as exhausted as I feel, but it seems the hope of having a better place to stay has reinvigorated some of that energy. “Another cave?”

“Better.” I pick up a few animal furs that will help keep Tania warm, as well as the little medical supplies we have left. “It seems like you really will be able to have that cabin you dream of.”

Tania’s answering grin is warm enough that it doesn’t feel like winter at all.



## TANIA

The place that Kiath brings us to is less of a cabin and more of a shack. It's dirty and old, and many parts of it are broken, including the doorframe and several of the chairs. Sometimes when the wind sweeps through the area, I can feel the cold leech into the house and I can feel the fragile roof shiver like it, too, is sick of the winter. I had to take out several rotten pieces of food, dead leaves, and twigs, and I had to spook one too many cold critters out the door and into the beak of a hungry Kiath.

The shack is, by all definitions, an awful place to live, and it's certainly not a place normal people would ever consider as a home.

I love it.

It's awful and old and dilapidated, but it's ours, and Kiath and I are going to be able to turn this into something beautiful. There's greenery growing here since it's warmer down this side of the mountain with only the rare wind sweeping through the house, and it will only get better and brighter once the winter thaws into spring.

We're protected, we're safe, and there's nothing here that can hurt us in this ugly little paradise. The angry villagers and their dead bodies are leagues away, and the snow is a bright white rather than stained with the crimson blood of people who hate us.

I don't want any more fighting on this land. It's too good for it, and it will especially be too good for it after Kiath and I put some work into making this little shack thrive.

"This will be a good place for us," I tell Kiath from my spot on the floor. He's been preening himself, perched upon one of the old broken chairs and

trying to get as much gore off of his feathers. “I just know it.”

Kiath chirrs in response but doesn’t actually say anything. I know he’s still tense from the battle earlier today. I am, too, but there’s an energy that is coming off of him that worries me that he still wants to go back to the village and raze it to the ground.

*Of course he does*, I think to myself, worrying a frayed piece of string coming off my sleeve between my fingers. That’s who he is, angry and fiercely protective. He’s never had to focus on the complexities of emotions.

Until me, I suppose.

I can only hope that he will listen to what I said before. I do not want more violence or bloodshed, and beyond that, I am worried that he will not come back safely if he gives in to these emotions.

With the village being so far away, I would not be able to stop him, or even follow him in time to the battle that would surely occur. By the time I would get to the village, he would surely be dead. Kiath is strong and determined, but he is not immortal, and I do not want to see him die alone because of who he is.

The people of the village do not need any more bloodshed, despite what they have done. If I never see violent blood spilled in the next ten years, it will still be too soon.

I bite my bottom lip and worry it as my mind shifts to thinking about Jennifer. I worry about her and how I haven’t seen her. In the past day, I haven’t had as much time as I could to think about her, but now that we are sitting and the adrenaline has left my body, I can focus on things that weren’t at the forefront of my mind.

I can only hope she will be okay.

“You have a strange look on your face,” Kith says, breaking the silence and making me jump. “What is on your mind?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Many things, I guess. I’ve only just now been able to realize everything I’m worried about.”

“Don’t linger. There are better things to do than sit around and worry.” He says the word like it’s a completely foreign concept, and maybe it is newer to him than it is to me. “We’re safe now.”

“We are safe,” I echo softly.

Kiath tilts his head at me curiously, but I just shake my head. I have to trust his word that he won’t go back to the village when I have my back turned, and I have to trust that everything will be okay with us.

“It’s getting late,” he says instead of pushing me to say anything else. “We’re going to need to eat soon to regain our strength.”

“I can probably cook something!” The idea of trying to use that old kitchen renews me with energy. “And there should be something around for you to hunt.”

Kiath snorts. “There’s plenty of food around the forest. It will be easy.”

“That’s good then. I don’t want you to have to fly too much until you’re fully healed.”

“I’m not as frail as you, Tania,” he says, and though others may take it as an insult, I do not. He is only speaking the truth, after all. “I do not need as much rest or as much care.”

“That may be true, but it would still ease my mind if you took it easy.”

The huff that Kiath gives me brings a smile to my face if only because I can see his feathers puff up in discontent. He’s strong enough to ignore what I’m saying, but I get the feeling he’ll listen even if he thinks ‘taking it easy’ is a worthless phrase. I pull myself off the floor and toward his perch on the rickety chair, resting my forehead against his.

“Thank you for saving me. Us,” I murmur. His feathers, the ones that have now since been meticulously cleaned, are as soft as clouds.

“I do not require thanks for what was the obvious action,” he responds, pulling away from me. “I was not going to let them kill us both.”

“Still.”

Kiath shakes his head and moves to stand, stretching out as much of his wings as he can in this small cabin. We’ll have to make it bigger if we do any renovations. “I’m going to go hunt,” he says, looking me in the eye.

“Alright. Come back soon?” I ask and lift my hand up to wipe off a bit of gore that’s still on his face.

“Of course.”

Kiath walks toward the door and steps outside. He flares his wings out, and it never fails to shock me just how big they are. With one final look toward me, he flaps them once, propelling his body towards the sky. I watch from the doorway until I can’t see him through the trees and clouds.

I run one hand down the old wood of the doorway with a soft smile. “You’ll be perfect in no time,” I tell the house, and its creaky walls groan as the wind blows through once more.

Closing the door and wrapping myself in some more furs to stave off the chill, I make my way to the kitchen. It hasn’t gotten any better since the last

time I inspected it, rusted over with disuse, but I have no doubt in my mind that I can make something out of nothing.

Cooking is easy and made even easier with the lack of resources I currently have at my disposal. While preparing a simple stew, I find myself daydreaming about a garden, filled to the brim with all sorts of vegetables. I dream about a quiet life where I don't have to worry about my autonomy being in question and where I don't have to think about if I will be able to eat.

I think about the fat nobles with their excess money and excess greed and dream about not being jealous of them for once in my life.

Taking the finished stew in my hands, I step towards the little table and chair near the window. While old, it's not broken, and it stands tall even when I rest my whole weight on it. Perhaps I will keep this stubborn little table and chair as a reward for lasting all these years alone and abused by the elements.

Just like me.

I look out the window, deep in thought, and I'm still delighted to see trees. There are no leaves on them, and they are covered in a fair amount of snow, but the forest provides a deep sense of comfort and excitement. I cannot wait for spring.

In the distance, I can see blue, and the realization comes to me that that is the ocean. I smile giddily and lean back in my chair, stew all but forgotten.

The sunlight goes down as I stare out the window, cataloging every little detail of my new favorite view, and I find my gaze fixated on a dark little shadow. I open my mouth in confusion, but any questions die on my lips as pretty birdsong fills the air.

I push myself away from the table and walk towards the door. The singing is pretty and comforting. I want to know what it is. I exit out of the cabin and begin my trek all the way towards the ocean, and I do not feel the cold seeping into my bones.

I only care about that little shadow that's tempting me far away, and I refuse to think of anything else until I figure out what it is.



# KIATH

**C**hilled and bounding gales course over my feathers, my body suspended several dozen feet above the rolling snowy incline below me. I can still imagine her taste on my lips.

My voice rushes through the wind and over the blowing trees. The melody has grown monotonous to me.

I flutter higher, and my pitch rises.

I drop a few feet and look over the distant valleys, and a subtle baritone dip drips from my beak.

It is not tradition, because I don't know my origin. I was not taught to sing for my mate. The melody pulses through my veins, from my evasive mind to my throbbing nethers, as an instinctual pattern.

The intonations and the rhythm spring from my emotions, improvised and carried forward over miles.

*If she doesn't come, she can't be mine.*

The uneasy sentiment crops up occasionally, but is easily dissuaded.

*But she will come. She belongs to me.*

My eyes dart over the landscape, my song growing strained and conflicted in my ears.

Where is she? I still don't see her arrival.

Flying forward and downward, scouting the landscape, my claws dig into the snowy terrain as I billow past. I caress mountain peaks, glimpse over cavern entrances, double back to the cabin, and swoop past the river, all to no avail.

*Do not cheat the process. If she is meant to return to you, she will.*



Then a familiar, sweet smell crosses my senses. I look down over the horizon, catching a glimpse of white cloth grayed by the elements within range of our newly improvised home.

My volume increases, my voice barely straining to pierce the raging winds and penetrate the distance. Her brown, wavy hair vanishes in perspective as she looks up, and the shimmer of her bright gray eyes permeates the white of the falling snow. They meet mine, and my heart stills as a mischievous smile crosses her face.

I cross some of the threshold separating us to make her mission more manageable, but I cannot deny her trek lest I doom this union forever.

A small ledge still separates us. She needs to bridge the gap and bring herself up to me.

Then I can claim her properly.

She almost slips on the icy ledge, and I have to restrain myself from hurrying to her aid.

“Kiath?” she cries out, questioning my intentions. I don’t dare break my song.

She brings her lithe form up the rock wall separating us, finding indentations in the slick face and using them to climb. I see the fabric tightening against the curves and edges of her form, and blood rushes downward, as I’m allowed less room for imagination.

I cannot wait for her to be rid of her clothing. If I had it my way, she would never wear it at all. Its function might be to safeguard her from the chill, but it is functionally in the way of my advances. It’s a barrier to the one thing that excites me most.

My song never ends as she approaches, her smell growing more intensely intoxicating by the moment. I do not need to struggle to continue exhaling air, and nor do I struggle to sing. I am overwhelmed by her splendor, reveling in the shrinking distance between the two of us.

“*Ma khari*,” I say to her as she reaches my level at last. “You came.”

She smiles, caught off-guard. There’s something mystifying and distant about the expression she gives me in response.

“Of course I came,” she says in disbelief. “Were you not singing for me?”

I nod in understanding.

“Not everybody can hear the song,” I tell her. “When I first sang it to you so long ago, you did not hear it. But I knew that given time, you would.”

She shivers a bit as a gale of wind blows strongly over her.

It cannot be here. We will have to go lower.

“When did that happen?”

I shake my head. “It does not matter,” I tell her. “What matters is that you’re here now.”

In one swift, brazen movement, I fly to her and lift under her legs, bringing her into my arms. I can smell her growing arousal and know that I have found a shard of perfection in this singular moment.

She wants me.

I end my song and give her an intense, lingering stare.

We flutter down from the high snowy ledge where I tested the strength of her bond, down to the rushing river below. I can already feel her shiver lessening and bring her down in front of one of the tiphe trees beside the river.

She looks at me, biting her lip, before turning her head.

For a moment, her pulse rises, not out of arousal but out of fear for the singular ursain that roars at her, roaming through these woods. My arrival seemingly has not dissuaded it, and it appears to attempt to draw closer, motivated by the sweet nectar that flows through my love. Her intoxicating scent is a beacon to all life.

I do not need to bloody it to set an example. I need only remind it of the countless ursain I took in sport.

I cast an intimidating gaze at it. It roars still.

I take a very measured and deliberate step forward, my arm still on Tania’s shoulder.

The ursain backs off a little. I hold my ground, licking my lips menacingly.

As the river’s trickle continues in the distance, the roar of the ursain grows discouraged. Taking a look between me and my love, the ursain bounds away.

*Later, I will punish that creature.*

Her gaze is grateful and full of yearning.

I pin her to the face of the tree, feeling her soft flesh give under my grip. Moving toward her neck, I pull her hair away from it before nearing and inhaling deeply.

Her breath stills. I take my tongue and run it along her neck, kissing up and down its length. A surge of chemicals courses through her. I can feel her need, and as I breathe her in, I linger on its growing intensity.

“You’re my mate,” I whisper in her ear, lightly biting her earlobe. “And now that I have you, you’re bound to me for the rest of your life.”

Her heartbeat quickens. At first, I sense a moment of hesitation. But gripping her tightly, I feel that shift to admiration.

She grips my head, urging me on and pressing me into her, as my lips lower from her neck to her chest.

“Hang on a moment,” she says, breathing deeply and trying to compose herself.

I puzzle over her.

She will not tell me no, but in this instance, my curiosity watches her lightly move away from me.

She lifts her shirt up off of her form, exposing her bare breasts, before stripping beside the river, setting her clothes down by the river bank.

I cock my eyebrow, watching her. Her every movement invites me to take her right now.

With her back still turned, I swoop in, motivated by her boldness. It was so much fun to desecrate her, but this open display is so much more enticing. She no longer hesitates to accept her feelings for me, and her willingness to give in to her primal urges only deepens my affection for her.

Taking her shoulder and raising her level to me, I grip her breasts with the tips of my claws, before running their sharp edges along the surfaces of her skin. The idea that I might slip and cut her, leaving blood dripping onto the river bank, arouses her so much. I can already feel the moisture collecting between her legs as I press into her with my groin.

I can feel myself growing, guided toward her opening in spite of my unwieldy length. This time, rather than forcing the connection, I let nature move me forward.

I prod her opening, still fondling her chest.

“Tell me how much you want me,” I whisper into her ear.

But rather than speaking, she brings herself back to me, forcing me inside in one movement.

She gasps as she penetrates herself on me.

Inside of her, I curl around her tunnel as I expand, snaking my way toward utterly pleasuring her. Instinctually and by memory, I know all of her sensitive points... I know where to poke and rub to turn her moans into screams with my spiraling approach toward her center.

Her chest sways backward and forward, her soft breasts rising and falling

with her every urgent movement. She is entwined with me at the hip, and we move chaotically in harmony as one unit. I'm no longer sure whether I'm thrusting into her or she's moving into me.

The longer we move, the more she heats up, and the less coherent she becomes.

Around us, the pavos' morning song fills the air, punctuating the rhythm between our movements. The river's steady flow adds to the sound of my feathers colliding with her skin, my every thrust coated by warmth and a steady emission of fluids.

Her chasm is home to me, in a way that my cavern never was. I can feel its embrace transforming me, motivating me toward desires I cannot understand.

Her moans grow more insistent, her pace quickening. In response, I can feel my mind overloading with pleasure.

I thrust into her quicker, my organ curling and uncurling with almost instinctive reflexes.

"Tell me you love me," she gasps, her hand now grasping my claw on her breasts, pressing it into her.

I pound into her, still lost in my sensations.

"I love you, *ma khari*," I sigh in response, frantically moving forward.

The sounds of our bodies slapping into each other have reached a crescendo, their once indiscernible melody, with dissonant noises and illogical rhythms, now moving into harmony.

"I want you to fill me up," she urges me, grasping my claws even tighter. "Fill me up with your seed!"

My movement accelerates.

I cry out, as I feel myself erupting inside of her, motivated by her urgent and primal cries. I feel her tight grip on me loosen, as she falls forward, and entwined by our sex, we watch an ursain cub moving beside the flowing river, following its parents.



## TANIA

The following day, Kiath and I wake up in each other's arms. Soft rays of morning sunlight spill through the cracks in the walls of our dilapidated little hut, promising a clear and pleasant day. Snow still covers the ground in many places, but the clear blue sky means we'll have a respite from the snowfall.

Kiath and I get up after a few minutes and decide to go and gather some supplies since the weather is favorable. It's a bit warmer here than at Kiath's nest, and winter is nearing its conclusion, but a late snowstorm could still come at any moment, so we decide we'd better gather supplies while we can.

After dressing and having a quick bite to eat, we set out into the beautiful mountain forest. As we walk leisurely between the snow-capped evergreens, our eyes peeled for animal tracks or useful plants, we talk cheerfully, enjoying each other's company.

My heart feels incredibly full as we go. I never really pictured myself getting married before meeting Kiath, but I can't believe how good it feels now that I am. Well, I suppose I'm not technically married, more like mated, but it amounts to the same thing. I have a partner for the rest of my life, and I couldn't be happier about it.

Kiath tells me all about the plants and animals that abound in this area, and we share some laughs when he tells of a few hunts gone wrong in this region. I love listening to his stories, though I can tell he exaggerates some of them to make himself look better.

"You know," I say as I pick a handful of wild herbs to season our meat with. "If I didn't know you better, I might think you were full of shit."

“I’m not full of shit,” Kiath responds. “I released in the woods this morning. Why do you say that?”

I laugh heartily at this. Sometimes I forget Kiath doesn’t understand many human expressions.

“No, no,” I say through my laughter. “It’s an expression, my dear. It means you’re lying or exaggerating.”

“I do not lie,” Kiath responds in a peevish tone. “It is all true. I used the beak of the dead hawk to stab the wolf, that’s how it happened.” I laugh again at this and Kiath looks at me with a puzzled expression.

“Oh, forget it,” I say. “I believe you, Kiath.”

“Do you?” he responds deviously. “Perhaps you shouldn’t. I may be, as you so oddly put it, full of shit. But I did kill the hawk and the wolf, that part is true.” We laugh together this time and I put my arm in his as we walk, smiling as we cherish each other’s presence.

We walk through the forest together for another hour or so, finding a fair number of herbs and natural medicaments. Kiath also catches several horned surus and brings down a massive three-horned drake for us to store in the freezing mountain caves. All in all, we have a good haul, easily enough food for a few weeks.

“I have a surprise for you,” Kiath says as he drags the dead drake behind us.

“Oh?” I respond curiously.

“There is a hot spring not far from here. You can bathe and relax there, it is truly a beautiful place,” Kiath continues.

“Kiath, that sounds wonderful!” I respond enthusiastically. “I would love a bath. It’s been too long since I had a proper one. And with warm water to boot!”

“Come,” says Kiath. “Let’s drop our supplies off at home and then I will show you.”

The way Kiath says home brings a warm smile to my face. I finally have a home, a true home. And someone I love to share it with me. I truly don’t know how I could be any happier.

We make our way across the forest toward our hut for the next hour, or so. The ground is still littered with patches of snow, but it’s not blanketed in white as it was a month ago. The bitter winter is finally nearing its end, and the forest is beginning to come alive again.

The spring growth is just beginning to poke its way shyly out of the dark,

sweet-smelling soil, wondering anxiously if it has come too early. The birds are chirping merrily, and the sound of woodpeckers burrowing for food splits the air pleasantly. The season of growth and rebirth is nearly upon us, and the stirring forest senses its approach.

Once we reach our hut, hidden deep within the still snow-capped trees, we drop our supplies off and head out for the hot springs.

“It will not take us long to reach the place,” Kiath says as we set out. “Perhaps an hour, at most.”

“I’m in no rush,” I respond warmly, taking hold of Kiath’s arm once again. We continue talking and laughing as we trek through the woods, and after about an hour, just as Kiath said, we reach the hot spring.

The hot spring is one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen. Surrounded by towering pines, the spring sits nestled against the mountainside, steam rising rapidly from the water. The strange mixture of half-melted patches of snow and green grass beneath creates a strikingly beautiful contrast.

Some weeds and flowers are beginning to sprout as well, adding to the elegant beauty of this place. I make my way forward in awe, staring at the spring with wonder in my heart. I reach a hand out gingerly, touching the steaming water. Then I laugh. The temperature is perfect. It’s as if the gods put this here just for us.

“Well,” I say, turning toward Kiath behind me. “No point in wasting time, let’s get in.” I turn back toward the spring and begin to coyly strip. I pull my tunic slowly down one shoulder, lifting it toward my neck and flexing my back slightly. I turn toward Kiath again as I do the same on the other shoulder, a mischievous smile covering my face.

He watches intently, his bird-like eyes narrowed. I laugh and pull the rest of my clothes off quickly, though I don’t dispose of the seductive movements entirely. Once naked, I climb into the steaming hot water, cherishing the instant relaxation it brings to my muscles.

I find a comfortable seat for myself on a rock in the spring and lay there for several minutes, enjoying the peaceful bliss of the moment. Then I look toward Kiath once again. He still stands there, perfectly still, watching me hungrily. Urges begin to grow within me, and I beckon him forward. To entice him I lift myself from the water just enough to bare my breasts.

My nipples harden instantly as the cold air makes contact. I toss my hair to one side and turn my head at an angle, never breaking eye contact with



Kiath. Once again, I beckon him forward, showing him what he'll get if he joins me.

Kiath continues watching for a moment, then begins to step forward slowly.

"The water is just fine," I say in a seductive tone, splashing it around so my breasts gently shake.

"I think I will find out for myself," he says, voice laced with desire. He climbs in slowly, never breaking eye contact. As he crosses the water toward me, I stand up fully, desire building inside me. He reaches me and leans forward, his face nearly touching mine. I feel close to bursting with sexual desire. I am ready to ravage him, to...

"Well, I'll be damned!" says a cold voice from behind us. Kiath whirls around toward the voice with blinding speed, but I am frozen, unable to move. All the warmth of the spring seems to disappear, my sexual desire vanishing like a gust of wind.

I know that voice. I hate that voice. Slowly I turn toward it, trepidation filling my very being.

"I always knew you were a whore, Tania, but I must admit, I never would've expected this," says the man. The man who tortured me treated me like property and made my life miserable. Blackwell. The darkest, most evil of slavers to ever walk Protheka.

Blackwell is tall and broad, a mountain of a man in truth. His hair is dark as coal, his wild untamed beard the same color. Thick eyebrows sit above his beady, malicious eyes. Those eyes bring back horrible memories. The dark brown, almost black, irises are like dark pits sucking the happiness out of the world.

Blackwell smiles at us evilly without a hint of mirth in those cold eyes. He's dressed in black and brown leather, a heavy war axe hanging at his hip, his right hand resting on its head.

"Glad to see this monster hasn't ripped those beautiful teets of yours off yet," he says. "Why don't you turn around and let me have a look at the rest? I've missed you, you know. You were always the most talented of my women."

"What are you doing here, Blackwell?" I say, steeling myself.

"Well, I've come to reclaim what's mine, of course," he says. A low growl is coming from Kiath, and I sense his body tensing, but I put my hand on his arm to forestall him.

“I don’t belong to you, Blackwell,” I say firmly. “I never have. You cannot own another person.”

Blackwell only laughs at that. “You naïve little bitch,” he says coldly. “I’ve owned you for years, and I still do. And after I kill this abominable monster you seem to be fucking, I will remind you what a real man feels like. It would seem you weren’t properly broken before, but that is easily remedied. I do enjoy a good breaking of the spirit.”

“No, Blackwell,” I respond. “There’s only one monster here, and it’s not Kiath. I’ll never go back with you. Walk away now, and we’ll let you live.”

Blackwell bursts out laughing again, this time with seemingly genuine mirth.

“Let me live?” he says. “You’ve truly lost your mind, woman. No matter, I never needed your mind anyway. As long as your body is intact, I will use you. Thoroughly.”

Fear and hatred course through my veins, my heart pumping a thousand beats per minute. It’s time to end this, once and for all.



## KIATH

The scent of fear – Tania’s fear – spikes in my nostrils. A wave of powerful anger washes over me as I process the scent. *Only I can scare my mate. This man will pay.* I realize as he and Tania speak that this must be the slaver she told me about.

That realization only increases my anger. This man made her miserable. He tortured and beat her. And now, he speaks of using her body in ways only I am allowed to. This man thinks he can take what is mine, but I will prove him wrong. I protect mine, at any cost.

A low, bird-like growl rumbles out of me as he speaks, growing louder with every word he says. I’m on the brink of leaping from this spring and ripping the man’s throat out when, suddenly, at least a dozen more men emerge from the trees behind Blackwell.

Each of them carries a weapon, and each has the look of a seasoned warrior. They are bulky men, dressed in brown furs and leather. About half of them appear to be carrying swords, while the rest bear either an axe or a morning star.

My first thought is that I need to get Tania to safety before I take care of these men. However, my feathers are too wet to fly right now, and I’m not sure we could outrun all of these men. *We will have to fight our way out,* I realize. With this realization, time seems to slow down.

I take a deep breath. The smell of the spring mingles with Tania’s fear and the trepidation of the warriors. Blackwell’s scent is an odd mix of rage, excitement, and strangely, arousal.

The sounds of men moving their feet restlessly and the wind beating

against cloaks drift into my ears. I look at each of the men in turn. Their movements seem to slow down as I focus in on each of them.

*Thirteen men, three of them left-handed. A limp on the bald one. Big bearded man favors his right side.* In a matter of seconds, I've taken in every detail and formed a rough plan in my head. *I'll have to attack and give Tania time to find a weapon. The man with the limp first. I need to keep moving and try to take them on individually.* With my plan formulated, I turn to Tania.

"When I attack," I say to her in a firm voice. "You must find a weapon. Prepare to defend yourself if any get past me. And Tania, if it looks like I'm going to lose, get out and save yourself."

"We fight together, Kiath," she responds. "Win or lose, live or die, we do it together."

"Last words to your pet?" Blackwell sneers, cutting us off. "Come now, little birdy," he continues. "You've been fucking my slave. Now you must pay. Hand her over and perhaps I will let you live in a cage in my bedroom. You can watch me have my way with the little whore."

Blackwell doesn't get a chance to say anything more as I leap toward him with blinding speed. Somewhere in the back of my brain, a voice says stick to the plan, but it hardly even registers. White-hot rage drives me forward in a blur of motion. I go straight for Blackwell, talons outstretched and ready to tear him limb from limb.

Blackwell is quick, however, quicker than one would expect of a man of his size. He manages to back up behind his men before I reach him. Anger still burning hot in my soul, I slash out at the first man, my talons raking his face and taking out one of his eyes. The man falls to the ground, gripping his face as it bleeds profusely.

I hear a twig crack to my left and the sudden sound of steel being swung. Instinctually, I roll to the right, just dodging the vicious arc of the sword coming straight for my head. I come up in front of another soldier who swings his morning star at my neck.

I slam my forearm into the man's wrist, stopping his weapon before it reaches me, then with the other hand I slash him across the chest as deep as I can. The sound of another weapon cutting through the air causes me to dodge to my right again, but this time, the sword manages to gash my left side.

My side burns as warm blood begins to leak out onto my feathers. The men begin to circle around me, weapons held firmly in front of them. Doubt creeps into my brain, but I push it away. *I had a plan, it's time to use it.*

Knowing I'll need to isolate them one by one if I'm going to have a chance, I dash forward and roll to my left, escaping their trap just in time.

I begin leaping from tree to tree, trying to get them to split up and pursue me. They follow as I'd hoped. I lead the men away from the spring and away from Blackwell as far as I can. Then, breaking into a sprint, I head straight for the nearest tree.

Using my momentum, and a few flaps of my still-wet wings, I run about ten feet up the tree, then push off with both legs as hard as I can. Soaring through the air, I extend my wings again, using them to glide a few extra feet until I land about two yards from Blackwell.

Claws out, I sprint the last couple of feet, attacking Blackwell with everything I have. He dances backward, holding his axe up to block my incoming claws. With impressive speed, Blackwell blocks my right-handed attack and spins away from my left. I continue my assault, spinning, thrusting, and jumping toward him, but he manages to block or evade all of my blows.

Blackwell begins to laugh as our dance progresses. "Is this all you have?" he sneers. "I've had slave boys who fight better than this."

Suddenly, Blackwell stops dodging and starts to attack. His long-hafted war-axe begins to fly toward me with blinding speed, forcing me to duck and dodge consecutive blows. *How is he so fast? I've never seen a human move like this.*

The sound of feet crunching leaves and snow alerts me to his men approaching from behind, and I know I must back away, or risk being surrounded. I begin to run toward another tree, planning to use the same technique as before, but the blood loss from the wound in my side slows me down.

Before I can get all the way up, Blackwell catches up and swings his axe viciously. It cuts deeply into my calf as I'm pushing myself off the tree. Pain erupts within me, clouding my brain.

Despite Blackwell's blow, I manage to push myself with enough force to escape the men temporarily. As I glide toward the spring, I see Tania holding the sword of the man I slashed across the chest moments earlier. Two of Blackwell's men are pressing toward her, trapping her against the wall of the spring.

Pain in my leg and blood loss forgotten, I land behind the men. I grab one from behind and sink my teeth deep into his neck, causing dark red blood to

spurt from his jugular. Dropping the twitching corpse to the ground I reach up and block the sword of the next man, who is swinging for my head.

I prepare to stab the claws on my right hand into his neck when suddenly, steel explodes from his stomach in a burst of blood. Tania appears as the man collapses to the ground, holding the hilt of the sword now lodged firmly in the warrior's stomach.

She's managed to throw on her loose white linen undershirt, which is now covered in blood, and her brown leather leggings. The look of her covered in blood, shirt unlaced, and hair disheveled is incredibly sexy, but there's no time for that now. I nod to her and turn to face the incoming onslaught.

"I will lead them away," I say, gripping the wound in my side and leaning heavily on my uninjured leg. "Keep moving, don't take on more than one at a time. We have to split them apart if we're going to survive."

"Be careful, Kiath," she says in a concerned tone. "You're hurt already, you'd better follow your own rules."

"Don't worry about me," I respond, picking up one of the dead men's axes. With a grunt, I launch the axe toward our oncoming enemies. It turns end over end through the air and hits one of the men square in the head, splitting his skull and sending him to the ground in a heap.

The rest of them are almost upon me now. I wait until the last moment, pretending my wounds have nearly done me in. Then, with a burst of energy, I leap into the air and turn my body horizontally.

Stretched out completely flat in the air, I grab the neck of one man with the talons on my feet and the other with my hands, ripping their throats out as I spin and toss them aside like rag dolls.

This sudden burst of ferocity seems to give the remaining men pause for a moment, but a yell from Blackwell behind them drives them back into action. Six of them lay dead, but the man whose eye I cut out has returned to the fight, bringing their number to seven, not counting Blackwell.

They form up in a semicircle, approaching me cautiously, steel glimmering in the sun. With a jolt, I realize they've cut me off from the trees. The spring is now at my back and they've formed up tightly to cut off my escape. They close in together, forcing me to go on the offensive.

I lash out and gouge one of them across the face, but another thrusts his sword deep into my right side, deep enough to nick a rib. Pain explodes in me once again, and I fall to one knee.

I look up, and they are all around me. *Is this the end? Have I failed?* My

thoughts cut off abruptly as I hear a wicked scream erupt in the distance.  
*Tania.*





## TANIA

**T**he world seems to pause as I watch Blackwell's man stab Kiath in the side. Kiath falls to his knees with what seems to be distorted slowness.

I can almost feel the blade myself, feel the impact of the forest floor on his knee as he falls.

*No, I think, rage beginning to bubble up inside me. No, I will not lose control of my life again. Blackwell has taken so much from me already. I won't let him have Kiath, too. This ends here. It ends now.*

My very being seems to tremble with a fury I've never known before. Adrenaline pumps through my veins like a gushing river. Anger, frustration, and the instinct for survival drive me to my very limit, beyond what I ever thought myself capable of.

I open my mouth and release a scream at the very top of my lungs, packing all the fear, frustration, and helplessness I've felt in my life into one terrible war cry. Then I begin to run. I don't even feel my feet moving as I go. My entire being is focused on the man who caused all of this. *I will kill you.*

Faintly, out of the corner of my eye, I register Kiath taking advantage of the distraction caused by my scream to rejoin the fight with Blackwell's men. I don't know how much longer he can fight, but I'm determined to kill Blackwell before I go to him. It's the only way to end this.

Suddenly, without even realizing it, I'm on top of Blackwell, swinging my sword with all my might. Blackwell only dances away from the blade laughing.

"Look at this," he says with a hoot. "A woman swinging a sword. What's

more, a slave woman.” I keep silent as he taunts me, swinging viciously at all parts of his body. *His confidence will be his undoing, I just have to surprise him.*

Suddenly, Blackwell goes on the attack, parrying one of my blows with his axe and then swinging its wicked edge toward my free arm. I manage to yank my arm upward and over the axe head, but barely. *I have to be careful.*

Cautiously, I take a step backward, circling Blackwell with my sword pointed straight at his heart. *Use your surroundings, Tania. The trees. Use the trees.*

I take a moment to look around, then dash behind the nearest tree. When Blackwell follows, I stretch myself around the other side of the trunk, lashing out at his legs. I manage to graze his thigh, drawing a bit of blood.

“You’ll pay for that you monster-fucking whore,” Blackwell spits at me. “I’ll let all my men take a turn with you for this.”

“If you can catch me,” I sneer back at him. I’m beginning to realize that this is my only chance against this man. He is far faster and stronger than me, but I can outsmart him. If I can turn the terrain to my advantage, maybe I can surprise him. It only takes one well-placed blow.

Faintly, I hear the sound of steel clanging and men dying behind me. *Kiath still fights then. Just hang in there a little longer, Kiath.*

Invigorated by the knowledge that Kiath still lives and resists, I go on the offensive once again. I run toward Blackwell with my sword out as if I’m trying to run him through, then, when Blackwell brings his axe up to parry the blow, I duck underneath it and manage to land a slight gash on his hip as I roll away.

*He still underestimates me. Good.* Blackwell curses again as I come up behind him, but he whirls and swings his axe at my head. I begin to duck, but all of a sudden, Blackwell changes the motion of his axe mid-swing, bringing it straight down toward my shoulder.

Instinctually, I roll to the left, but the edge of the axe lands a glancing blow on my right shoulder. Pain lances down my arm as I land a few feet away from Blackwell. Warm blood oozes from my wound, but I ignore it.

*Shit, I think. He’s starting to try now. Good thing I managed to injure him before he realized I’m a threat.* I have to hope that his two injuries will slow him down and that he’s losing more blood than I am. If I can land one more good hit, maybe I can run him around until he bleeds out.

Blackwell and I begin to circle one another again, each of us looking for

an opening in the other's defenses. Blackwell still has a disdainful sneer on his face, but I can see he's focused now as well. It will be harder from here on out.

I never learned to fight, but I have seen other people duel on many occasions. Instinct drives me to continue circling and keep my injured side away from him, while my experience watching others tells me to watch and wait. The winner in most fights I've seen is the one who wears their opponent out.

I'm also reluctant to leave myself open by being overly aggressive, so I decide to let him expend his energy trying to get to me. Sure enough, Blackwell advances, swinging his axe for my chest, then turning mid-swing to strike at my front knee.

Anticipating some sort of faint, I spin away from the blow and come up on Blackwell's left side. I bring my sword up and swing for his neck, but he manages to recover, pulling his axe up to parry the blow.

Immediately, I back away again, inviting him to attack. Blackwell obliges, swinging wildly at my head with lightning speed. I roll behind a tree, narrowly dodging the axe. As soon as I'm on my feet again, Blackwell is there, his steel flashing toward me in a silvery blur.

I dodge again, knowing I could never get my sword up again. As soon as that blow misses, the next is coming at me. I dodge and dodge again. Attack after attack comes from Blackwell, each of them narrowly missing me as I spin behind trees and roll under the wicked axe-head.

The blows keep coming, but they seem to be slowing down. My energy is waning as well, but adrenaline keeps me alert and gives my muscles the extra kick they need to avoid his axe.

"Getting tired?" I ask in a taunting tone. "Is this really all you have? I'm disappointed."

Blackwell snarls angrily, swinging his axe again. I roll under the blade, and this time, I aim another slash at his legs. This one bites deep into the flesh of his right thigh, just above the shallower gash I gave him before.

"Fucking bitch," he growls, putting a hand over the wound.

He comes at me again, swinging the axe toward my side. This time I decide to parry, but as soon as my sword meets the axe, Blackwell lunges with his other hand, striking me in the face and nearly breaking my jaw. I fall to one knee from the force of the blow, but I manage to roll away before his axe comes to meet me.

Blackwell's axe lodges deep in the forest floor as I roll away from it. He wrenches it from the ground and advances again. *He's limping now for sure. Just need to dance around a bit longer.* I try to ignore the searing pain in my shoulder and the ache of my jaw as I begin to circle him once more.

Blackwell follows, limping but moving with a terrifying fury. His eyes seem to be on fire. Blood covers his right side from the wounds I've given him, but he still moves with surprising speed.

When he reaches me, I step around his incoming attack trying to get inside the axe. He changes directions again, striking down toward my hip. I twist away from the blade, but not fast enough. The axe leaves a deep gash in my right hip, nearly down to the bone.

The pain is excruciating, but I have no time to feel it. I limp backward, trying to put some space between us. Blackwell keeps coming, laughing again.

"You can't dance forever, little lady," he says. "Sooner or later, you'll run out of steam and become better acquainted with my axe."

"Not if you run out first," I say, voice laced with determination. The blood loss is getting to me, though. I don't know how much longer I can do this. He's slowing down, but so am I. *I have to end this now or he'll kill me.*

Suddenly, a wild plan comes to me. *It's certainly audacious, but it might be my only chance.* Resolved to try anything at this point, I set my plan into motion. Quickly, I gaze to my left out of the corner of my eye, looking for a big tree with soft wood. *There, that's the one.*

I back away to my left slowly, trying to exaggerate my fatigue, which isn't difficult at this point. Blackwell follows, his axe raised high and laughing maniacally.

I lean against the trunk, sword hanging from my hand limply. I put a resigned look on my face, trying not to give away the tensing of my muscles.

"You shouldn't have tried to resist," Blackwell says, raising his axe. "It didn't have to come to this." With that, he brings the axe thundering toward my neck.

Without a millisecond to spare, I duck under the blade. It slams into the tree trunk, lodging firmly in the soft tiphe wood. Blackwell tries to pull it free, but it holds for a second, and that's all I need.

"You're right," I say, looking into his evil black eyes. "It didn't have to come to this." And with a feral scream, I lunge forward. Blackwell takes his hands off the axe at the last moment, trying to catch my sword, but he's too

late. The blade cuts right through his palms and drives directly into his heart.

Blackwell's body twitches slightly on the sword, then goes limp. I see the light flicker out in his eyes and know that it's over. It takes a second for the gravity of this moment to hit me. Shock and fatigue do their best to bring me down, but remembering Kiath, I dash toward him. Tears of pain and relief stream down my face.

I find Kiath lying on the forest floor, breathing shallowly. Around him lie the mangled bodies of Blackwell's men. Not a single one of them still draws breath.

"Kiath," I say through my tears. He looks up at me and smiles. Even though each of us are covered in blood and grievously injured, we stare into each other's eyes.

"You did it," Kiath says weakly. I take his hand in mine.

"No, Kiath," I say. "We did it."



## KIATH

**M**y vision has grown hazy. I look out at the forest around me, the dismembered men lying on the ground. All of them are bleeding out, and not one of them has life radiating from their dazed and distant eyes. They look strangely appetizing, and I want to punish my hunger in such a dire situation.

I still don't remember doing it. I just remember the immediacy of the situation, and needing desperately to defend Tania... and failing. I was nearly overtaken by these humble soldiers – mere humans, not even intent on killing anybody.

“Tania!”

I try to cry out, but it's no good. It emits from me as a hollow cry, the volume about as loud as a babbling brook. Blood trickles from my throat.

Have I been weakened by this bond?

I know that I need to worry about myself, but can't bring myself to. I lean forward on my right talon, attempting to steady myself up from the ground and the tree trunk just behind me, but as I try to pry myself up, I stumble forward. I attempt to lift myself with my wings but feel weighed down by the water and blood that coat my feathers.

Collapsing backward, my vision grays, both sets of my eyelids becoming heavy with the force of a wind that once blanketed and raised me. It's cold and unforgiving, and even with the dying of winter, a single flake of snow falls upon my beak.

I lick it off.

The water is nourishing to me.



*Maybe I'll just rest for a bit, I think.*

My eyes close for a minute, and I swear as they do that I hear a familiar shuffle moving forward through the snow. I dismiss it as a last-minute idle fantasy.

The mortals have their myths about death. I think that in death, we all join the birds. I can still see the heavy sunlight swathing me. I imagine myself parting the clouds and flying to the skies above the skies.

*It means nothing if Tania's not here,* I admit to myself. I flex my claws and let the chill give me substance.

Then, allowing the idle fantasies to humor me, I smell the air. I can sense the sweet aroma of nimond filling my nostrils. I can hear her familiar, shallow pants.

*She lives!*

As if the winds have drawn breath on me and allowed me life anew, my eyes open in time to see her rushing through the snow. She's still coated with the blood of her enemies, and I can feel myself stiffening with the reminder of her darker side. But there's something darker there, too.

I saw it on her when she recounted her past to me, and I found the crew she had to dismantle to reach this land.

"Kiath!"

She rushes toward me, and when she doesn't hesitate to shout through the landscape, I piece together her secret.

And it fills me with great pride.

She stumbles down next to me with a thud, and I can see for myself the blood and dirt that cake her face. There is also the vague, pulpy residue of the trees that coats her skin, and her hands look worn and callused. Her shirt is torn through, revealing scars and cuts that run both deep and shallow.

"You did it," I say at first.

But she doesn't hear me because my throat is parched and fractured.

"You did it," I repeat with a little more gusto, attempting to emphasize my pride by adding solidity to my wavering, incoherent voice.

She smiles at me. But it's not a smile packed with fear, or with admiration. I can see pity in her eyes.

*Better I be dead than left with no voice at all,* I think to myself.

Then I question whether an existence spent with her is worth losing my very essence, the very thing that makes creatures fear me.

*There is a way. If she can just figure it out.*

She nods in response, but her stare is distant and a bit lifeless still. She has reclaimed a part of herself, but at what cost?

“He’s dead,” she says meekly, then reiterates it. “Blackwell is dead. We’re safe.”

Her caress meets my wing, rubbing over it thoughtfully. She sees me wince, and I am filled with shame.

*Today, she is a warrior. Not me.*

I was supposed to defend her. It’s the one thing I prize most highly, of all of my capabilities.

My pondering over what I was before I met her runs my mind in several directions before I cough up blood and feel my mind’s trajectory halting.

She looks over my wounds. She sees the sharp gash in my side, through which some of my organs are now visible. And she knows what I know.

“By the gods,” she mutters, surveying all of my injuries and rubbing me with more force than I’d like.

Her touch normally is awe-inspiring. But as I feel it upon me, I mourn that I can’t cherish it at this moment.

“How can I help you?”

A desperation runs through her voice. Bringing my gaze into focus and staring up at her, I can tell that my pain causes her agony. It’s perfectly apparent in her strained brow, her rapid breathing, and her heavy frown.

I want to help her. Not just for my sake, but for hers.

I don’t want her to be in anguish.

*But it won’t work if I just come out and say it.*

“We’re mates,” I say simply.

A smile crosses my face, and as I look up to see her dire confusion, I can’t help but chuckle somewhat.

The action feels unnatural to me, and as the sharp laughter exits me, I feel my ribs straining.

Her face grows angry in response. I can see her teeth showing through, a fire entering her eyes that I now realize she must have directed at Blackwell minutes earlier.

“This is serious!”

I look up at her, trying to keep my gaze in focus. I don’t want her to misinterpret me. There’s too much at stake.

I can see what she sees. Lives snuffed out and left cold on the lingering permafrost, the victims of their own blind obedience and hubris.

“I know,” I emphasize, still struggling to speak.

She takes her hand and moves it toward me in sympathy, placing it on my chest. I know what can save us both, but it has to be surrendered voluntarily.

I stare at her arm. Hunger courses through me ravenously, but I have to restrain myself.

*We are mates.*

“Do you trust me?”

My eyes are fixated on her arm. Its veins pulsate wildly, like nectar flowing before me.

She sounds bothered that I’d even ask such a question. “Of course I do!”

I resist the urge to laugh. Sometimes, I wonder whether she’s under my compulsion or whether she legitimately cares for me. I remember when she was scrambling to flee me, afraid for her own life.

My eyes move from her arm, placed so conveniently in front of my ravenous maw, to her eyes, which not only show concern but have started to flow like the river running beside us.

“Then please don’t pull away,” I tell her.

Her eyes now show confusion, and as I move forward, driving my teeth gently into her flesh, they turn more toward horror.

As I tear into her, drawing blood first in small quantities, then in very large amounts, my incision becoming a large gash whose contents fall freely into the soil, she nearly pulls away.

But I can feel her intoxication while my teeth probe deeper, taking sustenance from a primal bond.

I can feel her ecstasy from my penetration shift darkly, and I realize that I’m taking her very essence and drawing it into me.

If I can’t stop myself, there will be nothing left.

A surge of life returns to me.

“What are you... doing?”

Her form is nearly skeletal for a moment. She wears a horrified expression of deep betrayal.

I attempt to reassure her, feeling my strength returning to me in spurts.

With difficulty, I pull myself away from her arm but let her blood rain down on me, providing its renewal to my parched body.

It drips onto my throat and onto my torso, falling into my mouth and arm. She does not have the energy to resist me anymore.

I pull away finally, and her gaze never leaves me.

“I’ve already told you, we are mated,” I say, finally able to clarify. “We are bound by blood.”

“What did you do to me?”

Her voice is weak. I can barely stand to look upon her, her form graying and skeletal.

I close my eyes.

“Heal,” I say, uttering it as though a command.

The wind howls, providing comfort. Its jagged breath no longer pierces or condemns me.

I am no longer betrayed by the very essence that flows through me.

I open my eyes and look upon her, as she looks upon herself.

All of her wounds from combat fade. The deep, muscular cut that cleaved through her shoulder is now healed over entirely, and all of the cuts in her torso are now only evidenced by the tears in her shirt.

Together, we are healed.

Separate, we are shells of ourselves, drawn from the healing nectar that unites us.

“How?”

She holds up her arm and flips it in front of her eyes, looking for any traces of the cuts that earlier tormented her.

“Because we are mates,” I clarify for one final time.

She looks upon me in incredulity, her betrayal having left her upon a sudden but strange realization. She stares at me, deeply contemplating me.

“We live and die by each other,” I add. “In blood, we are bound. In blood do we heal.”

The reality appears almost divine in her eyes, as she questions everything she has come to know.

I pull myself up from the bark of the tree, the transition effortless now. We traipse over the corpses that litter the ground at our feet, just glad to have found a shared purpose in this realm.



## TANIA

**H**is snores remind me of a bird's song, a deep, guttural noise intercut with a whistle. He looks at peace, so much more alive than he was mere hours ago when I wasn't sure if he would survive.

Sunlight crawls in gently through the windows of our ramshackle cabin, illuminating the dirt and grime left over from its previous tenant. It has the well-worn look of the cavern den, with all the necessities and comforts of a real home.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do if I lost him, or what kind of life I would build on this desolate continent. The pain would have probably killed me.

Why did I ever doubt him?

I observe Kiath's sleeping form and turn my arm over in my eyes one more time, still astounded by the reality before me. We were both battered, nearly dead, from combat, a lingering remnant of my old life that followed me ashore. Kiath himself ripped into me, drawing blood with his claws and teeth, only to fix me better than I was through our shared pain.

The snoring stops, and I lower my head to see the familiar, bird-like form of Kiath looking up at me, studying me. He doesn't utter a word. He merely contemplates me, taking me in appreciatively.

"We were basically dead," I tell him, still startled by the reality of it.

There was a time, moments after it happened, that I could have considered it some twisted nightmare, or forlorn dream.

"You still can't let that go," he says. But it's not denigrating to me, or judgmental. It's more thoughtful.

“In all my time, I’ve never seen anything like that,” I admit.

He scoffs, but his vocalization has a coo intermingled in it.

“You carried yourself from another continent, managing to survive and bring yourself here, even against the whims of storms and sea serpents, and you still don’t believe in magic?”

I shake my head in disbelief.

“I’ve seen magic, I think,” I say, trying to reflect back on a life I blanked out from my mind. “Or at least I’ve heard of it. But that…”

“Was different?”

He moves his wings around me, swaddling my bare shoulders.

“We have a lifetime to spend together, Tania,” he tells me. “And that lifetime could be hundreds or thousands of years.”

“I know,” I say contentedly, smiling gleefully. It feels weird to transition from a position where I could have died at any moment, either in the slave camps back home or by starvation or wild animals, to a position where I’m in a nearly immortal relationship.

“So Tania,” Kiath continues. “You’re going to see some strange things. Let go of your need to understand everything and give in to the magic.”

I nod again, looking down at my vanished wounds. There’s not even soreness where I was viciously cut into and nearly scarred.

And he was almost dead. There would have been no natural way to resuscitate him.

“Still,” he admits. “I was afraid that you wouldn’t figure it out.”

I try to recall what happened the day before. “I don’t know if I did,” I say.

“You could have pulled away. You could have let me die and gone with the other humans.”

I purse my lips together and shake my head. “I wouldn’t have done that to you,” I say. “That would have been thoughtless and selfish.”

“And that’s why you are my mate,” he replies. “Now and forever, whether you like it or not.”

I chuckle at the sinister undertone but have come to understand that he’s only jesting.

I wonder if he had been any different, if I would have returned to him, even faced with the probability of death in the wilderness. I have to think I wouldn’t.

He wraps his wing tighter around my shoulder before moving in to kiss me. Without a hint of reluctance, I bring my mouth into his bird-like beak,

enjoying his taste.

There's an urgency now that comes not from fear of death but from need. I have seen him at his worst, and even witnessing it only deepened the safety I feel in his care.

I trust him completely.

Gracefully, his hands move down from my shoulders where he was previously swaddling me down to my breasts. He pulls down the sheet covering my breast and begins twisting and turning my areolae with his claws. I savor the feeling of them manipulating me while also piercing me, knowing that there's nothing I can take from him now that I wouldn't survive.

"Harder," I say, moving my mouth briefly away from his, a strand of saliva still connecting us.

He nods and begins pulling on my nipples, twisting and kneading them like dough in his grip. I close my eyes, taking in the sensations of pain, seemingly now diminished, and pleasure, which has only been intensified through our bond.

Is our bond more than healing? Has he, in tying himself with me, actually made me more resilient to pain?

"Sing to me," I whisper, as his manipulation of my breasts only grows more intense.

Outside, I hear the wind pick up. I feel safe with him, concealed together in our little shed. I look toward the small openings in the wall, which have now been covered by small strips of tiphe wood.

He nods, and a melody exits his mouth, as soothing and foreboding as when he called me out of the shed and made me his mate. It comforts me somewhat while also putting me on edge, because it reminds me of how very different we still are, as creatures.

I peel open my eyes and tilt my head upward, moving to kiss him. He responds in kind but continues to attack my breasts with his firm talons.

I study every way in which his tongue twists in his mouth, wanting so badly to know him better, despite knowing that part of him will always remain a mystery to me.

My hand reaches downward as my tongue explores his mouth, and I reach to find the lump in his groin. Before I can feel the pouch of concealed skin that hides his member, it falls outward. I begin to grip it, twisting and turning it in my hand.



I can feel his reluctance. He wants to dominate me, not have me lead him. But there's an innate curiosity now that burns in me.

I've vowed to spend my life with this creature. I have a right to know him.

All along the member are a series of grooves, bumps, and ridges. I can feel how, as it twists and curves, the skin sinks and rises, moving inward and outward with the veins that adorn its surface.

I move away from his mouth and sink down lower, throwing aside the sheet to take him in my mouth. I feel him breathe after having reclaimed his dominance over me, and he grips my hair tightly as he thrusts his pelvis upward to fill my lips.

I can feel the excitement building within me, but it's a new cause. I am excited that, for the rest of my natural life, I get to explore and grow with this being.

My jaw stretches against his growing size, and I reach down along his length, trying to blindly find his balls. As I force myself deeper and deeper upon him, moving in time with his thrusts, I finally feel the protrusions and begin to twist and play with his orbs.

I can feel him opening up to me, thrusting still more eagerly, and I realize that I've hit one of his sensitive spots. Twisting him rhythmically, I pull my mouth off of him, with some resistance from him, before sinking lower and putting one of his orbs into my mouth.

My hand moves on instinct and begins rapidly stroking his contorted member, which feels wider than I remember it being. I suck him tightly while I stroke his shack with eagerness and passion, pondering the strange way the flesh moves over it with my hand's gestures. It feels thicker in my hands than I remember, with an almost leathery texture.

"Ride me," he urges me. His eyes are distant, overtaken by lust and pleasure.

I can no longer contain myself. In one swift motion, I lift myself upward, pulling my mouth off of him and climbing on top of him.

Briefly, I struggle to align his long, snaking member with my entrance. As I close my eyes again and let nature guide me, I feel him prod before immediately forcing himself into me.

"By the gods," I moan. His hands reach up and grip my breasts, twisting them in rhythm. I throw myself down upon him, then back up, feeling my breasts sink and rise on their own as I bounce upon his lap.

He takes in every part of my body, moving from my almost orgasmic expression down to where his pink cock enters me.

“How did I get so lucky?”

His eyes savor the moment. I feel exposed in his gaze, my very soul revealed to him. But this time, I’m unbothered by it.

I want him to see every part of me.

He thrusts upward into my tunnel, his movements growing more erratic and less rhythmic. I can see him already struggling to contain his release, as though embarrassed by its speed.

“Give it to me,” I moan. “I want all of you inside of me.”

He hesitates, but I decide to stop delaying my release. As he thrusts with less grace and more force, my moans grow in volume and intensity. I can feel my voice building, growing from a moan to an eruption.

I push myself down harder on him, trying to contain as much of his length within me as I can before he fills me up. I can feel him start to swell and pulse inside me as his voice changes into song.

He swirls up inside of me, filling me completely with his twisting girth before I feel his organ twitch, sending me over the edge.

We cry out together, his hand tightly gripping my breasts as his seed swirls deep within me.

I collapse in his arms, still in disbelief that this is how my life will be.



## KIATH

**P**art of me really misses the chilled embrace of winter. It felt familiar, and the massive snowfall and unforgiving winds still remind me of Tania. It feels like I spent an eternity in the winter, just savoring every moment I had with her.

I will always cherish those cold nights spent in my cavern, huddled together with her against the elements in a nest made of straw.

I remember her smile upon seeing the fire pit and the bath. I wish I could frame her smile and look upon it forever.

*Though she did run away immediately afterward,* I think to myself, remembering how many times we came close to our deaths. We had to overcome so much to arrive at this point.

But everything must come to evolve. Rather than looking back fondly, forcing myself to compete with moments from my past, I always try to fly forward. I still have no idea what our future together might entail, but it's bound to be brighter the longer we live.

In the later parts of spring, I can feel the heat approaching me. Now, rather than the heavy snowfall dampening my flight, it might wind up being the sun's unforgiving caress that inhibits me.

I dive down, looking into the forest around me. Unlike in the winter, the forest is teeming with life, though most larger creatures still take care to avoid me.

Standing still, I survey my surroundings, drawing into the instincts that make me an apex hunter.

The pavos cry louder than ever, now that more spring-loving birds have

migrated and landed up in the trees.

The river flows fast, unhindered by the snowfall from the mountains above. The fish spring up, swarming wildly through the waters.

Something parts the grass ahead of me. I can hear its sharp, trodding steps brushing into the weeds. I can smell its savory rushing nectar and its pulsing heartbeat.

*Dae*, I think.

The ursain have grown much harder to find, having apparently migrated away. And Tania has somewhat subtly admitted that she's grown tired of thistle.

It stands upright, and I catch a firm glimpse of it. A sizable drake stands before me, its antler chipped in a couple of places, and a slashing scar running along its face.

"You're a survivor," I whisper, looking ahead but hunching down. "I can respect that."

Its head turns.

I can tell that it spots me because I hear its heart accelerate.

And that's when I notice another heartbeat coming from close by, belonging to a much larger creature.

"So you're not all gone," I whisper, spying the slowly approaching form of an ursain.

This one is also on the hunt.

I run over how to dispatch them both in my mind.

For some reason, Tania gets a bit upset when I come home with flayed carcasses and get blood all over her new crops.

The ursain roars, filling the area with its ferocious warning, and I know that I have to move. The drake has already begun to flee from us both, and the ursain has the advantage, having approached closer to my prey.

Rapidly, I fly into the ursain, tearing its eyes with my claws. It roars out in pain while I gouge into it.

It's enough to subdue the beast but not enough to kill it.

It will have to do.

I charge forward, trying to catch the *dae* before it disappears down into a ravine or a cavern. The drake is approaching a tight cluster of trees, which could make grabbing it very difficult if I don't move quickly.

I beat my wings faster, flying over it before it vanishes into the threshold, then lower myself above it.

Listening to its heartbeat once more, I drive my claw forward, puncturing its flesh where its heart should be.

The dae cries out as my talon drives into it. I pierce through bone and blood, seizing into the pulsating organ I need. I can feel it throbbing against me, fighting to stay alive, but to no avail.

It falls to the ground just in time for me to see the ursain rush toward me, its eyes nearly gouged.

“Sorry,” I say to the ursain. “I don’t have room to carry you. But you’ll make a delicious meal later.”

Gripping the dae expediently in my talons, I carry it off in my wake, just dodging the ursain’s final desperate slash. I think I feel two small bursts of movement from the drake before it hangs limply in my grasp, and my mouth waters thinking about the meal we’re about to prepare.

There have been no more signs of settlement since we relocated. We have remained elusive to the human camp thus far, and nobody else has come back from Prouz.

I flutter down, landing gently on top of our shed, leaving the dae on the ground for later. I look out at the garden we’ve prepared, which Tania takes so much pride in. It’s still overrun with weeds, but we’ve managed to till a decent area. For months, we’ve been gathering and growing crops.

The shabby walls have all been filled in and replaced. No more of the outside air now filling our shed.

I like to leave a little bit of dirt and straw around as a reminder of where I came from, but as I sneak inside, I can see that everything else looks immaculate. It’s taken some getting used to, but for Tania, the change is worth it.

“You’ve got to stop landing on top of the house, Kiath,” Tania says from behind the door. Her voice is stern.

Startled, I leap up and turn to face her.

The roof feels like a welcoming perch to me. It’s a lovely place to survey the area, looking out at the animals and the nature around me.

But we did just spend a lot of time fixing it, and my claws do damage it a lot.

“Sorry,” I say begrudgingly. “I brought drae for dinner.”

“That sounds delicious,” she says, approaching me and greeting me with a warm embrace. “Would you like to take it outside and separate it?”

I shake my head, looking at the small kitchen countertop. In the time

since we arrived here, we've more than tripled the size of our shed.

All along the countertop are vegetables. Tizret, somanas, fortisia, phenson, and burgona all fill buckets, the results of a successful harvest. Some of them were found growing outside of Tania's garden and brought here for seeds, but most of it was the result of a productive spring season.

"Quite a harvest," I say, acknowledging the crops all around the shed.

She nods, smiling.

Her shirt is dirty with work and sweat. As we step outside together, admiring the cool breeze that now fills the air, I am tempted to push her down into the soil and roll around with her. But, as she steps away from me, picking up a small bucket of water from beside the shed, she begins to sing a familiar melody while moving about the garden.

*It's my mating song*, I think. She fails to convey the intonations and the throat clicks, but I'd still recognize it anyway.

A smile crosses my face as I watch her, eager for all of the things I have yet to show her. In summer, crops grow natively that don't appear anywhere else in the realm.

Pulling the dae forward, I get to work, preparing it for her eyes.

"I don't know why we can't just eat the damn thing as it is," I mutter to myself, cutting into its flesh sharply. "Perfectly good meat here, and she just wants me to cut it up into unrecognizable parts."

I grumble, pulling apart the hindlegs from the torso with the bones intact. Using my sharp claws as a trained knife, I cut up along the ribs, separating the meat from the ribcage. I try to recall all the parts she likes and how they are all separated. Inevitably, I will fail to cut away at a part she likes, or I'll leave some gristle in the meat, but she's always been forgiving and patient.

She just appreciates that I put in the thought at all.

*If we cut it all up*, she insists, *it will last longer, and we'll waste less food.*

I shrug at the recollection.

I could easily devour this dae whole and still leave her with plenty to eat.

Sure, the summer season is almost here, which will mean faster-expiring meat. But it all seems unnecessary to me, more about the gesture than the practical application.

Placing the meat into a clean bucket, I move to the front of the shed, rubbing two stones together rapidly in the small hole in the ground. I think of the succulent feel of the meat on my lips and imagine it together with roasted burgonas.

When the fire ignites, she sits beside me, winded from pulling so many weeds. There's a heavy sweat accumulating on her brow. It makes her look more hardened. I can feel the rush to my legs at the thought of her sweaty, well-worked form bent over the garden.

I place a heavy metal grate over the hole, and we set the meat on top of it, watching it char before our eyes.

"New crop season coming up, isn't it?"

I nod. Tomorrow, I'll take her out, and show her all of the crops that grow on this continent.

"I'm excited to take you out," I reply, watching the building flame.

She moves closer to me, and I wrap my arms around her, holding her tightly. The wind kicks up, nearly spreading the fire beyond the confines of the pit.

Several fish splash in the distance, and I swear I hear the familiar roar of the ursain below us, just next to the rushing river.

"This is wonderful," Tania says, pressing her head into my arm.

I nod, looking out over the horizon. I wonder what new frontiers are left for us to explore, still excited to show her parts of the continent we couldn't reach in the winter.

"I love you," I say, looking down at her and moving to kiss her.

THE END.

To read more about Tania and Kiath my newsletter here: <https://www.subscribepage.com/celesteking>



## **PREVIEW OF MONTER'S MATE**

The Worlds of Protheke is a vast and growing world. Check out one of the books, Monster's Mate

Monster's Mate  
By Anne Hale & Celeste King

Available on Amazon [here!](#)

## TANEM

**T**he night is almost as dark as I am.  
Almost.

Maybe nothing is darker than I am. I don't know. I have lived a very long time.

Somewhere in my memory, maybe I can find something as dark as I am.

But I have no interest in searching through my memories for something that doesn't matter.

What matters is that I am darker than night, and I shift and ripple with the shadows of Eelry.

I am not trying to hide. Not really. I am hunting, and maybe I should hide. Be stealthy.

Maybe.

But I have no patience for playing hide and seek with my prey. They will see me coming. They will see their deaths.

They will certainly feel their deaths.

Next time, I will try to be stealthy. The taste of surprise in the blood and flesh of whatever I am eating is quite exquisite.

That, I have to admit to myself.

My favorite meals are dark elves. They taste like nothing else I have ever consumed.

And in my centuries of living...

*Centuries Tanem? Have you truly lived that long?*

In my centuries of living, I have never tasted anything like a dark elf. Their flesh is soft, supple, tender.

Their dark sorcery flows through their veins, providing me with strength and keeping me sated days after the meal.

My fangs are extending from my gums, just think about them.

The muscles in the tentacles that are sealed into my back flex and twist. They are hungry.

“Shh. Be still.” The words slip from between my fangs. My low, guttural voice a growl more than anything else.

I catch the scent of humans when I lift my head to the air. My nose wrinkles involuntarily.

I am not the biggest fan of eating humans. But perhaps tonight I will find something sweet to calm my tentacles.

Maybe tonight, I should do the easy thing and give up on hunting the dark elves who have probably sensed my presence in the city.

The humans are in a hurry, that much I gather from the way their energy sparks and whips in the air.

Their voices are low, their footsteps hurried. I follow them, my footsteps soft and swift against the cobblestoned ground.

My body has remained muscular, strong, and lean, despite my years of living.

I find it fascinating that humans age to become decrepit creatures, unable to help themselves.

The group of humans turn a dark corner, and my tentacles lift from where they were hanging down my back. I loom over them, and the fools still do not see me.

*You are so hungry.* My voice speaks silently in my head, coaxing me on.

I am about to attack, to grab one or two, when the scent reaches me. The fragrance is like nothing I have ever smelled before.

It is fresh and bright and so sweet. It smells even better than the magical blood of the dark elves.

Whatever it is, it is coming from the humans. I retract my tentacles, against their protests.

I can't eat yet. Not until I have found the source of the scent.

I am aware that my heart is racing and my stomach is twisting. My skin prickles as I follow the humans around corner after corner.

Soon, we come up to a one-story building with a low roof. I can't go in just as I am, so I wait for the humans to enter.

What is this place? I can hear dozens of footsteps crossing the dirt floor

inside. A thousand different scents mingle and exude from the building.

I allow the darkness to cover me, slipping inside before the elf guarding the door can see me.

All he notices is a whisper of wind caressing his cheek as I pass.

I remain close to the walls of the building, until a guard catches my scent. The giant creature looks up at me, signaling the guards behind me.

I duck into an alcove to my left, and they follow.

The tentacles stretch from my back and break their necks in seconds. I do not even have to move.

I heft their bodies into the alcove, piling them on top of one another. There are bales of hay close by.

I remain pressed into the darkness as I pile the hale on top of them.

Finding my prey will be impossible now. I can't hunt or else I will be hunted. Hunted to my end.

When I turn, I realize exactly what is happening inside the building. It is an auction. Whoever is running it is auctioning off precious jewels, animals and the like.

And humans, I quickly discover.

I can still smell the scent that has drawn me here. I can almost smell the fragrance in the air, shimmering like a bright light reflecting off glass.

I inch away from the wall, straining to see the front of the room. Several humans are auctioned off. They are beautiful; young, sweet things.

But right now? They are not enough to sate my hunger.

Not while the owner of the fragrance lingers close by.

The sixth auction item is a necklace containing several jewels of precious origin. I could not care less.

The seventh auction item is slightly more interesting.

"Get your hands off me, filth!" She screeches. Several of the humans and elves gasp at her words.

She is being brought, kicking and screaming onto the stage.

Strange. Usually humans like being auctioned off. They'll be taken care of instead of remaining in their slums.

An elf close by chuckles with amusement.

The human girl is still struggling on the stage. "Don't buy me!" She shrieks the words.

"I'll stay on the streets! I'll just run away from you!"

The scent is back and stronger than ever. I need to leave and find it. I

need it. Desperately.

As I leave, it wafts towards me, and I turn unconsciously.

It is her.

The human girl throwing a tantrum on the auction stage.

*Who is she? And why does her scent set me on fire?*

I cannot answer the questions that flit through my head.

## MOIRA

I have bitten three elves in the arm, and have chewed off an ear.

Dear gods, they taste awful.

The pain does not seem to register with them. They do not seem to even feel pain.

That doesn't matter to me.

I won't stop kicking and screaming until I get away from this place. From the auction house where I am as good as a side of taura.

I am sure I will be prodded and poked like a side of taura too. When I look down from the stage at the room, I see several elves and dark elves nodding at my appearance.

My heart almost freezes with fear, but I swallow through it, because if I do not, I will collapse.

I have been close to collapsing for several days now. I am not sure why. Maybe I am exhausted from worry. Maybe I am exhausted from grief.

I don't think it matters why any longer. I don't think it matters that I am exhausted any longer.

All I can do is keep kicking till they let go of me for one second. Then I can escape.

Both elf servants that hold onto each of my arms twist and I howl with pain. Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to cry.

Not until I have given up all hope.

Betrayal lingers, burning in the back of my mind as I fight for my life.

I was working well before my master, such as he was, decided to sell me off. I was a good worker, attentive, and kind.

I took care of him, his house, and his family well.

I almost cared for the dark elf. But I think that maybe this was all part of his plan.

To use me up and toss me out. Until the only thing left for me was to lay back with my legs spread for whoever bought me.

The elf servant twists my arms again.

This time, tears fall. I am sobbing now, openly and loudly.

Maybe, just maybe, this will deter whoever thought I looked good enough to buy.

I thought at first that my elf master was joking when he said I was to be sold off.

But quickly enough I realized it was the worst joke that I would ever hear. And the other human servants did not help.

I had always known they didn't like me, though I am not sure why.

But they had blamed everything that went wrong on me. So I was forced out.

"This feisty one will be sold to the highest bidder!" A dark elf on the stage grins at me, his sharp teeth glittering in the dim fires that sparkle from torches on the walls.

"NO!" I scream the word until I can feel my vocal chords start to crack.

"Buy me and I will curse you all to your deaths. Don't fucking buy me or you'll regret it."

Tears, real tears, are falling down my face. Tears of shock and exhaustion and grief.

And there is nothing I can do to stop crying.

My curses deter no one, and neither does my crying, I realize angrily. More hands with paddles on them have shot up.

The dark elf laughs loudly.

I recognize the elf closest to the stage who has now bid the most on me. He is known for his cruelty, and his ugly smile terrifies me.

I blink my eyes that sting with tears, and the room glitters around me. It smells rank, like sweat and drying shit.

Bile rises to my throat, but I know I cannot give up. Maybe I can escape.

This time, my struggles are more violent, and the elves must have lost their patience. They restrain me more forcefully.

And their claws draw blood. I fall to my knees as blood wells up from deep scrapes on both my arms.

My tears, this time, are silent.

The auction room goes quiet.

*Are they shocked? Did these superior creatures think that humans didn't bleed?*

The dark elf has ordered the servants to take me to the back. I will probably be punished there.

But just then, a loud, growling snarl comes from the back of the room.

*Monster.*

Because that is what it is.

It has thrown itself at the stage, a big, dark, hulking figure. It has clawed hands, and red eyes glitter from its face.

The elf servants jump into action, trying to restrain it.

*Why is the monster coming for the stage?*

The thought comes to me distractedly. Because I have seen my chance.

*GO! NOW!*

I slip away from the elves, who are too focused on subduing the beast. I don't care any longer that I am barefoot and bleeding.

But I am not fast enough. Because a dark elf shifts out of the darkness as I run past. He grabs me. He must have been waiting for me.

"You're all mine," he grins down at me. "And I don't even have to pay for you. You will be a nice treat that I keep chained to my bed."

My blood is cold, and I am shivering in his grip.

It is over. I know it is. Dark elves have magic. He will probably disappear with me now.

But someone disagrees.

The growl is low and rumbling and darker than the nighttime.

It is unnatural and the elf hisses.

"Beast." The word slips from his lips in a whistle and he shoves me behind him.

The monster faces us, and slowly, four long, thick tendrils stretch from his back.

The elf doesn't wait but summons a staff and throws magic at it. The beast avoids the magic effortlessly.

He growls again, leaping forward. The elf creates a dark forcefield around us. The beast bounces off it, but doesn't fall.

Our eyes meet. Both his red eyes close and open slowly. As though he is trying to communicate with me.



The elf throws spell after spell at him, swiftly, brutally. The beast is hurt several times but continues forward.

He is relentless, using his arms, legs, claws, and tentacles to fight.

I realize, when he avoids clawing at me when the elf shoves me in front of him, that the beast is trying to help me.

But why?

To be continued. To read more click [here!](#)